

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE COMMENTARY SERIES

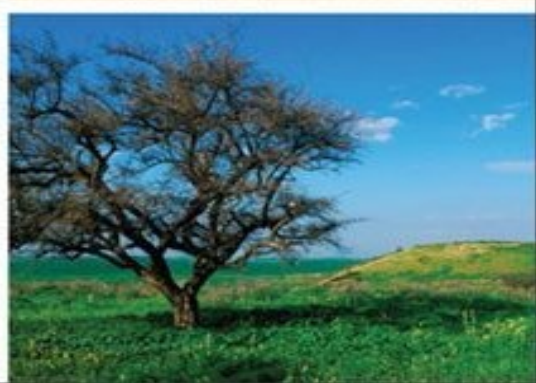
Minor Prophets II

John Goldingay and Pamela Scalise











Understanding the Bible Commentary Series

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Minor Prophets II

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and

To Charlie

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Foreword

As an ancient document, the Old Testament often seems something quite foreign to modern men and women. Opening its pages may feel, to the modern reader, like traversing a kind of literary time warp into a whole other world. In that world sisters and brothers marry, long hair mysteriously makes men superhuman, and temple altars daily smell of savory burning flesh and sweet incense. There, desert bushes burn but leave no ashes, water gushes from rocks, and cities fall because people march around them. A different world, indeed!

Even God, the Old Testament's main character, seems a stranger compared to his more familiar New Testament counterpart. Sometimes the divine is portrayed as a loving father and faithful friend, someone who rescues people from their greatest dangers or generously rewards them for heroic deeds. At other times, however, God resembles more a cruel despot, one furious at human failures, raving against enemies, and bloodthirsty for revenge. Thus, skittish about the Old Testament's diverse portrayal of God, some readers carefully select which portions of the text to study, or they avoid the Old Testament altogether.

The purpose of this commentary series is to help readers navigate this strange and sometimes forbidding literary and spiritual terrain. Its goal is to break down the barriers between the ancient and modern worlds so that the power and meaning of these biblical texts become transparent to contemporary readers. How is this to be done? And what sets this series apart from others currently on the market?

This commentary series will bypass several popular approaches to biblical interpretation. It will not follow a *precritical* approach that interprets the text without reference to recent scholarly conversations. Such a commentary contents itself with offering little more than a paraphrase of the text with occasional supplements from archaeology, word studies, and classical theology. It mistakenly believes that there have been few insights into the Bible since Calvin or Luther. Nor will this series pursue an *anticritical* approach whose preoccupation is to defend the Bible against its detractors, especially scholarly ones. Such a commentary has little space left to move beyond showing why the Bible's critics are wrong to explaining what the biblical text means. The result is a

paucity of vibrant biblical theology. Again, this series finds inadequate a *critical* approach that seeks to understand the text apart from belief in the meaning it conveys. Though modern readers have been taught to be discerning, they do not want to live in the "desert of criticism" either.

Instead, as its editors, we have sought to align this series with what has been labeled *believing criticism.* This approach marries probing, reflective interpretation of the text to loyal biblical devotion and warm Christian affection. Our contributors tackle the task of interpretation using the full range of critical methodologies and practices. Yet they do so as people of faith who hold the text in the highest regard. The commentators in this series use criticism to bring the message of the biblical texts vividly to life so the minds of modern readers may be illumined and their faith deepened.

The authors in this series combine a firm commitment to modern scholarship with a similar commitment to the Bible's full authority for Christians. They bring to the task the highest technical skills, warm theological commitment, and rich insight from their various communities. In so doing, they hope to enrich the life of the academy as well as the life of the church.

Part of the richness of this commentary series derives from its authors' breadth of experience and ecclesial background. As editors, we have consciously brought together a diverse group of scholars in terms of age, gender, denominational affiliation, and race. We make no claim that they represent the full expression of the people of God, but they do bring fresh, broad perspectives to the interpretive task. But though this series has sought out diversity among its contributors, they also reflect a commitment to a common center. These commentators write as "believing critics"—scholars who desire to speak for church and academy, for academy and church. As editors, we offer this series in devotion to God and for the enrichment of God's people.

Robert L. Hubbard Jr.
Robert K. Johnston
Editors

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary.* Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: 1992
A.D.	anno Domini
ANEP	*The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. Princeton, 1954
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969
Ant.	Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
B.C.	before Christ
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford, 1907
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* Edited by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart, 1983
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
cf.	*confer,* compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.* Edited by D. J. A. Clines. Sheffield, 1993–
e.g.	*exempli gratia,* for example
fem.	feminine
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.* Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d ed. Oxford, 1910

HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden, 1994–2000
Heb.	Hebrew
Hist.	Herodotus, *Histories*
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.* B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
KJV	King James Version
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint
masc.	masculine
MT	Masoretic Text
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
p(p).	page(s)
pl.	plural
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
sg.	singular
Syr.	Syriac translation in *The Syriac Bible*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 16 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–
Tg(s).	Targum(s); Targumic
TNIV	Today's New International Version
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*

VTSup	Vetus Testamentum, Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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Introduction: Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

The second six of the Twelve Prophets divide nicely into two sets of three books (though Zechariah is almost as long as the other five put together). Historically, the first three are set in the context of Assyrian and Babylonian domination of Judah, the period before the semi-independent existence of Judah came to an end in 587 B.C. The second three are set in the context of the Persian Empire, when Judeans have become free to return from exile but Judah is a Persian colony.

The historical time period to which Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah refer is thus the last decades before the fall of Jerusalem in 587, when Judah still had its own kings but was under the control of the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. The Assyrian domination of the Middle East began in the middle of the eighth century and continued to the late seventh. The last great king of Assyria in this period was Ashurbanipal, who reigned about 668 to 627. His death heralded Assyria's decline, and the fall of Nineveh, its capital, to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 is the key moment in the empire's collapse. For Judah, in particular, this also heralded the transition from Assyrian to Babylonian control. In the heyday of Assyrian power in Ashurbanipal's time Judah complied with Assyrian control, but during Assyria's decline it was more inclined to assert its independence. This stance continued after Babylon defeated Assyria, especially in a situation where Babylon and Egypt were both interested in controlling Syria and Palestine, and it led to several Babylonian invasions and the eventual termination of the Judean state in 587.

These three periods (acceptance of Assyrian control, Judean self-assertion during the power hiatus, and Judean self-assertion against Babylon and involvement in the power struggle between Babylon and Egypt) correspond approximately to the reigns of Manasseh and his son Amon (about 687–642 and 642–640), of Amon's son Josiah (640–609), and of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (609–587). Second Kings and Second Chronicles see the reigns of Manasseh and Amon as times of great apostasy, see the reign of Josiah as one of a great reformation, and pass another negative judgment on the reigns of the last four kings. Jeremiah, whose work as a prophet extended from

the time of Josiah beyond the fall of Jerusalem, implies similar judgments. But whereas 2 Kings puts the emphasis on Judah's religious unfaithfulness, Jeremiah also refers to the oppression of ordinary people by the wealthy and powerful in Judah.

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah presuppose these political, religious, and social realities, but they center on different aspects of them. Nahum concentrates resolutely on the coming fall of the Assyrian capital. Habakkuk focuses on the subsequent role of the Babylonians as means of Yahweh's acting against Judah, but he promises that Yahweh will also act against Babylon in due course. In Zephaniah, the theme of Yahweh's acting against other nations is background to a warning that Judah will be treated the same way, though Zephaniah also affirms that Yahweh has a positive purpose both for Judah and for the nations. The three prophets thus offer complementary theological reflections on Yahweh's involvement with the nations and with Judah.

The prophecies of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah all take the form of poetry; that is also true of some other prophetic books, while yet others are wholly prose or mix poetry and prose. It is not surprising that both prose and poetry appear in the Prophets. Prose and poetry communicate in different, complementary ways. Prose is more linear, logical, univocal, literal, left-brain, everyday. If you want to make something absolutely clear, you put it in prose. Poetry is more allusive, metaphorical, subtle, open-ended, right-brain, dreamlike. It uses images to point to mysteries that cannot be easily described in straightforward fashion. When you want to involve someone so that they come to understand and respond, you may use poetry. Poetry stimulates the imagination; it facilitates the light going on in devastating or encouraging ways. Poems seduce you along towards a conclusion you cannot anticipate and would resist if you could.

It is characteristic of Hebrew poetry to work in brief sentences dividing into two short lines that balance each other; the technical term for this is "parallelism." In Nahum 1:2–6, for instance, each verse comprises a pair of two-part sentences of this kind. The second line may restate the first in different words, or complete the sentence, or may offer a contrast with the first line. In some respects this makes it easier for listeners to understand the prophet; the sentences cannot get too complicated. As they listen, they are wondering how the second line will complete the sentence, though they can never be sure how it will do that; they have to keep paying attention.

There are other reasons why listeners have to keep paying attention. One is

that poetry by its nature is dense and packed with meaning. Poetry leaves out many of the little words and expressions that make understanding prose more straightforward. And it employs imagery in a way that prose usually does not. It expresses truth by means of symbolism, metaphor, and simile. It uses exaggeration and understatement. All this reflects the fact that it is seeking to communicate big truths, truths that may be too big to convey adequately by means of everyday speech with its prosaic nature. And it reflects the fact that prophets are usually seeking to communicate with people who do not wish to accept what the prophet has to say. So poetry functions like parable; it seeks to get underneath the audience's guard and it makes people think about things they do not wish to think about.

As poets, the prophets make much use of irony, the kind of statement that hearers cannot take at face value; they have to become aware that the prophet does not mean the words literally. The prophets make much use of rhetorical questions, which involve the hearers in a different way as they have to answer the question put to them even though the answer is obvious (but perhaps not something they want to admit). They involve the audience in a converse way when they are formally addressing other nations (for instance). Their real audience then is still the people of Judah, who are supposed to overhear what Yahweh says to other nations because of the significance of the message for Judah itself. Prophets can involve the audience by not making specific whom they address or whom they are talking about, so that the hearers cannot simply assume (for instance) that words of comfort are addressed to them but threatening words to their enemies; they have to keep asking, "Lord, is it I?" Their words build suspense, announcing that the prophet is about to tell us something but then using delaying tactics before doing so.

Purely as poets, poets may write because they have to, as composers may compose because they have to, and theologians may write because they have to work out what they believe. But when prophets write poetry, they do so because they want to communicate to other people and to do so effectively. Their aim is not merely to convey information, though it includes this, but to persuade or manipulate or lure their listeners into submitting to their way of seeing things, and shaping the appropriate response.

Nahum

John Goldingay

Introduction: Nahum

Nahum is an example of a kind of prophecy that occurs within other prophetic books, one that declares Yahweh's intentions with regard to a foreign nation. Its opening phrase, "An oracle concerning Nineveh," exactly corresponds to the introductions to a series of such prophecies within Isaiah, such as "An oracle concerning Babylon" and "An oracle concerning Moab" (Isa. 13:1; 15:1). But Nahum is the only example of a whole prophetic book described in this way (Obadiah, Jonah, and Habakkuk also focus on the destiny of foreign nations, but they do not have this heading). The term "oracle" (*massa*') comes from the verb *nasa*' "lift up," perhaps suggesting it is a pronouncement that one lifts up one's voice to utter, but the OT generally does not imply an awareness of this etymology and most commonly uses the word simply to denote a prophecy relating to a foreign nation (TNIV just has "prophecy").

Like those prophecies in Isaiah concerning Babylon and Moab, the book of Nahum seems to be a collection of prophecies, not just one. It is not a single composition. Often we cannot be sure when we are moving from one prophecy to the next. In the MT the book has just two chapters, which correspond to 1:1–14 and 1:15–3:19 in English translations. The MT then divides its two chapters into two sections. The first corresponds to 1:1–11 and 1:12–14, the second to 1:15–2:13 and 3:1–19. But the difficulty over perceiving the book's structure does not matter too much, because there is considerable unity in its theme. The entire book concerns Nineveh. It is strange that Isaiah's extensive oracles concerning foreign peoples include no "oracle concerning Assyria/Nineveh," though the book includes much material on Assyria. Nahum has several connections to parts of Isaiah relating to the eighth and the sixth century, and interestingly fills a gap.

Prophetic books can include the words of more than one prophet, and perhaps this is so with Nahum, but the links between the different prophecies in the book may make it improbable. Like the question of how many prophecies it comprises, this makes little difference to the book's interpretation. It is a collection of interlinked oracles on a common theme with a common perspective. I shall refer to the author of them all as Nahum for convenience.

It is also the case that prophetic books can result from a complex process of redaction; people who treasured the words of a prophet as words that came from God added to them as they were themselves inspired to do, and annotated them in light of what God was doing in their day. Again, this may be so with Nahum, but if it is, then scholarly disagreement over the nature of this process suggests that the book does not give us the kind of data that enable us to work out what was its nature.

The Context

Near the end, the prophecy warns the king of Assyria concerning the collapse of his empire (3:18). This suggests that the prophecies indeed belong in the context of the Neo-Assyrian Empire's domination of the Middle East. The book then focuses on Nineveh because Nineveh replaced Assur as the capital of the Assyrian Empire in the seventh century. It was an impressive and carefully fortified city. The modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq stands on its site.

Nahum's reference to the fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes (3:8) indicates that the prophecy dates after 663 B.C. It would be natural to reckon that it belongs towards 612, when Nineveh was about to fall; that event would have provided evidence that Nahum's prophecy had indeed come from Yahweh and would have led to its gaining a place among the prophetic books that would eventually become "Scripture." If it came earlier, from the time of Manasseh or Amon, it is surprising that Nahum has only good news for Judah; the time of Josiah with its measures of religious reform is more plausible. Nahum would thus date from about the same time as the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry (626). While Nahum can refer to the fall of Nineveh, of Assyria, and of its king as if these events had already happened (e.g., 2:1–2), in the manner of other prophets, this is because it has already happened in Yahweh's intention. One indication that such *qatal* ("perfect") verbs relate to events that are still future is the fact that Nahum can also overtly speak of these events as future, using *yiqtol* ("imperfect") verbs.

The book closes with a question addressed to the Assyrian king, "who has not felt your endless cruelty?" Although Assyria's reputation for cruelty was doubtless deserved, quite likely it was no more cruel than (for instance) Babylon, Rome, Britain, Russia, or the United States; you do not get to be an empire or to stay an empire by being nice. Even apart from that, no people likes to have its destiny controlled by another and to pay for the privilege.

For decades Judah has been kept in that position. Like Isaiah, Nahum

implicitly promises Judah that Assyria will not be free forever to keep Judah under its control. Yahweh will put Assyria down and deliver Judah. Like Isaiah, Nahum thus seeks to build up faith and hope in Judah, to enable Judah to keep its head high until that day comes. There are no pointers in any of the OT prophecies about other nations that these prophecies were designed to encourage Judah to take action against these nations, nor of their having that effect. If anything, they were designed to discourage such action and to encourage Judah to trust in Yahweh to take this action through the sequence of world events that Yahweh controlled. That is especially characteristic of the Isaiah tradition with which Nahum has particular links. Like Isaiah, Nahum offers Judah no encouragement to rebel against the Assyrians. Judah has to wait Yahweh's time and let Yahweh be the one who takes action.

So the fall of Assyria would be of great significance for Judah itself because it was a colony or subaltern of that empire, and it would be natural for there to be great rejoicing in Assyria's fall. Yet all this is only implicit in Nahum. In introducing the theme of Yahweh's jealousy with which the book opens (1:2), J. M. P. Smith comments that "the particular form of offence here resented is evidently the wrongs done to Israel by the great powers" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* p. 288). Yet the word "evidently" gives the game away, as such words often do. The prophecy actually contains rather little allusion to the significance for Judah of Nineveh's coming fall. While it does refer to the fact that the fall of Nineveh means the breaking of the Assyrian yoke from Judah's neck (1:13, 15), it puts more stress on the enmity and arrogance of Assyria's stance in relation to Yahweh (1:2, 8, 9, 11) and on its violence, rapaciousness, and greed in relation to other nations, as an imperial power (2:12; 3:1–4, 19); Assyria's interest in Syria-Palestine and Assyria's attacks on Egypt reflected its desire to control the trade routes to its west. It is possible that the religious innovations of King Manasseh of Judah (see 2 Kgs. 21) reflected Assyrian influence, though the OT does not say so and Nahum does not refer to it, even while alluding to aspects of Assyrian religion and its relationship to Assyrian politics (3:4).

Nahum the Poet

The prophecies in Nahum have in common a remarkable poetic force, expressed in a variety of ways. This begins in 1:2–8 with their innovative and creative use of scripture (this is admittedly an anachronistic way to put it, as we do not know that an actual collection of "scriptures" exists, but evidently Judah

does have authoritative traditions about Yahweh's acts and words, the kind of material that eventually forms part of its scriptures). Thus the book opens by taking up a description of Yahweh's nature that the OT traces back to Sinai, and producing a devastating adaptation of it; it combines that with a description of Yahweh's coming that recurs in the Psalms. All this is cast into an incomplete and broken alphabetical poem, which combines form with incompleteness and brokenness and thus suggests the orderliness and method of Yahweh's involvement in the world, the incompleteness and fragmentariness of that involvement, and the unpredictability and randomness of the way it works out for peoples such as Assyria who thought life was under their control.

The vivid and concrete poetry that follows is very different in form from the theologically reflective nature of 1:2–8. Here the prophecy's poetic power expresses itself in dramatic imagery. Nahum likes to make metaphors and similes tumble over one another. People will be "entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine . . . consumed like dry stubble" (1:10). Here as elsewhere, the swiftness of movement from image to image and the usual economy of poetic diction make it difficult to be sure of the flow of the Hebrew or of the details of the interpretation, but the effect is clear. The images overwhelm the listener as the event will overwhelm its victims. In 2:11–3:1 Nahum systematically expounds the metaphor of lion and prey, in 3:4–5 that of a promiscuous woman, while in 3:15–17 he plays in several directions with the metaphor of locusts.

In other passages the concreteness of the poetry takes the form of imaginative descriptions of events, in particular of the fall of a city, described as if the prophet were witnessing it; this brings home to the audience the reality of the event that is still future. In 2:1, four infinitival phrases rush headlong over each other asyndetically, the unmodified form of the verbs heightening the effect:

Guard the fortress,
watch the road,
brace yourselves,
marshal all your strength!

Vivid description follows in 2:3–4:

The shields of his soldiers are red;
the warriors are clad in scarlet.
The metal on the chariots flashes
on the day they are made ready;
the spears of pine are brandished.
The chariots storm through the streets,
rushing back and forth through the squares.

They look like flaming torches;
they dart about like lightning.

The vivid description continues through 2:5–10, coming to a climax with "pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale." Then 3:1 has "city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims"; and 3:2, "crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots" (see further 3:3), while 3:14 has "draw water for the siege, strengthen your defenses! Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork!" This last passage additionally illustrates the prophet's use of irony and sarcasm. Rhetorical questions recur (1:6, 9; 2:11; 3:7, 8, 19—the book thus closes with a question) and are another way by which the prophet involves his hearers.

The prophecy makes effective use of parallelism and related poetic devices. The very first oracle begins with a well-designed, careful example (I translate prosaically to convey as much as possible of the way the verse works):

God passionate and punishing is Yahweh,
Yahweh is punishing and master of wrath,
Yahweh is punishing in relation to his foes
and he is raging in relation to his enemies. (1:2)

The verse is an effectively constructed example of "terrace parallelism." "Punishing" is carried over from line one to line two and again to line three (the same word each time in Hebrew—the NIV varies it a little). "Passionate" is subsequently spelled out as "master of wrath" and taken up again in "raging"; the missing object for the verb "punishing" eventually appears in the third line in the phrase "in relation to his foes," which "in relation to his enemies" then exactly parallels; the "and" and the pronoun "he," both grammatically unnecessary, signal the close of the double couplet.

This verse already illustrates the prophecy's effective use of repetition; for similar examples, see 2:11–3:1; 3:15–17. In 1:4–5, further, Yahweh makes the "rivers run dry" and "the hills melt away"; in 2:6 the gates of the "rivers" are thrown open and the palace "melts" (NIV has "collapses," which reads more easily, but it is the same verb as before, used in a stretched sense and thus making the link). In 1:8 "he will make an end"; in 1:9 "he will bring to an end" (the verb is the same but it is now the participle rather than the finite verb). In 1:9 and 11 the verb "plot" recurs (though "think" is a more plausible translation each time). In 1:11 and 15 the word *beliyaʿal* recurs (NIV has "wickedness" and "the

wicked"). In 1:11 and 3:19 the word *raʿah* recurs (NIV has "evil" and "cruelty"). Yahweh is a (word-for-word) "master [*baʿal*!] of wrath" (NIV, "The LORD . . . is filled with wrath"); Nineveh or Ishtar is a "mistress [*baʿalat*] of sorceries" (1:2; 3:4). In 2:9 and 3:9 *ʾen qeseh* (there is no end) recurs, and in both contexts there are other occurrences of *ʾen:* there is no one (2:8), there is nothing (2:11), there is no number (3:3), there is no healing (3:19). The two verbs *galah* recur in the *puʿal* and *piʿel* (2:7; 3:5), perhaps with an awareness of the two possible meanings in the first passage (compare also the noun *golah* in 3:10). "'I am against you,' declares the LORD Almighty," says 2:13, and also 3:5. Double recurrences of *gam* run through 3:10–11 to underline the parallel between Thebes and Nineveh: literally "both it [was] for exile . . . also its infants . . . Both you yourself will be drunk . . . also you yourself will seek." The prophecy uses assonance and alliteration, notably in 1:10, *sebukim ukesobʾam sbuʾm,* "entangled and drunk from their wine"; and 2:10, *buqah umebuqah umebullaqah,* "pillaged, plundered, stripped." Such devices add emphasis, make unexpected links, and underline contrasts.

Nahum and his Addressees

Nahum's name means "comfort," an apposite name in light of the significance of his ministry in Judah. The term "Elkoshite" occurs only here; it likely indicates the name of the village Nahum came from, so that it parallels the description of Amos as coming from Tekoa and Micah from Moresheth, and of the ancestors of Nahum's commentator as coming from a village called Goldenhay. Nahum's allusion to Judah (1:15) would make one suspect that Elkosh is an otherwise unknown Judean village, though there is no positive indication of this. His alleged tomb is in a town called Alqosh in Iraq, near ancient Nineveh; tradition says his family was among the exiles from the northern kingdom who lived there. The name Capernaum, "Nahum's Village," suggests a tradition that he came from there, though Capernaum seems not to have been occupied in Nahum's day. There was also a village called El-kauze in southern Lebanon, near the Israeli border, in an area that would have been part of Naphtali; the name is quite similar to Elkosh.

Whether they are accurate or not, most of these traditions link Nahum with the northern kingdom, Ephraim, rather than with Judah. This coheres with the reference to Ephraim as well as Judah (Jacob as well as Israel) in 2:2. Part of the background to the prophecy is Assyria's capture of Samaria, its termination of Ephraim's national existence, and its transportation of much of Ephraim's

population. While Assyria had brought devastation to Judah in the eighth century, and Isaiah makes clear that Yahweh has not finished with Assyria, it had failed to take Jerusalem, and the OT accounts portray the conflict as culminating in an act of divine deliverance and judgment on Assyria. There was no such ambiguity about Assyria's invasion and defeat of Ephraim.

We do not know anything about the prophet Nahum beyond what 1:1 tells us. How did he deliver his prophecies? The OT suggests three main settings for the work of prophets: the regular worship of the temple (see prophetic messages in the Psalms), the broader function of the temple courts as a gathering place (see Jeremiah), and the royal court (see the Deuteronomistic History and Isaiah). Any of these could be possible settings for these prophecies.

The prophets' rhetoric utilizes the potential of different forms of address. Sometimes the prophet speaks in person at length, speaking *about* Yahweh (e.g., 1:2–11). Sometimes he quotes Yahweh's own words (1:12–15). Sometimes it is not clear who speaks.

Sometimes he addresses an unnamed city or people as a corporate entity (with singular verbs or pronouns); sometimes he identifies this city or people as Nineveh or Judah. Sometimes he addresses people in the plural, once he addresses an unnamed leader, once he identifies this unnamed leader as the Assyrian king. With hindsight we can say that 1:2–13, 15 address the Judean people, 2:1–3:17 address Nineveh, 1:14 and 3:18–19 address the Assyrian king. But in each case the addressee is introduced simply as "you" and not identified until some time after their initial appearance. There is thus a feminine character (1:11–13) who is eventually identified as Judah (1:15), a masculine character (1:14) who is eventually identified as the Assyrian king (3:18–19), and another feminine character (2:1) who is eventually identified as Nineveh (3:7) (cf. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 8). But the anonymity of the addressees leaves some of this open. This is one way in which "Nahum is a text that seems even more than other biblical books to have striven to maintain the option of multiple interpretations" (Lanner, "*Who Will Lament Her?*" p. 4). "Throughout Nahum, dangling pronouns leave the reader puzzled, off guard" (O'Brien, *Nahum*, p. 51). Thus the reader cannot take the risk of simply assuming that the warning of a city's fall applies only to Nineveh. More scarily for its original readers, for the most part the description could as easily apply to Jerusalem, and soon after Nahum's day Yahweh indeed deals with Jerusalem in a way that fits this account. The people of Judah cannot listen to this prophecy and simply congratulate themselves on not being its victims. They have to keep asking, "Is it I?"

The question of who is rhetorically addressed (the Assyrian king, or Assyria, or Judah) is different from the question who is the actual audience, who actually hears the prophecies. I take it that in this sense the individual prophecies all addressed Judah in the seventh century, though the eventual book might have been compiled for the Judah of the exile. It would match the pattern in books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah if the prophecies were particularly meant for the Judean king's hearing, even though he is not mentioned. Declarations rhetorically addressed to Nineveh or its king are meant as encouragements and challenges to Judah and its king, the people who actually hear them.

Nahum shares with other prophets the realistic awareness that the rise and fall of empires does not distinguish within a city or nation between the "innocent" and the "guilty," as Jesus speaks of the nations being separated into two groups, the "righteous" and the "others," who as nations will go away either to eternal life or eternal punishment (Matt. 25:31–46).

Nahum as Scripture

Describing the prophecy as a "vision" (1:1) emphasizes its divine origin. As with "oracle," we should perhaps not stress the etymological meaning of the word "vision." To designate the book thus need not imply that Nahum had a vision in the narrow sense, and the book does not suggest that. Rather the word indicates the judgment that the community had come to concerning Nahum's oracle. It had recognized it to be a divine revelation (cf. Isa. 1:1).

Given the power and sophistication of the prophecy, it may seem unlikely that this book comprises the only prophecies Nahum ever uttered. So why were these particular prophecies ones that the community preserved as words from Yahweh that they did not want to lose and wanted to pass on? Perhaps it is significant that they are the most substantial group of prophecies about Assyria and Nineveh that definitely come from the last decades of that empire (it may be that there are such prophecies preserved within the book of Isaiah, but if so, these present themselves as glosses on Isaiah's own prophecies). It would be natural for the OT to have things to say about the fall of the great Assyrian Empire.

Another reason might be the fact that the fall of Nineveh established that these were indeed words from Yahweh. They give testimony to the fact that Yahweh is sovereign in history by providing an instance of when Yahweh had declared the intention to act and had then done so. And precisely the fact of their fulfillment opened up the possibility that there was something else to learn from them. It might be for that reason that the prophecy became a book.

Given that an "oracle" is something spoken, the subsequent expressions in 1:1 constitute an alternative description of what will follow in this prophecy. It is now something written as a book. This is the only prophetic "book" that begins by describing itself thus, though the word does appears within other prophetic books, especially in Jeremiah 36. Given the brevity of this prophecy, "book" is an odd English word, but the Hebrew *sefer* covers any written document. The book shows no awareness of how Babylon turned from being Yahweh's means of vanquishing Assyria to being itself Judah's oppressor. This may indicate that it reached its final form before that happened, within about a decade after 612 (Floyd, *The Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 20).

Yet once the prophecy has become a book, the way names occur in it gains another significance. Nineveh is explicitly mentioned only in 1:1; 2:8; and 3:7. The NIV adds further references in 1:11, 14; 2:1 (its small square brackets mark these); the TNIV adds another in 2:5. Assyria is explicitly mentioned only in 3:18. The NIV is doubtless right that Nahum has Nineveh and Assyria in mind all the way through, but the absence of concrete references invites readers to see that the prophecy has broader significance. It parallels the way Isaiah 13:1 announces that what follows concerns Babylon, but Babylon and its conquerors are then not mentioned through Isaiah 13:2–16. Likewise Isaiah 40:1–43:13 has Babylon and Cyrus in mind, but they are unmentioned until Isaiah 43:14–21 and 44:24–45:7. Each time, the prophecy invites readers to see the fall of one empire as an instance of a pattern which they can then look to see repeated. It is the assumption worked out in a different way in the visions of four empires in Daniel 2 and 7. So Nahum is immediately about the fall of Assyria, but it has implications for the destiny of other empires. We might see this assumption worked out in another way in the Nahum "Pesher" from Qumran, 4Q169. The word pesher here denotes a commentary that interprets a biblical book section by section and does so by seeing it as looking forward to the End, which is reckoned to be arriving in the time of the commentators. In the Nahum pesher, Assyria becomes the Gentile empire that rules Palestine in the first century B.C., the Qumran community's own time; Assyria thus stands for Rome.

The Empire Writes Back

Nahum invites people to see the coming fall of Nineveh as an expression of an aspect of Yahweh's character and an embodiment of a pattern of behavior, and to believe on that basis that it will take place. If the prophecy refers back to Jerusalem's deliverance from Sennacherib, this enhances that argument. But it

also thereby invites subsequent generations to look in the same way at the fall of Nineveh that it announces, which is now past; to have their faith built up further on that basis; and to believe that Yahweh will act that way again, for instance in putting Babylon down. So the book looks some way back and also some way forward. Prophecies concerning the Assyrians in Isaiah 1–39, which were vindicated by events, form the basis on which Nahum encourages people to believe that Yahweh will act again and finally against Nineveh. And one can indeed then imagine the actual book coming into being after the fall of Nineveh, when that event has in turn proved the truth of these prophecies, so that it could stand as a further piece of prophecy that was instructive for the future. Its influence on Isaiah 40–55 is then an indication of this process being effective; the fall of Babylon does further illustrate the pattern Nahum announces.

The form of the prophecy, with its paucity of explicit references to Nineveh and its pointers to the fall of Nineveh being just one instance of a pattern in Yahweh's dealings with the world, points to its scary significance for many twenty-first-century readers. In the context of modernity, Western readers have commonly disliked the book for its picture of Yahweh's violent judgment. They have critiqued Nahum as a nationalist prophet, one who represents the same viewpoint as false prophets such as Hananiah (so J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* p. 281). It does not appear in church lectionaries; it is not often read in church. This is both wise and unwise, because the book indirectly addresses Western imperial powers such as Britain and the United States, who have reason to fear the nationalism of less powerful peoples (who can do little about their subservience, but who can hope and pray). Francisco García-Treto comments that better than confronting Assyria with the inevitability of its fall "would be to work for a context of cooperation and mutual support" ("The Book of Nahum," p. 616). It is often the case that people in power wish to urge moderation, peacefulness, and cooperation on people who are not in power. And we have noted that Nahum does not urge rebellion on Judah. But he does reckon that a process of conscientization or consciousness-raising needs to happen, whereby the colonized power can cut the imperial power down in its thinking, pending the day when Yahweh cuts it down politically.

So Nahum declares the destiny of imperial powers. Western readers have reckoned that Nahum's message is hard to reconcile with Jesus' message of peace. Yet Jesus speaks much of God's violent judgment. A key assumption that Nahum shares with other prophets is that Yahweh works through the violence of nations such as the Babylonians and the Medes and that this is a consistent

feature of Yahweh's involvement in the world. The alternative view would be that God is not involved in the rise and fall of empires. Nahum's God is a God of love who does not leave people under the sway of violent oppressors forever.

Major powers do have to be wary lest the declarations of Nahum come to provide them with ideological support for their actions in the world. They then make themselves even more open to critique. But Nahum provides less powerful peoples, too, with no encouragement to attack their overlords. The prophecies do provide them with hope that God will not leave them under this domination forever.

The bulk of the contents of Nahum comes from a colonial context; Judah is under the control of the empire. As a book, Nahum may come after the fall of Nineveh and thus from a literally post-colonial moment, though it will turn out to be a moment between two empires. In this document, then, "The empire writes back with a vengeance" (the title of an article by Salman Rushdie in the London *Times,* July 3, 1982). But in Nahum it does not write back "to the center" (as an adapted version of the phrase goes on). It writes for itself. The book reflects the classic colonial experiences of invasion, powerlessness, oppression, and also (in Ephraim's case) of displacement, and insists that these will not be the end. It resists any pressure to use the empire's language (contrast Isa. 36:11!) and insists on holding on to its own way of looking at itself.

So Nahum is divinely-inspired resistance literature, which Wilhelm Wessels ("Nahum") thus compares with anti-apartheid literature in South Africa. Its markedly poetic nature contributes to this function; oddly, we might think, powerful poetry often emerges from oppressed societies. The hyperbole utilized in describing Yahweh and in describing Assyria's fate creates before people's imagination a different world from the one people experience at the moment and promises that this world will become a reality.

§1 Yahweh's Commitment to Exact Redress (Nah. 1:1–15)

After the introduction in verse 1, Nahum begins by expounding the theological truths that undergird his message. Verses 2–8 are rather like a psalm of praise, though in form and content there is a significant difference between verses 2–3a and 3b–8. The significant principle asserted in verses 2–8 is that Yahweh is active in the world punishing nations that behave as **his foes . . . his enemies** (v. 2). After the opening description of Yahweh, Nahum goes on to describe in metaphorical terms what it looks like when Yahweh intervenes in the world to do that (vv. 3b–6). And he adds that while those enemies cannot escape this judgment, it is possible to take refuge with God and find protection when this judgment comes about. Thus **the LORD is good** (v. 7) pairs with **the LORD is a jealous and avenging God** (v. 2) as a bracket round the verses. Nahum's conviction that God punishes nations will be confirmed in the New Testament when Jesus describes himself sending nations into eternal fire, though Nahum's declarations are less frightening than Jesus' as Nahum is talking about a mere this-worldly judgment.

Between the introduction in verse 1 and the reference to Judah in the last verse, there are no references to specific peoples. The NIV adds references to Nineveh in verses 8, 11, and 14, and a reference to Judah in verse 12. Verses 1 and 15 indicate that the NIV is right that Nahum is especially concerned with Nineveh and Judah, but its small brackets indicate that these references to Nineveh and Judah are the NIV's additions. Nahum is here expounding principles. In verses 2–8 Nahum speaks of Yahweh's enemies, not Judah's, and the openness of his language about Yahweh's enemies means Judah would have to consider the possibility that it could count as one of the enemies with which Yahweh was angry. The question is whether a nation is formulating policies that work against Yahweh's purposes and simply serve itself. Nor is there any suggestion that Judah is involved in bringing judgment on Yahweh's foes. Usually in the Prophets God works via historical processes that simply involve the big empires.

Verses 2–8 are partially alphabetical. Verse 2 begins with *alef* (*ʾēl,* **God**). Verse 3b almost begins with *bet* (*besufah,* **in the whirlwind**). Verse 4 begins with *gimel* (*goʿer,* **He rebukes**). Verse 5 begins with *he* (*harim,* **The mountains**). Verse 6 almost begins with *zayin* (*zaʿmo,* **his indignation**). Verse 6b begins with *khet* (*khamato,* **His wrath**). Verse 7 begins with *tet* (*tob,* **good**). Verse 7b begins with *vav* (*veyodeaʿ,* [and] **He cares**). Verse 8b begins with *kaf* (*kalah,* **an end**). There are a number of alphabetical poems in the OT, though most are psalms (Lam. 1–4 are other examples). So this is an aspect of the hymn-like nature of verses 1–8 and it may support the suggestion that Nahum delivered his prophecy in the context of worship. The fact that the sequence is imperfect (the actual order in the alphabet is *ʾ, b, g, d, h, v, z, kh, t, y, k*) is not an indication of corruption in the text; it is common for alphabetical poems in the OT to work only in partial fashion. The fact that the alphabetical sequence stops after verse 8 is one indication that a new section begins at verse 9.

1:1 / In general terms, this opening description parallels that of other prophetic books, though it has distinctive features. Its use of the word **oracle** (*massaʾ*) compares with Habakkuk and Malachi. Habakkuk parallels Nahum in being an oracle concerning a foreign people; Malachi parallels Nahum in having a double heading in which the description of it as an oracle is followed up by another description. But in Nahum the explicit description of it as a proclamation concerning a foreign city is unique, as is the second description of it as a **book.** On the terms the verse uses, see further the introduction to Nahum above.

1:2–3a / Nahum begins by declaring the good news that Yahweh is a **jealous** God. Being jealous or passionate or zealous (*qannoʾ*) is one of the marks of being a real person. As God, Yahweh is not an abstract principle or a being remote from emotions, but one with the whole gamut of strong feelings that characterize a person. So when people despise Yahweh or treat other people wrongly, that arouses strong feelings in Yahweh, the kind that drive Yahweh to take action rather than sit back and do nothing (e.g., Isa. 9:7; 37:32; 42:13; cf. John 2:17). The further good news is that Yahweh is a God who takes redress (*naqam*). The NIV has **avenging,** which might be misleading. The context indicates that Yahweh indeed has the strong feelings associated with vengeance, but in the OT the notion of vengeance belongs in the context of law. It suggests exacting the appropriate redress from someone who has wronged a member of your family,

so as to put things right between people. It is not merely the expression of private feelings of vindictiveness. Applied to God, "vengeance is Yahweh's righting of wrongs" (O'Brien, *Nahum,* p. 48; cf. Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). But Yahweh takes redress on "his foes . . . his enemies." Nahum does not indicate here how they behave as Yahweh's enemies; he will give us some idea of this in due course. There is no indication here that Yahweh is taking action because these people have done wrong by Israel. No doubt that is implicit, but the explicit point is that they are *Yahweh's* enemies.

The implementation of proper redress is helped if a person is **filled with wrath** (cf. Rom. 12:19, where Paul associates God's wrath and God's vengeance). Literally, Yahweh is "master/owner of wrath" or expert in wrath, as Joseph is an "expert in dreams" or an archer is an "expert in arrows" (Gen. 37:19; 49:23). Wrath provides the energy that makes people take proper action that they might not take if they were not so furious. Further, Yahweh is one who **maintains his wrath.** This kind of energy needs to be safeguarded, developed, harnessed, and not allowed to wane, if one is to do the right thing in the world. It is often tempting not to be wrathful when we should be; it is easier to be nice. Like human beings, Yahweh prefers being merciful but sometimes has to resist that temptation. Isaiah 28:21 notes that acting in wrath is God's "strange work"; it is alien to God. And Lamentations 3:33 notes that God brings affliction only unwillingly—literally, "not from the heart." It is against God's central nature.

The word for **God** in verse 2 is *'el,* not the regular *'elohim.* Nahum's usage thus corresponds to that when Moses speaks of Yahweh as a jealous God (e.g., Exod. 34:14), and also when Yahweh provides a personal self-description after the golden calf incident (Exod. 34:6). In verse 3, Nahum goes on to allude to that self-revelation more directly in describing Yahweh as **slow to anger** and as one who **will not leave the guilty unpunished.** In Exodus the emphasis lies on the slowness of Yahweh's anger, more literally the length of that anger (that is, the length of time before it comes into play); compare the English expressions "long-suffering" and "short-tempered." In Nahum, the emphasis lies on the fact that Yahweh may put off expressing anger, but will not do so forever.

That is underlined by his extra expression: Yahweh is slow to anger but **great in power.** This underscores the contrast with Exodus, which has "slow to anger, and abounding in love." When Yahweh stops being long-suffering, Yahweh acts with force. The expression "great in power" suggests a more direct link with the later occasion when Moses refers back to Yahweh's self-revelation, in Numbers 14:17–19, which Moses introduces with the wish that Yahweh may show great

power (NIV has "may the Lord's strength be displayed").

Nahum then jumps over the references to Yahweh's compassion, grace, love, faithfulness, and forgiveness in Exodus and Numbers, and goes straight on to the declaration that Yahweh "will not leave the guilty unpunished"; more literally, Yahweh "certainly does not acquit." Exodus and Numbers leave in tension the "positive" and "negative" statements, the ones relating to Yahweh's grace and Yahweh's punishment; the stories in Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 illustrate both. In relation to Nineveh, Jonah picks up on the positive (Jonah 4:2); Nahum picks up on the negative. The historical context of Jonah's ministry in the ninth century and of Nahum's in the seventh century, and the literary context of Nahum's book following Jonah, might imply that Jonah indicates that Nineveh had its chance but Nahum indicates that it then failed to take it. But the likely historical contexts of the two books reopen that question, given that Jonah is usually dated after Nahum. Even if is too late for Nineveh, other superpowers always have the choice of Jonah or Nahum before them.

Solemnly, the fact that both sides of that description of Yahweh originally applied to Israel is a first indication that the people of Judah have to listen to Nahum's message carefully. The theological principles that Nahum expounds can work against them as well as for them. Yahweh **takes vengeance on his foes;** and it is quite possible for Israel to come to belong to that category. Indeed, Nahum's language here offers the first of a number of links with Isaiah. In Isaiah 1:24 Yahweh declares, "I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies." And there, the Judeans are Yahweh's foes and enemies. Nahum reminds the Judeans that this does not merely apply to them; Isaiah reminds them that it can apply to them.

1:3b–6 / After the theological definitions in verses 2–3a, Nahum goes on to metaphorical description of how it looks when Yahweh comes. In keeping with Middle-Eastern and biblical description, initially he pictures that in terms of the arrival of a fearsome **storm** (v. 3b) whose effect can be to shake the ground and cause catastrophic landslides in **the hills** (v. 5). His listeners would be familiar with this from regular experience in winter, from the texts they heard in worship (especially the Psalms), and from the words of other prophets (e.g., Pss. 50:3; 83:13–14; Isa. 28:2; 29:6; Jer. 23:19). Alternatively, one can picture the effect of Yahweh's coming by analogy with the way the intense heat of the desert wind in summer can wither crops and pasturage, even in the most fertile, flourishing, and beautiful areas of the country (v. 4b). The place names suggest territory both east

and west of the Jordan (the Golan and the hills above Haifa), and also the far north. But the language is not merely naturalistic. Talk of rebuking and drying up sea and rivers (v. 4a) recalls the Red Sea event and the Jordan crossing, recalls other Middle-Eastern cultures' stories about their gods, and recalls other OT appeals to their imagery. Those stories told of a divine victory over the dynamic power of the sea; the oz saw that achieved at creation, at the Red Sea, and the Jordan. Nahum sees it as achieved again when Yahweh acts in history. There is no suggestion that Nahum is referring to "eschatological" events, events associated with the ultimate consummation of Yahweh's purpose in history in the future, at the End. Or if Nahum is referring to that ultimate consummation, he is doing so in order to encourage his hearers to see the historical events he is about to describe as constituting a particular embodiment of that ultimate purpose. History does not give way to eschatology; eschatology gives way to history.

The subsection comprising verses 3b–6 closes with a further assertion concerning the way this event will give expression to Yahweh's fury. Verse 6 puts it in three ways. Yahweh expresses **indignation,** a sense of outrage. Yahweh burns with anger (NIV paraphrases as **fierce anger**); "anger" is the Hebrew word for nostril, so that the expression suggests snorting with anger, but the reference to burning denotes the destructive effect of the anger rather than merely the heat inside the person. To underline the point, Yahweh's **wrath** pours out **like fire.** And the result is that **rocks** shatter. The word for rock is one that commonly denotes a high rock on which one takes refuge; it is thus a term used to describe God (e.g., Isa. 17:10; Hab. 1:12). Verse 7 will go on to refer to Yahweh as a refuge, and this invites us to reckon that this is part of the point here in verse 6. With irony, Isaiah urged people to take refuge in the rock from Yahweh's wrath (Isa. 2:10, 19, 21). Nahum makes explicit that this will be futile. The very crags will shatter before Yahweh rather than collude with attempts to turn them into refuges from Yahweh.

Most of the finite verbs through verses 3b–6 are in the *qatal* ("perfect"); one might translate "he has made all the rivers run dry. . . . The mountains have quaked and the hills have melted away. The earth has trembled. . . . His wrath has poured out like fire; the rocks have shattered before him." Visibly they have not done that, even metaphorically. But Nahum has seen them do that in his vision or his mind's eye. He knows that Yahweh is set on expressing wrath in this way. It is so real it can be spoken of as already actual.

1:7–8 / There *is* such a thing as a rock that can provide refuge in times of trouble; or rather, there is such a person. Yahweh is **good.** This brief declaration stands out for its conciseness; it parallels Psalm 34:8; 100:5; 135:3. It says all that needs to be said. The word for **refuge,** *maʿoz,* could link both with the verb *ʿuz* and the verb *ʿazaz,* the one meaning "take refuge," the other "be strong." So the noun can mean "refuge" or "strength," or can combine both connotations. Yahweh is someone strong who provides people with a trustworthy safe place in times of trouble. Elsewhere Yahweh is a strong crag or rock, "a crag of strength/refuge" (Ps. 31:2; Isa. 17:10; cf. also 2 Sam. 22:32–33). Here Yahweh's being people's refuge or strength is set over against the ultimate unreliability of the rocks people might be inclined to trust in (v. 6). It also correlates to the opening description of Yahweh as one who takes redress and is full of wrath. Psalms commonly plead for two actions from Yahweh, the putting down of the suppliants' attackers and the deliverance of the suppliants themselves. These are the two sides of one coin. So they are in Nahum. Of course this works only if we are the beneficiaries of Yahweh's acting in redress and wrath (not people on the receiving end of that action) and are people who trust in Yahweh (rather than in other refuges).

The declaration that "Yahweh is good" is spelled out by **He cares for those who trust in him.** Literally, Yahweh "knows" or "acknowledges" them. Nahum uses the ordinary verb for knowing, which often suggests recognizing, paying attention to, and caring for (see Amos 3:2). The word for "trust" is not the usual one but another verb that suggests taking refuge (cf. NRSV), like Ruth taking refuge under Yahweh's wings (Ruth 2:12). Israel had sometimes been inclined to take refuge in resources such as those offered by the Egyptians (Isa. 30:2), but experience suggests it is better to take refuge in Yahweh than in human resources, even impressive ones (Ps. 118:8–9). That is especially so when it is Yahweh who is bringing the trouble. In the context of **an overwhelming flood** and the prospect of being swept into the **darkness** of death, the only realistic option is to flee to the one who brings the trouble.

We have noted that there is no overt suggestion in verses 2–6 that the declaration concerning Yahweh's punishment relates to Judah's own longing for redress; it relates to the putting down of Yahweh's enemies, not Judah's. If Judah appears in chapter 1, it is here in verses 7–8. What Judah is encouraged to look to Yahweh for is not vengeance but protection. Yet even here Judah is not mentioned. The continuing absence of any names in the prophecy means that both the people of Jerusalem and the people of Nineveh have to decide whether

they want to be people to whom verse 7 applies or people to whom verse 8 applies. The antithesis and the implied choice are paralleled in Isaiah 50:10–11.

1:9–11 / Now for the first time Nahum offers some indication of what makes foes into foes. **Plot against** is an over-translation. The verb is a regular one meaning think, think up, or plan (KJV has "imagine") and the preposition is *'el,* which has broad meaning. Isaiah 10:7 uses the verb (in the *qal,* not the *pi'el* as here) to refer to Assyria's plans to invade Israel to extend its empire. So Nahum is asking something like "What do you people think about Yahweh?"

Although the NIV has **they** in the main text of verse 9, the margin indicates that the verb is actually second person; it addresses "you." Who are the "you"? Whom is Nahum addressing? In adding the word **foes,** the NIV's marginal reading indicates the assumption that it is the Assyrians. One might then see some irony about the answer Nahum imagines them giving: "He is one who is bringing about an end" (the verb is a participle). The parallel with Isaiah suggests that this could indeed be what Nahum imagines Assyria thinking; at least, Isaiah pictures Assyria saying this. Perhaps cynically, perhaps with ecumenical broadmindedness, the Assyrian king in Isaiah's day told the Jerusalemites that Yahweh had sent him to destroy Judah (Isa. 36:10). Nahum puts on the lips of Yahweh's foes an equivalent theological statement: they say Yahweh is bringing about a total destruction of Judean strength, of the kind Sennacherib tried to effect, and almost achieved. It will be one that will thus mean **trouble will not come a second time.** There will be a final solution to the Judean problem. Assyria will not have to come to deal with trouble in Judah or bring trouble to Judah again. The irony is that whereas the Assyrians are thinking in terms of the total destruction of Judah, what Yahweh has in mind is the total destruction of Assyria; the words in fact almost repeat a line from verse 8. No, Assyria will not cause trouble for Judah again.

But in the absence of indications to the contrary, it would be more natural to reckon that a prophet's "you" speaks to the Judeans themselves; it is the third-person statements in verse 10 that then refer to the Assyrians. For the Judeans, the implication of the question and its answer is that they find it hard to believe that Yahweh is going to take action against Assyria that will finally terminate Assyria's capacity to cause trouble to Judah. There are further parallels with the book of Isaiah. Following on his ironic comments about rocks, Isaiah asks in what way humanity is to be "thought about" (Isa. 2:22), then critiques the way Assyria "thinks" about itself and about what Yahweh is doing through it (Isa.

10:7). Later the book critiques the exiles' "thoughts" about Yahweh's intention to restore them by means of Persia's conquest of Babylon (Isa. 55:7–9); there, too, there is a clash between Yahweh's thinking and the Judeans' thinking about the superpower, as there was in Nahum's day, though in rather a different connection. Here in verses 9–11, once again the lack of any concrete reference to Nineveh or Assyria facilitates the words' being applied to other situations than the one that directly confronts Nahum and his contemporaries.

Verse 10 then describes the result of Yahweh's act in a series of vivid images juxtaposed with jerkiness, with a cumulative effect. Yahweh's victims will be like people **entangled among thorns** or like tangled thorns. They will be like people rendered incapable through drink, perhaps drink that has been spiked, a standard image for divine judgment; they will have drunk the wine of Yahweh's wrath. They will be **consumed like dry stubble,** burnt up with frightening ferocity, another standard image for the effect of Yahweh's action. This verb in the last line is the only finite verb in the verse; it is again *qatal* ("perfect"), so that the verse once more speaks of the catastrophe as if it has already happened.

In verse 11, the NIV's gloss again plausibly assumes that in Nahum's context Nineveh is a city from which someone has **come forth,** and presumably it is the Assyrian king who has done so. This might then be a reference to Sennacherib's expedition to Judah in Hezekiah's reign (cf. Isa. 36–37), or to one of the seventh-century expeditions to Egypt by Ashurbanipal or his army. But Nahum continues to provide no names, so the prophecy is not limited to this application. The verse takes up the verb "plot," or rather "think," from verse 9, and uses it to indicate something of the rationale for Yahweh's act of judgment by tweaking the earlier expression in various ways. Here the verb has a direct object; the verse refers to thinking up **evil.** And the different preposition that follows (now *ʿal* not *ʾel*) makes more explicit that it refers to thinking something up **against** Yahweh. One **who plots** evil is then re-described as one who **counsels wickedness.** "Counsel" is again a word that reminds us of Isaiah, who uses this verb (for instance) to describe Yahweh having made a plan to crush Assyria (Isa. 14:24–27). Nahum thus again speaks with irony. It is the job of a king to make plans, and Isaiah 7:5 speaks specifically about some kings who are making wicked plans (using expressions related to Nahum's) against Judah. But this king will find that there is a higher authority making plans concerning his destiny. And that is because he plans "evil" and counsels "wickedness" (*beliyaʿal*). Nahum's hearers could understand that word to mean "worthlessness" (*beli* and *yaʿal*). But the preceding talk of "an overwhelming flood" and the "darkness" of death (v. 8)

might make them think about Death as the one who swallows up (*bala*ʿ) and/or of not being able to come up from the realm of death (*beli* and ʿ*alah*).

But is it Nineveh from which the one who counseled wickedness came forth? In verse 15 it will be explicit that the feminine singular entity that Nahum there addresses is Judah, and this would make sense here. The verse then might refer back to that humiliated departure from Jerusalem by Sennacherib (cf. Isa. 36–37), which would be an evidence to support the prophet's coming declaration that the Assyrian monarchy will finally fall (v. 14). Or might the one who came forth who counseled wickedness be Manasseh or Amon? It could then be Judah that experiences the destruction described in verse 8. Indeed, soon after Nahum's day it does so.

1:12–13 / The introduction **This is what the LORD says** suggests that verse 12 marks a new start, and the change in subject matter fits with this. Verses 2–11 focused on Yahweh and "his foes . . . his enemies." Perhaps Judah needed to be asking "Is it I?" It is quite likely that Judah was addressed in verses 9–11, and no doubt it was in the wings throughout, but it was not the reason for Yahweh's taking action against those enemies. Here Judah is more clearly on the stage alongside Yahweh and alongside the enemies of Yahweh, who are also Judah's enemies. But again, this is still a matter of inference until it becomes explicit in the chapter's very last verse. Judah still has to be careful about the way it reads verses 12–14.

The introduction has another rhetorical significance. It draws our attention to the fact that verses 2–11 were Nahum's words, not Yahweh's. Of course at another level they were Yahweh's words; verse 1 implies that everything in the book comes from Yahweh. But Nahum speaks as if he framed the words in verses 2–11; he refers to Yahweh in the third person. Now he speaks as one who passes on words he has heard Yahweh speak, and he uses the form of introduction that a king's representative uses. Once again, there is an ironic link with Isaiah, where the Assyrian king's envoy begins his message to the Judean king's ministers, "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says" (Isa. 36:4). Here, Nahum addresses Judah concerning the Assyrians, speaking as the representative of Yahweh and bringing the words of the *real* great king. Perhaps Nahum still made up the words, as the Assyrian king's representative did; they do not thereby lose authority. Indeed, the introduction underscores that authority. Or perhaps he has sensed words in his head that he did not devise; he has heard Yahweh actually speak the words that follow.

In verse 12a Yahweh first goes on to summarize the drift of verses 2–11, confirming that Nahum's words did express Yahweh's thinking. At this moment the Assyrians are **unscathed and numerous,** literally "full and many." They have lost none of their troops, and they are a mighty force. But **they will be cut off and pass away.** Yahweh again uses *qatal* ("perfect") verbs, which would literally suggest that their being unscathed and numerous is past and that the cutting off has already happened (compare the comment on vv. 3b–6). The NIV plausibly assumes once again that the use of this form of the verb suggests that the event is not literally past but that it is so certain it can be spoken of as actual, because it is actual in Yahweh's purpose.

After the reprise of verses 2–11, Yahweh goes on to the new feature of verses 12–15. In verse 12 the NIV adds reference to Judah to make explicit that Yahweh now addresses the Judeans rather than the Assyrians; verse 15 supports this interpretation. Although it is Assyria that has directly **afflicted** Judah (*ʿanah* in the *piʿel*), Assyria was Yahweh's agent, as it claimed in Isaiah (though "afflicting" is not particularly Isaianic language). But the time when it had that role is coming to an end. The time of affliction is over.

We should not read too much into the **no more.** Over coming decades Yahweh will afflict Judah again by means of Babylon when Judah again rebels against Yahweh (cf. Lam. 3:33; Isa. 60:14 and 64:12 also use the verb of Yahweh and of human oppressors). But that is outside the purview. The present generation can rejoice that the Assyrian **yoke** and the Assyrian **shackles** (likely the straps that held the yoke in place) are as good as broken.

1:14–15 / After addressing a feminine entity in verses 12–13, Yahweh turns in a different direction and addresses a masculine entity. The NIV's addition of **Nineveh** can hardly be right, as the city would be addressed with the feminine; the masculine pronoun suggests a reference to the Assyrian king. Yahweh confronts him in such a way that Judah can overhear something that is good news for it. While verses 14–15 thus address Judah only indirectly, they are otherwise parallel to verses 12–13, comprising Nahum's introduction to Yahweh's words, a declaration concerning the oppressor, and some lines that spell out how this is good news for Judah.

There is yet more irony about Nahum's words of introduction. Verse 11 spoke of someone who had made plans "against" Yahweh; perhaps the reference was to those very plans of Sennacherib that Isaiah relates (Isa. 36–37). Now Yahweh has given a command "against" the king (NIV has **concerning,** but it is the same

Hebrew preposition).

There will be three aspects to his punishment. First, he will be the end of his dynasty; literally, "it will not sow itself from your name again." His sons will not succeed him on the throne. Second, the images of his gods will be destroyed; Assyria will be treated the way they had treated other peoples. Yahweh's deity will have been vindicated. Third, Yahweh will prepare his grave. This might seem an honor; Yahweh apparently looked after the burial of his servant Moses. But in this case it is because **you are vile,** in the sense of reviled and of no importance. Instead of being the beneficiary of a great state funeral, no one will want to bury him, so Yahweh will have to.

All this bad news for the king is good news for Judah. Yahweh goes on to invite Judah to imagine a messenger hastening over the mountains toward Jerusalem bringing the **good news.** Literally the verb simply means "bring news," but if there is any doubt as to what kind of news it is, the parallel line removes it. It is news of **peace,** *shalom,* the return of well-being to the city, because the Assyrian king is dead. The exhortation to **Celebrate your festivals** presupposes that the people will be able to do this with new fervor in light of this new demonstration of Yahweh's power and commitment. People will have been praying for Yahweh to grant them release and making **vows** to Yahweh concerning the offerings they will bring when Yahweh does that, and now they can **fulfill** them (cf. Pss. 22:25; 116:14, 18). This **wicked** ruler will never again be able to **invade** Judah. Literally, "wickedness" will not again do so; the word is the same as in verse 11. Not only did he plan wickedness; he *was* wickedness. The NIV has **they will be completely destroyed,** but the last line continues to be masculine singular and it is more natural to take it to continue to refer to the king. The last verse of Nahum will make all this more explicit.

Nahum's words are taken up in Isaiah 52:1, 7–10 (v. 4 there also refers to Assyria; and see also 40:9–11). That prophecy addresses the Judeans just before the fall of Babylon and the release of the Judeans from exile, illustrating the principle that Nahum's words do not relate merely to the single event of the fall of Nineveh.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / Oracle: *massa*' can also mean "burden" and Jer. 23:33–38 plays with the word's double meaning, but in general the use of the word to mean a prophetic pronouncement does not imply that connotation, and

BDB assumes there are two separate words.

1:2 / In the last line, there is no Heb. word for "his wrath"; the NIV plausibly assumes that "his wrath" carries over from the earlier line. But Akkadian has a verb *nadaru* which means "be wild, go on the rampage" that is especially associated with the activity of supernatural figures. The NJPS seems to assume that *natar* (NIV "maintains") here is cognate with that verb, and the TNIV "vents his wrath" may make the same assumption. See also *HALOT, DCH.* That would bring the verse to a fine climax (on its structure, see under "Nahum the Poet" above).

1:3 / For **and great in power** the TNIV has "but great in power." One has to deduce from the context whether the conjunction *vav* means "and" or "but." Here the NIV follows the meaning in Exodus and Numbers, where the next expression is "and abounding in steadfast love." But the TNIV is surely right that Nahum utilizes the breadth of meaning in *vav.* The NJPS sees "great in power" in Numbers and in Nahum as a reference to Yahweh's great self-control or "forbearance," but this involves some reading into the expression. In Numbers Moses has been urging Yahweh not to give the impression of being unable to bring Israel into the land, and more likely this is the power Moses goes on to affirm. But whatever the meaning in Numbers, for Nahum the expression likely refers to Yahweh's power to act in judgment.

1:7–8 / The MT takes the six lines as two triplets and thus two verses. The NIV reworks them as three couplets; couplets are more usual in Hebrew poetry. But in the content of the lines, the MT's arrangement makes sense; and vv. 9–11 seem to be further triplets.

1:7 / The first line is rather short. The LXX has "to people who wait for him," which makes for a more regular line and might have dropped out of the MT. But the LXX may have filled out the line from Lam. 3:25, and the MT draws attention to its assertion by its brevity. In the second line, more literally Yahweh is a refuge in "the day of trouble." Sometimes the context indicates that "the day of trouble" is "the day of Yahweh" (Obad. 12, 14; Zeph. 1:14–15; cf. also Hab. 3:16). But the expression can be used less technically (Pss. 20:1; 50:15; 77:2; 86:7; Prov. 24:10; Isa. 37:3; Jer. 16:19), and that fits the general statement here.

1:8 / The markers around "Nineveh" indicate that the NIV added this word. The Heb. has "her/its place" (*meqomah*); the NIV presumably assumes "she/it" is Nineveh. Eaton (*Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah,* p. 60; cf. Lanner, *"Who Will Lament Her?"*) suggests it is Ishtar, Nineveh's patron goddess whose worship also spread through Syria and Palestine as a result of Assyria's own rule there; her "place" is then her temple (cf. v. 14; and see the additional note on 3:4). But whereas other enigmatic pronouns eventually get interpreted in the book by references to Judah or Nineveh or the Assyrian king, there is never any explicit reference to Ishtar. The word can be re-vocalized to read "opposition" (*mequmah;* Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,* p. 43), which makes good sense.

1:9 / If the opening plural verb *tehashebun* is third person (cf. NIV), it is feminine, which is odd in the context. But it can also be parsed as second person masculine (cf. NIV margin).

1:10 / The comment in the NIV margin that "the meaning of the Hebrew for this verse is uncertain" is milder than that of scholars such as J. M. P. Smith, who describes it as "wholly unintelligible" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* p. 294). This applies to the details of the text; the general point is clear enough.

1:11 / **Wickedness:** in later times *beliyaʿal* is a name for the devil, "Belial," but this usage is not otherwise known in the OT and hardly applies here.

1:15 / The MT makes this the first verse of a new chapter, and for 1:15–2:13, printed Hebrew Bibles enumerate the verses as 2:1–14. More likely the English versions are right to take v. 15 as the end of ch. 1.

§2 The City's Fall (Nah. 2:1–13)

Chapter 2 describes an attack on a city. Once again there is just one indication that the city is Nineveh (v. 8). For the most part the account could apply to any city, and Judeans would be wise to reflect on the way it might apply to Jerusalem; it is quite similar to prophetic threats concerning Jerusalem (see, for instance, Isa. 10:28–34). Indeed, the way it follows straight on from 1:15 pushes us in that direction, especially if we read it in light of the Masoretes' chapter division where chapter 2 begins with what English translations treat as the last verse in chapter 1 (see the additional note on 1:15).

One could imagine that the picture describes something happening before the prophet's eyes, and in a sense it does so, but it has not yet actually happened; it takes place before the prophet's inner eye. Nahum shares a vision with us. The fact that the event is literally future becomes explicit in the last verse.

2:1–2 / The first two verses introduce the picture; the relationship between them is a little like that between 1:12a and 12b–13 and between 1:14 and 15. In each of these cases bad news for one entity is followed by correlative good news for its former victim.

Literally, the attacker *has* advanced on the city. Dramatically, with its people we await its actual attack. There are two forms of preparation that the city needs to undertake as it braces itself for this attack. There are practical preparations: making sure the city's physical defenses are in good order and watching out for when the attackers make their move. There is also a psychological component, summoning up inner strength for the battle. The exhortation is issued in breathless, urgent, asyndetic form, all in infinitives, as if there is hardly time to work out the grammatically precise form of the word or as if all that is needed is the idea that the verb conveys (see the comments on "Nahum the Poet"). But there is some irony about it, because all this preparation is going to get the city nowhere. The city is doomed. This is hinted by the opening word **An attacker,** which is more literally "a scatterer," someone who will not merely attack (and might then fail) but someone who will scatter the city's army. That is underscored by the fact that actually Yahweh is the regular agent of scattering in

the OT, and this reference makes sense here. The reference to this scatterer thus takes up the description of Yahweh through chapter 1. The word also suggests Judah's own need to be wary of this prophecy. "Scattering" is what Deuteronomy warns could happen to the people of Israel itself (Deut. 4:27), and it is what does happen to Jerusalem's forces when the city falls (2 Kgs. 25:5).

But if verse 1 once applied to Judah, it does so no longer. The one-time scatterer is now the restorer, or the scatterer of Nineveh is by the same act the restorer of Judah (v. 2). All the preparation that verse 1 urged on the city is indeed pointless because of the intention that Yahweh is implementing. Verse 2 thus makes explicit the good news for Israel. Once again the event is described as if it had already happened (lit., "Yahweh *has* restored"). More strikingly, the verse affirms that this restoration applies to both the northern and southern kingdoms. That is, whereas **Jacob** and **Israel** are commonly names that both refer to the entire people of Jacob-Israel, here the **like** implies that they are distinguished. **The splendor** of Jacob is a term for the northern kingdom, and perhaps especially for its capital, in Amos 6:8; 8:7 (NIV has "the pride of Jacob" there). The nation was put out of existence and its capital destroyed by Assyria in 721 B.C. "Israel" then here describes the southern kingdom, which inherits this term as a theological description of its status as the people of Yahweh once Ephraim (for which "Israel" was the political title) has met that fate. Indeed, it might be that here both terms apply to Ephraim, so that 2:2 complements 1:15. Nahum's promise is that the reversal correlative to the demise of Assyria is that the northern kingdom, which was its victim, is restored along with the southern kingdom, which has not been destroyed but has had its religious and political life devastated by Assyrian control.

2:3–10 / The visionary goes on to describe the events that unfold before his inner eye, speaking now in the present tense (in Heb. participles and "imperfect" verbs) and once again conveying a vivid and breathless impression of the impressive, frightening, exciting rush of events.

The "he," the army's commander, of verses 3 and 5 might be the human commander-in-chief of the attacking army. But in verse 1 the scatterer was probably Yahweh and verse 2 explicitly referred to Yahweh. It is therefore natural to take the commander-in-chief in verses 3 and 5 to be Yahweh. This is the case in passages such as Isaiah 13:2–16, which has a number of points of comparison with Nahum. This army that will turn out to be the Babylonians and Medes when Nineveh falls, or the Babylonians when Jerusalem falls, or the

Medes and Persians when Babylon falls, is an army that serves Yahweh, not merely its national commander. Perhaps the verses simply describe this earthly army; but perhaps alternatively, or additionally, they describe Yahweh's heavenly army. Their **shields** are **red** and their clothing is **scarlet** because they are covered in the blood of the city's inhabitants (cf. Isa. 1:18, where words related to these two terms describe the sin of the people of Jerusalem, whose hands are full of blood).

Nineveh stands on the bank of the Tigris, with a tributary flowing through the city. Verse 6 may picture the attackers opening the floodgates that protect the city and thus flooding it, or simply entering the city through the **gates** on the side of the city that faces the **river.** "The complex of rivers, dams, dykes, moats, sluices, bridges, walls and gates offers a large field for conjecture as to the precise meaning of the phrase 'gates of the rivers'" (J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* p. 319). But in 1:4 "rivers" carried the overtone of tumultuous cosmic waters that could threaten the stability of the world, which may suggest that Yahweh is letting loose those waters on the city. The **palace** might then be the temple, the same word in Hebrew. And the palace literally "melts," an odd verb to use, but it is the same verb that described the mountains in 1:5. So this confirms that verse 6 is more than simply a prosaic literal description of the way a city such as Nineveh might fall. The city, along with its political and/or religious centers of power, is being overwhelmed by dynamic cosmic forces.

Although the NIV says that the meaning of the opening word in verse 7 is uncertain, the NIV's translation is entirely plausible, especially if we reckon that verses 3–6 have implied Yahweh's involvement in events. It has been **decreed,** or settled, by Yahweh that the city shall fall; fall it does. Like Babylon in Isaiah 47, the city is compared to a woman who is taken from greatness and majesty to humiliation and whose servants, or **slave girls,** are horrified at what happens to their mistress.

Another image is of the city as a pool (v. 8), which in its stillness contrasts with those overwhelming rivers. But it is like a reservoir that has had its plug pulled. Like the slave girls, here the draining waters stand for the city's population, which is disappearing off into exile as the city falls (like the population of Jerusalem when it falls). And here Nineveh is actually named.

Likewise the city's wealth disappears (vv. 9–10a). And all the marshaling of strength (v. 2b) has got the city nowhere (v. 1 0b). Both halves of verse 10 offer further vivid, compact, terse accounts of events and their aftermath (see "Nahum

the Poet" above).

2:11–13 / In yet a third image, Nineveh's army is a pride of **lions** and the city is the **den** to which it returned from its expeditions, bringing its plunder for its people to share in (vv. 11–12). But where now is the den? In this context, some irony attaches to the phrase **with nothing to fear** (more literally, "with no one to make them afraid"). On one hand it is a description of the freedom of predators and the like (e.g., Deut. 28:26; Jer. 7:33), the freedom these predators thought they had, but which they have lost. On the other, it is a recurrent promise to Israel (e.g., Lev. 26:6; Jer. 30:10; 46:27; Ezek. 34:28; Mic. 4:4) of which Assyria thought it could make nonsense; but in the long run it cannot.

As happened in chapter 1, in the first part of this chapter Nahum spoke, and thus referred to Yahweh in the third person, and mostly spoke in the past or present as if things had happened or were happening. Now, however, at the end of the chapter Yahweh speaks, bringing the chapter to a climax and speaking of what is going to happen. This time, the transition to Yahweh's speaking is emphasized by the addition of the phrase **declares the LORD Almighty** (lit., "declaration of Yahweh Armies"). The title is difficult to construe, but clearly enough it designates Yahweh as the one who controls mighty forces, perhaps both the forces of heaven and those on earth. The transition implies the assertion that there is no doubt that Yahweh affirms the declarations in verses 1–12 and no doubt that Yahweh can fulfill the intention announced there.

"I am against you" are Yahweh's frightening words to Nineveh. They confirm that the attacking army is Yahweh's own means of acting, that the fate of the **young lions** is sealed, and that their **prey** are now safe. To put it more literally, whereas the **voices** of Assyria's **messengers** had been heard in Jerusalem in the past (e.g., Isa. 36:13; 37:9), that will not happen again. Whereas Nineveh had been the hub of the world, with its envoys scuttling off in all directions, now all that is over.

Additional Notes §2

2:2 / While there are contexts where "Jacob" refers to Ephraim and "Israel" refers to Judah, only here are the two set over against each other in this way, and it is an odd usage. Perhaps the preposition *k* ("like") is pleonastic or emphatic, suggesting "the very splendor of Israel," so that "Jacob" and "Israel" both refer to the whole people.

2:5 / It is odd to picture the troops stumbling after being summoned. But **summons** is the verb *zakar,* which usually means "be mindful of." Further, there is no word for **yet;** the two lines are simply juxtaposed. That might mean the second is subordinate to the first: "he is mindful of his picked troops when they stumble on their way," and makes allowance for them or encourages them.

2:7 / There are two verbs *galah,* and as the KJV indicates, *gulletah* here (**be exiled;** cf. the noun *golah* in 3:10) could alternatively be translated "be stripped" (cf. 3:5), particularly in this context where the verb's subject is unidentified but feminine.

§3 Yahweh Confronts the Bloody City (Nah. 3:1–19)

Chapters 1 and 2 only hinted at the reasons for Yahweh's anger, but the opening and close of chapter 3 are more concrete. Here Yahweh speaks all through the chapter. Yahweh confronts the city because it is responsible for the deaths of so many people as a result of its desire to accumulate wealth, which has led it into empire-building and war-making. Its apparent strength will not save it.

3:1–4 / Woe is an over-translation; the Hebrew *hoy* resembles English "Oh," which we can use in many contexts with many connotations. One context for *hoy* is mourning (e.g., Jer. 22:18, where NIV translates "alas"), and there is a sense in which that would be appropriate here as Nahum is announcing the death of a city—though the expression of grief would then be somewhat ironic. Verse 7 will ironically lament Nineveh's actual lack of mourners. But *hoy* often introduces a prophetic declaration of horror at wrongdoing (e.g., Isa. 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22), with more the connotations of an aggressive English "Hey!" It attracts the listeners' attention in confrontational fashion. The reason for the aggression is that this is a **city of blood.** The word for "blood" is plural, a common form to indicate bloodshed. There are two ways in which this might be a city of blood. First, the expression recalls the critique that other prophets make of Jerusalem; it would then suggest the way the city's people treat each other. The well-off and powerful people behave in ways that cause the deaths of people without resources and without power. The parallel line indicates that they do not have to wield physical weapons in order to do so. The city is **full of lies;** the well-off and powerful are able to swindle the powerless out of their land and their lives by their deceit. And thus the city is **full of plunder** in the sense that it is full of the results of people robbing one another. The fourth line returns to the first, as **victims** suggests people who have had their flesh torn; it is the word for "prey" in 2:12–13.

Yet before and after verse 1, the critique of the city relates to the way it treated other peoples, and despite the difference in language that may also be the case here. The city is responsible for countless deaths and acts of treachery in its

relationship with other peoples and is full of plunder and prey from its military exploits.

Verses 2–3 then comprise another description of conflict, and another description that is breathless and verb-less (cf. 2:3–5). Here, the context suggests that this is not a conflict that consumes the city but one that the city itself causes. The lines describe the way the city acts as it sends its army out on expeditions. Yet the parallel with those earlier descriptions suggests an irony; this is indeed the kind of conflict that will consume the city itself. It will become the city of blood, the city whose own blood flows, over which anyone who cares for it would proclaim "Oh!" in that other sense.

It might not seem obvious how that involvement in conflict links with the further image for the city's activity that follows (v. 4). The terms **lust** and **harlot** are related (the phrase is *zenune zonah*), and the NIV's translation exposes a problem, because prostitutes are not usually characterized by sexual feelings. They are characteristically women who find themselves in the sex trade because of economic need. It is the lust of men that leads to this being a way they can make a living, and they do not usually have any sexual feelings for their clients. But the Hebrew words translated "lust" and "harlot" do not refer specifically to prostitutes but more generally to women who indulge in sexual activity that ignores the constraints accepted by their society; this would include prostitution but need not be confined to it. Thus words such as "promiscuity" or "immorality" are nearer English equivalents.

It is still the case that the word translated "harlot" is "a slur by which to demean Nineveh" (O'Brien, *Nahum,* p. 68). Why this slur? It is a recurrent one in the prophets (before Nahum's day, see esp. Hos. 1–4; in Nahum's day, see Jer. 2–3; subsequently and most systematically, Ezek. 16 and 23), usually to describe Israel itself. One may guess that it works as a slur because men find that the idea of their wives having sex with another man arouses such strong feelings of shock, anger, and loathing (women may have similar reactions to the idea of their husbands having sex with another woman, but in a patriarchal society it is the men with whom the prophets especially need to communicate if they are to bring about change). All this is underlined when Nahum describes this woman as "good in grace" or "good in graciousness" (NIV translates **alluring**). It is the kind of description a man would rejoice to apply to his wife ("a gracious woman gets honor," says Prov. 11:16 [NRSV]).

In what sense does the city engage in immorality? One context in which the OT speaks about such immorality is in connection with trade, and this may indicate

that giving sex for money is indeed something of which the city is metaphorically accused. One might reckon that the exchange of surplus goods between people would naturally be an activity undertaken within a community for everyone's mutual benefit. It is no more a means of one person increasing their share of these goods than is the case when people make loans to one another; they do this to help each other, not to make more for themselves. Similarly, doing business with one another, where (for instance) one person makes pots, another makes jewelry, another has expertise in medicine, or where one person may have a surplus of grain, another of olives, is meant to be an aspect of living in community. It is only when sharing and exchange comes to focus on profit that it becomes prostitution. Isaiah thus links trade and prostitution in speaking of Tyre (Isa. 23). And Assyria is a great trading nation (cf. v. 16). A major motivation for its carving out an empire in the areas where it does (such as Syria and Palestine) links with furthering trade. It is in empire-building and war-making for the money.

It is in that connection that this beautiful and gracious woman needs also to be **a mistress of sorceries.** The word the NIV translates as "sorceries" and then as **witchcraft** refers to the collecting of information on signs from astrology or other sources about when different actions are wise and when they are not, and on how to counteract signs that suggest calamity is threatened. These are the resources that a Mesopotamian power such as Assyria needs to utilize in order to know when it would be wise to make war in order ultimately to pursue its trading ambitions. The subordination of everything to profit extends far beyond the mere spoiling of community relationships. The city has traded peoples, **enslaved nations** (lit., has "sold" them). Once again Nahum seems to have been part of the inspiration for Isaiah 40–55, where the description of Ms. Babylon (Isa. 47) recalls this description of Ms. Nineveh; the word for "sorceries"/"witchcraft" recurs there.

3:5–7 / The opening line repeats 2:13a. As 2:13 brought verses 11–12 or verses 1–12 to a climax with Yahweh's own words, so 3:5–7 do that as they follow on 3:1–4. Once again the declaration **"I am against you"** is a terrifying one.

As the images in 2:11–12 suggested the way "I am against you" is spelled out in 2:13, so the metaphor of harlotry in 3:4 suggests the way the expression is spelled out in 3:5–7, at least initially suggesting another image for Yahweh's punishment of the city. If the city is someone who behaves immorally, let her be exposed and treated as such a person. As far as we know, Nahum is not referring to the way a

prostitute or a woman who was sexually immoral was actually treated in Israel; none of the Oz references to such women indicate that they were actually treated thus. The language again suggests the feelings of a man whose wife has been unfaithful; this is what he might wish to do. The picture of the sexual shaming of Ms Nineveh offends modern readers (see O'Brien, *Nahum,* pp. 87–103), and perhaps offended ancient ones. It was not designed to be nice but to drive a point home. That is emphasized by the repetition of the phrase **declares the LORD Almighty,** literally "pronouncement of Yahweh Armies" (see on 2:14). There is no doubt that Yahweh has uttered verses 5–6 and no doubt that Yahweh can fulfill the intention announced there.

Pelting the woman/city with **filth** suggests a move away from the prostitution/immorality metaphor, since the word does not just suggest trash. More literally it denotes "abhorrent things"; the prophets use this term to refer to the loathsome worship practices of other peoples. The comment thus parallels Yahweh's earlier declaration about destroying images (1:14). The implication is then perhaps that not only has the city's expertise failed it (v. 4). Its religion has also failed it (v. 6). The next line takes the point further. The verb for **treat you with contempt** is *nabal* (*piʿel*), though there are several homonyms spelled *nabal/nabel,* so that this *piʿel* could mean "cause to wither" or "treat as a fool" just as well as "treat with contempt"; all make sense here, and Nahum's hearers could pick up all these resonances. All would fit with making the city **a spectacle,** something people looked at with horror and disdain.

At last verse 7 makes explicit that it is Nineveh that Yahweh is talking about and to. Yet there is then immediately the irony that people who see what happens to Nineveh ask the same kind of question that will come to be asked shortly when Jerusalem is destroyed. **"Who will mourn for her?"** (cf. Jer. 15:5). Where is there **anyone to comfort you** (cf. Lam 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21)? Judah can never risk relaxing as it reads Nahum's words. It can never simply congratulate itself on not being Nineveh.

3:8–17 / Neither can Nineveh relax on the basis of its own strength and significance (vv. 8–10). In 663 B.C. the Assyrians had captured the great city of **Thebes** in the far south of Egypt, close to modern Karnak and Luxor, a city which might have thought it was unassailable because of its location. Like Nineveh, it was a river city, mostly on one bank of the **Nile,** and thus in a position analogous to that of Nineveh on the bank of the Tigris. The Nile is thus not all around Thebes, though it is the city's resource and protection, but the description of Thebes is formulated in order to emphasize its similarity to

Nineveh. Likewise, Nahum speaks of the "sea" as Thebes' **defense,** whereas Thebes is hundreds of miles from the sea. The NIV thus translates **river,** and the word is sometimes applied to rivers. But here Nahum may also be making another reference to Middle-Eastern thinking in which the sea with its dynamic power is a figure for such power asserted against Yahweh. Like Nineveh, Thebes was a great religious center; its Hebrew name transliterates the Egyptian No Amon, "City of [the king of all the gods] Amon." It had the protection and support of the great power of **Egypt,** at that time ruled by a Cushite (Sudanese) dynasty. It also had the support of **Libya** and **Put.** Libya is a term for north Africa in general, west of the Nile; Put commonly appears in connection with Libya and is perhaps part of that area.

So Thebes is strong. Yet it fell, to Assyria. It would therefore be natural for Nineveh to answer, "Yes, of course I am better then Thebes. We conquered Thebes, didn't we?" But that in itself means that Nineveh is vulnerable, too. Once more, its defeat is described in terms that might be familiar but Judeans would be wise to shudder at them. Isaiah had declared that Assyria would "lead away . . . Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles" (Isa. 20:4); it happened, and Nahum takes up this language. Isaiah 13:16 declares that infants will be dashed to pieces in Babylon (cf. Ps. 137); Nahum declares that this happened in Thebes. But Jerusalem will be **taken captive** (e.g., 2 Kgs. 24:15–16) by the same power as Nineveh. As Thebes and Nineveh **went into exile,** so will Jerusalem (e.g., Lam. 1:18). As their **infants** pay a terrible price **at the head of every street** for living at this moment, so will those of Jerusalem (e.g., Lam. 2:19–20). As people cast **Lots** for the **nobles** of Thebes and Nineveh, to see who would have the best slaves, so they will cast lots for Jerusalem (Obad. 11).

The comparison between the fate of Thebes and the destiny of Nineveh is then made explicit, and emphasized by the fourfold repetition of the particle *gam* in verses 10–11 (see "Nahum the Poet"). Like Thebes, **You too will become drunk** with the poisoned wine of Yahweh's wrath. (So will Jerusalem, according to Isa. 51:21; there are other links with Nahum in Isa. 51:17–22, the passage that leads into 52:1–10 with its links to Nah. 1:15.) Or to put it more prosaically, with the harsh juxtaposing of language that Nahum likes, **you will go into hiding and seek refuge.** Of course a city cannot do that. Verses 12–13 add other images for this disaster; Nahum piles them up.

Verse 14 then begins a sardonic series of invitations to the city. Go on, prepare for a **siege.** Make sure you have a **water** supply. Strengthen **your defenses,** the ones the prophet has evaluated as totally useless (it is the same expression as was

translated **your fortresses** in v. 12); the details of verse 14 tell the city what it must do in order to build up these defenses, in case it cannot figure this out. But the prophet perhaps adds a further level of the sardonic. **Clay? Mortar? Brickwork** (that is, mudbrick)? Will that be enough? Any Israelite knows that a decent fortification is made of rock.

Hence the conclusion in verse 15a. These efforts will get no one anywhere. **Fire** and **sword** will **devour** you as effectively as a plague of **grasshoppers** consumes crops; mudbrick is no defense against fire or the people who light the fires.

Several lines then play wickedly with the image of **grasshoppers,** or **locusts.** First, in the circumstances, these insects' capacity for multiplication might provide a model for you. You need to increase the way they do, if you are to resist this attacking army. Second, face the fact that there are already people among you behaving like locusts. They are the merchant traders that Nineveh has rejoiced to have **increased the number of.** That was the point about having an empire. But business people will make sure they look after themselves, like CEOs selling their stock just before it nose-dives. These traders are **like locusts** that **strip the land and then fly away.** Even more worryingly, third, **Your guards** and **your officials** are also **like swarms of locusts** that disappear when the sun shines hot, and no one knows where they have gone. They are the diplomatic or political equivalents of the businessmen who know which way the wind is blowing and know when to abandon their people and get out, to look after their own skin.

3:18–19 / The form of address changes. For the only time in the book, Nahum explicitly addresses the **king of Assyria,** which might be the great Ashurbanipal or might more likely be one of his non-illustrious successors, who presided over the collapse of the empire. His words constitute a mock dirge; instead of grieving over the deaths of people and the imminent death of the king, Nahum taunts the king about this. He first taunts him with the fact that his **shepherds** and **nobles,** the political and administrative leaders who are directly involved in the government of the country, are fast asleep. That means his people are **scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them.** In isolation one might reckon that this means they are failing in their duty like the guards and officials of verse 17. But the next verse presupposes that the disaster has now happened and the king himself is dying. So verse 18 more likely means that the shepherds and nobles are sleeping the sleep of death. Invading forces make a point of

eliminating the leadership of a city they capture. These attackers have done that. Ordinary people are less likely to lose their lives. But they are leaderless and lost.

The king himself is rather in the position of Saul after the battle at Mount Gilboa (1 Sam. 31), when much of the army had been slain and Saul had been mortally wounded. It is dramatically convenient to keep the king alive to be addressed in the last lines of the prophecy. But he is indeed mortally wounded; **Nothing can heal your wound.** "And I would just like you to know that no one will be sorry to see you go."

The reason for that is the king's relentless **cruelty:** the word is the word earlier translated "evil" (1:11).

Additional Notes §3

3:1 / **Plunder** (*pereq*) is a different word from the expressions in 2:9–10, where plunder refers to the way armies pillage a city. This word comes from a verb meaning "tear away." The KJV has "robbery."

3:4 / Behind Nahum's imagery might also be an awareness that Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess, is goddess of both love and war; this provides a link between sexual activity and war. On Ishtar, see, e.g., Karel van der Toorn et al., eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 452–56. But it is then odd that Nahum never mentions the goddess, and it is not necessary to refer to her to explain Nahum's language.

3:10 / For **the head of every street** the TNIV has "every street corner," which may not have quite the same meaning but makes a nice idiomatic equivalent.

Habakkuk

John Goldingay

Introduction: Habakkuk

A distinctive feature of Habakkuk is its dialogical nature. It recounts a series of exchanges between the prophet and Yahweh concerning Yahweh's involvement with Judah and the Babylonian Empire.

1:1 Introduction
1:2–4 Habakkuk's protest to Yahweh
1:5–11 Yahweh's response
1:12–2:1 Habakkuk's protest to Yahweh
2:2–20 Yahweh's response
3:1–2 Habakkuk's plea to Yahweh
3:3–15 A vision of Yahweh's coming
3:16–19 Habakkuk's response

This outline points to a contrast with Nahum. While Nahum has a consistent theme, its collection of prophecies does not have a clear structure. While Habakkuk may bring together material from different occasions, this has been crafted into a clearer sequence. (Admittedly the English chapter division after 1:17 is odd; it follows the MT, which has a subsection division here. In the MT the chapters are 1:1–2:8, with that subdivision; 2:9–11; 2:12–20, subdivided after vv. 14, 17, and 18; 3:1–13, subdivided after v. 7; and 3:14–19.)

Habakkuk the Prophet

Habakkuk's name (pronounced Ha*bak*kuk, not *Hab*akkuk or Habakk*uk*) seems to come from the name of an herb. We know nothing personal about him apart from his name. It is unusual for us to be told nothing about the family or geographical background of the person whose name heads a prophetic book, or about his context except for the reference to the Babylonians (1:6) which presumably dates him during the same time as Jeremiah. His description of the Babylonians (1:9–11) implies that Babylon is a well known player in Middle-Eastern affairs. Habakkuk is inspired to see something of their significance in Yahweh's purpose, to see them as raised up by Yahweh, and to see why Yahweh has raised them up, though he is also inspired to see beyond them.

Rather unusually, Habakkuk is introduced as a "prophet" (1:1; cf. 3:1). This is

the only introduction to a prophetic book before Haggai and Zechariah that uses the word, though it is used later in many prophetic books. Whereas the word "prophet" came to have value status, in the OT its implications are much more ambiguous. Its resonances overlap with those of "televangelist." It could suggest scandal, self-serving, deception, and self-deception as easily as imaginative proclamation of God's truth.

Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in connection with the temple, and Chronicles also speaks of people involved in prophetic ministry there. Perhaps Habakkuk is called a prophet because he did this, leading in praise and prayer and bringing a word from Yahweh that responded to such prayer. The book of Habakkuk might be modeled on such exchanges. Like Jeremiah (and Job), Habakkuk addresses forceful words of confrontation to Yahweh (cf. also Ps. 82) and receives responses which do not necessarily please him or confirm his way of looking at things. Habakkuk engages Yahweh in an argument—not one concerning his own needs or suffering, but those of his people. Yahweh does not rebuke him for engaging in this argument; Yahweh's answers *do* put him in his place.

Habakkuk appears as a member of the clan of Levi in the deuterocanonical story of Bel and the Dragon, and this might somehow preserve correct information that he was a Levite and suggest that he indeed combined this position with the gift of being a prophet in the way Chronicles describes. His having a role in worship would fit with the fact that his speaking to Yahweh occupies so much of the book, and that his words closely parallel the words of the Psalms. Habakkuk 1:2–4 and 1:12–17 resemble psalms of prayer and protest ("lament psalms"); so does 3:2–19a, though it also has links with psalms of thanksgiving and testimony to Yahweh's appearing. Habakkuk 2:1 could suggest a prophet seeking a word from Yahweh in the context of worship. This background in worship is a feature Habakkuk may have in common with Nahum. But intermingled with forms suggesting prayer and praise are prophetic forms such as that of critique and warning (2:6–20), and again as is the case with Nahum, the book as a whole does not look like a liturgy.

Like Nahum, Habakkuk begins with an editorial note describing the book as an "oracle," a *massa',* the word applied to proclamations concerning other nations in Isaiah 13–23. Verse 1 goes on to say that Habakkuk "saw" the prophecy. This verb also appears in the introductions to Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, and it compares with the way Nahum 1:1 speaks of that book as a "vision" (see the introduction to Nahum). In Habakkuk, too, in due course

Yahweh will speak of a "vision" (Hab. 2:2–3; NIV translates "revelation"), and Habakkuk will relate something like a vision (Hab. 3). But the book as a whole is not a vision, and the NIV's use of the word "received" in 1:1 correctly infers that we need not press the visual aspect of Habakkuk's prophetic insight. Words such as "vision" and "revelation" can have a looser sense, conveying the fact that God was behind the scriptural writers' insights without this meaning that they necessarily relate "visions" in the narrow sense. The whole book expresses insight given by Yahweh, but it is expressed in words addressed to Yahweh and in words Habakkuk hears.

Habakkuk the Book

The fact that Yahweh speaks of "raising up the Babylonians" (1:6) might give the impression that Habakkuk prophesied early on in Jeremiah's time and in a similar time to Nahum, before Assyria lost power; the fact that he speaks of Judah as characterized by injustice and violence (1:2–3) would then imply the period before Josiah's reforms. But "raising up the Babylonians" might refer only to their coming to cause trouble in Judah, and one could then date the book in the time of Jehoahaz or Jehoiakim, who went back on Josiah's reforms. Chapter 3 has been dated rather later, to the time in the mid-sixth century when Babylon was indeed about to fall. As is the case with Nahum, all this may indicate that the book has undergone gradual development in order to reach the form in which we have it, but there is no consensus on a particular view of this process and I therefore comment on the book as we have it. Like Nahum, it manifests some verbal and poetic links through the material that are consistent with one person authoring the whole, and it rather gives us that impression by its recurrent first-person singular verbs and its references to Habakkuk in 3:1 as well as in 1:1.

Further, the attempt to link different elements in the book with different historical contexts may be too literalistic. While the fact that different parts of the book suggest different contexts might mean the prophecies come from different periods, it might mean the book is projecting itself into the periods it refers to, so that these phenomena may tell us nothing about its actual date. The book is a dramatized discussion of the nature of Yahweh's involvement in the world of international affairs, especially as these affect the people of Yahweh. We might then call it a discussion of theodicy, though that construct imports much modern baggage. And its stress on waiting and steadfastness, and its prayer (2:3–4; 3:2, 16), indicate that it is not merely a discussion of a theological or apologetic question but a pastoral tract. Habakkuk 3:19a, its last line (apart from the closing

rubric), suggests what it seeks for its hearers. "The book aims to involve its hearers in the reeducation of Habakkuk" (Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 88).

As with Nahum, however, it is noteworthy how few are the specific references to the particularities of Habakkuk's context: to be specific, there is just one—that single reference to the Babylonians. Habakkuk thus makes clear by this concrete reference to Babylon that he is concerned with one immediate embodiment of empire, but he also suggests by confining himself to this one reference to a specific empire that his prophecy can apply to other superpowers. Once more like Nahum, additionally he implies by the way he speaks about the superpower that his warnings also apply to Judah if it behaves like the superpower. This links with the nature of the introduction to the book. Most prophetic books provide pointers to their historical setting in their introduction, suggesting that we will not understand them unless we see them against this background. The total lack of any chronological pointers in the introduction to Habakkuk (there is not even an equivalent to Nahum's reference to Nineveh) hints that this information is unnecessary.

The paucity of concrete reference facilitates and in principle justifies the interpretation of Habakkuk at Qumran. Like Nahum, Habakkuk was a prophecy on which the Qumran community produced a commentary, or pesher (1QpHab), in which they interpreted it as relating to the events of their own day assumed to be the time of the End. The "wicked" or faithless are then other groups within Judaism who (the Qumran community says) persecuted them and from whom they had distanced themselves, particularly the regular priesthood in Jerusalem. For them, "the Babylonians" become "the Kittim," the Romans, as in the Nahum pesher, whom God will use to punish the "wicked," and in particular "the wicked priest"—that is, the high priest in Jerusalem.

The book's message, then, is that Yahweh's way of dealing with a situation in which a society is characterized by unfairness and violence involves making use of the unfairness and violence of some other power, even though (or precisely because) such superpowers are themselves ruthless and violent. That fact means that a superpower must itself be put down in due course—an event in which ordinary peoples can then rejoice and which constitutes a new embodiment of a known pattern of God's activity in the world. The vocation of the people of God is to wait on God for the fulfillment of these faithful intentions.

§1 A Protest and an Answer (i) (Hab. 1:1–11)

After the introduction (v. 1), Habakkuk challenges Yahweh about faithlessness and violence in Judah and Yahweh's failure to act in deliverance (vv. 2–4), and Yahweh announces the intention to take action by means of the Babylonians (vv. 5–11).

1:1 / See the introduction to Habakkuk above.

1:2–4 / Habakkuk challenges Yahweh in the manner of the Psalms, perhaps doing so as a prophet representing the community. Right away, then, Habakkuk raises what we call the question of theodicy. Why is there so much evil in the world, and why does God do nothing about it? But right away, as in other parts of the OT, Habakkuk raises this question not by talking to other people or by seeking to reflect theologically, but by speaking directly and confrontationally to God about it. And the "problem of evil" is not the problem of why suffering such as illness or natural disaster comes to people who do not deserve it, but why God does nothing about the wrongdoing people do to one another.

Addressed to Yahweh, **How long?** is a question characteristic of the Psalms, though Habakkuk's particular expression (*ʿad-ʾanah*) comes only in Psalm 13:1–2 (but it occurs 4 times there). Other synonymous expressions occur more frequently (esp. *ʿad-matay;* e.g., Pss. 6:3; 74:10). Whether addressed to Yahweh or to human beings, "How long?" is not a request for information to which Yahweh could give an answer such as "another five/fifty years" that would send the prophet home satisfied. It is a rhetorical question that disguises a protest or reproach. It implies, "stop doing what you are doing." Yet Habakkuk never makes such an actual plea. In a psalm one characteristically asks for two things—for Yahweh to listen to one's prayer and then in response to take action to rescue from trouble. Habakkuk's words make clear that these have indeed been his two pleas, but Yahweh has ignored both, and he wants to know how long Yahweh will carry on doing that—or rather, he wants Yahweh to stop doing it. But whereas a psalm would regularly utter such a plea and Habakkuk refers to the way he has been doing so, he does not do it here. Perhaps the implication is that

it seems pointless. Or perhaps the lack of a plea hints that the protest form of the prophecy is less a means of getting Yahweh to act than it is a means of gaining some understanding. It is a means of working out how to look at what Yahweh is doing, for the benefit of people who will listen to the prophet as much as for the prophet's own benefit. One might compare this to Abraham's "prayer" in Genesis 18, which never actually articulates a direct plea; its concern, too, is as much to articulate an understanding of the way Yahweh acts in the world.

In fact, the problem Habakkuk explicitly raises is that Yahweh does not **listen** and does not **save.** The verbs **call for help** and "save" are very similar (*shwʿ* and *yshʿ*), which brings out the link between them. Even phonetically, calling for help should have a close relationship with being saved from one's predicament. But it does not. To underline the point, in the two lines of the verse, "call for help" is paralleled by **cry out,** the verb used of Israel in Egypt (*zaʿaq*). Yahweh listened to that cry—why not to this one?

The subject of the cry is **"Violence!"** (*khamas*). Violence filled the earth before the flood (Gen. 6:11, 13), it is another recurrent topic for prayer in the Psalms (e.g., 55:9; 74:20), a concern of Proverbs (e.g., 16:29), but especially of the Prophets in Habakkuk's time (e.g., Jer. 20:8; Ezek. 7:23; Zeph. 1:9). But no one protests at "violence" more resolutely than Habakkuk and his God—six times in two chapters (1:2, 3, 9; 2:8 [NIV "destroyed lands"], 17). The etymological link in English between violence and violation draws attention to two aspects of the meaning of the Hebrew word. It covers only sinful violence, violence that violates relationships and community standards. And it can apply to violations of relationships and community standards that do not involve physical violence.

Why? (v. 3) is then a further classic question in the prayers of the Psalms (e.g., 10:1; 22:1; 42:9) and in the protests of Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 15:18; 20:18). Once again, it is not a request for information but a rhetorical question that implies a protest and the conviction that actually there cannot be any satisfactory answer. The question **Why do you make me look at injustice?** begins to bring out the distinctive nature of Habakkuk's protest over against those of the Psalms and Jeremiah. Habakkuk is not protesting about his own suffering, about violence shown to him, but about violence that he sees all around him. Admittedly it is likely that the Psalms are indirectly so concerned, in the sense that a psalmist wrote for the sake of people who were subjected to violence and people prayed these psalms on behalf of people who were subjected to violence. But a concern for other people who were subjected to violence is explicit in Habakkuk. He is offended by the monstrous situation he confronts in the community, by which

Yahweh seems not to be offended. No matter how loud he shouts about it, Yahweh will neither listen nor do anything. He lives as a man who is compelled to "look" at the faithless oppressing the faithful. He cannot understand why Yahweh makes him look at all this, why they are **before me** all the time, nor how Yahweh can personally bear continually watching it and doing nothing (**tolerate** is another word that literally means "look at" or "watch").

In verse 3 Habakkuk brings together three pairs of words to express what he sees and what Yahweh sees. "Injustice" (*'awen*) suggests causing trouble or suffering or harm to someone else; when Rachel was dying in childbirth, she wanted to call her baby Ben-Oni, "Son of my Trouble/Suffering" (Gen. 35:18). **Wrong** (*'amal*) is another word for such trouble or sorrow. **Destruction** (*shod*) comes from a common verb for causing devastation and thus goes with **violence.** The third pair suggests how the trouble is caused and how the devastating violence is put into effect. **Strife** (*rib*) and **conflict** (*madon*) are both legal words. They insinuate that the wrongdoers are able to use the law so as to wrong other people who are less adept at working the legal system. It seems that the usual rule holds, that the powerful and clever people in the community and the people who exercise authority there are themselves heavily involved in the wrongdoing, in fraud and violence. Community life is totally broken down.

The result (v. 4) is that **the law is paralyzed,** or ineffective. "Law" is torah, which would not usually refer to the legal system but to the teaching of Moses or the prophets or the sages. One can see how this teaching was ineffective in the time of Manasseh or Amon, but possibly Habakkuk's specific context is the aftermath of the reform of Josiah, who sought to implement the concerns of a book of torah. If the strife, violence, and disorder of the community's life are unconstrained by the exercise of authority based on proper teaching, and conversely these make such teaching and exercise of authority impossible, Habakkuk is referring to the way Josiah's reform actually failed to make a significant difference to Judah's life. And he is suggesting that God bears responsibility for this. After all, the teaching scroll spoke of sanctions in connection with ignoring it, but Yahweh is turning a blind eye. Yahweh is indifferent to the violence that affects the community and unresponsive to this suppliant's cry about that, and "is therefore evidently to blame for the current breakdown of social norms" (Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 103).

Josiah's teaching scroll is usually assumed to be some form of Deuteronomy, but it makes little difference which form of torah we assume Habakkuk refers to, because in this connection they all have the same concern. They all aim to

inculcate faithfulness and fairness in the community, but the actions that verse 3 has described frustrate those aims. So **justice never prevails.** Here the noun is *mishpat,* which denotes decision-making authority. There is a sense in which *mishpat* does prevail in the society; authority is exercised. But it is not exercised (lit., it does not go out) in accordance with torah. As is often the case, the two parallel lines in verse 4a need to be interwoven to understand their point. Torah does not prevail in the sense that it does not affect the way decisions get made; decision-making authority fails in the sense that it is not exercised in accordance with torah.

Verse 4b sums up the point of verses 2–4a. The first line sums up verses 2–3. The words **wicked** (*rashaʿ*) and **righteous** (*tsaddiq*) are antonyms, though not in the same way in English as in Hebrew, as English does not have equivalents to the Hebrew words. People who are *tsaddiq* are people who live faithfully in their relationships in the community and do the right thing by them. People who are *rashaʿ* are people who ignore the obligations of their relationships in the community; they just live for themselves. The latter **hem in** the former like an army surrounding a town. The words "wicked" and "righteous" are singular; we could say in English "the wicked person attacks the righteous" without implying that there is but one of each, and it takes more than one person to "hem in" anyone. The parallel line **so that justice is perverted** then restates verse 4a, repeating the noun but introducing to close the subsection a new verb that comes only here in the OT (*ʿaqal*). Decision-making authority does go out, but it goes out twisted, crooked, bent out of shape. And Yahweh does not respond to pleas about this iniquitous state of affairs.

1:5–11 / Yahweh is stung into responding and implies that Habakkuk's protest was quite proper. It is necessary to do something about the way people are treating each other in Jerusalem, and Yahweh is committed to acting. Typically Yahweh will act by using some other human groups as agents. Earlier in its history, especially in the story told in Joshua, Yahweh had used Israel as an instrument of judgment against other people, though in the Latter Prophets Yahweh does not speak in these terms. But Yahweh had always also used other peoples as a means of acting in judgment against Israel, and Yahweh intends to continue doing this. In those earlier books in the OT there is no indication that the Israelites were themselves inclined to make war against other peoples; Yahweh had to turn a people who do not seem by nature to have been particularly warlike (a warrior such as David is the exception rather than the

rule) into a fighting force. The Babylonians are very different; Yahweh can use them as they are.

In Habakkuk, as can be the case in the Psalms, while the move from one person speaking to another is sometimes marked (as at 2:2), sometimes it is not marked, and apparently people were expected to figure out for themselves what was happening. While this can be difficult, this shift in verse 5 is quite clear (cf. 1:12). The plural imperative verbs in verse 5a, **look** and **watch,** indicate that someone different is being addressed, and the content of the first-person verbs in verse 5b indicates who it is that now speaks.

In the Psalms there are only rare examples of Yahweh responding to a plea. Yahweh does respond to Jeremiah and to Job, but in doing so changes the agenda or says "I'm not saying." Yahweh's direct response to Habakkuk is thus out of the ordinary. Recognizing the rhetorical significance of the "How long" and "Why," Yahweh answers the question behind the question and tells Habakkuk of the action that he is about to see. (Of course it is a prophet's job to declare what Yahweh intends to do, and in this connection there is nothing surprising about the statement in vv. 5–11. We need to keep in mind the possibility that the whole dialogue is a rhetorical device for conveying what a prophet would say anyway.)

First (v. 5a), Yahweh redirects Habakkuk's "look" and "watch"; the two words (*raʾah* and *nabat* in the *hipʿil*) recur from verse 3, though there the NIV's translation of the second was different. But the fact that the verbs (and "your" in v. 5b) are actually plural shows that Yahweh's reply to Habakkuk takes the form of an address to the people as a whole. This confirms that in verses 2–4 Habakkuk was speaking on behalf of the people as a whole, in the manner of a prophet or a psalmist. Yahweh urges the people to raise their heads and look at what is happening on the international scene, to look toward **the nations** instead of toward the life of Judah that causes so much pain. While the exhortation takes up the words from verse 3, it also puts the people in the position of lookouts. It is as if they are all to stand on the city wall and watch the military hordes sweep across the horizon.

The plural "nations" often refers to the empire or superpower, and so it is here. The people will thus be **utterly amazed:** Habakkuk emphasizes the point by doubling up the verb (*tamah*), preceding the regular *qal* form by the *hitpaʿel* form of the same verb (it is the only occurrence of the *hitpaʿel* in the OT). What is so amazing? Habakkuk (the poet) and Yahweh (the speaker) heighten suspense by first emphasizing yet more the extraordinary nature of what is about to be announced without telling the addressees or the readers of the book what it is (v.

5b). Again Yahweh doubles up forms of the same root; **"I am going to do something"** is more literally "[I am] doing a deed." The resolution to the problem of theodicy is not eschatological but historical. It will come in the people's experience, **in your days.** Indeed, it is coming. As is sometimes the case when we say "I'm coming" even though we have not set out yet, Hebrew can use present participles to refer to something future and thereby indicate how certain it is and how the addressees can therefore relax—or, rather, stand on tiptoe.

The NIV's **"that you would not believe, even if you were told"** then makes poor sense, given that they are about to be told. "That you will not believe when you are told" makes better sense. It is characteristic for prophecy to involve announcing events that the audience does not believe, whether they constitute good news or bad news. The necessity of prophecy arises from people's unwillingness to think outside the box, and so does the failure of prophecy in that people still decline to do so.

The unbelievable news at last follows (v. 6): **"I am raising up the Babylonians."** The NIV's margin notes that the announcement refers more literally to the "Chaldeans." Strictly speaking, that term refers to a people from an area of southern Babylonia, but a dynasty from Chaldea came to rule Babylonia as a whole and thus gave their name to the entire people. The verb for **raising up** (*qum* in the *hipʿil*) is one the OT often uses in connection with Yahweh's bringing into power people such as judges, priests, prophets, and kings (e.g., Deut. 18:15; Judg. 2:18; 1 Sam. 2:35; 2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Kgs. 14:14). It thus suggests Yahweh's beneficent and sovereign activity towards Israel. But it can also be used of Yahweh's raising up agencies of punishment (e.g., Amos 6:14). Jeremiah speaks in a parallel way of Yahweh "summoning" an enemy or "bringing" disaster from the north (Jer. 1:15; 4:6), specifically Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9). The fact that Habakkuk speaks of Yahweh raising up the Chaldeans does not mean we can date the oracle on the basis of what we know of the rise of Babylon; Habakkuk might be speaking thus when Babylon is only a speck on the horizon, or speaking some years later when it is about to impinge more directly on Syria and Palestine.

Yahweh goes on at some length in describing Babylon's willfulness, power, confidence, self-aggrandizement, military might, skill, determination, plundering, and enslaving. Again, we need not infer Habakkuk is relying on reports from the front, or on special revelations from Yahweh. One superpower is much the same as another, and is described as such. Whether this is bad news or good news, by implication the point is that this new superpower is heading

Judah's way. But that is only implicit; Yahweh speaks explicitly only in general terms about the implications of Babylon's self-assertion for the world in general.

Through verses 6–9a Yahweh's characterization of the Babylonians focuses on their might rather than their vices until the characterization eventually comes to critique in the last line. The word **ruthless** (*mar;* v. 6) is often translated "bitter," but in contexts like these it suggests "fierce." **Impetuous** comes from a verb that suggests they get on with things quickly (*mahar*); they do not wait around. In this connection they cross the breadth of the earth to appropriate homes that belong to other people. They inspire awe and dread as people who assert their authority on the basis of who they are (v. 7a). Here verse 7b picks up the language of verse 4, where Habakkuk spoke of the situation in Judah as one that involved *mishpat* (NIV "justice") not "going out" or not being exercised in accordance with torah; instead it went out in perverted form. When the Babylonians are about, there is no doubt that *mishpat* (here NIV has **law**) "goes out," or gets exercised. But it is "their law," "their authority," which is just as perverted as the one exercised in Judah. One can see that Yahweh is opening up the possibility of critique by Habakkuk: how can Yahweh be raising up a people who are just as lawless as Judah?

Verses 8–9a then suggest a series of frightening similes for the Babylonian army, ironically similar to Byron's line "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold" (ironically, because the poem concerns the way Yahweh dealt with the Assyrian wolf). At their climax the word **violence** recurs, and one can once again see that Yahweh is opening up the possibility of critique by Habakkuk: how can violence be a way of putting right violence?

Verses 9b–11a describe the Babylonians' power more literally, indicating how justified is their confidence and how effortless their achievements. Following this, at the climax in verse 11b once again we get a clear value judgment, this time a religious one rather than a moral one. On the assumption that the conventional English translations are right, the Babylonians were **"guilty men, whose own strength is their god"** or "whose strength [they attributed] to their god." Either way, their guilt lies not in their actions but in the attitude they took to that strength. The judgment is then parallel to the one Yahweh passes on the Assyrians (e.g., Isa. 10:5–19). They do not recognize where their strength comes from and for what purpose it is given to them. The term for "guilty" is one that suggests trespassing on Yahweh's rights (a "guilt offering" is an offering that makes compensation for that). This is what they do by taking credit for their achievements themselves or by giving it to their gods. And these are the people

Yahweh is raising up . . .

Additional Notes §1

1:2–4 / The portrayal of this argument between prophet and God would not be affected if Hab. 1:2–4 protests about the *Assyrians,* so that Habakkuk's prophecy relates to their defeat by Babylon, to whom (with the Medes) Nineveh fell in 612. But the language of the verses more suggests strife within Judah than attacks from outside. The same objection also applies to the suggestion that Habakkuk is already speaking about the Babylonians, with vv. 5–11 then expressing Yahweh's acceptance of responsibility for this.

1:7 / Honor: *se'et* comes from *nasa';* the related word *nasi'* means "leader," and in parallelism with *mishpat* it is likely that *se'et* has a similar meaning. Lit., "from it, its authority and its leadership goes forth" (the Babylonian army is spoken of as "it" through vv. 7–11, but English translations use pl. "they").

1:9 / Their hordes advance like a desert wind: The NIV margin notes that the meaning of *megammat* ("hordes") is uncertain. The NIV apparently interprets it on the basis of the meaning of a related word in Arabic meaning "abundance." "Like a desert wind" is *qadimah,* which usually means "eastwards."

1:11 / Guilty men is *we'ashem,* lit. "and guilty." Both the grammar and the train of thought are jerky and it may be that the text should read a form of the verb *sim* (put) or of *shamam* (desolate, devastate), but no particular proposal has carried conviction. The NRSV takes the verb *ʿabar* (NIV "go on") to mean "transgress" and then takes *we'ashem* as a verb, "and become guilty." This is less jerky in train of thought but the *vav*-consecutive plus perfect verb following on the *vav*-consecutive plus imperfect verb is difficult.

§2 A Protest and an Answer (ii) (Hab. 1:12–2:20)

In a sense there was nothing surprising in Yahweh's response to Habakkuk; it is entirely in keeping with Isaiah's understanding of the role of Assyria and with Jeremiah's understanding of Babylon. But Yahweh has given hostages to fortune in noting that the Babylonians are inclined to violence, that they seize homes that do not belong to them, that they make up their own rules for the conduct of relationships, that they worship themselves, their power, and their glory. How can they be Yahweh's agents? Habakkuk's response thus verbalizes his disquiet at Yahweh's response to his earlier protest. It is a question that Christians often raise about the prophets' assumption that Yahweh uses other nations in this way. Even this unease is one already answered in the way Isaiah speaks of Assyria, who will be put down when Yahweh is finished with them. In other words, in the form of a dialogue through chapters 1–2 Habakkuk is reprising issues that Isaiah deals with in more discursive form. Yahweh's response comes in the form of a declaration similar to that in Isaiah: Yahweh will act in judgment on Babylon, too, in due course. Perhaps there is no difference in God's using Babylon in this way from God's using anyone else. For instance, God uses preachers despite the fact that one of their common motivations is that they like preaching and God may even use commentators despite the fact that they write because they like doing it. If God worked only through righteous people, this would mean not working through human beings at all.

1:12–17 / Once more the content indicates a change in who is addressed and who speaks. Habakkuk again takes up his questioning protest, reformulated in light of verses 5–11. But he begins with some affirmations that focus on who Yahweh is (vv. 12–13a) such as he did not include in his first protest but that recall declarations of trust in Yahweh such as do appear in protest psalms. Yet like some such statements in the Psalms, these actually function to give extra bite to Habakkuk's protest. Like Moses arguing with God in Exodus 32 and Numbers 14, Habakkuk reminds Yahweh of some characteristics of the divine being and activity that Yahweh seems to be forgetting (!). More literally, perhaps, they are characteristics Yahweh is not taking enough account of, as Habakkuk sees it.

Yahweh is always having to balance the demands of wrath and the demands of mercy. Whereas Moses suggests Yahweh is giving too much sway to wrath, Habakkuk suggests Yahweh is not giving enough sway to wrath, in relation to Babylon here as in relation to Judah in 1:2–4. Once again, there is no actual plea in this otherwise psalm-like protest.

It begins (v. 12a) with an emphatic declaration of some basic things Habakkuk takes for granted, which he includes as background to the issue he intends to raise with Yahweh; the logic is similar to that in Jeremiah 12:1. That is, **"are you not . . ."** is an indirect way of declaring, "I know you definitely are . . ." **From everlasting** (*miqqedem*) is an over-translation; *qedem* simply refers to what is "before," temporally or spatially. "From aforetime" would convey the idea better. One point about Habakkuk's declaration may be that "from aforetime" or "of old," long ago, Yahweh personally defeated evil (e.g., Isa. 51:9), the kind of evil now embodied in the Babylonians which Yahweh intends to harness (!). The invocation of Yahweh is then complemented by the invocation of **My God, my Holy One.** Habakkuk sees Yahweh as "Holy," transcendent, absolute, and inspiring awe. Yet he also knows that Yahweh is "My God" and "my Holy One," as Isaiah knows that Yahweh is "Israel's Holy One." He knows that Yahweh combines terrifying transcendence with personal commitment to him and his people. The personal nature of this relationship leads into the declaration **we will not die,** which in the context constitutes a declaration that the rampaging of the Babylonians will not imperil the existence of Judah, even if it is Yahweh's means of punishing wrongdoing in Judah.

Habakkuk thereby also anticipatorily suggests a response to a question that arises in a modern context. It might seem that having Judah invaded by the Babylonians is not a great deal of help to the oppressed faithful in Judah, who will suffer from the consequences of invasion as much as the people with wealth and power who are their oppressors. Indeed, the latter may well be the ones who can use their resources to escape the catastrophe. Actually, they do not seem to have done so but attempted it only when it was too late (2 Kgs. 24; it would be nice, and poetic, to think that this was because they believed the prophets who promised there would be *shalom,* and were wrong). The people who were taken off to Babylon were the people with status and resources; the ordinary people were able to reclaim the land that the powerful had appropriated. The Babylonians did not annihilate Judah. Habakkuk's "we will not die" worked out.

Verses 12b–13a then apply the general statement in verse 12a to the particular situation, again simply declaring something Habakkuk affirms that he takes for

granted and providing further background to the issue Habakkuk intends to raise. First, he summarizes Yahweh's point in verses 5–11; the unidentified "them" refers back to the subject of verses 6–11, the Babylonians. Once again, the invocation of Yahweh is then paired with something less conventional. Describing Yahweh as a rock is common enough; actually addressing Yahweh as **Rock** is unique ("my rock" would be less surprising; perhaps a "my" carries over from v. 12a). There is a paradoxical relationship between this description of Yahweh as a rock or crag, something to climb onto for safety, and the confession that Habakkuk makes, **you have appointed them to execute judgment** and **you have ordained them to punish.** The first clause picks up the word *mishpat* (here "judgment") from verse 4 ("justice") and verse 7 ("law"). In the absence of any exercise of proper authority in Judah and in light of the Babylonians' penchant for exercising authority, Habakkuk affirms, Yahweh is making the Babylonians the means of introducing some proper authority into Judah. The second clause then safeguards the necessity for this authority to be exercised properly. Yahweh is making them a means of punishment or correction or chastisement in Judah; "punish" (*yakakh* in the *hipʿil*) refers to the kind of discipline that is designed to change someone's pattern of behavior in a proper direction. When Isaiah 2:4 and 11:4 speak of putting things right in the way nations and peoples relate to each other, they use in parallelism the verb for "exercise authority" (*shafat,* usually translated "judge") and this verb for "punish" in the sense of "correct," and this connotation in respect of the way nations relate fits well here.

The rationale for that is that such action on Yahweh's part is an expression of Yahweh's moral nature (v. 13a). Again Habakkuk picks up his own language from earlier: **look on** and **tolerate** are the verbs he used in verse 3 (where he declared that he could not understand how Yahweh could make him look at injustice or how Yahweh can tolerate wrong) and the verbs that Yahweh used in verse 5. Verses 5–11 have confirmed that **Your eyes are too pure** for that; **you cannot tolerate wrong** (*raʿ*, a different, more general word for "wrong" from that in v. 3).

Adding reference to Yahweh's eyes being "pure" (*tahor*) underlines the point very strongly. First, this is the only passage that refers to pure eyes, and the image is a remarkable one. It is bodies (or other things such as houses or altars or animals) in their physicality that are either pure/clean or unclean/taboo. But because wrongdoing can make a person unclean or taboo, purity can come to be a metaphor for righteousness or faithfulness; and thus the metaphor can be made to apply to the hearts that formulate righteous and faithful intentions or the

words that plan their implementation. But this is the only passage that refers to pure eyes. The implication seems to be that something taboo can cause offence not merely by physical contact but by mere sight. Yet second, this is the only passage that speaks of Yahweh's purity. By its nature, the antithesis purity/cleanness over against uncleanness/taboo can apply only to things other than Yahweh. The point about purity is that it means people can come into God's presence, and the point about the taboo is that it means they cannot do so, the deciding factor being whether there is anything about them such as recent contact with death or with sex that would make their being incompatible with God's being. So speaking of Yahweh's eyes as pure involves a strong anthropomorphism. Careful human beings would not want to risk being made taboo, and thus unable to come into God's presence, even by their eyes. Habakkuk speaks as if God were such a person.

In verse 13b there is no **then** in the Hebrew, but the NIV correctly interprets the logic. Habakkuk had asked a question like this in verse 3 in connection with wrong within Judah, but now the subject is the nation that Yahweh has appointed as a means of disciplining Judah. Given the impossibility of Yahweh looking at wrongdoing and just shrugging shoulders, why is Yahweh doing that with regard to **the treacherous?** That English word is inclined to suggest the behavior of human beings towards one another, but it is not obvious how Babylon has been treacherous, at least to Israel, and *bagad* more often refers to a stance people take in relation to God, to unfaithfulness (e.g., Isa. 48:8; Jer. 3:8, 11, 20; 5:11). Habakkuk's critique of Babylon thus parallels Isaiah's critique of Assyria, though it expresses the matter differently. Just as people with wealth are expected to use their wealth for the benefit of other people and are being unfaithful to God if they fail to do so, people with power are expected to use their power for the benefit of other people and are being unfaithful to God if they fail to do so. But it is typical of superpowers to use their power in a way that benefits themselves, and the Babylonians do that. They **swallow up** other peoples. In effect, that is the critique in Isaiah 10:5–19; the actual verb comes in the boast Jerusalem hears on the lips of its destroyers in Lamentations 2:16 (see also Isa. 49:19; and the comment on *beliyaʿal* in Nah. 1:11). And unlike Judah, these other peoples may have done nothing to deserve this; they are at least relatively **righteous** over against the **wicked** superpower (see v. 4b and the comment for this antithesis, which there applied to relationships within Judah). Habakkuk's question then is, **Why are you silent?** A plea that Yahweh should not be silent is another feature of the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 83:1 [MT 2]; 109:1), and Yahweh grants

the necessity to move from silence to action in Isaiah 42:14. The proceedings of the heavenly cabinet (as pictured in passages such as 1 Kgs. 22:19 and Job 1:6) require that Yahweh declare a decision and commission aides to go and implement it, and the arousing of the energy of a warrior requires a move from silence to yelling, but Yahweh is not acting in either way. "It is as though the lower courts have erred or been corrupted, but the high court makes no move to set aside the judgment and correct the error" (Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah,* p. 131).

Verses 14–17 expand on the predicament of these nations that are relatively righteous and the verses thus add to the prophet's critique. The situation of humanity in the world is like that of **fish in the sea** or **sea creatures** (etymologically, the word refers to things that crawl about, so one might think of creatures that end up as what we call seafood). They have **no ruler** to look after them and they are thus vulnerable to fishermen. The helplessness of these creatures is no problem as long as no one is trying to take advantage of it, but now Babylon is doing exactly that, like a fisherman catching fish in Lake Galilee and returning home rejoicing. And Yahweh let that happen. "What did you think you were doing when you created humanity?" Habakkuk asks.

There is an irony here. Humanity itself was supposed to exercise authority over these creatures (Gen. 1:28) but we ended up eating them. So perhaps Habakkuk points to some poetic justice; humanity was supposed to rule the sea creatures and thus look after them, failed to do so, and ends up in the same predicament as they. The fisherman's success naturally means **he rejoices and is glad** and that he expresses his gratitude; he **sacrifices** and **burns incense.** But Habakkuk adds another irony. In reality a fisherman would offer these expressions of gratitude to his god. Habakkuk pictures him offering them **to his dragnet,** as if the net had been the ultimate key to his splendid catch. The figure has become an allegory. The Babylonians worship their means of winning their victories, their own military strength, instead of offering real worship; again we may compare the critique in Isaiah 10:5–19. Therein lies their treachery or faithlessness in relation to God.

So "Are you going to let that go on forever?" Habakkuk asks (v. 17).

2:1 / Whereas there was no gap between the questioning in 1:2–4 and the response in 1:5–11, now Habakkuk waits to hear what Yahweh will say. This likely corresponds to the way prayers in the Psalms worked. In some OT stories people apparently get an immediate response when they turn to Yahweh to ask

something (e.g., Gen. 25:22–23), but in others people have to wait (e.g., Jer. 28; 42). The stories do not tell us why that should be so, though we might guess that it witnesses to the fact that Yahweh does respond but also to the fact of Yahweh's freedom. We cannot expect Yahweh to answer us; we cannot compel Yahweh to do so, certainly not to our time frame. So Habakkuk commits himself to waiting until he receives a response. Rhetorically this adds suspense and reminds us again that in Habakkuk we should not necessarily assume we are reading a simple transcript of an event; we may be reading a piece of narrative theology like Jonah, a divinely-inspired discussion of a theological question in narrative form. At the same time, the declaration offers further insight on the way the relationship between prophet and Yahweh worked. If actually we have a rhetorical construction here, that may even strengthen the point, because it still indicates how an author would think of the way this relationship worked. Evidently a prophet could confront Yahweh quite argumentatively, and could realistically expect that Yahweh would answer, but (like Job) could not control when a word from Yahweh came. Habakkuk could not will a response from Yahweh. Nor could Habakkuk think up a response and assume it was Yahweh's. Prophecy and theological reflection are two different things.

The image Habakkuk uses with regard to seeking a word from Yahweh is that of the lookout. A city has lookouts to keep **watch** from its **ramparts** for when an enemy is advancing on the city and then to warn its people so they can prepare (see, e.g., Isa. 21). A prophet is then a metaphorical lookout whose task is to discern, by means of a more far-seeing form of perception, when Yahweh is bringing trouble and to warn the city so it can respond by changing its ways so that Yahweh may relent (e.g., Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–20). Habakkuk is thus standing at his watch like a lookout. But there the metaphor breaks down, because he is not waiting to discover what will happen but waiting to discover how Yahweh will respond to his questioning (it breaks down in a different way in Isa. 62:6–7, where the metaphorical lookouts on Jerusalem's walls keep urging Yahweh to reestablish Jerusalem). This points to another understanding of Habakkuk's "watch," that it refers more literally to his position as a minister in the temple (e.g., 2 Chr. 35:2; Neh. 12:9; Zech. 3:7). He intends to wait on Yahweh there.

What answer I am to give to this complaint takes up another aspect of the fact that in addressing Yahweh he does not speak for himself but for his people. It is their questioning that he has been passing on to Yahweh and to which he seeks a reply. This, too, could support the idea that the questioning and

answering is a piece of narrative theology. But there are no parallels for the idea that *tokakhat* means "complaint"; it means rebuke, correction, or chastisement (hence NIV margin). It is related to the verb "punish" in 1:12. So what Habakkuk is wondering about is how he is to respond to the people's rebuke of him, or how he is eventually to respond to the rebuke from Yahweh that he is expecting in the manner of Yahweh's rebuke of Job, or how he is eventually to formulate to the people Yahweh's response to his rebuke of Yahweh.

2:2–3 / Yahweh indeed responds with a **revelation** (*khazon,* the noun from the verb translated "received" in 1:1); Yahweh enables the lookout to see something that one could not see with ordinary eyes because it is too far away, or gives insight to the prophet who is seeking it. The bidding to **Write down** what he sees links with the fact that it relates to events some time in the future. One aspect of this is that writing it down will make it possible to vindicate the claim that Yahweh has said this and that Habakkuk is Yahweh's prophet. The commission to write it down then implies that Yahweh indeed intends to act, but in a while, not now. Yet Yahweh has a more specific point in mind, related to someone being able to read out the prophecy now and thus make it possible for people to take notice of it; one might compare the dictating and writing in Jeremiah 36, even though that involved a scroll. Admittedly it is difficult to be sure what that precise point is. Perhaps prophets inscribed prophecies on tablets and left them in the temple courts for people to see. The NIV then plausibly assumes that to **make it plain on** stone **tablets** will mean that **a herald** (lit., "someone who reads it out") can **run with it.** When the moment comes that this revelation is about to be fulfilled, the herald who has to read it out can get about his task with ease. "Make it plain" suggests a declaration that is unequivocal. There is no obscurity about it. Perhaps Yahweh is speaking to the fact that often prophecy is expressed in symbols and images. Only rarely is it concrete in a way that means it can be held accountable. Yahweh here promises something concrete. Revelation is often obscure but immediate, or obscure but distant. This revelation is clear but distant.

But what is the revelation? The rhetoric continues to proceed by building up suspense; there is the comment about waiting (v. 1), then the instruction about writing (v. 2), and now an explanation about time to elapse before the fulfillment of the revelation whose content we have not been told (v. 3). Again, this would fit with the prophecy being a piece of narrative theology, if the readers for whom it is designed are people who have been waiting some time for Yahweh to act.

There will indeed be some time before the moment of fulfillment (v. 3). Habakkuk has implied that one of the problems in the community (as psalms often make clear) is deception; people's word cannot be trusted (1:4). It would be tempting for people to reckon that Habakkuk's alleged revelation from Yahweh was something of this sort. Yahweh declares that it **will not prove false.** But the revelation does relate to the **appointed time,** to **the end** (NIV has "an" appointed time, but that word also has "the" before it). There is an "appointed time" within Yahweh's intention to which the revelation relates; the revelation will come true at "the end" of the period that Yahweh has set. "End" (*qets*) is an ordinary word for the conclusion of a period of time (e.g., Exod. 12:41; Deut. 15:1). It is not a term that would make people think in terms of *the* End, the "eschaton," though it may have that meaning in some later visions in Daniel 12 and at Qumran. Prophets do use it to refer to a devastating punishment coming on Ephraim and Judah (Amos 8:2; Ezek. 7:1–7), though there its reference is more existential than chronological. It is the end for them. But those existential connotations might well apply here. The appointed time will come, the end of the time Yahweh has set, and it will mean devastating punishment for Babylon, "the end" for it. In the meantime, Judah must wait in patience and expectancy (v. 3b). **Though it linger** perhaps reflects the fact that the actual audience of the prophecy is people for whom it has indeed tarried, and it encourages them still to live in expectancy. They will see the revelation's fulfillment. Whether or not that is so, this is the encouragement and the promise for readers of the book who live under the domination of one superpower or another. Even if the prophecy does not mean action this month or this year, it does mean action and, when its time comes, it will not fail. If there seems a contradiction between "Though it linger" and **it . . . will not delay,** we might compare its point with the feelings a couple have about the coming birth of their baby. Pregnancy takes time, but the baby's time will definitely come.

2:4–5 / Apparently the revelation begins here, and it continues in verses 6–20, even though these verses do not look especially like a revelation (ch. 3 might be reckoned to contain a revelation, but it has its own introduction and context). For the most part, verses 4–5 comprise a further description of the superpower, spoken of as a nation and thus as "he" or "it," as it was in 1:6b–17 (where NIV turns the singular expressions into plural).

The opening of the description in verses 4a and 5a is difficult (see the additional notes) but it is clear enough that verse 4a refers to someone who is **not**

upright in spirit or desire or appetite (*nefesh*) and that verse 5a similarly refers to someone who **is arrogant** (Prov. 21:24, the only other occurrence of this word, illustrates its implications). The remaining four lines of verse 5 put flesh on this and make clear that the "person" that the verses are describing indeed stands for the superpower that takes over all the nations in Habakkuk's world. Perhaps it sees itself (or says that it sees itself) as leading them beneficently into a united future with all the advantages of centralized government and common policies throughout their world; people in power often make such claims. If so, Yahweh calls its bluff. The phrase **he is as greedy as the grave** is literally "he opens wide his spirit or desire or appetite [*nefesh* again] like Sheol"; that is the way in which his spirit or desire or appetite is not upright. Sheol can be pictured as opening a huge mouth to swallow people, especially when death takes them before their time; the superpower does the same (as Habakkuk pointed out in 1:13). **Like death** it **is never satisfied.** To use the terms of another image, the superpower acts like a farmer at harvest time who **gathers to himself all the nations.** The parallel verb **takes captive** is indeed what Babylon does, though the verb is a neutral one for "collects up" and continues the harvest metaphor.

In the midst of all that with all the pressure it brings, **the righteous will live by his faith** or—as the margin puts it—by his "faithfulness" (v. 4b). Habakkuk has protested that in Israel the wicked hem in the righteous (1:4) and in world politics the wicked swallow up the righteous (1:13). Yahweh makes an outrageous promise that simply confronts what Habakkuk says: "You must not let the evidence of your own eyes contradict the real truth." Of course it is the case that this is how things sometimes are in the people of God and in the world, but that is not the regular truth. Hold on to the regular truth. Yahweh's promise is that "righteous" people, people who do the right thing in their relationships with God and with others, will live and not die (cf. 1:12). When things look otherwise, the key is "faith" or "faithfulness" or trust or steadfastness or truthfulness (*'emunah*). The key is to keep on trusting Yahweh and trusting Yahweh's faithfulness and Yahweh's promises. Verse 4b thus restates verse 3b.

So far, Yahweh's response might seem unsatisfying, like that to Job. It fails to address Habakkuk's point, which is that the Babylonians are even more corrupt than Judah, and that they can therefore hardly be allowed to function as Judah's judge and jailor. And far from promising any immediate action, Yahweh gives notice that there will be no action for a while. Yahweh does continue to imply that there will be action, but does not indicate what kind. So if verses 4–5 begin the revelation, it will be disappointing if that is all the revelation comprises. But,

in fact, Yahweh has much more to say. In effect, Yahweh has here granted Habakkuk's point and underlined it: the superpower, like all superpowers, is grossly arrogant and greedy. By implication, Yahweh has acknowledged that action to bring judgment to it is absolutely necessary.

2:6a / The revelation thus continues in verses 6–20, though it takes idiosyncratic form. Once again the prophet communicates by making people work hard in understanding him, like Jesus did. With irony, Yahweh introduces the revelation with the same expression as Habakkuk used in his protest in 1:12. Thus **"Will not all of them"** is again an indirect way of making a strong declaration, "All of them will definitely . . ." The revelation contains a promise concerning Yahweh's action, but it is an indirect promise. It takes the form of declarations on the part of the victims of the superpower who were referred to in verse 5, declarations concerning the fact that this action is coming. Outside of this context, much of it could refer (for instance) to a king of Judah (see the comment on v. 9), but in this context the object of the invective continues to be Babylon. Yet the absence of names reminds listeners that this invective can apply to other superpowers—or to Judean kings.

Taunt, ridicule, and **scorn** are fair descriptions of what will follow in verses 6b–20, but the three words Habakkuk actually uses are not in themselves pejorative in the manner of these three English words. All three come alongside each other in Proverbs 1:6 to describe the form of a wise man's teaching, and there is nothing pejorative about them there. First, literally, the victims will "lift up a poem." The verb (*nasa'*) is the one lying behind the noun *massa'* in 1:1; the noun (*mashal*) is usually translated "proverb" or "parable," but "poem" is the nearest English word. The second noun (*melitsah*) occurs elsewhere only in Proverbs 1:6; the NIV there translates it "parable." The third noun (*khidot*) suggests puzzling statements, the kind that you have to think hard about. Thus, while the series of five "Oh!" declarations that constitute this poem parallel the sequences in Isaiah 5:8–25 and (on a larger scale) in Isaiah 28–33, they are more parabolic and mind-stretching than those. The NIV translates the *hoy* as **Woe;** it is the "Oh!" or "Hey!" that Nahum, for instance, uttered to Nineveh (Nah. 3:1), and reference to bloodshed will soon follow (v. 8), as it does there. Like Nahum's, this prophetic "Oh!" confronts not the powerful in Judah, as Isaiah's do, but the powerful in international affairs. It may be that such an "Oh!" was commonly an expression of grief at a misfortune that had overcome someone (cf. 1 Kgs. 13:30, the only occurrence outside the Latter Prophets), but the prophets

characteristically express themselves in this way only ironically. Habakkuk makes the oppressor's victims speak like such a prophet; or rather, he puts his own prophetic declarations on their lips, not least in the challenge with which the series ends in verse 20. To put it another way, like the book as a whole the five "Oh!"s are a theological construct by means of which the book continues its project of theological education. The Babylonians never hear these "Oh!"s; they are purely for the ears of the Judeans—for them to think about, and to reassure them.

The five "Oh!"s are a means of protesting the superpower's action and of declaring that consequences will follow. The superpower is guilty of wrongdoing against humanity and against the land, or earth, against cities and their inhabitants, against forests and their wild creatures, and ultimately against God. It has appropriated resources from all over the world (vv. 6b–8), used them to build itself up (vv. 9–11), built a magnificent capital city through the exercise of its tyranny (vv. 12–14), attacked and devastated other peoples (vv. 15–17), and bowed down to pathetic images (vv. 18–20). The prophet typically combines several ways of stating how its wrongdoing will lead to trouble. This can happen because its victims wake up and take action (vv. 6b–8), and/or because its projects protest at what made them possible (vv. 9–11), and/or because the failure of these projects comes directly from Yahweh (vv. 12–14), and/or because the superpower's wrongdoing carries an inbuilt feedback mechanism (vv. 15–17), and/or because the object of its trust is inherently inadequate (vv. 18–20).

2:6b–8 / The first "Oh!" protest parallels another word from Nahum (*rabah* in the *hip'il*). "You [Nineveh] got yourself a huge number of merchants" (Nah. 3:16; NIV "increased"). "You [Babylon] got yourself a huge amount of stuff that was not yours," Habakkuk declares (NIV **piles up**). Babylon indeed got hold of the resources that made it into one of the wonders of the world, much of it no doubt by means of exacting taxes. But **makes himself wealthy by extortion** suggests a reference to trading, since "extortion" (the word occurs only here) is related to the verb for borrowing and lending. So Habakkuk speaks of Babylon as a trading nation that has made its profits by imposing extortionate trading terms. Habakkuk asks, **How long . . . ?** But "how long are you going to carry on doing this" may more likely be Habakkuk's point, to judge from verse 7. The question is a warning. Babylon is going to find this rebounds on it, so it would be wise to change its ways now.

In effect Habakkuk then likens Babylon to a nation that has its balance of

payments hopelessly out of order (v. 7). It is another one of those strong statements disguised as a question: "Your debtors will definitely wake up and you will find yourself turned into plunder instead of taking plunder" (NIV **victim** is a word for "plunder"). It is as if the small countries from which Babylon has "borrowed" (by requiring them to pay those taxes to the imperial center as well as by simply plundering their lands) have simply accepted their position as the natural order of things but they will **suddenly** realize that it is not. They have the power to turn things around. In the modern world, one can see how this worked as the colonies of the European powers came to insist on their independence. The fact that Babylon has caused such devastation does not make this impossible (v. 8). There is another reference to "violence" (cf. 1:2, 3, 9) in the expression **destroyed lands** because this reads more literally, "because of human bloodshed and violence to a land."

2:9–11 / The second "Oh!" warning restates the point by means of a different image. The word for **realm** is literally "house"; this is the image that runs through the subsection. The NIV's "realm" perhaps assumes that the person of whom Habakkuk speaks is the king. This might then also suggest a king's desire to build up his household in the sense of his dynasty, or it might suggest the habit of kings to build themselves impressive palaces. The passage would compare with the *hoy* declaration in Jeremiah 22:13–19, which also speaks of Jehoiakim as involved in **unjust gain.** But since Habakkuk has been consistently speaking of Babylon as "he," more likely the house-builder stands for the empire as a whole. The reference to building might recall the impressive buildings of Babylon itself, but Habakkuk goes on to speak more metaphorically about building your nest on high in order to be inaccessible and safe (cf. Jer. 49:16), **to escape the clutches of ruin.** But this will not work. Literally (v. 10), "you have planned shame for your house, the end of many peoples, sinning [against] your life." As any empire has to do, Babylon had planned its policies, and it was not too worried about these policies bringing **the ruin of many peoples** by appropriating their resources. But it had thereby unwittingly planned shame for itself, because it will find its policies turn back on it. It has thus sinned against its own life and it will forfeit that life. The moment will come when **The stones of the wall** of this house themselves **will cry out** in protest, just as Habakkuk has been crying out in protest to Yahweh about oppression in Judah (1:2, the same verb), and the **woodwork** will join in. Even the raw materials that the Babylonians use, impressively assembled into a fine building of stone and wood

(again cf. Jer. 22:13–19), will recognize the wrong to which they have been harnessed and will cry out against the bloodshed—the cost at which they were built—like the blood crying out from the ground on which it had been shed (Gen. 4:10). The superpower has acquired gains to the ultimate detriment of its own house. It has tried to set itself so high that it can never be pulled down, but ironically this very effort will be its downfall.

2:12–14 / The third "Oh!" warning speaks similarly about the one **who builds a city,** by means of **bloodshed** (cf. v. 8; also Nah. 3:1) or **crime** (*ʿawlah*): not that Babylon broke any laws, except God's laws written into creation. The frustration of its aims is again expressed by one of those strong statements disguised as a question, this time noting an irony. To paraphrase Habakkuk's words, "Now: it definitely comes from Yahweh Armies (see Nah. 2:13 for that title) that all the labor the Babylonians impose on subject peoples in order to build Babylon into a magnificent city is totally wasted." Habakkuk adds a distinctive rationale for Yahweh's act of judgment. By its building, he implies, Babylon has been seeking to enhance its glory, but Yahweh will not tolerate that (v. 14). As is commonly the case, **knowledge** implies acknowledgment and recognition.

2:15–17 / The fourth "Oh!" takes up another familiar OT image. One way of defeating an enemy is by poisoning his **drink.** So when Yahweh causes an enemy unaccountably to collapse, like a drunk, it is as if Yahweh has given him a poisoned drink, the cup of Yahweh's wrath. And in Jeremiah 51:7 Yahweh puts such a drink in Babylon's hand for it to give to other nations and thereby defeat them. Here, the image is initially secularized: the superpower pours out its wrath (v. 15; see the additional note) and defeats other nations by making them **drunk** and incapable. That means they end up a little like Noah, **naked** and humiliated; that was also the fate of a defeated army (e.g., Isa. 20:4).

By conquering other nations, the superpower is again seeking to add to its own **glory;** but we know that Yahweh's glory is the one that counts (v. 14) and that actually the superpower is to experience the same **shame** and **disgrace** (v. 16, where the words are *qalon* and *qiqalon,* an intensive form of the same word; more literally it suggests "belittling," v. 16). Here Habakkuk uses the explicit theological image of the **cup** of poison in Yahweh's **right hand,** which is being turned into one the superpower itself will drink (cf. Isa. 51:17–23).

Verse 17 adds quite another reason for this judgment. Habakkuk speaks once again of **violence** (cf. 1:2, 3, 9; 2:8), but now of violence against **Lebanon,** in the

felling of its trees (cf. Isa. 14:8; 37:24). This presumably occurred in connection with building projects, in the manner of Solomon's. The **animals** are perhaps there simply as a makeweight, though the Babylonians' expeditions and the transporting of this lumber will have depended on animals. These wrongs to the created world will also **overwhelm** and **terrify** Babylon. Verse 17b repeats v. 8b.

Unwittingly the superpower formulates policies that will bring it shame, not the splendor it seeks. It has made other people drink poison (that is, defeated and decimated them) and has thus exposed their helplessness and shamed them, but it will find itself having to drink its own medicine.

2:18–20 / The final "Oh!" warning postpones the exclamation to the middle verse, which signals that this subsection is more than just another in the series; it is the last. It begins instead with another rhetorical question that challenges Babylon to think, and it introduces quite another consideration as it takes up the nature of Babylonian religion. It springs from a standard feature of the OT's polemic about images; after all, **a man has carved it.** The specific focus of Habakkuk's scorn is that it is then ridiculous to ask the image for guidance. Being humanly-made, inevitably **it teaches lies.** It cannot give real revelations about a future that it does not control. Its maker knows that he has made an image that cannot actually speak ("they have mouths but speak not") yet he **trusts** in it, even though it is **his own creation**.

The "Oh!" then builds on this. How stupid can a person be, one **who says to wood, "Come to life!" Or to lifeless stone, "Wake up!"** Habakkuk continues with another rhetorical question: Can it teach? (**give guidance** is the same verb as in v. 18). Just use your intelligence! An image looks very impressive **covered with gold and silver** but (oddly NIV omits the "but") **there is no breath in it,** no life. As usual, this polemic will have been designed in part to encourage the Judeans not to fall into the trap of believing the Babylonians' claims for their gods, and this will be especially important in the later context when the Babylonians will be able to claim they have defeated Yahweh (Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,* pp. 127–28). Babylon has trusted in the images it has made for itself, but it will find they let their creator down. Babylon will long to discover what to do, but it will find that (unlike Yahweh, before whom Habakkuk stood waiting for a word) these images cannot speak.

But the LORD—he **is in his holy temple** (the word order puts emphasis on the subject). "Temple" is literally "palace"; Habakkuk refers not to the temple/palace in Jerusalem but to Yahweh's temple/palace in the heavens from which Yahweh

exercises sovereignty in the world. What a contrast there is between this God and those so-called gods. Of course the Babylonians believed their gods were in the heavens; they did not reckon that their images *were* the gods, at least not in theory. But the prophets assume that a deity who can be represented by a humanly-made image nevertheless cannot be much of a deity. It is wise to bow and **be silent** (*has,* like the English "hush") before this real God. The bidding recurs in Zephaniah 1:7 and Zechariah 2:13, and we might imagine it as a bidding during worship when people were urged to be in reverent and submissive silence, though there is no evidence of that. In the prophets the cry refers to a silent submission before Yahweh when Yahweh acts, the real-life silent submission that the silent submission expressed in worship would symbolize.

The commendation of silence might raise the question of whether Habakkuk is also going back on his indulgence in loud protests in 1:2–17. At the same time, verse 20 may also prepare the way for chapter 3.

Additional Notes §2

1:12 / The TNIV follows the Jewish tradition that sees **we will not die** (*lo' namut*) as an emendation of "you will not die" (*lo' tamut*), one of eighteen theological corrections in the MT. This one would have been designed to safeguard against the merest suggestion of the idea that Yahweh might die. "You will not die" would make a good pair with "are you not from aforetime"; Habakkuk's confession then traces Yahweh's being both backward and forward. Yahweh is not a here-today-gone-tomorrow, dying-and-rising God like some others whom Habakkuk could name.

In v. 12b, **them** represents a singular suffix, picking up the singular in vv. 6–11 in the Heb. The singular reappears in v. 13b.

1:14 / The Qumran Habakkuk pesher has the nice alternative reading *lo* for *lo',* which more directly refers to Gen. 1:28, "like sea creatures for them [humanity] to rule over."

1:15 / **The wicked foe:** the NIV adds this; there are no equivalent Heb. words. The antecedent for the verb is the "wicked" in v. 13.

1:16 / **By his net . . .** in v. 16b is, more literally, "by his net his portion is fat and his food is rich."

2:1 / On the alternative understanding of **watch** noted above, we could take the word for **ramparts** (*matsor*) to have a similar meaning, deriving it from *natsar* ("watch over, keep watch") rather than *tsur* ("wait for").

2:2 / NRSV has "that a runner may read it," but this seems to reverse the meanings of the finite verb and the participle; lit. Habakkuk says, "that a reader may run with it" or "that a reader of it may run." The NIV **herald** stems from the fact that "read" is *qara',* which implies reading out loud. The line can hardly denote

that the message is publicly placarded so that a passerby may (silently) read it easily.

2:3 / The promise that the revelation **will not prove false** makes the reader reconsider the previous two lines. The NIV's **speaks** apparently derives *yafeakh* from *puakh* meaning "breathe," but the NJPS more plausibly assumes that it is an instance of the other root *puakh,* meaning "testify" (see, e.g., Ps. 12:5 [MT 6]). So this middle line would at least hint at the meaning "it testifies concerning the end." In turn, in the first line **awaits** translates the adverb *ʿod* (lit., "the revelation [is] yet for the appointed time"). But there is another root *ʿod* used in the *hipʿil* to mean "witness," and although this particular verbal form can hardly come from this root, that first line also hints at a reference to witness (one could emend *ʿod* to *ʿed* to make this explicit, "the revelation is a witness to the appointed time").

In v. 3b, the NIV's alternative translation in the margin derives from Heb. 10:37. In Habakkuk, there is no personal antecedent for "he."

2:4 / More literally in v. 4a, "There: his spirit has been swollen [or made heedless or made weak], it is not upright, in him." The verb *ʿafal* occurs only here and in Num. 14:44 and its meaning is uncertain.

Paul is inspired to give v. 4b a quite different significance when he quotes it in Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11. Hebrews 10:38a is closer to Habakkuk's own meaning, though Heb. 10:38b adapts the text to make its own point. Habakkuk could also be understood to be promising that "the righteous will live by its faithfulness/truthfulness," referring to the faithfulness/truthfulness of the revelation. The point then would be that the righteous will live strengthened and enabled by the fact that God is going to make the revelation a reality.

2:5 / There is no problem with the Heb. for **wine betrays him,** though it is a surprising comment in the context. Given the metaphorical references to Babylon's appetite in the context, it would presumably be a metaphor. The way addiction to alcohol can turn a person into someone who betrays their relationships provides an image for the way Babylon's appetite for power turns it into a people that is faithless in relation to Yahweh. "Betrays" is the same verb translated "is treacherous" in 1:13 (the participle both times)—there also it was similarly spelled out as involving swallowing up the righteous.

But the NRSV has "wealth" (*hon*) instead of "wine" (*yayin*), following the text of the Qumran pesher, which makes more literal sense: it was Babylon's appetite for wealth, expressed in its enlarging of its empire, that led it to faithlessness to Yahweh and to other peoples.

Never at rest represents another Heb. verb (*nawah*) that occurs only here. The NIV takes it as a denominative from the word for a habitation (*naweh*). It then apparently offers the neat critique of Babylon that it never stays at home; it is always restlessly seeking somewhere new.

2:6 / **How long** (NIV then adds **must this go on**) actually comes in the middle of v. 6b in the Heb., between **stolen goods** and **and makes himself wealthy.**

2:7 / **Debtors** is a denominative verb from *neshek,* which means "interest" (lit., "something bitten off"). In its two other occurrences the *qal* means "pay interest" and the *hipʿil* "charge interest," so one would expect the *qal* participle here to mean "debtor" rather than "creditor." The NIV has "creditors" in the margin because it is usually creditors who would cause the kind of trouble Habakkuk refers to. But one can see how in the modern world either creditors (for instance, in Asia) or debtors (for instance, in Africa) might do that.

2:9 / More literally, "Oh! The one who robs robbery, ruin for his house, in setting his nest on high, in escaping from the clutch of ruin." The phrase "ruin for his house" is then parenthetical, like "how long" in v. 6; it contrasts the house-builder's aim with what he will actually achieve. He is trying to safeguard against ruin but is actually bringing it on himself.

2:13 / People's: the word is actually pl., "peoples'"; pl. "nations" then matches it.

2:15 / From the wineskin: The NIV takes the noun as *khemet,* which otherwise occurs only referring to Hagar's water bottle in Gen. 21:14–19. More likely it is the much more common *khemah,* "fury." This is used with reference to Babylon in Isa. 51:13, but much more frequently it refers to Yahweh's fury (e.g., Nah. 1:2, 6), esp. in the image of the cup of Yahweh's fury, the cup of poison (e.g., Isa. 51:17, where instead of Babylon administering it, Babylon is now to drink it, as here in Hab. 2:15–17).

2:16 / Be exposed (*heʿarel*) is lit. "be counted as uncircumcised" and thus shamed. But this usage occurs only here and the NIV margin notes the alternative tradition that reads another rare verb *heraʿel,* "stagger."

§3 A Plea and a Vision (Hab. 3:1–19)

Chapter 3 opens with a new heading that is even comparable to that of the book as a whole (1:1), and the chapter closes with its own concluding footnote (v. 19b). The heading designates it as a "prayer," which takes the narrow form of a plea (v. 2) and of a declaration of trust in Yahweh (vv. 16–19). The main body of the chapter (vv. 3–15) comprises a description of Yahweh's coming which is both an answer to the plea and the basis for the declaration of trust. While the book would not seem incomplete if it ended at 2:20, this final chapter reinforces its impact in several ways. The report of the vision fills out the revelation in 2:4–20, giving another account of how Yahweh will put down the superpower. The plea and the confession of trust model the appropriate responses to the revelation.

3:1–2 / The conversation is not over. Habakkuk speaks once more and has the last word; Yahweh does not speak in chapter 3. But it is a very different form of speech from the one with which Habakkuk began. Ultimately it amounts to an "Amen" to Yahweh's word rather than a disputing of it (Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi,* p. 54).

Nevertheless, the introduction actually describes it as "a prayer." This word (*tefillah*) usually denotes a plea, the appeal a person makes in court; a common OT understanding of prayer is that it involves taking a stand in Yahweh's cabinet, seeking to get the assembled gathering to agree to do what we ask. A **prophet** (see the introduction) is in a particularly strong position to do that, as prophets were admitted to Yahweh's cabinet to overhear what decisions were made (cf. Jer. 23:18, 22) and had the freedom to interrupt the cabinet's deliberations. The actual plea follows in verse 2, and it is the chapter's only plea. Perhaps the word "prayer" is used here in a broader sense that can include praise, declaration of trust, and thanksgiving—as it can in English (cf. Neh. 11:17; also the verb *palal hitpaʿlel* in 1 Sam. 2:1; Jon. 2:1). **On *shigionoth*** is the kind of heading to prayers and praises that appears in the Psalms, presumably referring to the form of the poem or to some musical or liturgical way of using it. Indeed, the singular "shiggaion" comes in the heading to Psalm 7.

Scholars have thought that this heading, along with the similar footnote with

which the chapter closes (v. 19b), indicate that this is a poem by Habakkuk that came to be used in worship although it was originally part of the prophetic book. The notes concerning its use in worship then came to be part of the prophetic text, just as the headings about using psalms came to be part of the Psalms' text. It is indeed a plausible idea that such a poem could be abstracted from the prophecy in order to be used in worship, as happened with the song of Daniel's three friends in the longer version of Daniel 3 in the Septuagint and with the song of Mary in Luke 1, which came to be used, respectively, as the Benedicite and the Magnificat in Christian worship. It is also a plausible idea that this poem of Habakkuk's would then have such rubrics added to it.

Yet it seems less plausible that these rubrics would subsequently be retrojected into the text of the prophetic book. A more likely alternative possibility is that the prayer existed in its own right as a worship text, with the heading and footnote, and that it kept this form when it was incorporated into the book. It would then have been simply one of the compositions by Habakkuk that were brought together into the book. Perhaps, then, the chapter as it stands reports an inspired prayer that Habakkuk as a prophet prayed, in the manner of the prophetic worship leaders whose ministry is described in Chronicles (cf. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 156). Admittedly, in itself the heading **A prayer of Habakkuk** need not mean Habakkuk himself wrote it (see the additional note); it could signify that the prayer has been added to the book to offer a further angle on the issue Habakkuk discusses, as a prayer that someone like Habakkuk could properly pray in this situation; it would then also guide the book's readers in an appropriate response to the book. But there are enough links with chapters 1–2 to render it more plausible that chapter 3 was composed in the context of a relationship to chapters 1–2 from the beginning.

Either way, the testimony put onto Habakkuk's lips in verse 2a introduces this plea in verse 2b and opens his introduction to the description of Yahweh's coming that will follow in verses 3–15. He begins with what he has **heard.** In other contexts this might refer to what he has heard in worship about Yahweh's deeds in the past; this would lead well into an appeal to act in this way again (cf. Ps. 44). But back in 1:5, when he reported Yahweh's first response to him, promising to do "something" spectacular in his days, he used the same word that is translated by **deeds** here (*poʿal*). This suggests that here he refers to what he has "heard" of what Yahweh intends to do. He has come to **stand in awe** at this deed Yahweh intends to undertake rather than to dispute it. At the same time, his reference to hearing of the deed that Yahweh intends also introduces verses

3–15, where he will pass on what he has heard. In other words, verses 3–15 will spell out the nature of the deed that verse 2a refers to. Once again Habakkuk thus heightens suspense by telling us about his reception of the message and his reaction to it before telling us the message itself. Daniel uses the same technique as he tells us of his response to God's revelation and what he does next about communicating it (Dan. 2:19–28) before telling us what it is (Dan. 2:29–45).

So Habakkuk has moved from dispute to submission, like Job. Yet this does not mean he simply yields to silence (any more than Job does?). There are two senses in which he declines to do so. First, he is not keen on the idea that Yahweh's action might have to wait a long time (it will actually wait many decades, of course), and he wants to make sure that does not happen. Rhetorically, this will be a way of reassuring his audience of that point. So as well as standing in awe, his further response, still before relating the vision, is to plead with Yahweh to make this not just something that one hears about from the past and might see in the future but something that Yahweh does now. It is tempting to reckon that Yahweh's acts belong in the past (for instance creation and the exodus) and perhaps to add the expectation that they may come again at the End. Habakkuk wants to see them in the present, in history, politics, and experience, in the here and now (Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah,* p. 110). To underline the point, he repeats the expression "in the midst of the years" (NIV changes the wording to avoid the repetition). Only here is the word "midst" (*qereb*) used of time. **Renew** is more literally "make them live"; he wants to see the message brought to life, turned into reality. Likewise **make them known** also carries the connotation of "cause them to be acknowledged"; make people recognize them as Habakkuk has in coming to "stand in awe" at Yahweh's deeds.

There is a second sense in which Habakkuk declines simply to subside into silence. Presently Judah lives in a time of **wrath;** he asks that Yahweh may **remember mercy.** Each word requires some comment. First, *rogez* is not a usual word for wrath. Along with related words, it more often suggests turmoil or tumult. Perhaps it refers to Yahweh's tumultuous behavior, but the context suggests reference to the world's turmoil as people are experiencing it "in the midst of the years." So Habakkuk is pleading for Yahweh not to leave the world in its turmoil. He wants Yahweh thus to act in "compassion," which is the usual meaning of *rakham;* this will issue in "mercy," but "compassion" for a people and a world in need more directly points to the motivation for mercy. So this appeal further buttresses the plea for Yahweh to act *now.* And the appeal for action is implicit in the verb for "remember," or be mindful (*zakar*), which itself

suggests the kind of mindfulness that issues in action.

There is no indication that Habakkuk is here concerned for Judah alone. Yahweh's message has spoken of the way the nations as a whole sit under the oppression of the superpower, and Habakkuk pleads for compassion for them all.

3:3–15 / Now comes Habakkuk's account of the message about Yahweh's activity, the further revelation that spells out what Habakkuk heard at the beginning and what he has now heard more of. Habakkuk has engaged Yahweh in a dialogue reminiscent of that with Abraham (Gen. 18:23–33), but with implications for the nations that are almost the opposite of those found in that passage. Now he reports a vision (**I saw,** v. 7) of Yahweh coming to act in the manner Yahweh has in the past. It is Habakkuk who speaks and reports his vision, but at another level the reporting of the vision does give Yahweh one last word in this dialogue. Initially, we could not be sure whether Habakkuk is giving an account of Yahweh's coming in the past of the kind described in passages such as Judges 5, and certainly his way of describing Yahweh's coming follows such patterns. But a note such as the reference to **your anointed one** (v. 13) suggests that rather he is giving an account of Yahweh's coming in the present. He speaks of Yahweh's coming as past because it has already happened in his vision and thus has happened within Yahweh's purpose and is bound to become something that has indeed happened "in the here and now." We do not know whether this is indeed simply a vision Habakkuk received or whether the Holy Spirit inspired him consciously to construct a prophecy in the form of a vision report that utilizes the form and the language of accounts of Yahweh's coming with which he and his readers would be familiar. Either way, it is marked by archaic images and expressions of uncertain meaning, though its general significance is clear enough.

The vision utilizes six sets of imagery.

(1) When Yahweh appears in order to act, it will be as if Yahweh is coming from the abode on Mount Sinai to act in the way described in passages such as Deuteronomy 33, Judges 5, and Psalm 68 (v. 3a). **Teman** is both a term for the south (e.g., Isa. 43:6) and a term for a specific place to the south, in Edom (e.g., Amos 1:12). Paran, in turn, is a term for a place on the way from Sinai to Canaan (e.g., Num. 10:12; 12:16). Deuteronomy 33:2 has Yahweh coming from Sinai, dawning over Israel from Seir (another term for Edom), and shining forth from **Mount Paran.** Such poems are aware that while Yahweh lives in a palace in the

heavens and took up abode in another palace in Jerusalem, Yahweh's original holy mountain on earth, the original portal between earth and heaven as far as Israel was concerned, was Mount Sinai. More than once in the past, Israel knew Yahweh had journeyed to Canaan from that wilderness in the south, the mysterious, marginal realm. Psalm 68 prays for Yahweh to do that again, and in Habakkuk's vision God does so. In keeping with such traditions, **God** (here *'eloakh*), further defined as **the Holy One** (see the comment on 1:12), once again makes the journey.

Later Habakkuk returns to this imagery in describing Yahweh as a colossus who "strode through the earth" as in Judges 5:4 and Psalm 68:8, when Yahweh "came out" in making that journey from Sinai (vv. 12–13a).

(2) Such an appearing will necessarily manifest the kind of **splendor** and **power** that will reverberate through the cosmos. So when Yahweh appears in order to act, it will be like the bright shining of the dawn sun with its **rays** flashing forth, which makes it impossible to look at God, so that this "power" that God comes with is **hidden** until God is ready to reveal it. It brings the very presence of Yahweh filling the earth and the heavens with divine majesty and praiseworthiness (vv. 3b–4). Perhaps the imagery here was suggested by Habakkuk's being in prayer in the temple at the morning time of worship at daybreak (so Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Volume 2,* pp. 483–84).

(3) When that power expresses itself in comparable visions like those in Deuteronomy 33 and Psalm 68, it involves both blessing and calamity. In this vision, as in Judges 5, at first sight it is all calamity. When God chooses to let that power be seen, it expresses itself in epidemic and **pestilence** (v. 5), the agents Yahweh had used in putting the Egyptian Empire in its place. The Canaanites thought of these frightening, unstoppable forces as deities. Israel knows there is no real deity apart from Yahweh and that these terrifying forces are under Yahweh's control, in the manner of the destroyer at the exodus (Exod. 12:23) and the aide who similarly "destroys" Israel, by means of an epidemic, in David's day (2 Sam. 24:15–16). They are negative equivalents to agents such as commitment or steadfastness that also serve Yahweh (e.g., Pss. 23:6; 43:3). They are aspects of Yahweh's own person (it is Yahweh who strikes the Egyptians and also Yahweh who manifests commitment and steadfastness to people), yet they can be distinguished from Yahweh as semi-hypostasized realities.

(4) When Yahweh appears in order to take action, it will be like God standing up to act, and thus making the earth shake (v. 6). The imagery has changed from that of the brightness of the sun's rising to the violence of a storm that can

threaten features of the landscape that look most established and secure. Either that violence terrifies **the nations,** or the crumbling **mountains** and **hills** are themselves an image for the nations that seem to have been in power forever. Either way, as Yahweh went before Israel to defeat the Canaanites and then came to defeat Jabin in Judges 5, so Yahweh will act again to put the nations (that is, the empire) in their place and deliver Judah. As Yahweh retreads this age-old journey (see the additional note), Habakkuk watches the peoples on the way reduced to panic, though actually they have nothing to worry about because Yahweh is not concerned about them (v. 7). **Midian** was a people to the south (cf. v. 3) who lived on Yahweh's route from Sinai. **Cushan** appears only here; it presumably belongs in the same area.

Habakkuk reverts to storm imagery in subsequently describing how "sun and moon stood still in the heavens"; the storm totally obscured them (v. 11a).

(5) When Yahweh appears in order to take action, it will be like a victory over the tumultuous waters embodying dynamic and turbulent energy that asserts itself, opposes God's purpose, and threatens disorder and incalculable chaos in the world. The cosmic reverberations at Yahweh's coming perhaps themselves raise the question of whether behind the empire's assertiveness is the assertiveness of cosmic powers of disorder, the **rivers** and **the sea.** The superpower is the current embodiment of these powers, and Yahweh's acts will be assertions of ferocious power against these cosmic forces. Verse 8a presupposes that Habakkuk has witnessed Yahweh winning a victory over rivers, **streams,** and sea. Yahweh did originally defeat such powers at creation and again at the Red Sea (e.g., Ps. 74:13–15). In Habakkuk's vision Yahweh has defeated them once more. The rhetorical question again makes a strong statement: "You truly were **angry with the rivers** . . . Yes, **your wrath** was **against the streams** . . . Yes, you did **rage against the sea.**"

Verses 9b–10 revert to the imagery of **rivers** (apparently bursting forth as a result of Yahweh's action against their metaphysical source), **Torrents of water, the deep,** and **waves** (lit., "hands"), but interweaves that with reference to **mountains.** These features of both land and sea are images for the power asserted against Yahweh that is embodied in the empire.

Habakkuk subsequently also comes back to the language of **wrath** or **anger** and to talk of Yahweh acting to **deliver** (vv. 12–13a), and then he reverts yet again to the imagery of the **sea** and the **great waters** (v. 15).

(6) When Yahweh takes action to overcome those negative powers, it will involve acting like a battle commander fighting vigorously: **you rode with your**

horses and your victorious chariots and unleashed **bow** and **arrows** (vv. 8b–9a). Habakkuk later segues again into describing this action of Yahweh's from on high as like that of a warrior with **flying arrows** and **flashing spear** (v. 11b). When he then describes Yahweh as a colossus who **strode through the earth** (v. 12), the parallelism of **threshed the nations** may imply that actually Yahweh "trod the earth," trampled it.

Yet in verse 8b, **victorious** (*yeshuʿah*) is the word usually translated "salvation" or "deliverance" (e.g., at the Red Sea, Exod. 14:13; 15:2), so that the verse expresses the actual link between Yahweh's acting in wrath and Yahweh's bringing deliverance. It is through Yahweh's acting in anger, wrath, and rage that people find deliverance. Precisely by bringing about turmoil Yahweh is expressing compassion, as Habakkuk asked (v. 2). So it is only at first sight that this vision is all about Yahweh bringing calamity. Yahweh acts to deliver people from their oppressors.

But more specifically, the reason why Yahweh **came out,** made that journey from Sinai, was not just the deliverance of all the peoples that are subject to Babylonian power but specifically **to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.** Here, to "save" and to "deliver" are the same Hebrew expression (*leyeshaʿ*), the verb related to the noun for "deliverance" in verse 8b ("victorious" in NIV). The expression "your anointed one" refers to the Davidic king, but trying to identify this king becomes problematic as Habakkuk has implied that the Judean leadership was ripe for judgment. Perhaps Habakkuk thinks not of a particular king, the king on the throne at the moment, but of the Davidic king as the one to whom Yahweh is in principle committed.

Yahweh's act of deliverance will be a corollary of crushing **the leader of the land of wickedness** (v. 13b). "Leader" is literally "head"; "land" is literally "house," the word translated "realm" in 2:9 in a similar context. The parallel line takes further the combined image of the leader and the house as it declares, more literally, "laying [it/him] bare from foundation to neck." Verse 14a then gives an alternative description of Yahweh's killing of the imperial leader whose **warriors** threatened **to scatter us** and **devour**.

3:16 / Verse 16 pairs with verse 2 in expressing Habakkuk's response to the vision. Verse 2 told us of that response anticipatorily; verse 16 does so after relating the vision. It again makes clear that Habakkuk is not merely an uninvolved spectator in this vision, not least because it concerns his own people. More significantly, Habakkuk is modeling the response he looks for from his

listeners.

There is some paradox about the response, corresponding to the nature of the vision. As a vision of Yahweh coming to act in wrath, with its cosmic reverberations, it was intimidating, terrifying, and paralyzing (see v. 16a). Yet as a vision of Yahweh coming to deliver Judah, it was designed to inspire hope and confidence (see v. 16b). The NIV makes this tension explicit with its **Yet,** but there is no "yet" in the Hebrew; if anything, the conjunction (*'asher*) that appears at this point means simply "when" or "as" and continues on from what precedes. The implication would be that being in turmoil goes together with settling down (the usual meaning of the verb *nuakh,* translated **wait patiently**) to wait for this moment of judgment to arrive.

Once again, it would be an exaggeration to say that at last the questioning, indignant prophet is silenced; he keeps talking. But his talk has a different tone. The vision of Yahweh's coming has not silenced him, but it has alarmed him and encouraged him. The world is in turmoil; Habakkuk is now consumed by turmoil of his own at the prospect of what Yahweh intends to do to resolve the world's turmoil. He expects that situation to continue. But at the same time he comes near to silence in declaring his commitment to "settling down" in the midst of all this turmoil as he awaits the act that corresponds to the vision, as Yahweh had urged (2:3).

3:17–19 / Habakkuk's last verses expand further on that attitude to which he is committed in the meantime, and which he wants to commend to his hearers. The experiences he describes in verse 17 might be metaphors for adversity, but they are the kinds of things that happen when an army invades another country. The necessity to forbid the destruction of fruit trees in war (Deut. 20:19–20) reflects the fact that this was common practice, through carelessness or as a deliberate act of hostility. And an invading army will likewise kill and eat a country's animals, without any thought for its future. Habakkuk can imagine the country going through this; and it does, when Babylon invades it. Or perhaps Habakkuk imagines things getting worse as natural disaster adds to military invasion, so that he is portraying a possible "worst-case scenario" (Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,* p. 157).

There is again no **yet** in verse 18, though the NIV does convey the effect of the language describing the transition from verse 17 (see additional note). There is an odd thing about being an Israelite (or a Christian). It means being able to continue to **rejoice** or exult or be triumphant (*'alaz*) and **be joyful** when there is

no visible reason for that. Habakkuk intends to begin that exulting and rejoicing now—the verbs are cohortative. And this is because he is exulting and rejoicing in **God my Savior,** literally in "the God of my deliverance." Habakkuk thus picks up another of the "deliverance" family of words (cf. vv. 8 [where NIV has "victorious"] and 13). The fact that (as his vision has assured him) Yahweh as the God who delivers is committed to acting in deliverance, delivering the people, and delivering the anointed king means that Habakkuk can exult and rejoice *now.* One does not wait for the event of deliverance to take place before beginning to smile about it.

To put it another way, **the sovereign LORD is my strength** (v. 19a). Literally, Habakkuk speaks of "Yahweh my master" (*'adonay*). Habakkuk is only a servant, but what matters is whose servant you are. If you are the servant of a powerful master, this puts you in a very strong position in life. Habakkuk can leap about with the confidence and agility of a **deer** climbing the rocks, like the king who gives his testimony in Psalm 18:33. Yet that king does so on the basis of Yahweh having actually delivered him. Habakkuk makes his confession on the basis of Yahweh's mere promise. He knows that people who wait for Yahweh find new strength even before they see what they wait for (Isa. 40:31).

Whether adversity takes the form of imperial oppression or natural disaster, the prophet has become convinced that they are not the end of the story. Yahweh will bring him and his people out the other side of these troubles. A time of exultation and rejoicing will come. Habakkuk is not envisaging an eschatological deliverance in the sense of a far-off event that he will not see, but a deliverance that he will experience.

In the event, the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. almost certainly did not happen within Habakkuk's lifetime, but it did happen. A prophet has to live with Yahweh's decisions about when a vision finds fulfillment. Perhaps one consideration that helps him do this is the very fact that (like most prophecies) his vision is not a wholly novel one. It constitutes a reassertion of Yahweh's known pattern of activity. Its restraint in referring to Babylon by name (as Nahum is restrained in his references to Assyria) is a symbol of that. The pattern it speaks of has obtained before, not least in Babylon's own defeat of Assyria, within Habakkuk's lifetime. It will recur. Habakkuk knows that whether he himself sees its next embodiment is not so important. It will need to be repeated again and again over coming millennia.

The footnote (v. 19b), similar to a phrase from a psalm heading (e.g., Pss. 4; 6), is a reminder of the fact that this prayer-poem was a song used in worship, and

as such it seeks to draw people into the kind of statement of faith that the preceding lines offer. During some periods, maybe during Habakkuk's day and certainly over succeeding decades and centuries, people's present experience was of the kind described in verse 17. This did not mean they stopped rejoicing and exulting.

Additional Notes §3

3:1 / Of Habakkuk: the expression "for the director of music" in v. 19 actually parallels this expression; both "of" in v. 1 and "for" in v. 19 translate the preposition *le.* This usage parallels that in the Psalms, where the phrases typically translated "of David" and "for the director of music" also involve this preposition. Neither in the Psalms nor in Habakkuk does "of" indicate that the Hebrew uses a construct, the equivalent of a genitive. And in neither context is it particularly natural to reckon that *le* signifies authorship. So here it would be as natural to reckon that verse 1 designates what follows as a prayer "for" Habakkuk, with the implication that an existing prayer has been inserted into the book for Habakkuk to pray, as it were.

Shigionoth may link with Akkadian *shigu,* meaning "lament," though the Heb. word has a broader meaning.

3:2 / I have heard of your fame: more literally, "I have heard the report about you/from you"; the verb and noun are related (*shamaʿti shimʿakah*). It is the same expression as in Nah. 3:19. Given the link back with 1:5, the phrase more likely refers to the message Yahweh has given Habakkuk.

3:3 / The NIV begins **God came,** which immediately flags a complication about the verbs in 3:15, as "came" is a *yiqtol* ("imperfect") verb, which in prose usually refers to the future. It is not *qatal* ("perfect"), which in prose usually refers to the past. But in poetry *yiqtol* verbs can refer to something that has already happened (the background lies in some aspects of the history of Hebrew and its relationship to cognate languages). This whole poem refers to a vision that is past in Habakkuk's presentation but refers to events that are still future.

Selah is another musical or liturgical term, much more common in the Psalms than "***shigionoth***" but just as mysterious. One might translate it "Rise," but we have no idea what this would then refer to. It comes at a semi-logical transition point here, a more logical one in v. 9, and a not very logical one in v. 13.

3:4 / I have assumed the NIV is right to understand v. 4 to refer to the brightness of the sun, but it may rather begin the description of Yahweh's coming as like that of a storm (cf. v. 6). Yahweh's majesty and praiseworthiness are then seen as reflected in the heavens by the clouds that simultaneously reveal and obscure Yahweh's coming, and in the lightning that illumines the sky against this somber backdrop; and that points to the intervention of this fiery warrior deity to sort out affairs on earth in the way Habakkuk has urged.

3:6 / It is theologically true that **His ways are eternal,** but in the context it is more likely that Habakkuk is declaring that his pathways, his route, are "age-old." The expression refers to the fact that Yahweh is repeating the journey from Sinai that passages such as Deut. 33 and Ps. 68 describe. The TNIV has "he marches on forever."

3:7 / The LXX takes **Cushan** as a variant for Cush, which refers to Sudan, but this does not fit the geography if Yahweh is journeying from Sinai to Canaan.

3:8 / **And your victorious chariots:** the NIV takes this as a construct expression, even though the suffix comes on the word that would usually be the construct. Perhaps more literally, "your chariots [in] deliverance."

Rivers and **streams** both translate the same word, *neharim,* perhaps an intensive plural suggesting "*the* River," which is identical with "the Sea." Verse 9 has the more regular feminine plural *neharot*.

3:9 / ***Selah*** (see the additional note on v. 3) comes at an apposite point, as v. 9b links with v. 10.

3:12–13 / In v. 8 "wrath" was *ʾaf;* here *ʾaf* is translated **anger** and **wrath** is *zaʿam,* often translated "indignation" (so Nah. 1:6). There is little difference between the words, though *ʾaf* is more common and more often refers to ordinary human anger. On ***Selah,*** see the additional note on v. 3.

3:14 / **To scatter us:** the Heb. has "to scatter me." **The wretched** is likewise singular. Thus v. 14 already speaks of Habakkuk's personal participation in the events the vision is describing. This is then background to v. 16.

3:16 / The verbs in the first two lines are *qatal* ("perfect") and may plausibly be taken to describe the prophet's reaction to the vision. The verbs in all of the final four lines are *yiqtol* ("imperfect"), and I thus take it that the creeping, trembling, and waiting patiently all characterize the prophet's ongoing state.

3:18 / **Yet:** lit., "then I—I in Yahweh intend to exult." The pronoun is expressed as it does not need to be and comes at the beginning of the line, and thus has emphasis; "in Yahweh" comes also before the verb, and the verb itself is cohortative.

3:19 / **My:** the first person is odd and the *-ay* ending may rather be an archaic plural ending (TNIV perhaps assumes this).

Zephaniah

John Goldingay

Introduction: Zephaniah

Uniquely among the prophets, Zephaniah's ancestry is traced back four generations. Perhaps this links with the fact that his great-great grandfather was one Hezekiah. If this was *the* Hezekiah, it would give reason for mentioning this ancestor. The reference might then also hint that there is a sense in which Zephaniah was a true descendant of that great faithful king. Indeed, whether or not the name refers to *that* Hezekiah, this might be the resonance of the name. His designation as "son of Cushi," meaning "son of the Sudanese," may further indicate that his father was an African. "The meaning of Zephaniah's name indicates that he was someone whom Yahweh "hid" (*tsafan*) like treasure, or like something in danger. The name is not uncommon (the OT mentions several Zephaniahs), but his name may also suggest something about the background that became his foreground. His prophetic ministry involved confronting Judah in Josiah's day about its commitment to deities other than Yahweh (see esp. 1:4–6). Presumably this confrontation took place early in Josiah's reign, before Josiah's reforms or in connection with them; Zephaniah would surely have supported the reforms. He would then likely have been born in the time of Manasseh, and if his family had been people who were committed to Yahweh, like Moses' mother, they might well have needed Yahweh to hide their son, someone who was their treasure and would be in danger. Second Kings 21:16 relates how much innocent blood Manasseh shed.

All this further indicates that chronologically he preceded Habakkuk, and probably Nahum as well. But Zephaniah's focus on the destruction of Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple, and on the restoration that would follow, means the book relates closely to those events lying beyond the focus of Nahum and even of Habakkuk. The subject of Zephaniah's prophecy thus also links with Haggai and Zechariah, which follow and focus on the temple's rebuilding and the community's cleansing (cf. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Volume 2,* p. 493).

The Book of Zephaniah

Like Nahum, the book of Zephaniah comprises a compilation of material

arranged without explicit structural markers. There are thus a number of ways of understanding its structure. For instance, the MT divides the book into sections comprising 1:1–9; 1:10–18; 2:1–4; 2:5–15; 3:1–13; 3:14–20. The English chapter divisions thus follow half of these. The NIV divides it into 1:1; 1:2–3; 1:4–13; 1:14–2:3; 2:4–7; 2:8–11; 2:12; 2:13–18; 3:1–20; the TNIV has quite a different understanding. Yet Zephaniah parallels Habakkuk in having a broad logic to its arrangement; it moves from speaking of the calamity coming on Jerusalem (in ch. 1), to speaking of the calamity coming on the surrounding nations (in ch. 2), to speaking again of calamity for Jerusalem and for the nations but saying more about a positive future for both (in ch. 3). Perhaps we may see it by analogy with a short story or a sermon in which the author or the preacher moves from one point to another in largely seamless fashion. I deal with it as follows:

1:1 Introduction
1:2–2:3 Warnings and exhortations for Jerusalem and Judah
2:4–3:7 Declarations concerning other peoples—and Jerusalem
3:8–20 Promises and warnings for Jerusalem and the nations

However we understand the detail of the arrangement, the broad sequence shows that Zephaniah is thus a miniature-scale equivalent to the book of Isaiah, since one could outline Isaiah as follows:

1:1 Introduction
1:2–12:6 Warnings and exhortations (and promises) for Jerusalem and Judah
13:1–27:13 Declarations concerning other peoples—and Jerusalem
28:1–39:8 Warnings and exhortations (and promises) for Jerusalem and Judah
40:1–66:24 Promises and warnings for Jerusalem and the nations

Zephaniah's threefold structure also parallels that of Amos, though the order in Amos is different:

1:1 Introduction
1:2–2:3 Warnings for other peoples
2:4–9:7 Warnings for Ephraim (and Judah)
9:8–15 Promises for Ephraim (and Judah)

It has been argued that the element of promise in the ministry of prophets such as Amos, Isaiah ben Amoz, and Zephaniah does not come from these prophets themselves but from subsequent expansion of their work. And it is true that Isaiah 40–66 (as well as some earlier material in the book) did not come from Isaiah ben Amoz. But the suggestion that these prophets offered no promises of restoration conflicts with a consistent portrayal in the text itself of

the OT prophets as combining an emphasis on warning with an element of promise. That combination reflects the theological fact that Yahweh must discipline Israel for its waywardness yet cannot give up commitment to Israel or give up on the project of working with Israel. One would therefore expect Zephaniah's prophecies to include promises of restoration as well as warnings of calamity. It is possible that some elements in Zephaniah (esp. within 3:8–20) result from the Holy Spirit inspiring later elaboration of Zephaniah's own work, but we do not have criteria for deciding if this is so, and it is quite possible to interpret the prophecies without knowing whether it is so. Elsewhere within the book, too, the world of scholarship has reckoned that the actual words of Zephaniah have been amplified and developed over subsequent decades, as is the case with Nahum, but it has reached no consensus on the nature of this process or on how to distinguish between Zephaniah's words and those of his subsequent interpreters. Thus if such a process generated the book as we have it, it seems we cannot trace the nature of that process.

Zephaniah the Poet and the Preacher

Like Nahum, Zephaniah is a poet who makes much use of devices such as metaphor, repetition, and paronomasia (utilizing similarities between words that may or may not actually be related). His very first phrase, "by gathering, I will bring to an end everything" (1:2; see the additional note), combines similar-sounding forms from two different verbs and also suggests a link with the noun "ingathering." He then begins chapter 2 with a related repetition using a different verb, "gather together, gather" (2:1). He takes advantage of the link between *ʾadamah* and *ʾadam,* earth and human being (1:2–3), the negative and positive meanings of words for "leftovers" and "leave" (1:4; 2:7, 9; 3:12, 13), the use of "Canaanite" to refer to trading (1:11; 2:5), and the similarity of *kesef* and *kasaf,* silver and shame (1:11, 18; 2:1). He utilizes paronomasia in declaring that Gaza (*ʿazzah*) will be abandoned (*ʿazubah*), Ekron (*ʿeqron*) uprooted (*ʿaqar*); and Kereth (*kerot*) cut off (*karat,* 2:4; the verb *karat* occurs in 1:3, 4, 11). "Territory" (*khebel*) in 2:5, 6, 7 has a homonym meaning "destruction," while his listeners would also be familiar with a similar word meaning "pain." "Evening" (*ʿereb*) in 3:3 is tellingly similar to a word for "wild." The word for "plunder" in 3:8 (NIV margin) is similar to the word for "testify" (NIV text). In 3:10 the word for "worship" has a homonym meaning "be rich/abundant" and the word for "scatter" has a homonym meaning "flow/overflow." He utilizes the ambiguity of expressions such as *ʾadamah* and *ʾerets* (both of which can refer to the whole

earth or to the land of Israel), *paqad* (attend to/care for/punish; 1:8, 9, 12; 2:7; 3:7), and the raising of Yahweh's hand which can signify blessing or punishment (1:4). He turns harvest and sacrifice into threatening metaphors (1:2–3, 7–8; also 2:1–2), vividly pictures the panic and cries of anguish arising from different quarters of the city (1:10–11), and uses innovative metaphors such as wine settling on its "lees" (1:12). He utilizes repetition and alliteration in speaking of "a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish [*yom tsarah umetsuqah*], a day of trouble and ruin [*sho'ah umesho'ah*], a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry" (1:15–16). Words for anger, wrath, and fury then recur in 1:18; 2:2–3, while in 2:2–3 he repeats "before" and "seek" three times each (both are words beginning with *b;* "seek" also occurs in 1:6). His use of the exclamation *hoy* (2:5; 3:1) and connecting words such as *laken* (3:8) and *ki* (2:4; 3:9) help to make subtle links between 1:2–2:3; 2:4–15; 3:1–7; and 3:8–20. Such devices illuminate points, drive them home, keep listeners or readers on their toes, involve them in the interpretation of his words, and invite them to make connections they might not otherwise make.

While we do not know what position or role Zephaniah had in Jerusalem, or the context in which he would have delivered his prophecies, many of his words do gain extra resonance if we imagine him delivering them at a festival in Jerusalem. He begins in 1:2–3 by speaking of Yahweh gathering things up, where he uses a verb related to a word for ingathering; if he delivered his prophecy at the Feast of Ingathering (Exod. 23:16; 34:22), Sukkot, or Tabernacles, *the* great pilgrimage feast, this would add bite to his words. In 1:4–9, this would also be true of the references to "this place," to the non-Yahwistic worship there, to seeking help and guidance from Yahweh as opposed to other deities, and to an extraordinary sacrifice to which Yahweh has invited people. The same would apply to the command to be silent if that is a command occurring in the liturgy, as well as to the emphasis on Yahweh's day from 1:7 through 2:3 if that is a theme from worship. Although Zephaniah is not described as a prophet, perhaps he ministered in the temple in the manner of a prophet (see the comments on "Habakkuk the Prophet" above).

There is no indication that Zephaniah's prophecies concerning other peoples had a political agenda (for instance, to support Josiah's foreign policies) or that they were used in that connection, though they may have been. The drift of Zephaniah's own emphasis lies in the opposite direction. In his words, Yahweh confronts the people of God. The situation is one in which the people of God are enthusiastic about their worship but, whether they realize it or not, they are not

actually offering their worship to Yahweh. They have become preoccupied with making sure that their needs are met and with safeguarding their future because they do not think that God is involved in these matters, and this has perverted their worship. They may assume that a day is coming when God's purpose will be fulfilled for them, and if so, they are right, but they will find that in the short term this is a day of calamity, not blessing. Zephaniah urges them to see that if calamity is coming to other peoples, how much more will it come to God's own people in their unfaithfulness and their resistance to learning the lessons God has been seeking to teach them. God does not think there is any prospect of a reformation on the part of the people as a whole because its leadership is so willful—though it is always possible to take action to avert disaster even when God speaks as if it is inevitable. God does overtly challenge the ordinary people in the community to seek God; this may not avert disaster, but it might mean that they themselves escape it. But disaster is not God's last word for other peoples; they are destined to come to worship God. And disaster is not the last word for the people of God; the ordinary people who trust in God are destined to be the nucleus of a people who will be restored, protected, and honored. It is a pattern one can see recurring through Israel's story and through the church's story. Zephaniah's confrontations and promises thus address (for instance) the church in the U.S.A. and provide material for the church in Europe to reflect on its history.

§1 Warnings and Exhortations for Jerusalem and Judah (Zeph. 1:1–2:3)

1:1 / Whereas Nahum and Habakkuk have rather nonstandard introductions, the introduction to Zephaniah follows the pattern of other prophetic books; it is especially close to that of Hosea. First, its editors describe the book as a whole as **The word of the LORD**. The word *dabar* can signify a section of a discourse such as a sentence, but it commonly signifies a complete discourse of some kind, such as a message or command or promise or statement (cf. 2:5). Thus little stretch would be involved in describing a whole book as "the word of such-and-such a human author," and then by extension as "the word of the LORD." The expression suggests something that is complete and coherent. It is the word **that came to Zephaniah,** literally that happened or became (*hayah*) to Zephaniah. That is a strong statement of the divine origin of the book as a whole. There is no room for slippage between what Yahweh wanted to say to the people and what Zephaniah actually said, as if it was inevitable that as a human being Zephaniah might mishear what Yahweh said. The entire message came from Yahweh. (On 1:1, see further the introduction to Zephaniah.)

In the section which follows, five times, in 1:2–3a, 3b–6, 7–9, 10–13, and 14–18, the prophet moves from declaring that Yahweh is bringing terrible calamity to indicating the reason why Yahweh is doing so, without identifying any human agents of it. In the first and fifth subsections (1:2–3a, 14–18) he talks about "the earth" without mentioning Judah and Jerusalem, though we will note that the words for "earth" are ambiguous. Hearing judgment declared on the world might make Judah think it is safe, but the intervening sections make clear that it, too, is in peril. In the second and fourth subsections (vv. 3b–6, 10–13) he talks about Judah and Jerusalem. Zephaniah lambasts it for worshiping gods other than Yahweh and for reckoning that Yahweh will never take action against it. In 2:1–3 he then indicates the response that the prophecy requires.

The passage 1:2–2:3 illustrates well the ambiguity in the Prophets concerning whether the prophet speaks *as* Yahweh or *for* Yahweh, and of the way Yahweh can move between speaking in the first person and self-referring in the third person. The text alternates unsystematically between these. In Jeremiah this can

cause some uncertainty as to whether the "I" who speaks is Yahweh or the prophet, but it does not cause confusion in Zephaniah; it is obvious enough when Yahweh is speaking as "I" and when the text is referring to Yahweh in the third person. The two ways of speaking have complementary effects or implications. When the prophet speaks directly in Yahweh's name, as happens in 1:2–4, this brings home forcibly that it really is the case that Yahweh in person is confronting the people. When the prophet refers to Yahweh in the third person, as happens in 1:5–7, this takes the heat off slightly.

In verses 2b, 3b, and 10a Zephaniah preserves the distinction by adding the parenthetical "declares the LORD," literally "Yahweh's declaration." The word "declaration" (*ne'um*) comes only in contexts such as this, referring to Yahweh's words to a prophet. Parallel to the book's introduction, the phrase functions to underline the fact that people are not just listening to human prognostications. Zephaniah reckoned his words came from Yahweh, the people who collected his words into a book did so in the conviction that he was right, the Jewish community came to concur with that, and the Christian community accepted its judgment.

In verse 4 Zephaniah continues to speak *as* Yahweh but moves to speaking *for* Yahweh in verses 5–7. Within verse 8a there is a particularly brisk transition between the two; he then speaks *as* Yahweh through verses 8–13, with the resumptive "declares the LORD" in verse 10. In verses 14–16 he speaks *for* Yahweh, or Yahweh uses the third person (this transition is eased by the third person reference in the quotation in v. 12). Unannounced, for verse 17a Yahweh speaks in the first person but then immediately reverts to third person for the remainder of verses 17–18 and for 2:1–3.

1:2–3a / Zephaniah begins with a warning of a terrible harvest: literally, "by gathering, I will bring to an end everything." In a context such as this, in effect the verb *'asaf* suggests gathering things together in order to dispose of them, but more literally it simply means "gather," and a related noun means "ingathering." That links suggestively with the reference to **the earth,** which is *'adamah,* "the ground" (not *'erets,* "the world"). We are talking about a harvest; perhaps Zephaniah delivers this message at a harvest festival. But he invites us to imagine looking across some vast valley and seeing **everything** gathered together—for disposal.

Verse 3a (ending with **rubble**) then details what "everything" means. This is a terrible harvest of animate life in all the categories of creation. Zephaniah's vision

compares instructively with Isaiah 24, where Yahweh declares the intention to strip bare the earth; Zephaniah compares Yahweh's action with a vigorous, thorough harvesting. But in Isaiah 24 it is the *'erets,* and the focus is on humanity. Here humanity has a place; two references to *'adam* indeed almost form a bracket around the verse, though I take the fourth line as an introduction to the next subsection (see the additional note). Yahweh intends to bring an end to *'adam* on the face of *'adamah.* But the terrible harvest embraces everything that moves. In describing this, Zephaniah uses language that more closely parallels the description of world destruction in Genesis 6–8 and the earlier description of world creation in Genesis 1 (see, e.g., Gen. 1:26; 6:7). This is not merely a terrible harvest but a reprise of the undoing of creation at the flood. The reason for the destruction comes in the fourth line; however we understand it (see the additional note), it takes the thought and language in a new direction and marks the end of the subsection.

1:3b–6 / So is Yahweh revoking the commitment never again to **cut off** humanity from the face of the earth (cf. Gen. 9:11 for this verb)? First, we need to consider what Zephaniah means by **the earth** and how its devastation impinges on his readers. Both *'adamah* and *'erets* can denote the whole earth or the land of Israel. In itself, Isaiah 24 could be referring to the land of Israel; there, it is the context that suggests it refers to the world as a whole. In Micah 1:2–7 the movement of thought is the opposite, and the same is (if anything) the case here in Zephaniah. In verse 2, the KJV has Yahweh sweeping away everything from "the land," implying that it is Judah's "earth" to which this verse refers (cf. Isa. 6:11 for similar talk of Judah's "earth"). Perhaps Zephaniah plays with the ambiguity of the word "earth" and now makes clear that it is indeed Judean earth that he had in mind. Or perhaps he moves from a cataclysm that affects the whole world to one that envelops Judah. If so, and verses 2–3a indeed refer to a worldwide devastation, verses 3b–6 now indicate that this is not something from which Judah can expect to be protected. Yahweh's **hand** will not be raised to protect Judah. Indeed, the image of Yahweh's hand (or Moses' hand) "stretching out" regularly denotes bringing calamity and defeat, notably in the exodus story (e.g., Exod. 7:5; 14:21; 15:12). In that context, however, the raising of Yahweh's or Moses' hand works for Israel's benefit. Now Yahweh's hand is raised against Israel itself, as in Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 5:25). "Cutting off" humanity as a whole (v. 3b) will lead to or include "cutting off" the unfaithful ministers and people in the temple. The fact that 2:4–3:7 has a parallel movement supports the idea that the

sequence is from world devastation to the devastation of Judah. Here, part of the background may be that people were familiar with the idea that Yahweh might bring about another calamity that would envelop the whole world but assumed that Yahweh's own people would be protected. Zephaniah promises that their illusions will be shattered.

The expression **this place** suggests a further narrowing of the prophet's focus, since "place" (*maqom*) commonly denotes not merely a location but something that is "set up" (*qum* in the *hipʿil*), a shrine or sanctuary such as the Jerusalem temple. The word is used in this way recurrently in Jeremiah 7. This connotation fits here, as Zephaniah is referring initially to the elimination of alien worship from the temple itself. The account of Josiah's reform uses the expression "this place" in the same connection and also refers to each of the elements of alien worship that appear in verses 4–5 (see 2 Kgs. 22:16–20; 23:4–5, 10–12); they also appear in the earlier account of Manasseh's religious innovations (2 Kgs. 21:1–6).

Baal is "the Master"; the word *baʿal* has the article. It is thus not a proper name but a common noun, like the word "Lord," and it has a similar meaning. There is no reason why Yahweh should not be called *baʿal* apart from the word's connotations, and it seems that it was once customary so to call Yahweh; when Saul and Jonathan named their sons Esh-Baal and Merib-Baal (e.g., 1 Chr. 8:33–34), it is unlikely that *baʿal* referred to anyone other than Yahweh. The Master is technically not the senior deity but he is the most prominent deity in the traditional religion of Canaan (rather as many Christians are more comfortable with Jesus than with God), which continued to be a prominent religion if not the dominant religion in the land through the monarchic period. The Master was concerned among other things with the fruitfulness of the land, its produce, its animals, and its people, and one may guess that a particular focus of people's worship of the Master related to this, as Hosea implies is the case in Ephraim a century before Zephaniah. As the OT tells the story, there were occasions when kings such as David and Hezekiah (and later Josiah) attempted to eliminate this worship, while prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah campaigned in the name of the same stance, but they all failed; only after the exile did Judah commit itself to Yahweh alone, in fulfillment of the promise that Zephaniah will give in 3:11–13, when Yahweh will write the torah into Judah's heart (Jer. 31:31–34).

The phrase **every remnant of Baal** need not imply that most Baal worship has already been eradicated; the following lines indicate that this is not so. To **cut off . . .** "every remnant of Baal" means "to do away with Baal worship in such a way that there is not a remnant, not a trace left" (cf. the similar expression in Ezek.

11:13). The reference to cutting off **the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests** restates the point; even their names will be gone. Zephaniah uses two nouns for priests: first *kemarim,* which always denotes priests who serve other deities, but then also *kohanim,* the regular Hebrew word for priests of Yahweh. The subsequent reference to people who **swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech** reflects the mixed allegiance of people in Judah and Jerusalem, and Zephaniah's use of the two words for priests likely has the same significance. Apparently there were Baal priests and Yahweh priests in the temple, but the latter connived with this situation; so Yahweh will cut off "the priestlings along with the priests" (NJPS).

Zephaniah refers (second) to **worship** of **the starry host,** to an involvement with some theological views and religious practices that is better known to us from Assyria and from Babylon in a slightly later period. These practices naturally took place on the housetops where the planets and stars can be seen. They work under the assumption that the gods work via the movements of the stars and planets. One could therefore divine from these movements events that could be expected to take place both in the political realm and in the personal realm, a practice with which we still associate astrology. Having discovered what the stars portend, one can take appropriate discrete or evasive or apotropaic action.

Third, Zephaniah refers to people swearing their oaths by Molech. As the NIV margin indicates, the Hebrew reads "Malcam." The marginal note assumes that the deity referred to is "Milcom," a deity especially associated with the Ammonites, as is noted (significantly) in connection with Josiah's reform in 2 Kings 23:13. Milcom was the god of the Ammonites as Chemosh was the god of the Moabites—and (from their perspective) Yahweh was the god of the Judeans. But here in Zephaniah, mentioning "Molech" alone points in another direction. In connection with Josiah's reform, 2 Kings 23:10 and 13 distinguishes the worship of Milcom and other such deities of neighboring peoples from the worship of Molech, to whom Judeans would sometimes sacrifice children. Both Milcom and Molech recall the Hebrew word *melek,* "king," and are likely related to it, and Zephaniah's word "Malcam" is actually the regular Hebrew word for "their king." Some OT references speak of sacrifice to Molech in association with sacrifices in connection with the dead, and it may be that Molech is the king of Sheol. Judean involvement with Molech, then, would link with the regular human desire to keep up links with members of the family who have died, to express one's concern for them, and to gain help from them. More literally,

Zephaniah speaks of people who swear *to* Yahweh and swear *by* Molech (cf. TNIV). They swear allegiance to Yahweh in worship, making the kind of confession of faith that Christian worshipers make when they say the creed, but they take oaths on the basis of a commitment to Molech. They combine their loyalties.

There are other people who have given up on Yahweh altogether (v. 6). They no longer **seek the LORD**; in other words, they do not **inquire of him.** Yahweh is not the one they turn to as their resource for blessing or healing or guidance.

1:7–9 / The exhortation **Be silent** (see the comment on Hab. 2:20) marks the beginning of another subsection, which introduces the idea of **the day of the LORD.**

For centuries Yahweh has put up with the kind of attitude on the people's part that verse 6 expresses, not least during the long reign of Manasseh that came to an end only a few years previously. But Zephaniah knows that this particular period of divine longtempered-ness is coming to an end. So Judah should "be silent before the Sovereign LORD"; this is the only appropriate reaction when "the day of the LORD" **is near** (v. 7a). The expression "Yahweh's day" would be a familiar one, as is already presupposed in Amos 5:18–20. Zephaniah's preceding words have already indicated that, like Amos, he asserts that this day will be a time when Yahweh brings not blessing (as people likely thought) but terrible calamity. The declaration that something is temporally "near" is mostly used in connection with this expression "Yahweh's day" and related phrases (e.g., Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; Obad. 15). Zephaniah may even be the first person to use the phrase "Yahweh's day is near." But the *idea* that Yahweh's day is near goes back at least to Amos. In Amos's day, the fall of Samaria soon proved him right. For Zephaniah, it will be the fall of Jerusalem that does that, though it will not come for forty years. One implication may be that in the short term Josiah's reform would make the implementation of Zephaniah's threats unnecessary. It was the eventual failure of that reform that meant "the day" had to come.

Amos had also already presupposed that Yahweh's day need not be an End after which nothing else would happen. It will be a day of great trouble or blessing, but after it life will continue. Thus the fall of Samaria was indeed the day Amos had announced, and passages such as Lamentations 1:12; 2:1, 21, 22 will imply that when Jerusalem fell, the day Zephaniah here announces came. On the other hand, each of these "days" is less cataclysmic than the words of prophets such as Zephaniah might have made one expect. So Yahweh's day can

be a symbol of ultimate, total disaster or blessing—and Israel periodically and partially experiences manifestations of this "day."

Part of the background of "Yahweh's day" that Amos 5:18–20 presupposes may be that it is a great festival. Zephaniah thus goes on (v. 7b) rather sardonically, **The LORD has prepared a sacrifice,** like the Levites preparing a sacrifice at a festival, or like a woman preparing a dinner. Jehu speaks in similar terms when inviting the prophets, servants, and priests of the Master to their death banquet (2 Kgs. 10:18–28). A "sacrifice" (*zebakh*) would commonly imply a fellowship occasion when family and friends ate together in Yahweh's presence. Thus in this connection Yahweh **has consecrated those he has invited.** That is, Yahweh has signified acceptance of these guests, identified with them, declared them to be holy (*qadash* in the *hipʿil*).

Zephaniah does not suggest that any negative connotations attach to this sacrifice. Nor does he explicitly do so when he continues by declaring that on the day of Yahweh's sacrifice Yahweh will "attend to" the various groups of leaders mentioned in verse 8. The NIV translates *paqad* **punish,** which is certainly the implication, but the verb is a euphemism, like the traditional English translation "visit." The verb can be used in an entirely positive way, as it will be in 2:7 (NIV "care for"). So here an inattentive hearer might easily reckon that Yahweh is promising to look after the guests at the sacrifice, as it would be proper for the host to do. The guests include **princes,** a general term for "officials" (TNIV), and **the king's sons,** members of the royal household. But they also include **all those clad in foreign clothes.** Are these foreign envoys? Or Judeans who have assimilated to foreign ways? Or the ministers in robes associated with alien worship (a comparable note also appears in the story of Jehu's "sacrifice," 2 Kgs. 10:22)? Uncertainty likewise attaches to the description of people **who avoid stepping on the threshold,** and some uncertainty also surrounds the reference to **the temple of their gods** which follows (see the additional notes). But there is no doubt that **violence and deceit** means violence and deceit, characteristic topics of prophetic critique (e.g., for violence, see Amos 3:10; Mic. 6:12; Hab. 1:2, 3; for deceit, see Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:11, and v. 11 below). So the objects of Yahweh's attention are initially neutral in moral and religious significance, and then they seem to be ambiguous, but then finally they are of clearly negative significance. By the end of verse 9, Yahweh's attentiveness has to be the negative kind. To "attend to" indeed means to **punish.**

1:10–13 / The MT and NIV reasonably start a new subsection at verse 10,

though the argument continues without a break as Zephaniah imaginatively portrays the cataclysm of which he has spoken taking place and declares why it must do so. The declaration about noise and the exhortation to wail contrast ironically with the exhortation that opened verses 7–9.

Yahweh's day will see the echo of disaster in different parts of the city. The **Fish Gate** was on its north side (cf. Neh. 3:3; 12:39); the name implies it was the gate near the fish market, presumably because it was on the side of the city where merchants would arrive with fish to sell. The **New Quarter,** the *mishneh* or "Second [Quarter]," is the area west of the Jerusalem of David's day. Both north and west would be places where trouble might strike first, the north being the direction from which an army would come and both being sides where the city was inherently vulnerable, without natural defenses. Likewise, **the hills** might be the gentle slopes on the city's northern and western sides that contrast with the steep and protective valleys to the south and east, or they might be the embankments in the city of David, signaling that disaster has spread from the edges of the city to its heart. In either location, the **loud crash** will be the noise of buildings falling. In turn, **the market district,** the *maktesh,* is more literally "the mortar," a place of pounding (cf. Prov. 27:22), which might imply "the quarry" or perhaps "the hollow," an area shaped like a mortar (land dipping down as opposed to a hilly area). It likely refers to the Tyropean Valley, the zone between the rise where David's city was built and that further, gentler rise to the west, "the New Quarter." It is identified as the commercial area by the following reference to **merchants** and people who **trade with silver** (trade is done with precious metals; coinage has not yet been invented).

As with the princes and the king's sons, there is nothing to mark the residents of these different districts as particularly sinful, though the context may imply that they were; other prophets assume that merchants and traders are inclined to be swindlers. Verse 12 makes it clear once again that they are people who deserve trouble. Yahweh will make a point of locating the people who especially deserve punishment, though once more Zephaniah explicitly speaks only of Yahweh's "attending to" them. Literally, these are people who are "thickening on their lees." The lees (NIV **dregs**) are the sediment of grape skins and yeast that sits at the bottom of the casks as the wine ferments. The lees contribute to the process of maturing. We can read the image positively or negatively. The wine needs to sit there for a while; and these people have been sitting in Jerusalem for a long time. But the wine must not sit there for too long, lest it become sludge-like itself; and the people have done so. And they **think** (lit., "say in their heart") that

"Yahweh will not do good and will not do bad." Yahweh is not the one who brings them blessing (they look to other deities for that) and will not bring them trouble; Yahweh is simply not involved in the world in either way. Against the background of that conviction, the declaration that Yahweh will **search Jerusalem with lamps** gains extra force. The people who think Yahweh will do nothing will have a rude awakening.

The natural human hope is that you should live long enough to dwell in the house you build and drink the wine from the vineyard you plant, and Yahweh can promise that (Isa. 65:21). But the actual human experience is often that people get taken by illness or war before they can do so. That is what will happen to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. Their wealth will be plundered and their houses demolished by invaders. It will be a fulfillment of the kind of warning issued in Deuteronomy 28:30, 39.

1:14–18 / The NIV appropriately starts a new section, though the argument again continues without a break. Verse 14 begins by taking up the declaration from verse 7 but adds that Yahweh's day will be **great,** then repeats that it is **near** and further adds that it is **coming quickly** (as people in Isa. 5:19 in effect encouraged it to do).

The succeeding verses simply go on to spell out the grim nature of this day. Yahweh's day will be **bitter,** harsh, and bleak for people who experience it as they hear the loud **shouting of the warrior there.** It seems that Yahweh is the warrior who is shouting, as the TNIV makes explicit; so it is in Isaiah 42:13, the only other place where "shout" (*tsarakh*) occurs. It will indeed be **a day of wrath,** of **distress and anguish,** of **trouble and ruin,** of **darkness and gloom,** of **clouds and blackness,** of **trumpet and battle cry,** of **distress** and walking as if one were **blind,** stumbling around in the dark (Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,* p. 184). Verse 17b makes the point more gorily and messily. The additional terms in verse 18 underscore the devastation further. It is **the day of the LORD's wrath,** characterized by **the fire of his jealousy** (see the comment on Nah. 1:2), a fire that gives expression to Yahweh's passion and burns up the land.

In this subsection, the reason for the coming of Yahweh's day is put very briefly: it is **because they have sinned against the LORD** (v. 17a). They have failed to live up to Yahweh's expectations of them; indeed, they have not tried. Zephaniah reverses the word order, "against Yahweh they have sinned," and thus emphasizes the magnitude of their wrongdoing. **Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them** (v. 18) is a comment that likely amplifies the

point. The earlier references to trading and specifically to silver, and to wealth (vv. 11–13), would suggest that it is their economic success that has made them confident that they can withstand any crisis; they will be disabused of this notion. But the reference to sinning against Yahweh may mean the silver and gold is the material out of which their images are made. Isaiah 2:7, 20 and Hosea 2:8 might suggest there is a link between the two.

A distinctive emphasis of this fourth subsection lies in the extent of the effect of Yahweh's day. It will affect not merely Jerusalem but the rest of the **fortified cities** in Judah, such as Gezer and Lachish with their **corner towers.** It will thus mean that the whole land is **consumed;** Yahweh will make a **sudden end,** a "terrible" end (*bahal* in the *nipʿal*) of all the inhabitants of the land (v. 18). The NIV here has **world** and then **earth,** as it had "earth" in verses 2–3; there each time the word was *ʾadamah,* whereas here each time it is *ʾerets.* Verses 4–6 then zoomed in on Judah and Jerusalem and verses 7–9 and 10–13 focused on Jerusalem in particular. Verses 14–18 have broadened out to consider other cities, which all suggests that Zephaniah has the "land" of Judah in mind when he speaks of the *ʾerets* in verse 18.

2:1–3 / The MT starts a new subsection here and the English chapter division follows; the subsection then introduces the subsequent verses rather than concluding what precedes. The implication is that the **nation** (*goy*) is the kind of foreign people with which 2:4–15 concerns itself; *goy* applies to foreign peoples in verses 5, 9, 11, and 14 (also 3:6, 8). But the NIV's section heading (at 1:14) links 2:1–3 with what precedes, and both verbal links and links in content suggest this is right. Judah is then the "nation" Zephaniah addresses, and the verses tell Zephaniah's hearers what are the implications of 1:2–18, how Judah is to respond. The word *goy* can be applied to Israel in a neutral sense; it is simply the word for nation. Indeed, Yahweh promised to make Abraham into a great *goy,* and verse 9 will refer to "my nation." But the book of Isaiah almost begins by calling Judah "a sinful nation" (Isa. 1:4), and it is this usage that Zephaniah follows in calling Judah **a shameful nation** though the meaning of that qualifying description is unsure (see additional note). Judah, then, is challenged to **Gather together, gather together.** Already here, too, Zephaniah's usage is unique. The verb *qashash* means to gather stubble; only here is it used intransitively, and the two forms of the verb (*hitpaʿel* and *qal*) occur only here. In substance, though not in words, the exhortation makes a wicked link with 1:2–3, where Yahweh spoke of collecting up the people (among other things) from the

ground in order to trash them, in the way one collects stubble in order to dispose of it. So Zephaniah invites the nation to assemble in order to proceed to the trash heap.

The nation is apparently invited to do that voluntarily, an ticipating the moment when **the appointed time arrives,** literally to act "before the birth of the decree," the moment when the deci sion about Yahweh's day is implemented at the end of its gestation period. So Zephaniah continues to speak of **the day** that is coming. This will be the moment when **that day,** Yahweh's day, **sweeps on like chaff** (v. 2). The word for "chaff" (*mots*) is different from the word for "stubble" (*qash*) which lies behind verse 1, but Zephaniah continues to work with this image in a way that involves allusion and ellipse. "Sweeps on" is the ordinary verb for "passing over" (*ʿabar*), but here it gains its connotation from the derived word for "wrath" or "overflowing rage" in 1:15, 18 (*ʿebrah*). So the day of wrath will sweep on the nation and overwhelm it like chaff. The further two lines in verse 2 put the point more straightforwardly. They speak once more of Yahweh's day as an occasion when **anger** burns, hinting at another nod to the fiery destiny of chaff or stubble.

Two words dominate the subsection, the words **before** (3 times in v. 2) and **seek** (3 times in v. 3); both begin *b* in Hebrew. The verses thus urge, "before" the day of Yahweh's anger arrives, "seek" Yahweh (cf. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah,* p. 165). This further imperative in verse 3 takes us in another direction from the imperatives in verse 1, though the verb is again one that links back with chapter 1. Judah has failed to **Seek the LORD** (cf. 1:6); that is, it has failed to come to Yahweh for guidance and provision. Is it prepared now to put that right? Specifically, the people who are asked that question are the **humble of the land.** The English word "humble" is nicely ambiguous; it can suggest ordinary people who have no power, though it more often suggests people who have an appropriately meek and unassuming estimate of themselves. The Hebrew word *ʿani* and related words may also be able to suggest meek and unassuming, but they much more often suggest ordinary, powerless people. Sometimes "humble" can describe Israel as a whole as a people without power, and that would describe Judah for much of its life over against the superpower of the day, but sometimes it can describe the ordinary people within the nation over against the people with resources and power. In this context that seems the likely meaning, especially in light of the qualifying description of them as people **who do what he commands.** Literally, they are people "who have done his decision." The word is *mishpat* (see the

comment on Hab. 1:4), so the complication is that *mishpat* is usually the business of people with power, people who exercise authority and make decisions for others. Perhaps this links with the possibility that "the humble of the land" are those elsewhere described as "the people of the land," who (for instance, and significantly) put Josiah on the throne (2 Kgs. 21:23). They will be people who were outside the Jerusalem establishment but might still have authority in other towns and villages. They would then be people who simultaneously were humble in the sense of not being part of that central power structure but who exercised authority in their communities, and did so in a proper way.

An exhortation that the people who are "humble" and responsible should **Seek righteousness, seek humility** seems odd, as that description of them has already affirmed that they are characterized by qualities of this kind. More likely the object carries over from there, so that the prophet exhorts them to "seek [Yahweh] with righteousness, seek [Yahweh] with humility." "Righteousness" (*tsedeq*) denotes doing the right thing by people within one's community; "faithfulness" is as near a proper English equivalent and would be a good description of the proper exercise of *mishpat.* In the Prophets, *tsedeq* (or *tsedaqah*) commonly goes along with "authority" (*mishpat*).

If they will thus treat Yahweh as the one to consult and rely on, in a way that contrasts with the attitudes described in 1:2–18, then **perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger.** Zephaniah speaks as if the coming of Yahweh's day is inevitable but suggests that it need not swallow up everyone. And, in the event, it did take a heavier toll of the powerful than of the "humble." It was the powerful who were exiled. Zephaniah's assumption is the one Abraham makes in Genesis 18, that Yahweh will surely not sweep away the righteous with the wicked. Here Zephaniah anticipates Abraham's question, or recalls it, and raises at least the possibility that this would not happen. Yet it is only a "perhaps." Perhaps Zephaniah knew well that things do not always work out that way. And perhaps he recognized that people need to do the right thing because it is the right thing and not because doing so promises profit.

So whereas verse 1 addresses the community as a whole, but especially its central leadership, verse 3 addresses the people who do not need to be called **shameful.** Yet the NIV appends verse 2 to verse 1 and thus implies that even the "shameful" nation can escape the destiny Zephaniah threatens. It's never over until it's over. The community needs to see what it is currently gathering itself together for, and instead to become people who do "seek" Yahweh along with the people whom verse 3 directly addresses. The two sets of imperatives place

different destinies before people (perhaps the community gathered in the temple). They have to decide which destiny to accept.

Additional Notes §1

1:2 / The expression *ʾasof ʾasef* neatly combines a straightforward *qal* from *ʾasaf* ("gather") and an artificial *hipʿil* from *suf* ("end"). Jeremiah 8:13 uses this combination in a similar connection. Only the second verb recurs in v. 3.

1:3 / The NIV takes the fourth line to mean (more literally) "heaps of rubble [are] with the wicked"; this gives *makshelot* the same meaning as in its only other occurrence, in Isa. 3:6. The TNIV rather takes it as a variant for the more common *miksholim,* "things that make people fall"; the things that make the wicked fall are then the divine images, which is the connotation of *miksholim* in (e.g.) Ezek. 14:3, 4, 7. The context here may suggest that these would be images of animals, birds, and fish.

The placing of the parenthetical phrase **declares the LORD** puts us on the track of the right way to see the opening subsections within 1:2–2:3. Whereas the MT links v. 3b with what precedes and the NIV sees a new section beginning with v. 4, the occurrences of "declares the LORD" come near the beginning of a subsection in vv. 2 and 10, which suggests that in v. 3b this is the beginning of a new subsection. This implies the beginning of a new sentence, "When I cut off . . . ," which then leads into v. 4 (so TNIV). It is the first of a series of *vav*-consecutives running through vv. 3b–4. One could translate simply "I will cut off. . . . I will stretch out. . . . I will cut off," but it makes good sense to see v. 3b as resumptively subordinate to v. 4.

1:9 / **All who avoid stepping on the threshold:** lit., "all who jump over the threshold." First Samuel 5:5 refers to worshipers of Dagon not treading on the sanctuary threshold.

The temple of their gods: lit., "the house of their lords." This might thus refer to their human bosses rather than their deities.

1:14 / Literally, "the sound of [or hark,] Yahweh's day is bitter, the warrior shouts there."

1:15 / These lines were a major inspiration for the hymn *Dies irae* which appears in the traditional Roman Catholic Requiem Mass and thus in the requiems of Mozart and Verdi. The hymn turns the **day of wrath** into the day of final judgment from which Christ saves us; hence also the setting of the passage in lectionaries in Advent.

2:1 / **Gather together, gather together:** Zephaniah makes the point emphatic by using first the *hitpaʿel* form of the verb then the *qal.* Both occur only here and may be his innovation; the verb is usually *poʿel.*

Shameful is *loʾ niksaf;* the verb does not have this meaning elsewhere in the OT, but it occurs in later Heb. and Aramaic. More literally, the expression would mean "shameless." But other OT occurrences would suggest "not longing," with v. 3 then making clear that this implied not seeking Yahweh (cf. Ps. 84:2). What is clear is that a reason for putting the rather obscure expression here is the similarity between the verb *kasaf* and the noun *kesef* ("silver") in 1:11, 18. The people longed for *kesef* or were proud of their *kesef,* but actually they lack *kesef.*

§2 Declarations Concerning Other Peoples—and Jerusalem (Zeph. 2:4–3:7)

The main part of this section comprises four declarations about different nations. They vary considerably in form and thus look like prophecies of separate origin that have been brought together here to form a sequence. As a result, they offer a survey of the surrounding nations, like the surveys found in Isaiah and Amos, but briefer. Zephaniah began with the world as a whole (1:2–3a) and then moved to the implications for Judah (1:3b–18). He follows the same logic here as he turns to specific nations, Judah's neighbors and the more distant great powers (2:4–15). Thus Philistia covers the people to the west of Judah and Moab and Ammon the area to the east. The Cushites or Sudanese are the people who had ruled Egypt to the south, so that the term can refer to Egypt. Assyria is the great power to the north (in terms of the direction one travels). There is interestingly no reference to Babylon, the up-and-coming Middle Eastern power, nor to Edom, Judah's neighbor to the southeast which is often the subject of such prophecies, and only in connection with Moab and Ammon is there any suggestion that calamity comes to these peoples because of enmity towards Judah. The aim is simply to cover all four points of the compass. At the center, in verse 11, is a declaration about the nations as a whole, as is the case in Isaiah 13–23; the nations will become worshipers of Yahweh. Then Zephaniah moves again to the implications for Judah (3:1–5), as happens in Amos 1:3–2:16, before summing up the section (3:6–7). There is little stress on the reasons for Yahweh's action against the other nations; the point again is that Judah is going the same way, and 3:1–7 explains why this is so.

2:4–7 / Another reason Judah needs to turn to Yahweh is the fact that Yahweh is committed to devastating Philistia. The logic of Zephaniah's argument will become more overt in 3:1–5; Yahweh's involvement in bringing disaster is a threat, not an encouragement, to Judah. Moving from south to north, Zephaniah names four of the traditional five Philistine cities (see 1 Sam. 6:4, 17) in the coastal area covering the modern Gaza Strip and the area north of that, **Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod,** and **Ekron.** The fifth city was Gath; it seems have lost

significance even by the time of Amos (see Amos 1:6–8). But in general the Philistines were flourishing in this period, not least through their strategic position on the trade route down the Mediterranean coast. All four verbal expressions applied to them emphasize the radical nature of the disaster that is coming to them; **emptied** (*garash*) is a common word that describes the dispossession of one people by another that intends to take over its land, and the reference to being emptied **At midday** suggests how quickly its expulsion is achieved. The first and last expressions use paronomasia (see above on "Zephaniah the Poet and the Preacher"). Gaza (*ʿazzah*) will become an **abandoned** place (*ʿazubah*); Ekron (*ʿeqron*) will be **uprooted** (*ʿaqar*). It is as if the destiny of the places is written into their names; in being abandoned and uprooted they are becoming themselves.

On the **Woe** (*hoy,* better, "Oh!" or "Hey!"), see the comment on Nahum 3:1. This exclamation usually marks the beginning of a declaration, but here as in Habakkuk 2:18–20 it has a place in the midst of the declaration. The rhetorical significance of this placement will become clearer at 3:1 (see the comment below). There the "Woe" will encourage us to read 3:1 in continuity with what precedes (and then to find ourselves mistaken). Here it marks a transition from speaking about the Philistines to (rhetorically) addressing them. One could imagine the prophet, who is directly addressing people in Jerusalem, shouting to the far-off Philistines and attracting their attention by shouting "Hey!" The paronomasia continues as Zephaniah addresses "the inhabitants of the territory" **by the sea,** since the word for "territory" (*khebel*) has a homonym meaning "destruction"; further, *khebel* with a long "e" in the first syllable means "pain," specifically pain like that of giving birth (for the metaphor, see, e.g., Isa. 13:8; 26:17). **Kerethites** (*keretim*) is a term for Philistines, perhaps suggesting Cretans and reflecting their origin across the Mediterranean, and perhaps thus designating the Philistines as a whole by a term that strictly applies only to one numerous group within them; but again, an advantage of the word is that it suggests they are people who are being "cut off" (*karat;* cf. 1:3, 4, 11). They, too, are realizing the destiny their name implies.

The first-person statement that comes at the end of verse 5 encapsulates **the word of the LORD** that is against the Philistines. The verse thus opens (after the *hoy*) with the word "inhabitants" and closes with the phrase "from their being an inhabitant." In a broad OT context, addressing the **land of the Philistines** as **Canaan** would recall the fact that the "Philistines" indeed lived in territory that had been "Canaan" (cf. Josh. 13:2–5) and therefore in land promised to Israel.

The term might also associate them with Canaanite wickedness, serve as a slur, and thus further justify their elimination. But the peoples who lived in the Mediterranean coastlands, which long remained not really Israelite and which therefore in this sense were still Canaanite, thus lived on the trade routes and became involved in trade; so "Canaanite" came also to mean "trader," without any pejorative connotations. Zephaniah uses the word in this sense in 1:11, where "all your merchants" means "the entire people of *kenaʿan.*" Here, too, "Canaan" may have this connotation.

The paronomasia continues in verse 6, hence the odd form of expression (see NIV margin) which perhaps involved Zephaniah inventing the word *kerot* on the basis of the word *kereti,* in order to reinforce the idea that the Philistines are on their way to being cut off. Their bustling urban territory will become mere pasturage for shepherds.

What shepherds? Verse 7 then again picks up the word *khebel,* which came near the beginning of verses 5 and 6 in the expression "the territory by the sea," inhabited by the Kerethites. Etymologically *khebel* suggests an allocation of land (because *khebel* also means a measuring cord, as used in the measuring out of land), and it can refer to the allocations of land to the different Israelite clans (e.g., Josh. 17:5, 14). So the land of the Philistines "will become an allocation for the remnant of the household of Judah," actually in fulfillment of what was destined by Joshua (Josh. 15). We know from chapter 1 that Judah is on its way to devastation and decimation; it is the final insult for the Philistines that it will be the pathetic remains of Judah that have to abandon their own devastated land and take over the Philistines' territory to pasture their few pathetic sheep. In the evening these homeless shepherds will become squatters in the mansions of Ashkelon. Yahweh their God will have attended to them (*paqad*) in one way (Zeph. 1:8, 9, 12), but will then do so in this other way as well, and in some measure will **restore their fortunes.**

2:8–10 / On the other side of Judah, across the Dead Sea and the Jordan, are Moab to the southeast and Ammon to the northeast. Yahweh gave no reason for displacing the Philistines unless it was the implicit one that they were inhabiting territory long ago destined for Judah. But the land of the Israelites' relatives, the Moabites and **Ammonites,** had not been so destined (see, e.g., Deut. 2:9–19). Zephaniah does have a correlative reason for Yahweh's devastating them—although Israel had not sought to take over their territory, they had not taken a similar non-aggressive stance toward Israel. Their **insults** and **taunts** were not

mere scornful words but **threats;** more literally, they had been "doing big" (*gadal* in the *hipʿil*). They had occupied much former Ephraimite territory and had designs on Judah's territory. There were, indeed, times when they gained control of part of it. Unwisely, however, they are thus taunting **my people** and making plans with regard to **their land.**

Therefore introduces Yahweh's response (v. 9) very emphatically. "Therefore" often introduces a declaration that Yahweh intends to punish, then the attestation **"as surely as I live"** whereby I "stake my life on it" follows, then the reminder that this is something that Yahweh **declares** (lit., it is "the declaration of Yahweh"), the expression Zephaniah repeated in 1:2, 3, 10, and finally the qualifiers for the name of God, "Yahweh Armies" (see the comment on Nah. 2:13) and **the God of Israel** (which correlates to their being "my people"). There is something appropriate about **Moab** becoming **like Sodom** and **the Ammonites like Gomorrah** because they (Moab in particular) occupied the area that included the sites of these two cities. The story in Genesis 18–19 relates how they became **a place of weeds** (or perhaps more likely "chickpeas," the kind of thing one could use only as animal fodder) **and salt pits, a wasteland forever;** nothing useful will grow there. It seems, then, rather redundant to add that **The remnant of my people will plunder them; the survivors of my nation will inherit their land.** The language is acerbic on all sides. There is only a remnant of Judah, only a group of survivors, some remainders left from the people who were supposed to be "my people" and "my nation." They will plunder Moab and Ammon; but what is there to plunder? They will "inherit" these peoples' land, enter into secure and permanent possession of it (the verb *nakhal* denotes acquiring such assured possession rather than indicating specifically that one acquires it when someone within the family dies); but what is the use of it?

To judge from what follows (v. 10), however, the significance of this is that it all serves to underline hyperbolically the completeness of the calamity that Yahweh brings on Moab and Ammon. **"This is what they will get in return for their pride"** or "in place of their majesty" (*gaʾon*), their **insulting and mocking** (but the word is the one translated "threats" in v. 8, their big ideas about what they were going to do to Judah). Again their un-wisdom lies in their planning to attack "the people of Yahweh Armies."

2:11 / Following on verses 8–10, it would be natural to take the peoples to whom Yahweh will be **awesome** to be Moab and Ammon, but the rest of the verse goes on to make clear that Zephaniah's proclamation here widens onto a much broader canvas; perhaps we should reckon that what follows, rather than

what precedes, actually defines the **them.** At the center of the proclamations about Judah's neighbors and about the two great powers comes a generalization about **The nations on every shore.** Its placement thus parallels the declaration about the fate of **many nations** in Isaiah 17:12–14, at the center of the long sequence of declarations about individual peoples that occupies Isaiah 13–23. Zephaniah envisages the situation when Yahweh **destroys** (lit., "has wasted") **all the gods of the land,** or more likely (to judge from what follows) "of the earth." The thought parallels Psalm 82, though Zephaniah does not appeal to an equivalent rationale. The gods need to be put in their place. The action will mean that Yahweh is indeed "awesome" (*nora'*). Again, read in light of what precedes it, one might take this word to imply "fearful" or "terrifying," but what follows suggests we might read it more positively, as suggesting the peoples' recognition that Yahweh is to be worshiped and revered. The wasting of those gods will mean that "there will bow down to him each, from its own place, all the foreign shores of the nations." The term "foreign shores" strictly suggests the lands on the other side of the Mediterranean, but here it likely has a more general meaning. The link with "wasting" the gods supports the idea that "place" [NIV, "land"] (*maqom*) again denotes the sanctuary where the gods were worshiped (see the comment on 1:4). Yahweh's wasting of those gods will mean that from these sanctuaries their former worshipers will turn to bow down to Yahweh. This need not mean that they will leave the sanctuaries (the picture is different from that in Isa. 2:2–4); rather these sanctuaries will become places from which people look to Yahweh, like Daniel (Dan. 6:10).

2:12 / The second main part of the section about the nations speaks first and very briefly about and to the **Cushites,** or Sudanese, the people of the Upper Nile region who long ruled Egypt (see the comment on Nah. 3:9). In the context, then, the term likely refers to Egypt, rather as Chaldeans refers to Babylon (see the comment on Hab. 1:6). That might be the case notwithstanding the fact that the Sudanese no longer actually ruled Egypt. Whereas the NIV translates **will be slain by my sword,** "were slain by my sword" is equally possible (see the additional note), and in fact the Sudanese dynasty had fallen when the Assyrians won their victory at Thebes in 663 B.C. (see the comment on Nah. 3:8–17). It might thus make more sense to reckon that Zephaniah is referring back to that event as background to declaring (like Nahum) that Assyria, its conqueror, will also fall. The fact that Nineveh was built by a son of Cush (Gen. 10:8–12) would strengthen that link (Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 213).

2:13–15 / At much greater length Zephaniah finally and naturally speaks about Assyria, to the **north,** still the superpower even if its power is waning, and also about its capital, **Nineveh,** upon which Nahum focuses. It will be turned into a **desolate** place, a **dry** wasteland like a **desert.**

The subsequent description (v. 14) initially parallels that of Philistia (v. 6); the great city of Nineveh is turned into mere pasturage for sheep. But the prophet goes on to envisage it as simply the abode of wild creatures, like Babylon in Isaiah 13:21–22. As was the case in that picture, the prophecy then makes explicit what this implies about the impressive buildings of this great capital.

At least as significant is the contrast between Assyria's self-understanding and what its destruction signifies (v. 15). The description uses expressions that recur elsewhere to describe a great city or world power taken from the heights to the depths. Nineveh has been a **carefree** or exultant city, like Tyre before it falls (Isa. 23:7)–and like Jerusalem before it falls (Isa. 22:2). It could be exultant because it **lived in safety** or in confidence (*labetakh*), lived secure or with a sense of security, as the unfortunate people of Laish did (Judg. 18:7), and as Babylon will (Isa. 47:8). In its confidence it said, **"I am, and there is none besides me";** again these are words that will be put on Babylon's lips (Isa. 47:8, 10). In saying "I am" or "I am the one" (TNIV, though literally it is simply "I"; there is no word for "am"), there is some danger of Nineveh divinizing itself. Its "I" sets itself over against Yahweh's "I." It hardly recognizes this (though it is the implication of its self-understanding); in its own mind it will be setting itself over against other nations. There is no power like Assyria. Every superpower thinks it will be in its exalted position forever. There is perhaps more excuse for Assyria doing so than there is for later super powers, as Assyria is the first great Middle-Eastern empire. But each superpower that has followed has thought it was the empire on which the sun would never set; that phrase has been explicitly applied to Spanish, British, and American power. If Assyria thinks this in Zephaniah's day, the prophecy reports it with some irony, because with hindsight one can see that it is in terminal decline.

In his vision, Zephaniah can already see that. Nineveh has become **a ruin,** just **a lair for wild beasts.** Passersby **scoff** or hiss or whistle, and **shake their fists,** more literally their hands, in astonishment and horror.

3:1–5 / The MT opens a new subsection here (it actually then comprises vv. 1–13), which is quite reasonable, but in opening a whole new chapter English translations are misleading. The same is true of the NIV's headings, which have

described previous sections as "Against Philistia/Moab and Ammon/Cush/Assyria" but here we have simply "The Future of Jerusalem." More appropriately, the TNIV simply entitles those preceding sections "Philistia," "Moab and Ammon," "Cush," and "Assyria," and then similarly entitles 3:1–5 "Jerusalem." The dynamic of 2:4–3:7 involves declaring that Yahweh's attitude to Jerusalem is the same as it is to these other peoples. The function of 2:4–18 is similar to that of Amos 1:3–2:5 in relation to what follows. It has set up Jerusalem itself for confrontation by Yahweh. Aspects of 2:4–18 have hinted at something of this: the worrying references to the remnant of Judah, with the promises that are not very exciting (it will squat in the ruins of Ashkelon, it will take secure possession of the Sodom-like wastelands of Moab). Whereas one might have wondered whether the warnings to the nations encourage xenophobia or imply some encouragement to expansionist political policies or resistance to imperial powers, what now follows indicates that the point lies somewhere else entirely.

Indeed, verse 1 does not actually signal that the subject of Zephaniah's warnings has changed. Speaking of Nineveh, the previous verse began "This is the exultant [NIV "carefree"] city"; this verse begins, literally, "Oh, rebellious and defiled, oppressive city" (NIV reverses the order of the lines). We have noted that 2:4–7 gives precedent for locating the exclamation "Oh!" in the midst of a proclamation, so nothing stops the reader from initially assuming that 3:1 addresses the city that 2:13–15 described (the Syriac translation of the OT makes that explicit). While none of the three words describing the city is the most common one to convey the meaning in question, they are all words that could describe a city such as Nineveh. "Rebellious" (not *marah* but *pesha'*) is Amos's repeated indictment of peoples in Amos 1:3–2:5. Such rebelliousness can lead to defilement; in Isaiah 59:3 it is blood that has "defiled" people's hands (*ga'al*), and here the third descriptor, the participle "oppressive" (*yanah*), suggests the means by which rebellion has "defiled" the city. Oppressing people is an act of rebellion against Yahweh that generates defilement, and "oppressive" is a natural enough term to describe Assyria (it describes Babylon in passages such as Jer. 46:16). It is contrary to Yahweh's own character and it is thus incompatible with coming into Yahweh's presence. But "oppressive" is also a term to describe Jerusalem (e.g., Ezek. 22:7, 9); and this particular word for "rebellious" is one often applied to Jerusalem (Jer. 4:17); and this particular word for "defiled" is applied only to Israel. So we begin to wonder what this city is.

The subsequent descriptions (v. 2) confirm that it is indeed actually Jerusalem.

Not listening or obeying (*shamaʿ*) points that way; so does not accepting **correction.** Failing to **trust** in Yahweh and to **draw near to her God** makes things certain. Chapter 3 refers to a different city. The critique is the same as that in 1:4–9. The failure to trust and to draw near are expressed in having recourse to the Master (*baʿal*) in a concern that the crops will grow, to the planets and stars in a concern to control the future and safeguard against problems, and to Molech to keep in touch with family members who have passed away. The city is quite willing to draw near to all these, but not to Yahweh. And precisely the possibility of reckoning that Zephaniah continues to refer to Nineveh illustrates the frightful nature of the situation. Jerusalem is no better than another city. The argument indeed follows that of Amos 1–2.

In line with Amos, with his reference to oppression Zephaniah has already gone beyond the critique in chapter 1. He takes this further in verses 3–5 as they give more detail on the nature of the city's rebelliousness, defilement, oppressiveness, disobedience, resistance to learning, failure of trust, and reluctance to come into Yahweh's presence. Oppressiveness is the action of the leaders of a community, or at least it involves their connivance. So here, it is the responsibility of the city's **officials** and **rulers.** Both words are general ones for people in authority; the second (*shofetim*) is commonly translated "judges," and making decisions of a legal kind is one way in which people with power oppress ordinary people. There is a marked difference between the way the ordinary people mentioned in 2:3 go about decision-making (*mishpat*) and the way the big city's decision-makers do so. Zephaniah has two vivid images for the terrifying nature of their action: they are like (or rather they just *are*) **roaring lions** and voracious **wolves** (see the additional note).

One positive aspect to the link between church and state is the possibility that religious leaders hold community leaders to account, but this theory fails (v. 4). We think of **prophets** as a good word, but in the OT it is at best a neutral word, and often a word with negative connotations (see the comments on "Habakkuk the Prophet"). The many prophets contemporary with Zephaniah and Habakkuk were **arrogant,** positive and confident in the affirming and encouraging ministry they exercised towards their people (cf. Jer. 23:32). That meant they were unwittingly also **treacherous,** "people of [many] treacheries" or "of great treachery," people who totally betrayed Yahweh and totally betrayed the community by their positive and upbeat ministry and by the way they encouraged people to continue in a lifestyle that involved oppression and recourse to other gods (for this word "treacherous," see the comment on Hab.

1:13). Her **priests** likewise fail in their ministry. They **profane the sanctuary** or "profane what is holy." There is nothing more radical or far-reaching that could be said about priests, because the most basic aspect of their task is to make sure that what is holy stays holy, to keep the sanctuary holy, to make sure it is not defiled, and thus to make sure that Yahweh is willing to be present there. They do the opposite. The context again suggests that they do this by conniving with oppression and the worship of other deities and encouraging such practices, both of which will ensure that Yahweh stays away. In both respects they **do violence to the law;** they violate the torah that they are supposed to safeguard, implement, and propagate. A priest's lips are supposed to safeguard the acknowledgment of the torah and the acknowledgment of Yahweh, and people seek teaching from his mouth (Mal. 2:7); and this is how they behave.

The activity of officials, decision-makers, prophets, and priests thus stands in stark contrast to the nature and activity of the God whom they are supposed to serve and reflect, **the LORD within her** (v. 5). This last expression and similar ones recur in chapter 3. The city's officials "within it" are roaring lions (v. 3; NIV omits it there); but Yahweh is "within it" doing something about that (v. 5); Yahweh will thus remove the exultant from "within you" (v. 11; NIV has "from this city") but will leave a remnant "within you" (v. 12); henceforth Yahweh is "within you" as protector (vv. 15, 17; NIV has "with you").

The first characteristic of Yahweh within the city is to be **righteous** or faithful (*tsaddiq*); hence the exhortation to "seek Yahweh in righteousness/faithfulness" (2:3; see the comment). It is the direct opposite of the kind of behavior verses 1–4 described. To summarize that contrast, **he does no wrong.** In Habakkuk 2:12 the NIV translated the word *ʿawlah* as "crime," and that suggests something of the contrast. The next two lines spell out its implications. We have no evidence that a court would meet every morning and this may impose ideas out of the urbanized West with its professionalized legal systems. What does happen **Morning by morning** is that Yahweh makes the light of the new **day** dawn and **does not fail** to do so. And this is Yahweh's way of exposing wrong and bringing about judgment (cf. Job 38:12–15), of dispensing **his justice.** More literally it is Yahweh's way of giving a decision, giving judgment. The word is *mishpat,* which suggests a contrast between Yahweh's decision-making and that of Jerusalem's own decision-makers, its *shofetim* (v. 2). The fact that Yahweh exercises *mishpat* thus accompanies the fact that *tsedeq* attaches to Yahweh and emphasizes the way this is not so in the community (see 2:2–3). Of course there is no infallibility about the effectiveness of this: the fact that Yahweh arranges for wrong to be

exposed does not mean the community deals with it. It makes more of a moral appeal. And the trouble is that it brings no sense of **shame** to the kind of people who lead the city's life inside and outside worship, **the unrighteous.** The adjective is related to the word for "wrong," so it again brings out a contrast. Yahweh does no wrong; these leaders are all wrongdoers. Although Yahweh is active in this way, they still say, "Yahweh doesn't do anything" (1:12).

3:6–7 / Zephaniah sums up the implications of 2:4–3:5. On one hand there is the way Yahweh has **cut off nations** so that **their strongholds** were **demolished.** Yahweh speaks in the *qatal,* the "perfect" (even in the last line; see the additional note), apparently looking behind the prospective events in 2:4–15 to the pattern of action that Israel can already see in the way Yahweh has treated the nations. Yahweh needs to do this to provide a lead in to verse 7. Israel's story gives plenty of examples of Yahweh's cutting off the Philistines and the Canaanites (perhaps part of the point about mentioning Canaan in 2:5 is presupposed here), the Moabites and the Ammonites, the Sudanese (esp. the land of Egypt which they have recently ruled but from which they were turfed out) and the Assyrians.

In light of all that, **"I said . . ."** (v. 7). **To the city** is then an NIV addition, and in a context such as this the verb "say" regularly means "I said to myself," "I thought" (so TNIV). The usage is similar to that in Jeremiah 3:7, where Yahweh "thought" Ephraim would turn back when it had had its fill of worshiping the Master (*baʿal*). Here Yahweh thought there would be a contrast between Judah and those nations, thought that the city would turn back to **fear** Yahweh and/or to revere Yahweh and stand in awe before Yahweh (see the comment on 2:11 for the ambiguity of this verb). Yahweh thought it would **accept correction.** Whatever the significance of Yahweh's bringing trouble to the nations (for instance, whether it is corrective or retributive), when Yahweh brings trouble to Israel it is designed to shape the people, to turn them back in the right direction. It is chastisement not punishment. The trouble is that this rarely works (see Amos 4:6–11 with its bleak refrain). Yet hope springs eternal in the divine breast. Yahweh is always hoping for something better from us than we have so far provided and is never giving up hope.

Yahweh's hope was that perhaps the city might respond, and not have its dwelling cut off in the way the nations had been cut off (v. 6) and not have Yahweh's punishments come on it—more literally, not have Yahweh attend to it, as in 1:8, 9. But verses 1–5 recount the phenomena that indicate that Jerusalem has not fulfilled this hope. Instead its people have been **eager** to continue as they

were. The verb (*shakam* in the *hipʿil*) refers to getting up early in order to do something, a classic sign of eagerness (cf. Isa. 5:11). The people's eagerness is for corruption (the verbs are now plural; they will continue thus in v. 8).

Additional Notes §2

2:4 / The verse begins *ki*, which here (as often elsewhere) the NIV takes as merely being there to emphasize what follows (NJPS likewise has "indeed") and does not translate. It usually means "for" (cf. NRSV), which is admittedly an unexpected beginning to a section; but then, emphatic *ki* is also an unusual beginning to a section. It is always worth looking for a logical connection when *ki* appears, though sometimes the connection is subtle; here, indeed, its significance will become fully clear only when we reach 3:1–7. It will eventually transpire that the movement in 1:2–2:3 from the world to Jerusalem is repeated in 2:4–3:7; and the *ki* makes a link between these two sections.

Be **uprooted** might be the meaning of the rare verb *ʿaqar;* it could alternatively mean be hamstrung or be made barren (it occurs only here with a figurative significance). Any of these meanings would be worrying.

2:6 / More literally, perhaps, "the region by the sea, the abode of Keroth, will become [the abode of] shepherds and pens for sheep."

2:7 / **Restore their fortunes:** the expression is *shub shebut* or *shub shebit,* lit. "turn a turning." The marginal alternative "bring back their captives" assumes that the noun comes from *shabah* rather than *shub,* which is etymologically just as possible, but in some contexts (notably Job 42:10) "bring back the captives" cannot be the meaning, and it does not fit as well here.

2:9 / **Surely** represents *ki:* see the additional note on v. 4.

2:12 / The NIV provides **will be;** one could as easily understand "are" or "were." The fact that v. 13 begins "and" (NIV omits this) supports the idea that v. 12 is background to vv. 13–15; it would also explain why the prophecy to the Sudanese is so brief.

3:3 / **Evening wolves** is *zeʾebe ʿereb.* Jeremiah 5:6 has *zeʾeb ʿarabot,* "the wolf of the steppes," the wild wolf, and the expression at least involves another paronomasia. "Evening" pairs with **morning** in the third line, but the word also suggests that these are wolves from the wild who have no business exercising leadership in the city. The third line more literally says "who have not chewed bones in the morning." The NIV offers a plausible paraphrase; they eat up everything in the evening, bones and all. But the idea may be that they are ravenous in the evening because they have not eaten at all that day.

3:6 / In the sixth line, the TNIV's "they are deserted and empty" is better than NIV's **no one will be left.** The construction is similar to the one in the fourth line: "with no one passing through . . . with no one living [there]." All the verbs in the verse are *qatal* ("perfect") and the whole verse refers to the past.

§3 Promises and Warnings for Jerusalem and the Nations (Zeph. 3:8–20)

As the first section of the book (1:2–2:3) flows straight into the second, so the second (2:4–3:7) flows straight into the third, though the parenthetic "declares the LORD" as usual signals something of a new start. As was also the case in the second section, Zephaniah keeps us guessing about the nature of his argument. And again, the section comprises a collection of short prophecies that have been brought together as a larger presentation. Once more Yahweh declares the intention to act against Judah but also affirms that this will not be the end. Yahweh will preserve a remnant and turn it into a people that does trust in Yahweh, and will also form from among the nations a people that will worship Yahweh.

3:8–10 / Therefore in the Prophets is usually a worrying word, as it was in 2:9. This instance particularly recalls Amos's conclusion to his account of Ephraim's failure to learn the lesson from Yahweh's chastisements; in other words, verse 8 follows on verse 7 as Amos 4:12 follows Amos 4:6–11. There Amos declared, "Therefore . . . prepare to meet your God": it will evidently not be a pleasant meeting. Here Zephaniah declares, "Therefore" **wait for me,** and this, too, does not sound like waiting for something good: "Wait till your father comes home." Yet "wait" (*khakah*) never occurs elsewhere to mean waiting for something unpleasant, so perhaps the prophet communicates an ambiguity. The plural addressees might indeed be people such as officials, rulers, prophets, and priests, for whom the waiting might be negative. But they might also be the ordinary people addressed in 2:3, for whom the waiting would be positive. Either way, specifically they are to wait for the day Yahweh **will stand up to testify** against the leadership and in favor of the ordinary people. Once again Zephaniah indulges in a paronomasia, though it does not reduce the threat. As the NIV margin notes, the word rendered "testify" is actually the similar word "plunder" (see the additional note). The matter concerning which Yahweh will argue a case (one way or the other) will result in some plundering (one way or the other). The notion of Yahweh arguing a case fits the image of Yahweh that follows; literally,

"it is my decision" **to assemble the nations.** Once more, "decision" is *mishpat,* the word translated "what he commands" in 2:3 and "his justice" in 3:5. These words summon the nations to listen while Yahweh argues a case (cf. Isa. 1:2–3).

The NIV then assumes that Zephaniah again somersaults when Yahweh declares the intention "**to pour out my wrath on them"** in that it takes "them" to be these nations that Yahweh has assembled and it has Yahweh declaring that **The whole world** will be affected by Yahweh's **jealous anger.** But on that basis it is hard to make sense of a train of thought through the verses. It is more likely that "them" refers back to the people of Jerusalem, and the nations are gathered to hear Yahweh's case against these people. It is on *them* that Yahweh's wrath will be poured out, as was the case in 1:2–2:3, and it is the whole *land* that Yahweh's jealous anger consumes; the word is again *'erets,* as in 1:18 and 2:3.

The destiny of the people of Jerusalem will then contrast somewhat surprisingly with that of **the peoples** (v. 9). As well as burning up the people of Jerusalem in wrath, Yahweh intends (more literally) to "change the peoples [with] a purged lip." The word for "purge" or **purify** (*barar*) usually refers to physical cleansing rather than metaphysical or religious cleansing. In what way might peoples' lips need such purifying? We might start from hints in 2:4–15: the peoples make threats against Yahweh's people and their land and declare their confidence that they will stay in power forever. Such thoughts will be removed from their lips so that they **may call on the name of the LORD,** or, as one might as easily translate it, "call or proclaim *in* the name of Yahweh," testify to Yahweh. This astonishing aim in turn restates the one articulated in the midst of 2:4–15 (see v. 11), making explicit that as well as bowing down physically (which could signify enforced obeisance) they lift up their voices in worship and/or prayer and/or proclamation. Thus they will **serve him,** a verb (*'abad*) that often denotes worship (as when we speak of a church "service"). **All of them** will do so, and **shoulder to shoulder,** literally "one shoulder," or as we might think of it, side by side or arm in arm. The unity that the nations lost near the Beginning (Gen. 11:1–9) is now restored (Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 209), and given its proper focus. The unity at which an empire aims likewise has a new focus. The verse actually begins *ki 'az* ("because then"); the NIV does not translate the *ki* (see the additional note at 2:4). Including the "because" creates a link with what precedes, similar to that at 2:4. There is a subtle causal connection between pouring out wrath on Judah and purifying the peoples, similar to the one Paul sees between the Jewish people not recognizing their Messiah on one hand, and God offering the gospel to the Gentiles on the other.

Indeed, the worshipers will not even be confined to the empire that Judah knew (v. 10). From beyond Sudan, from an Africa too far away to be more than the subject of exotic tales, **worshipers** of Yahweh will come. More literally, these are suppliants. The noun occurs only here, but the related verb (*ʿatar*) means to pray in the sense of petitioning; it is the technical word for supplication or intercession, making explicit one of the possible implications of "calling on Yahweh's name" (v. 9). At the same time, using this unusual word makes it possible also to recall the homonym (an alternative form for *ʿashar* better known from Aramaic) meaning "be rich/abundant": the suppliants are also able to bring their abundance as they **bring me offerings.** The unusual expression **my scattered people** (see the additional note) involves a similar paronomasia, as there is one verb, *puts,* meaning "scatter," with a second meaning "flow" or "overflow" (see Zech. 1:17). People "scattered" all over the world will bring overflowing "offerings."

3:11–13 / So radical have been Zephaniah's declarations in verses 8–10 that one might easily have reckoned he was propounding a "supersessionist" view, a "replacement theology" whereby Judah ceases to be the people worshiping Yahweh and a Gentile people takes its place; one could compare Jesus' warnings in Matthew 21:43. But Zephaniah always has a surprise in the next subsection, and so it is here. In speaking *of* the destiny of the nations in verses 9–10, he has been speaking *to* the people of Jerusalem. He now addresses the city ("you" through vv. 11–12 is feminine singular) with good news. The bad news in verse 8 meant a terrifying outburst of wrath and the devastation of the whole land, but not the end of the people.

Zephaniah speaks of what will happen **On that day** (v. 11). Other occurrences of that phrase in Zephaniah in 1:9, 10; 3:16 illustrate its ambiguity. On one hand, it has its down-to-earth, prosaic significance, and here it follows on the "then" of verse 9. Likewise, Zephaniah 1:7 referred to a certain day, and the subsequent verses referred back to this day. Yet the day they referred back to was "the day of the LORD," and the expression "that day" itself can carry the same connotation (here, compare also the reference to "the day" in 3:8). Now references in Zephaniah to "Yahweh's day" do not imply a day to come at some distant time; he would agree with Ezekiel's warning about such thinking (see Ezek. 12:21–28). When he says it "is near" (1:7) he means it. If the day got postponed by a few decades because of Josiah's reform, it nevertheless came (in 587 B.C.) within the lifetime of some of his hearers if not within his own lifetime. Likewise the day of

purification and transformation was to follow on the day of wrath; he was not looking forward centuries. And after the decades of exile, the Jerusalem community was indeed reconstituted, and the Second Temple community made Yahweh its sole God, abjured the making of images and the attaching of Yahweh's name to such emptiness, and kept the Sabbath, all of these to an extent unparalleled in Israel's earlier story. There would be further expressions of wrath and further stages of restoration and renewal to follow; what happened at the fall and restoration of the city in the sixth and fifth centuries did not exhaust the notion of Yahweh's day. But within the foreseeable future the city would indeed know both shame and transformation.

So the calamity of verse 8 will not be the end, and the purifying of the peoples will not mean that other peoples replace Judah. Rather, there will be a purifying of Jerusalem itself. The city's current **wrongs** and the coming calamity that they will bring on it are reason for shame. They are reason for Jerusalem to have a sense of shame in its own being and for it to have a sense of shame in relation to other peoples (cf. the warning in Hab. 2:10). But then **you will not be put to shame** by such **wrongs.** What follows suggests this might have two implications. One is that they will have paid for those past wrongs and been purified through the removal of the people especially responsible for the wrongs, so they need no longer be ashamed for them. The other is that there will be no further wrongs to bring further shame.

A parallel between the third line and verse 9 underlines the point. Both begin "because then" (*ki 'az;* NIV omitted the "because" in v. 9, here it omits the "then"). Yahweh's purifying the nations turns out to have an equivalent in a cleansing removal **from this city** (lit., "from within you"; see the comment on 3:5) the people who **rejoice** or exult in its majesty. "Exultant" was the word applied to Assyria in 2:15 (NIV had "carefree" there). The leadership in Jerusalem (see 3:1–3) was pretty confident; perhaps in Zephaniah's day the decline of Assyria's power made it more so. In turn, "majesty" or **pride** was a term associated with Moab and Ammon in 2:10 (there *ga'on,* here *ga'awah*); the term will emphasize the leadership's confidence (but see the additional note). It has become as exultant as its imperial overlords, instead of learning from their threatened fate. The promise that **Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill** restates the point as "be haughty" comes from the verb *gabah,* which again means "be high" but thus "be proud" as a consequence. Taking such an attitude "on my holy hill" has a special inappropriateness, and that haughtiness will cease.

So Yahweh will remove the impressive and powerful people, the people with

leadership instincts, power, and money, but leave behind **within you** (the recurring expression; see the comment on 3:5) **the meek and humble** (v. 12). Concerning "the meek," see the comment on 2:3, where the related noun was translated "humble." Here, "humble" (*dal*) is another word suggesting poor and lowly. It does not imply that they are poor in the sense that they do not have food or homes; they are simply ordinary people, not rich people. Both words indicate people's position in society more than their moral qualities. Literally, Yahweh intends to leave behind "a meek and humble people" or "a weak and poor people"; that is, Zephaniah speaks in terms of a community. They are a group **who trust in the name of the LORD,** more literally "who take refuge in Yahweh's name," or "and they will take refuge in Yahweh's name" (the verb *khasah;* see the comment on Nah. 1:7). Being weak and poor means you have little alternative. You are not subject to the temptation to trust in your power or resources. You prove that "Yahweh's name is a strong tower" to which the faithful run and find safety (Prov. 18:10) because Yahweh's name stands for Yahweh in person; when one appeals to Yahweh by name, Yahweh in person shows up as a helper and defender.

The verb for **leave** (*sha'ar* in the *hip'il*) is the verb that generates the noun **remnant** (*she'erit;* v. 13). The fact that Yahweh leaves behind only the weak and poor shows how the notion of a remnant does not in itself imply that these leftovers are particularly holy. They are simply the people that an invading army would not make a point of killing, capturing, or transporting. They are not worth the bother. But being powerless and ordinary people, and thus the kind of people who end up as the leftovers, does exempt them from some temptations. It also propels them towards trust in something outside themselves. It does not in itself mean they *are* faithful, but the painful experience pushes them towards becoming leftovers that are faithful, a faithful remnant.

So this "weak and humble *people*" is **The remnant of Israel.** On the use of the word "Israel," see the comment on Nahum 2:2. As is probably the case there, Zephaniah takes up this term that politically denoted Ephraim as opposed to Judah and uses it to describe Judeans; now that Ephraim has gone out of existence, theologically speaking they *are* Israel. But in effect Zephaniah is warning the people of Jerusalem that most of *them* (or perhaps rather, the people among them who seem to count) are also about to lose the status of being Israel. Israel will be just some pathetic leftovers. Yet in Yahweh's eyes they will be Israel. Yahweh's designation guarantees their significance and guarantees the future of Israel (again, see the argument of Rom. 9–11).

These leftovers **will do no wrong,** imitating Yahweh (3:5) rather than the city-builder of Habakkuk 2:12 (the word there translated "crime"), and there will be no dishonesty about them. Zephaniah gives two lines to this particular facet and means of wrongdoing, thereby rather emphasizing it. As we know from our own experience of urban life, corruption is a characteristic means whereby people gain power and exercise it in order to make money, and when the powerless, ordinary people become perforce the city's leadership, they will be subject to the same temptation. They will resist it.

But what kind of **will** is this? Is it a statement or a promise or a demand? Perhaps it is all three. Doing right and forswearing corruption is a definition of what the remnant is, a little like, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin" (1 John 3:9a). These characteristics are also Yahweh's undertaking to Jerusalem; after the great purging, its people will have these characteristics. And furthermore, it is a challenge; it requires the remnant to apply their own wills to being such people.

The subsection closes with another subtle "because" (*ki*) that the NIV omits in the conviction that it is just a marker of emphasis (cf. v. 9). It is followed by a **They** that is emphatic: "because those people will pasture and lie down with no one to frighten them." There is a logical connection between their responsiveness to Yahweh and their security, though one aspect of the logic is that the promise of security is part of the reason for their responsiveness. They will find that as they are faithful to Yahweh, they will no longer be subject to the threats they have experienced from the superpower and from Yahweh. Zephaniah has described these at some length and with some vividness, with the warning that they will issue in a wasting "with no one living [there]" (3:6); here he uses the same construction to promise the opposite, a security "with no one frightening." Similarly, the picture of flocks "pasturing" and "lying down" was a negative one in 2:6–7, 14, a sign of devastation; now it becomes a positive one, a sign of security and provision.

3:14–18 / The appropriate response to much of this book would be lament, but the appropriate response to verses 11–13 would be celebration. Zephaniah reverts to addressing "Daughter Zion" ([TNIV], one might paraphrase as "Maiden Zion" [NIV **Daughter of Zion** gives a misleading impression as the genitive is a defining one, like "State of California"]). Once again Zephaniah identifies the city's people as **Israel** (see the comment on v. 13). **Sing** is perhaps too tuneful an expression to translate *ranan,* which suggests a kind of tuneless and wordless

ululating, the making of a "nananana" sound. The first two verbs in the verse ("sing" and **shout**) indicate the kind of noise that Ms. Zion is encouraged to make, and **Be glad and rejoice** specifies the attitude that the noise expresses (this cannot be presupposed; ululating and shouting can also signify grief). "Rejoice" or "exult" (*ʿalaz*) picks up another significant word, since 2:15 implicitly critiqued the "exultant" city (NIV has "carefree") and 3:11 promised that the people who "rejoice" will be removed from it. It is not exulting that is wrong; what matters is the object of your exultation.

While it is natural to see this encouragement about rejoicing as following on from verses 11–13, it more explicitly forms the lead in to verse 15, which provides the basis for and content of the rejoicing. It is that (more literally) Yahweh has removed the decision about the city; the *qatal* ("perfect") verbs refer to what will have become the case when the purging has happened. "Remove" is the verb from verse 11; exultation is now possible because removing the falsely exultant also makes possible the removal of Yahweh's decision about judgment. **Your punishment** is "your *mishpat,*" another use of this key word: see 2:3; 3:5; and in particular 3:8, where Yahweh declares, **"I have decided** [literally, "My decision is"] **to assemble the nations"** to hear the proclamation that wrath is to be poured out on Judah" (3:8). Now Yahweh has withdrawn that last decision; there is no further need to implement it. Yahweh has thus **turned back your enemy;** the collective expression can cover any enemy that arises. This will have come about through the fact that **The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you,** or rather, "is within you" (see the comment on 3:5). Yahweh is in the midst of this city as a warrior king who has no trouble turning back an attacker. In this context, one of the resonances of the description of Yahweh as Israel's king is the contrast with 1:5. The people think they have a king, and it is not Yahweh. They think acknowledging that king will benefit them and alleviate any anxiety they have about the future. The prophecy has declared that this will not be the case and that Yahweh will demonstrate that the presence in their midst of Yahweh as their king will mean that **never again will you fear any harm.**

To expand on that last line, **On that day** (see the comment on v. 11) it will be possible to encourage Jerusalem-Zion not to **fear** (v. 16). In Zephaniah's day it is only false prophets who encourage Judah in this way, but the other side of judgment, this will become Yahweh's word (cf. Isa. 35:4; 40:9; 41:10). That encouragement takes on more concrete form by means of the jussive "your hands must/need not drop." It is a standard image for the way fear can paralyze people in the midst of defending their city from attack (e.g., Jer. 6:24; 50:43; Ezek.

7:17; 21:7), but it also recurs in connection with fear arising from attempts to halt rebuilding projects in the restored community after the exile (Ezra 4:4; Neh. 6:9).

The basis for not being discouraged (v. 17) in turn expands on the declaration about the presence of Yahweh as King. Yes, "Yahweh your God is within you" (that expression recurs once more) as one who is **mighty to save,** literally as "the warrior who delivers." Back in 1:14, Yahweh was the warrior attacking Jerusalem. Now Yahweh is indeed the warrior king defending the city. Yet the warrior is also the lover; perhaps for Israel there is less tension between these than there might be for modern people (cf. Ps. 45). The one who loves is prepared to defend. So Yahweh feels the same joy that verse 14 encouraged Jerusalem to feel: literally, "he will rejoice over you with joy. . . . He will be glad over you with resounding" (on the intervening line, see the additional note). The combination of terms to refer to Yahweh's rejoicing is unique; while several passages speak of Yahweh "rejoicing" and "being glad" (*sus, gil;* e.g., Isa. 65:19, in a similar context), only this verse refers to Yahweh's "joy" or "resounding" (*simkhah, rinnah*). The implication is that if Yahweh will be taking such delight in you, Jerusalem, you can indeed relax about your future and be joyful yourself.

Verse 18 then constitutes another way of saying that joy and song will replace fear and discouragement. In the period after the exile the question of when mourning can or should give way to joy is a recurrent one (see, e.g., Neh. 8:9–12; Zech. 7:1–4; 8:18–19), and this declaration anticipates or speaks to that question, though its details are unclear (see the additional note).

3:19–20 / So far, the book has focused on Jerusalem and the people who live there, and on foreigners who live in other parts of the world. Only here in these final two verses does it speak to the experience of people who belong to Israel but are scattered elsewhere. These might be Ephraimites who have already been transported to Assyria, or Judeans who will later be transported to Babylon, or members of either nation who have taken refuge or will take refuge in surrounding countries or across the Mediterranean. The key expression in the two verses is the repeated **I will gather.** Yet the "you" in verse 19 still refers to Jerusalem (that is, it is feminine singular), and this indicates that the focus still lies there. As was the case when Zephaniah addressed foreign peoples, one has to distinguish between the rhetorical audience and the physical audience. All the prophet's words address the people of Jerusalem. Promising the exiles that they will return when one is actually addressing Jerusalem is in part a way of encouraging Jerusalem.

Verse 19 expresses the promise as if Yahweh has done it already ("I have gathered"). Similarly Yahweh goes on to declare, "I am dealing with your oppressors," even though the **At that time** makes clear that Yahweh is speaking about something that has not yet begun. "Oppress" is the verb *ʿanah* in the *piʿel* from which the words *ʿani* and *ʿanaw* for "weak," "meek," or "humble" derive, which suggests that it is these oppressors who have made people in the city weak and lowly. **I will rescue the lame** reintroduces the key verb *yashaʿ* (hipʿil), "deliver." Thus the promise more literally suggests a shepherd rescuing lame sheep, but it is a familiar image to describe a king's care for his people; and then the image's reference to Yahweh's delivering exiles pokes through the language. **I will . . . gather those who have been scattered** likewise suggests gathering sheep who have strayed (Deut. 22:1), but "scatter" comes to be commonly used in the OT to refer to the scattering of people in exile (e.g., Jer. 40:12). Yahweh goes on to promise that this will also involve their having **shame** replaced by **praise and honor** in the countries from which they need to be rescued.

The closing verse restates this promise. Here to **gather** means to bring home and to **restore fortunes** (see the additional note on 2:7). The phrase **before your very eyes** underlines the reality of Yahweh's act, and the closing **says the LORD** declares its certainty.

Additional Notes §3

3:8 / To testify is *leʿad;* "to plunder" (NIV margin) is *leʿed.*

3:10 / My scattered people is, lit., "the daughter of my scattered ones" and in other contexts it could suggest Judeans scattered by the exile; v. 14 will refer to "daughter Zion/Jerusalem." But the verb refers to the scattering of the nations in Gen. 10:18; 11:4, 8 (also Isa. 24:1), and in picturing Yahweh bringing calamity on Judah, Zephaniah has used other images than scattering or exile. "Daughter" can also be an image for a foreign people (e.g., Isa. 23:10, 12; Jer. 46:11; 50:42; Lam. 4:21, 22).

3:11 / Those who rejoice in their pride is, more literally, "those who rejoice in your pride," implying "those who rejoice in their pride in you." But one might more naturally take it to mean "those who revel in your glory" (TNIV; cf., e.g., Deut. 33:26, 29), another way of expressing a false trust in Jerusalem itself.

3:17 / He will quiet you with his love: the usual meaning of *kharash* in the *hipʿil* would imply "he will be quiet with his love," and the TNIV thus has "he will no longer rebuke you." But being quiet is usually bad news, implying refusal to respond or act; with reference to Yahweh, see the comment on Hab. 1:13. The one occurrence meaning "make quiet" (Job 11:3) also has the negative connotation. The NRSV "he will renew you in his love" presupposes that *yekhaddesh* had been accidentally changed to *yakharish.* Perhaps the MT means "he will be quiet in his love" in the sense that they will not require the noisy intervention to which

Hab. 1:13; Isa. 42:14 refer.

3:18 / There are no very problematic words in the verse, but the fact that the NIV text and NIV margin give quite different understandings of it indicates the difficulty of construing how the words fit together, and the TNIV adds another understanding: "I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you." The TNIV thus suggests a more natural understanding of the first Heb. word, the participle *nuge* from *yagah,* as meaning people who sorrow (cf. NIV margin) rather than "sorrows" (NIV). The verse is then a sharp warning to people who cannot imagine moving from sorrow to joy.

Introduction: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Following on the ministry of prophets such as Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Assyria lost its place as Middle-Eastern superpower and was replaced by Babylon. Judah underwent religious reform in Josiah's day but then reverted to its older religious ways and attempted to assert its political independence over against Babylon, and in 587 B.C. the Babylonians devastated Jerusalem and transported much of its population to Babylon. In 539 Babylon in turn lost its place as superpower to the Persians, who encouraged people such as the Judeans to go back to their lands of origin and take charge of them under Persian oversight. The three books that close the Twelve Prophets belong to this last period. Judeans who had been exiled were freed to return to the country that their parents or grandparents left, and some have done so. But Judah is still a Persian colony, a province of the Persian Empire.

Ezra 1–6 is a narrative account of the events from 537 to 516 B.C. which form the background to the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah. It does not present itself as a simple chronological account, and some aspects of the history are not clear, though it is clear that the lives of people in Jerusalem are rather fraught in this period. Although Cyrus had commissioned the returning Judeans to rebuild the devastated temple, local political factors and economic pressures meant that initially they made little progress with this work, and the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah drove them to take it up again and complete it.

While most of the eighth- and seventh-century prophets are dated in relation to the reigns of kings of Ephraim and Judah, a change comes about with Ezekiel, whose dates relate predominantly to the exile. Haggai and Zechariah's prophecies are then dated by the reign of the Persian king Darius I, who reigned from 522 to 485. Their ministries overlapped, with Haggai s exhortations to the community to commit itself to rebuilding the temple preceding the beginning of Zechariah's ministry by two months. Official leadership in this period belonged to the Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel (who was also a descendant of David and thus qualified to be king if Judah had a king) and to the senior priest, Joshua. Haggai and Zechariah both emphasize the significance of these two leaders, though Zerubbabel is more prominent in Haggai and Joshua in

Zechariah.

Following Ezra 1–6 there is a long chronological gap in Ezra and Nehemiah between the completion of the temple restoration in 516 and the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves in 458 and 445. Ezra came from Babylon with the support of the Persian king Artaxerxes I to see that Moses' torah was implemented in Jerusalem; Nehemiah came from the Persian capital, Susa, to see that the walls of the city were rebuilt. Malachi's ministry belongs some time after the temple rebuilding; it could have been before, during, or after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, as could the material in Zechariah 9–14 (see the commentary on both these questions).

Whereas verse dominates Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (and the prophetic books linked with other eighth- and seventh-century figures), the entirety of Haggai and Malachi and most of Zechariah is prose. While there is a rhythmic aspect to their prophecy, there is much less of the paronomasia, alliteration, and metaphor found in the preceding books. On the other hand, there are more indications that the authors of these prophecies knew their predecessors' work and were referring to it when it raised issues that they needed to address.

Haggai

John Goldingay

Introduction: Haggai

Whereas Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah have editorial prefaces introducing each book as a whole, the opening verse of Haggai immediately announces his first message; the book as such has no prologue. Haggai then tells us of four dated occasions over a mere four months between Labor Day/Late Summer Holiday and Christmas 520 B.C. when "Yahweh's word came through/to Haggai." This formulation introduces the reports of Haggai's prophecies in 1:1–11 (followed by the aftermath in 1:12–15a); 1:15b–2:9; 2:10–19; and 2:20–23 (the last formulation is abbreviated because it relates to the same date as that in 2:10). In effect, this gives the book the framework of a narrative about Haggai, concerning a series of occasions when Yahweh's word came to him and what this led to, rather than the framework of a collection of messages. The narrative concerns the process whereby the community came to commit itself to rebuilding the temple. So the book comprises messages from Haggai reported and framed by a narrator, perhaps a person who listened to him and here presents a personal account of his words in a narrative context. Insofar as this narrator is also involved in declaring the theological significance of Haggai' s words and of the people's reaction, one might see the book as a prophetic narrative, not only because it is about a prophet but also because "the narrator's voice speaks with prophetic authority" (Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 272). The way the reports all give specific dates for the divine proclamations follows the unique precedent of Ezekiel, though their being part of a narrative gives the dates extra significance. In a prophecy, a date roots the divine word in a specific context and makes it possible subsequently to refer back to it in light of its fulfillment. In a narrative, the dates also testify to the reality and concrete specificity of the events they introduce.

Like Nahum's editor, however, Haggai' s narrator may have brought together short sayings of Haggai' s and constructed longer interlinked addresses out of them, especially in 1:2–11. Further, as is usually the case with the books of the prophets, Haggai's words (and in this case the narrative about him) may have been supplemented by later expansions. But identifying these involves considerable guesswork and possibly fallacious assumptions.

Haggai's Context

The introductions to Haggai's words set him in the context of the restoration of the Judean community toward the end of the sixth century. Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon in 539 and soon permitted peoples whom the Babylonians had transported to return to the places from which they or their parents or grandparents had come. As Ezra 1–6 tells the story, Cyrus gave practical support to Judeans who wanted to return in order to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, which had lain in a devastated state since 587. These Judeans restored the altar, reestablished the proper cycle of worship, and began the work of rebuilding. But they then came into conflict with other local peoples who wished to join them in the work but whom the returned exiles did not wish to have working with them. This resulted in the work halting for fifteen years, during which time Cyrus died, the Persian Empire went through some leadership crises, and perhaps more Judeans made the move from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

All four dates in Haggai relate to the second year of Darius I, Darius the Great, who gained the Persian throne by means of a coup d'état after the period of turmoil in the empire following the death of Cyrus in 530 and then that of Cambyses in 522. Darius's action in gaining the throne hardly reduced the turmoil, and his task for the beginning of his reign was to consolidate his position and stop the Persian Empire from falling apart. His first year or two were thus times of many marriages (to legitimize his reign) and many battles (to put rebel peoples back under control). It seems that by the time of Haggai s prophecies Darius had largely achieved these aims and was thus the ruler of most of the Middle-Eastern world.

Ezra 5 relates how the exhortations of Haggai and Zechariah then led to the resumption and completion of the work on the temple. We have noted that Ezra 1–6 does not seek to be a straightforward chronological account of the events it records (it acknowledges that it does not present them in chronological order), and scholarly discussion has mulled over the question of precisely how factual its account is, but for the purposes of understanding Haggai we can sidestep those questions. Haggai does imply in 1:2 that he is not the first person to raise the question of rebuilding the temple and that the project has been subject to delay. His mode of questioning and the content of his questions in 2:10–14 may also imply that the sacrificial system is operating even though the temple has not been rebuilt, which fits with the account in Ezra.

Dating his prophecies by the reign of the Persian king makes for an extraordinary contrast with previous prophets. If their work was dated in terms

of the reign of kings, as was usually the case, these were the kings of Judah or Ephraim. There is a practical reason for dating Haggai s prophecy by the Persian king: there is no Judean king. Whereas Yahweh has fulfilled the promises of earlier prophets to free Judean exiles so that they could return home, their promises about the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy have not been fulfilled. The Persian authorities have not allowed that, and never will do so. Judah is a province of the Persian Empire, like Samaria.

Dating the prophecies by the reign of the Persian king also has a theological implication. Whereas some prophets had indeed promised the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy, Isaiah 40–55 had taken Yahweh's commitment to David in different directions. On one hand, those chapters say, Yahweh's anointed king was now the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who was in the midst of bringing Babylonian power to an end and making it possible for its victims to return home (Isa. 44:24–45:7); on the other, Yahweh was now making a covenant commitment to the whole people of Yahweh analogous to that established with David (Isa. 55:1–5). Chronicles and Ezra take up aspects of this theology in their understanding of the place of Cyrus and other Persian kings in relation to Yahweh's purpose and the needs of the community in Haggai s day (2 Chr. 36:23; Ezra 1–6). Dating Yahweh's words to Haggai in terms of Darius fits with this theology. The Persian king is Yahweh's vice-regent in relation to Judah. As far as Darius would be concerned, and in terms of the conventional modern relating of Middle-Eastern history, Darius's being king of Judah and eventually facilitating the building of the temple in Jerusalem were rather insignificant events. But in connection with the achievement of God's purpose in and for the world through Israel, they were monumentally important.

The Leadership of the Community

While providing dates in terms of the reign of the Persian king, the book describes Yahweh as actually speaking to Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, the governor, and Joshua ben Jozadak, the senior priest.

The word for governor, *pekhah,* is an Akkadian loanword used in the OT mainly to describe the governor of Persian provinces, especially Judah. Using this word to describe Zerubbabel may imply that this was indeed his official position; he was the local governor of the Persian province of Judah ("Yehud" in Aramaic), reporting to the governor of the satrapy Beyond the River (that is, the area west of the Euphrates, the whole of Syria-Palestine; cf. Ezra 5:3), which at this time was probably still part of the combined satrapy of Babylon and Beyond

the River. On the other hand, it may be that in this period Judah was formally still part of the Persian province of Samaria under the authority of its governor, and that Zerubbabel was not a "proper" provincial governor; his governorship perhaps carried more limited local authority. Judah did in due course become a province, and this may have happened in Zerubbabel's lifetime; it might then have been seen as a fulfillment of the promise in Haggai 2:20–23.

As son of Shealtiel, who was himself King Jehoiachin's eldest son, Zerubbabel was a potential heir to the promise to David and to David's throne. The genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3:17–24 makes his father another of Jehoiachin's sons, Pedaiah, which could still make him a potential heir, though a less immediate one, but by its focus on Zerubbabel and his descendants, that genealogy evidently treats his line as the key line of Davidic descent. Perhaps describing Zerubbabel as son of Shealtiel marks him as *the* senior descendant of David; Shealtiel "adopts" him. One way or another, then, Zerubbabel is *the* potential heir to the promise to David. Yet in Haggai there is no mention of his Davidic descent and he is simply the Persian-appointed "governor of Judah." In whatever sense he had that position, he had apparently succeeded Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8; 5:14). If this name is a variant on Shenazzar (1 Chr. 3:18), he was also a member of the royal family and was Zerubbabel's uncle.

The book then portrays Joshua standing alongside Zerubbabel in the leadership of the community. His name is sometimes spelled Jeshua (e.g., Ezra 2:2), a shorter formation in Hebrew (*yeshuaʿ* instead of *yehoshuaʿ*). As Zerubbabel must and can trace his ancestry to David, Joshua must and can trace his ancestry to Aaron via Jehozadak, the senior priest who was taken into exile (1 Chr. 6:1–15). Most occurrences of the terms usually translated "high priest" and "chief priest" (lit., "great priest" and "head priest") come in postexilic books. Presumably there was a senior priest in the preexilic period, but the change in nomenclature likely reflects the greater significance of the position in the Second Temple period, suggested by the very fact that the two people to whom Haggai refers are the governor and the senior priest. As the Davidic leader has less power than was the case before the exile, the Aaronic leader has more power. At the risk of being anachronistic, the two make for a suggestive pattern of holding state leadership and church leadership in two figures who are separate but equal and working together.

Haggai the Prophet

The book describes Haggai as "the prophet" five times. One result of this is to

give Haggai a designation indicating his position of authority alongside Zerubbabel "the governor" and Joshua "the senior priest" (e.g., 1:1, 12; 2:1–2); calling Haggai "Yahweh's messenger" or "aide" (1:13–14) has the same effect. There is no parallel for such a concentrated use of the designation "prophet." It makes for a nice contrast with the gloomy observation in Lamentations 2:9 that Jerusalem's prophets "no longer find a vision from Yahweh." It also stands alongside the fact that we know nothing personal about Haggai. All that matters is that he was a prophet.

The fact that his message focuses on the temple supports the idea that "prophet" suggests someone exercising a ministry in connection with the temple (see the comments on "Habakkuk the Prophet" and on "Zephaniah the Poet and the Preacher"), though this evidently does not mean being under the senior priest's authority (since his words constitute a challenge to the senior priest as well as to the governor). The fact that the book calls him also, unusually, Yahweh's "messenger" or "aide" makes for a nice link with Isaiah 44:26–28, which speaks of the promises of Yahweh's aide being fulfilled and then refers to the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple; Haggai is the embodiment of that. This designation also fits with the way he speaks like a royal messenger, declaring "thus said Yahweh Armies" (e.g., 1:2).

We know nothing about who Haggai was, not even his father's name or the place he came from. The fact that he is not mentioned in the list of people who returned from Babylon in Ezra 2 may imply that he was one of those whose family had not been transported and had stayed in Judah. His name is one of a number of names related to the Hebrew word *khag,* "feast," which perhaps indicates that he was born during one of the annual pilgrimage festivals. The name Haggai thus designates him as a "Feast Child," just as "Sabbatai" designates someone as a "Sabbath Child," and as "Sunday" and other days are used as names in Nigeria. The name is pronounced Hagg-ay, not Hagg-iy-ay (though in English the stress is on the first syllable, whereas the stress comes on the second syllable in Hebrew).

We have noted that 1:1 immediately introduces Haggai s first message; the book as such has no introduction. There, and subsequently, "the word of Yahweh" denotes not the book as a whole (as in Zeph. 1:1) but the particular message that follows. Whereas Zephaniah and Haggai s contemporary Zechariah speak in terms of Yahweh's word coming *to* them (Zeph. 1:1; Zech. 1:1; cf. Hag. 2:10, 20), Haggai speaks several times of Yahweh's word coming "through" him. Literally, it comes "by the hand of" Haggai (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:13, 23; Isa. 20:2), by

means of him or by his agency. The phrase is a strong expression of the fact that it is indeed Yahweh's word that Haggai mediates; he is simply the instrument through which Yahweh's own word comes. This is the means, then, by which Yahweh's word comes "to" certain people. Although it will be a word that relates to the people of Jerusalem as a whole, it comes immediately to their leaders. The same words of introduction recur in the midst of Haggai s preaching in 1:3 and in 2:1.

Haggai and his narrator continually emphasize the divine origin of his words. The subsequent preamble, "This is what the LORD Almighty says" in 1:2 (lit., "thus said Yahweh Armies") is adapted from the introduction that a king's messenger would give to his message; it is similar to the introduction Nahum used in Nahum 1:12 (see the comment there). The same preamble recurs (prefaced by "and now") in 1:5, then in 1:7; 2:6, 11. A resumptive "says the LORD" (lit., "Yahweh said") closes off 1:8 (cf. 2:7, 9). A parenthetical "declares the LORD" (lit., "Yahweh's declaration"; see the comment introducing Zeph. 1:2–2:3) interrupts 1:9; 2:4 (twice), 14, 23 (twice); and other occurrences close off 1:13; 2:4, 8, 9, 17, 23.

On the lips of other prophets, such declarations commonly provide backing for warnings of Yahweh's intention to bring trouble. Haggai has no such warnings. He does assume that Yahweh can be a trouble-bringer, and indeed he declares that Yahweh has been acting thus (e.g., 1:11). He also assumes that Yahweh makes demands of the community, and indeed he is fonder of imperative verbs than other prophets who simply declare what Yahweh intends to do and leave their audiences to work out how to respond. But his imperatives link with promises rather than threats; promises are the more characteristic speech form of prophets from the exile onwards. Haggai seeks to inspire rather than browbeat.

As Haggai puts more emphasis on his words having Yahweh's authority than any other prophet, so there is also hardly a prophet who is more successful, unless it is Jonah (who is a special case in several senses). Where we are told of people's reactions to the prophets they almost invariably respond with resistance, but Haggai and his colleague Zechariah are the best examples of prophets who speak and see people do what they say. When Haggai urged that he really was speaking Yahweh's words, people believed him. They "obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD." (1:12).

The Significance of these Prophecies

It is difficult to imagine that a prophet who spoke words such as the ones in Haggai never uttered other prophecies—it is far easier to imagine that he uttered many more. If so, the words in the book were the ones someone decided were of particular lasting significance, a judgment with which the community then agreed. What would be the basis for this conviction? The OT does not report all the acts Yahweh ever undertook, nor does it contain all the prophecies Yahweh ever inspired. As far as we can tell, the criterion for including prophecies was not merely (for instance) their theological profundity or the fact that they came true; indeed, there are many prophecies in the OT that are not very theologically profound and/or did not come true. The example of Haggai suggests that another criterion was their relationship with the story of Yahweh's engagement with Israel, which is the central focus of the OT.

In Haggai's case, then, the reason for including him at all, and for including these particular prophecies, lies in the decisive role they played in the restoration of the temple. This event was of key significance for the development of the Judean community after the exile as a community centered on the temple, and thus of key significance for the achievement of God's purpose through Israel. The book in its entirety focuses on the temple and points to a sequence of motivations for taking on and persisting in the building project. It will restore their economic fortunes (1:2–15a). It will issue in drawing the world to Yahweh and the manifestation of Yahweh's glory (1:15b–2:9). The temple will make it possible for there to be a purified people and pure offerings (2:10–19). And it will be based on the exercise of the authority of a Davidic leader (2:20–23). If the book had been written after the completion of the temple building, one might have expected it to mention this achievement; perhaps it was completed soon after Haggai delivered these messages from Yahweh and so its purpose was to continue the propagation of encouragement to complete the project. It is a plausible view that the success of Haggai s ministry in inspiring the temple's restoration led to the community's accepting of this account of his story and crediting the promises in chapter 2 that go beyond what actually happened.

From the exile onwards, the Jewish people will always exist in one form in Judah and in other forms in places such as Babylon and Egypt, and God will be at work in and through all these. But Jerusalem and its temple will continue to be a focus even for people who do not live there, and the development of the Second Temple community will have decisive significance for the Jewish people as a whole. Haggai and his prophecies thus play a key role in the OT story, the story

from the promises to Israel's ancestors via the exodus and the original building of the temple to the great deliverance in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes when the temple would need to be cleansed and rededicated. These prophecies thus continue to be significant for the story of Jesus' beginnings, which closely involve the temple (see Luke 1–2); for the ministry he exercised in the temple and its environs; and for the beginnings of the church, which also intimately involved the temple (see Acts). The significance of Haggai s words and achievement thus lies in their importance for the project Yahweh is pursuing through that story, and in particular his crucial role in connection with this crucial event of the temple's restoration. Conversely, the importance of this event explains Haggai s concentrated focus on this particular short period of time, and it might also explain why all the attention of the book centers on delivering these words.

At the same time, the nature of prophecy as opposed to (historical) narrative is to include expectations that go far beyond present realities. While narrative implicitly looks to the future and may also do so explicitly and prophecy implicitly refers to the past and may also explicitly do so, narrative overtly talks more about the past than the future, while prophecy overtly talks more about the future than the past. Chronicles speaks about the Davidic monarchy of the past and its significance for the present, but it does not indicate that it expects a restoration of that monarchy; Chronicles and Ezra 1–6 rejoice in the Davidic-Solomonic temple of the past and in the restored temple, but they do not express any expectations regarding it for the future. Haggai presupposes in down-to-earth fashion the position of the Persian king and of Zerubbabel as governor, and the practicalities involved in building the temple. But Haggai also explicitly promises that the restored temple will be more glorious than Solomon's (!), and that the rule of foreign kingdoms will be ended and the position of Zerubbabel exalted (cf. Stuhlmueller, *Rebuilding with Hope,* pp. 16–17).

Haggai s words confront modern Western attitudes. We are more comfortable with Amos than with Haggai, even if in the end we take no notice of Amos. Israel knew it heard Yahweh confronting it through a prophet such as Amos over its attitude to corruption, which enabled the powerful to flourish at the expense of ordinary people. It also knew it heard Yahweh confronting it through a prophet such as Haggai over the symbolic honoring of Yahweh expressed in the building of the temple.

§1 August (Hag. 1:1–15a)

The overlaps between Haggai's various sayings in verses 2–11, with their repeated resumptive beginnings describing them as Yahweh's words, suggest that these are sayings Haggai delivered on different occasions and that the narrator has brought them together into a coherent longer account of Haggai' s challenge concerning the need to take up the task of building the temple. The account thus brings together the fact that the people are living in restored homes when Yahweh is not and the fact that they have been experiencing economic problems.

1:1 / Given the chaotic nature of the events that brought Darius to the throne and the complication of moving between years calculated as beginning variously in January or in the spring or in the fall, we do not know how Haggai's narrator would calculate **the second year of King Darius,** but the year of his accession is usually given as 522 B.C. and so the dates in Haggai are taken to relate to the last months of 520 (see the discussion in Wolff, *Haggai,* pp. 74–76). The months are here counted by the Babylonian calendar which begins the year in the spring and nicely corresponds to the exhortation to make Passover the beginning of the year (Exod. 12:2). The sixth month will then be August-September. The first day of the month is a holiday marked by special offerings. One can then perhaps imagine Haggai delivering his exhortation in the unrestored temple, which is nevertheless the place where festivals would be celebrated and offerings made in the presence of important people such as the governor and the senior priest.

Through Haggai, then, Yahweh's word comes **to** certain people (the formulation is different in 2:1): Here, although the message relates to the people of Jerusalem as a whole, it comes immediately to their leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua (see "The Leadership of the Community" in the introduction to Haggai).

1:2 / Haggai's first message challenges people to get on with building the temple. The book therefore begins in the middle of things. There is no account of Haggai's "call," and these first words, together with the verses that follow, may imply that Haggai has been trying for some time to get the people to take up the task of restoring the temple. But his personal history before and after the

ministry recorded in this little book is irrelevant; all that matters is the role he played and the words he delivered at this key moment.

The further preface **This is what the LORD Almighty says** is a form of the introduction that a king's messenger would give to his message; it is the introduction Nahum used in Nahum 1:12 (see the comment there), except that Haggai refers to "the LORD Almighty," or "Yahweh Armies" (see the comment on Nah. 2:13). The title is a favorite one in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi and could encourage people to remember that Yahweh remains the real power in Judah's world even when that world seems under the control of an imperial superpower.

Although verse 1 indicates that this is a message given directly to the community's leaders, the message concerns the community as a whole. **These people,** more literally "this people," is sometimes a slightly pejorative expression in contrast to "my people" (cf. 2:14; Isa. 6:9–10). The book later refers to "this nation" (2:14), to "the remnant of the people" (1:12, 14; 2:2), and to "the people of the land" (2:4), apparently always speaking about the same group. This group might include both members of the community who had stayed in Jerusalem through the exile and people who had come from Babylon over the preceding 15 years or so. The book as a whole does not give us enough information to settle this question regarding the makeup of the prophet's audience.

The book makes no mention of a start on the temple project having been made 15 years previously or of subsequent local political difficulties or conflicts such as those that Ezra 3–4 reports. Nor does it concern itself with the imperial policies that would have encouraged the building as part of the Persian policy to facilitate local self-government in its provinces. Nor does it take into account the pressure on resources brought about by the return of people from Babylon, people who were members of the urban elite who would be net consumers of resources such as food rather than net contributors to the economy. The people's formulation of the grounds for not pressing on with the rebuilding of the temple, **The time has not yet come,** may imply either some theological reason or rationalization. Perhaps they argued that the exile was supposed to last 70 years (cf. Zech. 1:12) and they were counting carefully from 587. Or perhaps they argued that building the temple was supposed to be Yahweh's business, as Ezekiel implied. Haggai will soon point to another reason or two for their neglect.

1:3–4 / The message thus goes on to address the community as a whole more

directly. Perhaps we are to imagine Haggai actually addressing Zerubbabel and Joshua in the temple, but speaking to the whole people through them. Haggai was overtly challenging both the governor and the senior priest, though this might not really be a confrontational challenge. One can imagine that both leaders would be eager to restore the temple; their problem might be getting the community to give its energy to the task. It is in fact the people's attitude that Haggai directly seeks to change. Governor, priest, and prophet might be agreed about what was needed. But Haggai needs to galvanize both the leadership and the people.

In case the people were about to give a political or theological rationale for their declaration that it was not yet time to build the temple, Yahweh goes on to call their bluff with the inquiry in verse 4. The question suggests a series of contrasts with the story of the temple building in David's day. First, in effect David's argument there was the one Yahweh uses here. It was inappropriate for Yahweh to be living in a tent when David was living in a nice house. Second, Yahweh's argument here is thus the reverse of the one in 2 Samuel 7. There, Yahweh rejected the argument that a divine King needed a splendid palace; here Yahweh apparently embraces that argument. The challenge reflects the way we can never get Yahweh in a box or under control. One reason is that questions of theology and spirituality are usually complex. They have more than one side. When people think they have done justice to one side of a question, they can forget that there is another angle to consider. That is why there is such a contrast between the questions Yahweh raises and any question one can imagine a prophet such as Amos asking. For other prophets, the problem is that people are only too ready to build a house for Yahweh, and make offerings to Yahweh, and pray to Yahweh, and praise Yahweh because they are inclined to think that they have then done their duty by Yahweh. Prophets therefore have to disabuse the people of this misunderstanding (see, e.g., Jer. 7). The question this raises is not only a preexilic one. The prophecies in Isaiah 56–66 also belong to the Second Temple period, and Isaiah 66:1–2 ridicules the idea of building a house for Yahweh. If people are enthusiastic about the temple, they need to be warned about their enthusiasm; if they are not enthusiastic about the temple, they need to be warned about their lack of enthusiasm. The reason Israel has prophets is that there is always something that needs to be said that goes against people's instincts.

The description of the people's houses as **paneled** heightens the comparison and contrast with passages such as 2 Samuel 7. Among the four other

occurrences of this verb, one refers to Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 6:9), but two refer to Solomon's palace (1 Kgs. 7:3, 7), and one to Jehoahaz's notorious palace (Jer. 22:14). In the first two of these passages, the NIV assumes the word refers to roofing, and all four go on to specify that the paneling or roofing was done in cedar, which indicates how fine it was. The fact that Haggai does not specify the material suggests that the emphasis lies not on the luxurious state of the people's own homes but on the simple fact that these homes were properly restored and the work was finished—whether he refers to roofing or paneling. The people's houses would indeed have needed restoration; even the homes of those whose families had escaped going into exile would hardly have survived the siege and fall of Jerusalem in good shape. They had apparently done this work but had perhaps then found that the economic situation became more and more difficult. And, in contrast to theirs, Yahweh's house is left in its broken-down state.

1:5–6 / Through addressing their leaders, Haggai urges the people to **"Give careful thought to your ways";** the exhortation will recur in verse 7. They need to think about the way they have been living in their domestic comfort.

But before taking that exhortation further, Yahweh's argument goes in a different direction for a moment (v. 6). There might be two ways of reading the comments Yahweh now makes on their situation. Eating but never having enough and drinking but never having our fill might refer to a phenomenon Ecclesiastes examines, that it is possible to have all that we need yet still not be satisfied. But some of Yahweh's analysis must rather suggest that people do not have all they need even at the physical level. It is not that they have nothing; they are not starving. But they do not have enough to live a decent human life. Their harvests are not total failures but people are poor, even though they have been able to fix their homes.

Some of Haggai's expressions to describe their shortfall recall the warnings about the consequences of disobedience in the Torah in the long lists of the troubles Yahweh could bring on Israel as consequences of their disobedience, in passages such as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 (see esp. Lev. 26:26; Deut. 28:38–39). What are warnings (they are often described as "curses") in passages such as these are here described as actualities. They became realities at the fall of Samaria and the fall of Jerusalem. The frightening possibility Haggai here raises is that those events might not have exhausted the potential experience of being under Yahweh's punishment. Even though the exile is over, once again these troubles are spoken of as actualities and not merely possibilities. The punishment

could continue in the life of the restoration community, worryingly adapted to a different social context. Here, the combination of references to people farming their own land and to people earning **wages** is noteworthy. In a Western context, earning wages is a natural phenomenon. A traditional society such as OT Israel is for the most part not based on the principle of selling one's labor and it is not a monetary economy. The ideal is for the family to farm its own land and make a little surplus in order to cover needs that it could not meet from its own activity and to lend to families in need (and to pay taxes). But in Haggai's day neither self-sufficient, subsistence farmers nor people who had to work for someone else can make ends meet.

While Haggai is silent on the community's political situation, Ezra 4–5 emphasizes the political; and while Ezra 4–5 is silent on the community's economic situation, Haggai in contrast emphasizes their economic plight. But Nehemiah's report from a few decades later (Neh. 5) does offer a picture of the community's situation that parallels Haggai's, or rather indicates that it has become much worse—notwithstanding the community's response to Haggai's exhortations.

1:7–8 / Yahweh returns to the question raised in verses 2–3 and resumes the challenge of verse 5 to **"Give careful thought to your ways."** Here, the "ways" are not the actions the people have (not) been undertaking but the ones they need now to undertake.

The NIV's account of the continuing exhortation indicates the magnitude of the demand that Yahweh makes (v. 8). **"Go up into the mountains,"** Yahweh instructs them, to get **timber** for the task. It will require a huge expenditure of human resources (on the part of people who are already severely stretched) to get the materials for restoring the temple. But the instruction as the NIV renders it is an odd one. While the mountains around Jerusalem grew trees whose timber could be used for some forms of building (cf. Neh. 2:8), there were no trees that would provide the kind of timber that this project will require. Thus the narrative in Ezra 3:7 presupposes the need to import such timber from Lebanon, and, indeed, the narrative reports how the people acquired it. Perhaps it was there and available in 520 (unless this was what people had used to panel or roof their houses, in keeping with the usual pattern). Further, the people are already in the mountains, so it is odd to tell them to go up there; and the word "mountain" is actually singular. So it is more likely that Haggai is urging people to go up the mountain upon which the temple stands and take timber (brought

from elsewhere) to build there (so Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Volume 2,* p. 538).

The fact that Haggai speaks in terms of getting timber indicates something else about the nature of the work that needs to be done, in addition to linking with the reference to paneled houses. Haggai refers to "building" the house here and in 2:18 he will refer to the beginning of this work as its founding (cf. Ezra 3), as if the people will need to start from scratch (but see the comment on 2:18). But Solomon's temple was a very solid building with foundations of huge blocks of stone. It had been devastated, pillaged, and set on fire in 587, and verse 4 could declare that it **remains a ruin,** yet it had not been demolished. Indeed, the account of setting up the altar "on its foundations" so that regular offerings could be made there (Ezra 3; cf. Hag. 2:14) implies that the unrestored temple was in regular use. The people would have had to reconstruct some of its stone walls where they had been pulled apart (cf. Ezra 6:4), but they would not have had to lay new foundations. They would have had to rebuild its brick walls and manufacture new bricks if they were burned useless, but Haggai does not refer to this need—only to the need for timber, which would be required for the walls and the roof. They would, of course, need to restore the temple's interior. Thus although the community has vastly fewer resources than were available to Solomon, according to Ezra 5–6 they were able to complete the work in four and a half years, whereas Solomon had needed seven and a half.

Yahweh will then **take pleasure in it.** How would Yahweh do that? The verb is used with regard to sacrifices, and one aspect of Yahweh's positive response would be the acceptance of people's sacrifices. Micah 6:7 uses the same construction (*ratsah* followed by *b*) to describe Yahweh's acceptance of a sacrifice—or rather, in connection with Yahweh's non-acceptance of a sacrifice. The comparison thus again highlights the complementary nature of Yahweh's words through a prophet such as Amos or Micah with Yahweh's words through a prophet such as Haggai. There are contexts in which people are enthusiastic about worship and need to be put in their place; there are contexts in which they are insufficiently attentive to worship and need to be put in their place.

"Take pleasure in" also suggests something broader. Yahweh had abandoned the temple in 587. Taking pleasure in it would suggest returning to it. People could be sure of finding Yahweh there again. This links with the declaration that Yahweh will **be honored** (*kabed* in the *nipʿal*), or glorified, there. The use of the *nipʿal* verb rather than a strictly passive form such as the *puʿal* would suggest "I will glorify myself" or "I will manifest my glory," and this fits the use of the word

"glory/splendor" (*kabod*) in the background of Haggai. The destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. brought Yahweh dishonor. Yahweh had brought this destruction about, but it looked like the result of a defeat of Yahweh by the gods of Babylon. Indeed, Yahweh's "honor" or "glory" had withdrawn from the temple at that moment (Ezek. 11:23). But, in a vision, Ezekiel also saw it returning (Ezek. 43:1–5). The temple's restoration will be a symbol of the restoration of Yahweh's honor by the restoration of the community and it will lead to the return of Yahweh's glory there. Yahweh's acceptance of it and pleasure in it will result in and be evidenced and confirmed by Yahweh's coming there in glory. Haggai would likely also think in terms of the way Yahweh's presence would be apparent in the splendor of the people's worship, and in 2:7–9 Yahweh promises that the temple will be a place of material magnificence. Yahweh further adds that the presence of *kabod* will also mean the experience of *shalom,* of well-being, of a magnificent reversal of the conditions described in 1:5–6, 10–11. When people show no concern for the presence of the divine *kabod,* they experience no *shalom.* When they do their part in connection with the manifestation of *kabod,* they will also experience restored *shalom*.

1:9–11 / The close of Yahweh's exhortation explicitly brings together the themes of the people's neglect of Yahweh's house while their own houses are in good shape, and their economic difficulties. **You expected much.** They had good reason to do that. Prophecies such as those in Isaiah 40–55 had encouraged them to do so. The sentence continues, **but see, it turned out to be little.** Their experience in the land was nowhere near as wonderful as one would have expected in light of such promises. Wherever people looked, there was disappointment. Haggai's explanation is the fact that they were preoccupied with what they could take to their own house (the word behind NIV **home**) at the expense of doing something about the state of Yahweh's house.

Thus the poor harvests were not "just one of those things." Like earlier prophets, Haggai sees the poor harvests as sent by Yahweh. Here for the first time Haggai utters terrible sentences of which Yahweh is the subject: **I blew away . . . I called for a drought.** Of course it was implicit that Yahweh was behind the experiences described in verses 5–6, but only here does it become explicit. Yahweh acts in this way for reasons different from those that preoccupied those earlier prophets. Habakkuk and Zephaniah were appalled by the corruption that made it possible for clever and powerful people to do well at the expense of ordinary people, as well as by the inclination to turn to spiritual resources other

than Yahweh. It was these wrongs that had caused Yahweh to send poor harvests in their day. Haggai apparently does not need to worry about such questions. It is the people's focus on their own houses rather than on Yahweh's that is the problem. Like other prophets, in this connection he needs to confront the people who take the lead in the people's political life and its worship life in order to get them to exercise their leadership. Further, he makes it clear that in this context Yahweh is not on the side of the poor. The whole community needs to focus on honoring Yahweh in the way symbolized by building the temple.

Therefore . . . (v. 10). This word is commonly the segue from a prophet's indictment of people to the pronouncement concerning what will now happen. Here it has an equivalent place in making a declaration about what has happened. The specifics of the trouble that Yahweh has sent link with the date of the prophecy, at the beginning of the sixth month. In terms of the agricultural year, this is the last month; in the seventh month the people observe the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Sukkot, which includes the celebration of ingathering. Israel sees no rain from about April to October, and the dew plays a key role in some crops coming to fruition in September. But **the heavens have withheld their dew.** Instead, Yahweh "called for a drought," just as on other occasions Yahweh summoned armies to act as agents in bringing trouble to people (the same construction with *qara'*; e.g., Isa. 13:3). "Drought" signifies not merely the absence of rain (indeed, it is several times used in antithesis to "dew") but the consequent parched dryness of the soil, especially when dried up by the fierce heat of the sun. And thus the problem is a general one that means disaster for all crops. Haggai again alludes to warnings such as the one found in Deuteronomy 28:51 when he describes the way this drought affects **fields** and **mountains** and thus **grain** and vines and olive trees as well. It affects human beings and animals. It affects everything that people labor to produce. While there will be force to Haggai's words at this season in connection with the actual and projected harvests for that year, he is likely also implying that the people have an ongoing history of drought and poor harvests.

1:12 / Given that Yahweh commissioned Haggai to speak to Zerubbabel and Joshua but through them to the people, it is appropriate that the response comes from the two leaders and from **the whole remnant of the people.** That latter designation might have various implications. In origin, talk of a remnant surviving a catastrophe is a way of indicating how devastating the catastrophe was: only a remnant has survived. The term thus suggests the reduced nature of

the community in Jerusalem; it is but a shadow of its earlier self. But Yahweh then promised to restore the remnant and to make it the nucleus of a new people. Designating the community as the remnant then explains the community's own self-understanding. By Yahweh's grace and by the fulfillment of Yahweh's commitment, it has survived exile and reconstituted itself in Jerusalem. The description reminds the people that Yahweh has fulfilled the promises made to them. Further, this self-understanding may imply a claim over against other people. The narrative in Ezra likely reflects the fact that there are other people in Judah and Jerusalem who had escaped being taken into exile; these might be (for instance) people who had taken refuge in countries around Judah or whom the Babylonians had not bothered to transport. There are also people in the province of Samaria, the former territory of Ephraim, who worship Yahweh. The self-designation "remnant" may imply a claim to be the true people of Yahweh. Further still, the remnant that is preserved simply because the faithfulness of Yahweh cannot let the whole people go out of existence is then challenged to become a remnant that is in turn faithful to Yahweh, in keeping with a statement or challenge that now comes just a few verses earlier in the Twelve Prophets (Zeph. 3:13; see the comment). Here, the remnant meets that challenge.

So they **obeyed** Yahweh and obeyed Haggai's urging, **because the LORD their God had sent him.** The verb "send" fits with the metaphor of the prophet as Yahweh's messenger, reflected in the way the prophet says "thus said Yahweh," as if he were speaking like a king's messenger. Behind the metaphor is the broader image of the prophet's being admitted to the divine court, which discusses matters on earth and makes decisions concerning them; Yahweh, the president of the court, then sends a prophet to announce and implement its decisions. Somehow the people recognize that he is who he claims to be. This will not merely be a matter of responding to his self-assurance or conviction; in other contexts, at least, mere conviction does not get a prophet heard. It is at least as likely that they respond to the self-authenticating logic of his words. For all we know, over the previous 15 years Yahweh had sent other people who had fervently urged the community to take up the temple restoration project once more, but Haggai was the one who succeeded in convincing them that this was the moment. And their responsiveness to Haggai is an indication of their responsiveness to Yahweh. The closing verb of verse 12 restates this. The NIV has them "fearing" Yahweh, but in such a context the verb *yare'* denotes people's reverent submission.

Verses 12–15a refer to Yahweh eight times, and to **their God** three times, emphatically affirming Yahweh's sovereignty and Yahweh's relationship with the people (Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8,* pp. 44–45).

1:13–15a / In response to this reaction, Haggai speaks again, explicitly as Yahweh's **messenger** bringing Yahweh's **message** (*mal'ak, mal'akut*). Etymology would suggest that a messenger is not merely a communicator of words but a person who makes things happen, rather like a presidential aide, and this is commonly the case with OT messengers. Haggai' s actual message from Yahweh is the deceptively simple noun clause **"I am with you."** But that is a hugely significant declaration. It is "the briefest of the oracles of Haggai. . . . Yet the importance of this brief message cannot be overstated" (Meadowcroft, *Haggai,* p. 135). Yahweh's being with a person or a people does not merely mean a personal presence (which, perhaps, comforts people when they are suffering); rather, Yahweh's is an active presence (which changes the situation that causes the suffering). This active presence is the one Yahweh had promised the Judean community in Babylon (in slightly different formulations) two decades previously (Isa. 41:10; 43:1–2, 5). It is easy to imagine that some people present had heard this declaration, though Haggai intriguingly reverses its logic. There, "I am with you" meant "you need not fear [in a negative sense]." Here, "they feared [in a positive sense]" means "I am with you." And the declaration is not merely informative but performative as well. To say that Yahweh is with the people, taking action, is to put this declaration into effect, because this is what a presidential aide is in a position to do. Haggai s **declares the LORD** underlines the point.

So the LORD stirred up the spirit of the community's leaders and the community itself (v. 14); this perhaps then simply restates the point, as it is the declaration "I am with you" that accomplishes this. But the restatement indicates a recognition that something needed to happen to the people's dynamic—or rather, to its lack of dynamic. Yahweh had already stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to initiate the process whereby Judeans would go back from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and Yahweh had stirred up the spirit of the Judeans themselves to make the trek (Ezra 1:1, 5; NIV has "moved the heart," but the Heb. expression is the same). But there is evidently some more stirring (*ʿur* in the *hipʿil*) that needs to be done, and Yahweh has now done it. The notion of stirring the spirit or heart is the opposite of hardening it. Whereas hardening the heart involves presenting negative images and ideas, softening or moving it

involves presenting positive images and ideas. Yahweh has now done that by picturing the prospect of Yahweh taking pleasure in the temple and making the promise that Yahweh would be with them. If we are to distinguish between spirit and heart, then the heart refers more to mental operations and the spirit refers more to the dynamism of the will. So Haggai has already urged people to apply their hearts or minds to their ways, and the NIV quite reasonably paraphrases this expression as "consider" (vv. 5, 7); he will do that again in 2:15, 18 (NIV "give careful thought"). The word for "spirit" is also the word for "wind" with its energy and forcefulness, and it is this drive that Yahweh has now stirred up (see the comments on "spirit" in connection with 2:5).

Leaders and people respond to this arousing, yield to this provocation, and set **to work** (*mela'kah;* the word is related to the words for "messenger/message" in v. 13), within 23 days (v. 15).

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / The name **Zerubbabel** would suggest "offspring of Babylon." In Heb., strictly it should be *zeruʿbabel,* not *zerubabel.* In post-biblical Heb. ʿ (ʿ*ayin*) becomes a quiescent letter and can be omitted, but here the spelling is probably Babylonian; the Akkadian word for "offspring" is *zeru.* It was quite normal for Judeans to have foreign names without an implication of compromise; cf., for instance, "Hadassah" who is known as "Esther."

1:5 / **Your ways:** the NRSV has "how you have fared," which makes sense in the context, but it is hard to find parallels for *derakim* having this meaning. At the very least, the expression points to the link between the *way* people are presently experiencing life and the *way* they have been living.

1:11 / Haggai perhaps implies that there is a link between Yahweh's calling for a *khoreb* (**a drought**) and the people's leaving the temple *khareb* (**a ruin,** v. 9); the words come from homonymous roots, one meaning "be dry," the other "be desolate." Later, Haggai will have Yahweh shaking the *kharabah* ("dry land," 2:6).

1:12 / For **remnant** the NJPS has simply "rest," and there are passages where *she'erit* has that meaning (e.g., Neh. 7:72). This would fit with the use of the verb *sha'ar* in the *nipʿal* ("remain/be left") in 2:3. But if the noun here did simply mean "rest" it would seem redundant (no other group has been mentioned), and in the context of Haggai and Zechariah it more likely has theological significance.

1:15a / I follow the TNIV in seeing the chapter as ending with verse 15a and linking **in the second year of King Darius** with chapter 2. This gives 2:1–9 a similar beginning, including a reference to Darius, to the beginnings of 1:1–15a and 2:10–23.

§2 September (Hag. 1:15b–2:9)

The remaining three sections of Haggai contain no more concrete exhortations but focus on further motivating the community to get on with the rebuilding of the temple.

1:15b–2:2 / Seven weeks have passed since Haggai's first message; halfway through this period the people began the actual work on the temple. That first message came on a day of special observance, it being the first day of the month; this second message came on a very significant day, the last day of the week of Sukkot, the eve of the occasion when special services brought Sukkot to an end (Lev. 23:33–42; John 7:37). Sukkot was also the festival when Solomon's temple was dedicated (1 Kgs. 8; 2 Chr. 5–6).

This time Yahweh bids Haggai to speak directly to the people as well as to their two leaders. They are again referred to as the **remnant** (see the comment on 1:12). The pilgrimage festival would mean that more people were present in Jerusalem than usual, and of the three pilgrimage festivals Sukkot was the one in which people were mostly likely to take part.

2:3–5 / Like 1:2–15a, this confrontation begins by taking up something the people are thinking or might naturally be thinking, bringing it out into the open, and disputing it by urging a different stance and suggesting reasons for that stance. Given that 63 years have passed since the temple was destroyed, the answer to the question in verse 3 would be "Not many." But the question is largely rhetorical. Everyone would have heard about how splendid Solomon's temple was, and everyone could see the pathetic state of the shell that they had focused on through the festival. The point is not the contrast between the projected form of the Second Temple and the actual splendor of Solomon's temple, but between the still-ruined state of the building and its former glory. Three or four weeks of work would, if anything, have made this clearer. The task that faced the community would seem overwhelming.

Therefore Yahweh three times urges, **be strong** (v. 4) and Haggai three times adds, **declares the LORD** (see the introduction on "Haggai the Prophet"). Like the

English "be strong," the verb *khazaq* covers both physical and moral or emotional strength; in the imperative the latter is more significant. Particularly in the imperative, the verb occurs frequently in several telling contexts. One is the exhortations of Moses and Yahweh to Joshua and to the people as a whole on the eve of Israel's attack on Canaan, and the eastern clans' own exhortation to Joshua (Deut. 31:6, 7, 23; Josh. 1:6, 7, 9, 18). It also occurs in David's exhortations in Chronicles to Solomon about building the temple (1 Chr. 22:13; 28:10, 20), as well as in other exhortations in Chronicles concerning worship reforms and battles (2 Chr. 15:7; 19:11; 25:8; 32:7). The exhortations about building the First Temple also add "and work" (1 Chr. 22:16; 28:10, 20; also 2 Chr. 19:11; and Ezra 10:4). Although Chronicles is likely dated later than Haggai, the parallels imply a recognition of the magnitude of the task but also a reminder that the leaders and people of Yahweh have successfully faced such tasks in other contexts. But the secret to doing so is not merely remembering the inspiring examples of Joshua, David, or Asa; rather, it is the reassurance Yahweh goes on to give, **I am with you** (cf. 1:13 and the comment there). The people to whom Yahweh gives this encouragement are now referred to as the **people of the land,** which in this context denotes the people in general; they are presumably the same people just described as "the remnant of the people" (v. 2). Indeed, changing their designation perhaps suggests that the (mere) remnant has become the (real) people (cf. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2,* p. 281). See further the additional note below, and the comment on 1:2.

Yahweh's subsequent reminder (v. 5), **"This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt,"** supports the general application of the phrase "the people of the land." That piece of history is one that is open to being claimed by people who never went into exile as well as by people who did, and even by people in Samaria as well as by people in Judah. To exclude these groups, Yahweh would have needed to refer to coming back from Babylon or to recognizing Jerusalem. The reference to the exodus from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai would be especially apposite in the context of the celebration of Sukkot, with its reading of the covenant teaching at least every seven years (Deut. 31:10–13; cf. Neh. 8). Likewise the reference to Yahweh's spirit being in the people's midst will recall how that was so when they made the journey from Egypt to Canaan (cf. Isa. 63:11–14); it remains in their midst. The pleas in Isaiah 63:11–14 (and the promises in Joel 2:28–29) may presuppose that this seems not to be so in the time when those prophecies were given, and the people in Haggai's day may harbor the suspicion that it is not so in their context, but if so, Yahweh

reassures them. They do not have to wait until the last days for Yahweh's spirit to be in their midst; that is a reality now. It will generate the inner strength that is a fruit of the presence of Yahweh's spirit. To put it another way, it will generate a confidence that is the opposite of **fear.** We might say that a fruit of the Spirit is confidence rather than fear. The link between "I am with you" and "Do not fear" (see the comment on 1:13) clarifies the fact that "I am with you" (v. 4) and **my Spirit remains among you** mean the same thing. The first expression affirms that we are talking about a real presence of God in person. The second expression draws attention to the dynamic and life-giving implications of that presence. God's presence gives us the energy and power of the wind and the life-giving capacity of breath (in Heb., *ruakh* means wind and spirit and breath). The NIV's capitalization of "Spirit" helpfully draws attention to the fact that the one who is truly and powerfully present among the people is the Third Person of the Trinity, but thinking in such terms followed the cross, resurrection, and Pentecost. Although the Holy Spirit was present and active in people in OT times, they would naturally not conceptualize this in Trinitarian terms. Further, Christian understanding of the Trinity tends to lose the vigorous and vibrant connotations of "spirit" in the OT, and the NIV's capitalization is inclined to make us lose the dynamic of Haggai' s message.

2:6–9 / It will eventually become clear how these verses link to verses 2–5; Yahweh's shaking the cosmos will mean that the temple is not merely restored to its former glory, but receives yet greater splendor. But initially (v. 6) Yahweh moves in a different direction. In speaking of this shaking of the entire cosmos that is to take place **In a little while,** Yahweh speaks by means of a participle and thus actually says "I am shaking." Yahweh is so set on this action, and the event is thus so real, it is as if Yahweh is already doing it. The shaking of the heavens and the earth as if there is a landslide or an earthquake is a recurrent image to describe creation's reaction to Yahweh's wrath being expressed in the world (e.g., Joel 2:10; 3:16; Nah. 1:5). The image thus anthropomorphizes the cosmos; or perhaps we should say that it recognizes that the cosmos is a living thing, something that shares in life with God and with humanity. On some occasions, then, it joins in praise of what Yahweh does, but here it trembles with horror at what it sees, and its trembling is marked by phenomena such as thunder and storm. This dismay and terror affect the two main parts of the cosmos, **the heavens and the earth,** and the two main parts of the world itself, **the sea and the dry land.**

What causes their shaking? They are apparently reacting to Yahweh's shaking all the nations, making them tremble (v. 7). This is a rarer expression. Elsewhere, what seems to make the world as a whole shake is the sight of a great power reduced to nothing (e.g., Jer. 49:21; Ezek. 26:15; 31:16). Verses 21–22 will confirm that this is the connotation here. If the time when Haggai is prophesying is one when the world seems to be settling down, Haggai has not overtly expressed disquiet at this in the way Zechariah shortly will (see Zech. 1:7–17). Nevertheless Haggai evidently recognizes that Judah needs Yahweh to stir things up again, not let them settle down. He promises that Yahweh intends to take action to this end, and thus **shake all nations** when they see this happening. The result will be that **the desired of all nations will come** to the temple. The noun "the desired" comes from the verb for "desire" or "covet" in the tenth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:21. It is not a technical term but a word to denote the sorts of things that human beings delight in and appreciate and value. Yahweh here makes in a nutshell the promises expressed in passages such as Isaiah 60–62, which describe at length the nations bringing their riches and resources to Jerusalem and also make more explicit the implication that the nations will thus come to join in worship of Yahweh. In response to seeing Yahweh act in rather disturbing ways, the nations will want to acknowledge Yahweh and express that by bringing their treasures to Yahweh. And thus **I will fill this house with glory.** There is a glory that issues from the presence of the glorious God, but there is also a glory that comes from the presence of the splendid things in which human beings delight, which can draw attention to and/or reflect God's glory.

The NIV then has Yahweh going on to point out how easy it is for Yahweh to bring that about, given that **"The silver is mine and the gold is mine"** (v. 8). But these are noun clauses, with no verbs to indicate the time reference, and the fact that the verbs in verses 6–7 refer to what Yahweh is going to do (though see the additional note), and that the verbs in verse 9 are *yiqtol,* suggests that verse 8 declares the result of verse 7: "the silver will be mine and the gold will be mine." Yes, it will come to glorify Yahweh.

The building of Solomon's temple did involve some nations contributing to its splendor, but the shaking that Yahweh has spoken of implies tribute that is much more far-reaching (v. 9). We return to Haggai s starting point in verse 3. The ruined temple standing before people's eyes will attain a **glory** that exceeds the glory of its predecessor. Haggai "shows a path leading straight from 'nothingness' to 'glory'" (Wolff, *Haggai,* p. 84). **"And in this place I will grant peace."** This

"place" is again the temple (see the comment on Zeph. 1:4), and the gift is *shalom,* which in this context suggests not merely freedom from conflict but well-being and blessing. When the community has done what Yahweh has called it to do in restoring the temple so that it becomes somewhere where Yahweh can come to live, then the temple can also become once again the "place" from which reconciliation, harmony, well-being, and blessing will flow out into the community that lives around it in a way that benefits not only Judah itself but also those nations that have brought their gifts there.

Additional Notes §2

1:15 / See the additional note on 1:15 in §1.

2:3 / **Is left:** see the additional note on 1:12.

2:4 / In Ezra 4:4 "the people of the land" means "the local people [apart from us]," but elsewhere in the OT it can mean people with power (cf. "landowners"), while (to complicate matters further) in later Jewish writings it can suggest "ordinary" or "poor" people as distinct from the people with power or land. But it can also mean "the people in general," and this fits here.

2:5 / **This is what I covenanted:** lit., "the word/thing that I cut." The common expression is "to cut a covenant"; see Gen. 15:7–21; Jer. 34:17–20 for the background to the metaphor. Here *berit* ("covenant") is replaced by *dabar* ("word/thing/promise").

2:6 / The verse begins *ki,* "because," indicating the logical link with what precedes; this is further basis for the people taking courage and acting. The NIV omits the "because"; see the additional note on Zeph. 2:4.

Hebrews 12:26 reapplies Yahweh's words to a shaking of the cosmos that still lies in the future in its day.

2:7 / The verbs that follow on the participle in v. 6 ("I [am] shaking") are *w*-consecutives that take their significance from that participle, so that they suggest "and I am shaking . . . and . . . are coming, and I am filling." Only with v. 9 do we get an independent *yiqtol* verb.

For the feminine noun *khemdah* the Vulgate has masculine *desideratus,* which suggests the description of the Messiah as the "dear desire of every nation" in Charles Wesley's hymn "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus."

§3 December (Hag. 2:10–23)

More than two more months have passed; the day of the final prophecies by Haggai that are recorded, the 24th day of the ninth month (December) is exactly three months from the day when people began the work on the temple, on the 24th day of the sixth month (September, Hag. 1:15). The festival of Hanukkah, commemorating the rededication of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes, was subsequently set to begin on the day after this, on the 25th day of the ninth month (December), perhaps implying that the cleansing of the temple and the restoration of Judean independence on that occasion constituted a fulfillment of these promises (cf. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Volume 2,* p. 550). Yahweh here raises two issues that are superficially quite different from what has preceded in that neither relates directly to the building project, and they are quite different from each other—though both actually do relate to the rebuilding and motivate it.

2:10–14 / Once more the interaction between Yahweh and the people starts with a question Haggai is to ask on Yahweh's behalf, but this time it is a question for the priests. In one sense, asking priests a question was not out of the ordinary at all; it was their job to teach people, partly by answering questions of the kind that Haggai raises about topics such as cleanliness and taboo, and thus explicating what the Torah had to say (e.g., Lev. 10:10–11); more literally, Yahweh says, "ask the priests [for] *torah*." But prophets sometimes go in for parables and parabolic actions (e.g., Isa. 20; Jer. 18; Ezek. 4–5; and compare the symbolic features in Zechariah's visions). The fact that this question comes from a prophet would probably cause the priests to suspect that they were being set up, or at least to presume there was more going on here than meets the eye.

Consecrated meat (v. 12) is meat that has been offered in a sacrifice. Yahweh refers to **a person** and not specifically to a priest, so the reference is likely to meat from an animal that has been offered as a fellowship offering, which any offerer and Yahweh can share (Lev. 3). It was evidently acceptable for the offerer to take his share home and for other people to join in eating it, subject to certain conditions (Lev. 7:11–21). So Yahweh asks the priest to imagine a person taking

meat home, cradled **in the fold of his garment,** a corner folded back to make it into the equivalent of a pocket. If the fold were to touch some other food, does the meat's holiness then come to attach itself to the other food (so that you would have to treat that other food with special reverence, too)? Is holiness catching? **"No,"** the priests answer. Holiness is not catching.

Imagine a different possibility, then (v. 13). Suppose a neighbor has had a family member die and you have joined in the task of preparing the corpse for burial. That will mean you become temporarily **defiled** or taboo. You have had contact with death and you cannot then rush into God's presence, because death is so alien to God's own being. You need to undertake the appropriate cleansing rite. But then suppose you touch some food when you are still taboo. Does that food become taboo? Here the answer is the opposite from the one in the first case. Holiness is not catching; defilement or taboo is catching. You could not then make this food part of an offering; it could no more go into God's presence than you can.

There is nothing very controversial about these declarations by the priests. So what is this all about? It provides Haggai with an analogy for the position of **this people, this nation** (v. 14). Corporately, they are like the person who has had contact with a corpse. They are defiled. So that creates a problem concerning **Whatever they do,** literally, with "all the work of their hands." In verse 17 the phrase refers to their work with crops and animals, and this reference makes sense here. They are defiled, so their work is defiled, so the results of their work are defiled, and so **whatever they offer there is defiled.** That means their offerings are counterproductive; if anything, they make the situation worse, by bringing more defilement into Yahweh's presence.

Why or how are they defiled? And how are they to lose or avoid taboo status? Ezra 4–6 reports conflicts between the community rebuilding the temple and other peoples around who wanted to join in the work. If we read Haggai in light of Ezra, then "this people and this nation" becomes such other people and, in agreement with the stance taken in Ezra, Haggai is saying that such people are taboo and would make the work on the temple taboo. But that involves reading significance into "this people," "this nation" that we would never discern from Haggai itself. Rather, the "people" and "nation" is the same entity that Haggai usually refers to as the people, the community as a whole. The community is defiled. There might be all sorts of reasons for that: unfaithfulness and violence that hang over from before the exile, involvement with other deities in Babylon, continuing false worship and other forms of wrongdoing in Judah, and the

accidental and incidental defilements that in the best of circumstances affect individuals and thus affect the status of the community as a whole (prophecies in Zech. 1–8 and Isa. 56–66 provide some of the relevant data). We cannot be sure which of these Haggai had in mind, and he need not have had particular problems in mind. It would be an uncontroversial view that, for a variety of reasons, the community had a problem with its defilement.

The temple was designed to have a key role in resolving questions about defilement; hence the link between Haggai' s stress on the significance of the building project and his questions about defilement. When you are defiled, resolving your status often involves making an offering. Now it is hardly the case that in Haggai's day it was impossible to make offerings in the temple. Even in the aftermath of its devastation people were doing so (Jer. 41:4–5), and according to Ezra 3 Joshua and Zerubbabel had reestablished the altar before beginning the rebuilding work. Yet the invasion and devastation did put the temple itself into a defiled state (e.g., Lam. 1:10). So even if an individual might be able to find cleansing and bring offerings (as vv. 11–13 may presuppose), there is a problem at the macro level (v. 14). The people as a whole are defiled, and there is no remedy for that defilement until the temple is restored.

2:15–19 / Haggai continues, without any new introduction and specifically without a new date such as one would expect if this were a new prophecy (the date from v. 10 will be repeated in v. 18), although **Now** characteristically marks a new section in a prophecy rather than a new beginning. The opening of this new section compares particularly with 1:5. Here, as there (1:2–4), the new section continues on from a question Yahweh has raised, begins with the particle "now," and goes on to urge the people to **give careful thought.** The topic of the careful thought **from this day on** is also to be the same (cf. 1:6): how things were before the rebuilding of the temple began. To refer to the **temple,** Haggai here for the first time uses the word *hekal,* the word for a palace, instead of using the word for a mere "house" (1:2, 4, 8, 9, 14; 2:3, 7, 9). It is a reminder of what a splendid dwelling this is to be (cf. vv. 7–9). But what is the significance of "this day"? He goes on to refer to the occasion when **one stone was laid on another,** and in isolation we might take that to refer back to the time when rebuilding began (1:14–15a), but in the context this expression more likely explicates the significance of "this day," whose three prophecies in 2:10–23 mark it to be particularly significant. So the laying of one stone on another, which is also the temple's founding (v. 18), is not simply the occasion when the work began. In

our world, too, the laying of a foundation stone is a ceremonial event separate from the actual building work, and much preparatory work precedes that ceremonial event. Here, it makes sense to think of the work begun on the 24th day of the sixth month as this preparatory activity, such as the fetching of timber and the clearing of debris, and to think of the 24th day of the ninth month as marking the ceremonial beginning of the restoration proper. It is thus a significant day and one that illuminates and is illuminated by the three prophecies.

But whether we understand Haggai to be referring to the earlier beginning of the work, or to a ceremonial event on this day, does not affect the import of his question; either way, he goes on to look behind this to the ongoing situation before people committed themselves to the work. After the harvest you would come to what should be a grain stack of **twenty measures** and there are **only ten** (v. 16; there is no word for "measures," but the point lies in the shortfall). Likewise you would find a 60 percent shortfall in wine. Haggai thus reexpresses the point he made in 1:6 but puts it more concretely. And as in 1:9–11, Yahweh goes on to make explicit that this did not result from chance or from invasion but from Yahweh's personal action (v. 17). Again Yahweh, too, makes things more explicit in referring to hitting people's **work** with **blight, mildew and hail.** Yahweh also makes explicit a point that 1:5–11 presupposes. Sending such trouble to people was not punishment or retribution. It was discipline or chastisement; it was designed to win them back. **"Yet you did not turn to me,"** Yahweh observes. The substance of this accusation is similar to the one Yahweh makes through Amos in the same connection (Amos 4:6–11), though the expression is different (see additional note).

Haggai then resumes the point (v. 18), with his opening exhortation exactly repeating verse 15a. The reference to the date then confirms what **this day** is, and the reference to the day "when Yahweh's palace was founded" (to translate the expression more literally) restates the description of it as the occasion of the "placing of stone on stone" in verse 15. This is the first time Haggai has referred to the work in terms of "founding" (*yasad;* cf. Ezra 3:10–12). We have noted that it seems unlikely that the temple needed foundations to be laid in the sense in which we would use the term (see the comment on 1:8), and the verb can be used in a broader sense; in 2 Chronicles 24:27 it denotes restoration work. This verse then refers to the initiation of this process of restoration.

Haggai once more bids people to apply their minds to what they have experienced. But what have they experienced? The NIV understands verse 19 to

continue the description of deprivation: the answer to the question **"Is there yet any seed left in the barn?"** is then "No." But this leaves the promise **"From this day on I will bless you"** sudden and isolated and gives verses 15–19 as a whole an overwhelmingly negative cast that contrasts with the repeated encouragement to think about how things will be "from this day on." It is more likely that the NRSV is right to take the whole verse more positively. The answer to the opening question is therefore positive: yes, there is seed left in the barn. Then its interrogative carries over into the middle clause ("Until now have the trees not borne fruit?"), and the answer to this question is also positive; yes, they have. The people are thus invited to reflect on the way their experience has already changed over the preceding three months. Just before the fruit harvest in late August, where the book began, things seemed very gloomy. But now, in late December, they have done their sowing for next year and they still have grain to use as food for the coming winter and spring, and the fruit harvest itself came out much better than they would have dared hope. Those experiences are evidence that Yahweh has responded to their committing themselves to the work on the temple, and that further blessing will follow. The word **bless** carries its regular connotation of the flourishing of the harvest. In 1:5–11 Haggai had described the people's deprivations in terms of the implementation of the kind of curses threatened in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Now he promises the blessing of which those chapters also speak. Actually Yahweh says simply and baldly, "I will bless," so that this promise is open to including the nations that will have contributed so magnificently to the splendor of the restored temple (vv. 6–9; cf. Ps. 67).

2:20–23 / The book closes with a further twofold promise from this same day, though it has a semi-separate chronological introduction to mark the fact that it has a different specific concern from verses 10–19. Those earlier verses began with priestly matters; this subsection wholly concerns the governor. It makes no actual reference to the temple, though its context and its belonging to this same day suggest that Yahweh's promises to him relate to his commitment to the temple restoration project.

Once again Yahweh uses the participial construction to declare, "I am shaking the heavens and the earth" (v. 21, using the same words as v. 6). Once again Yahweh explains that this is the cosmos's reaction to Yahweh's disturbing of the nations (v. 22), here a reaction to the fact that "I am overturning the thrones of kingdoms"; in other words, "I am destroying the power of the kingdoms of the

nations." To reexpress it yet again, and more literally, "I am overturning the chariot and its riders; horses and their riders are falling, each one by his brother's sword." Thus Yahweh repeats the description of disturbing the nations but spells out its implications in a different direction. Verses 6–8 linked this overthrowing to the restoration of the temple; it would mean the nations would bring their treasures for its beautification. These verses spell it out in political and military terms. Haggai thus here approaches the international political agenda of Zechariah, and of other prophets.

Whereas verse 7 referred to "all nations" without implying any concern with their interrelationship and made one think simply of a worldwide recognition of Yahweh expressed in their support for the temple restoration (cf. Isa. 2:2; 66:18; Jer. 3:17), verse 22 refers to the overthrowing of **royal thrones** and **the power of the foreign kingdoms,** which parallels the way other prophets use the expression "the nations" to denote the imperial power. The subsequent declaration concerning the destruction of military might fits with that. I have assumed (see "Haggai s Context," above) that the background is the way the empire has settled down after some convulsions; Yahweh is then promising that this situation will change. But possibly the empire is still convulsing, and Yahweh is promising that total collapse will come. Haggai s language corresponds (for instance) with Yahweh's statement of intent with regard to the superpower in Isaiah 13:4, 19; Jeremiah 51:20–21 (see further Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8,* pp. 99–100). Even the talk of people falling by their brother's sword has a place earlier in Israel's traditions (e.g., Judg. 7:22). At the same time, Haggai s words might arouse a snide smile, since "fratricide is one of the main themes of the Behistun inscriptions," Darius's own account of how he came to the throne and quelled the rebellions of the opening years of his reign (Wolff, *Haggai,* p. 103).

Haggai and his people lived under the authority of the greatest empire his world had ever known. It was a relatively benevolent superpower, yet there was something odd about the arrangement. It is hard to square with Yahweh's commitment to David, either in terms of the Davidic king's rule of Israel or in terms of his being Yahweh's vice-regent in the world as a whole. So the positive aspect to Yahweh's undertaking to put down the superpower concerns what will take the place of the power of the nations (v. 23). Only here does Haggai use the expression **On that day.** Elsewhere it often marks the beginning of a new prophecy, though it can also make a link with the prophecy that precedes, and in other passages it occurs in the middle of a section and marks a new stage or introduces a new point within that one prophecy (e.g., Zeph. 1:9, 10; 3:11, 16;

Zech. 3:10). Here, the NIV's paragraph change obscures the way Haggai s usage belongs in the second category. Without verse 23, the point of addressing the promise in verses 21–22 to Zerubbabel alone is not clear, but verse 23 clarifies the point. What Yahweh will do with Zerubbabel is the other side of the coin of what Yahweh will do with the nations.

Zerubbabel is **my servant.** The person most often described as "my servant" is David (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:8; 1 Kgs. 11:36; Ps. 89:3; Isa. 37:35; Jer. 33:21; Ezek. 37:24), and it fits to reckon that Haggai is here affirming Zerubbabel's position as not only **governor of Judah** (v. 21) but also **son of Shealtiel** (v. 23) and therefore a descendant of David who could sit on David's throne (there is no specific reason to link the designation of Zerubbabel with "my servant" in Isa. 52:13–53:12). The declaration **I have chosen you** also fits with this (e.g., 1 Kgs. 11:34; Ps. 78:70—where David is also "his servant"). The promise **I will make you like my signet ring** is a much more innovative declaration, but this also links with Zerubbabel's Davidic heritage. Zerubbabel's grandfather had been the signet ring on Yahweh's right hand, but Yahweh had decided to pull him off in order to deliver him into the hands of the Babylonians (Jer. 22:24–27). A signet ring is a seal (1 Kgs. 21:8); so the Davidic king represents Yahweh, and what the king says and does represents what Yahweh says and does. Jehoiachin was therefore being threatened with the loss of his position as Yahweh's representative and servant. And this happened. Now, whereas Jehoiachin was cast off and taken to Babylon, Zerubbabel has been taken from Babylon and is promised a position like that of a signet ring, as Yahweh's representative exercising Yahweh's authority.

Haggai speaks of something soon to take place; it is associated with a present leader, not an anointed one to come, possibly in some far-off day. One could reckon that he is promising Zerubbabel something like a restoration of the arrangement from the monarchic period, when a king was *the* authority (and it was the king whom a prophet would address). Further, whereas governor and senior priest have appeared together in 1:2–2:9, at the end of the book Joshua has disappeared. Yahweh's message in Haggai thus contrasts with that in Zechariah, where the movement can appear to be the other way (see Zech. 3).

Yet Haggai does not speak of Zerubbabel as the anointed one or as one destined to be king (Darius is the only "king" in the book). So "Haggai does not challenge Persian authority, but he does put it into perspective" (March, "Haggai," p. 731). The dating of the prophecies by the years of the emperor's reign "is a persistent reminder that the people are subjects of the empire," yet this designation of Zerubbabel as Yahweh's signet ring stands alongside that; Judah is

"in but not of the empire" (Meadowcroft, *Haggai,* p. 213). There is no suggestion that Yahweh is commissioning Zerubbabel to put down the Persian Empire or to rule the world. Probably Haggai is following the usual prophetic view that this is Yahweh's business; however Yahweh brings it about, it will not be through action on the part of little Judah. So perhaps Haggai, too, avoids overemphasizing Zerubbabel's significance. He *is* simply the "governor" (as far as we can tell he was in fact the last Davidide governor; Nehemiah, for instance, was governor but not a member of David's line). Given Haggai s resolute focus on the temple, in the context it is more likely that the significance attached to him is that as Yahweh's representative he can make sure the temple building is completed (Wolff, *Haggai,* p. 107). And he did (Ezra 5–6).

Apparently Yahweh had a change of mind about having the whole world bring its treasures to the temple or overturning the power of the empire in Zerubbabel's day. These are not the only examples of Yahweh not fulfilling undertakings given through the prophets. This phenomenon seems not to trouble Israel. Perhaps they have witnessed enough instances of Yahweh's words being fulfilled that, on occasions when they are not, they can shrug their shoulders, and assume that there must be good reason, and continue believing that the purpose underlying the unfulfilled undertakings will indeed be fulfilled. It might seem that the fulfillment of the glorious project of temple rebuilding would itself be an unlikely occurrence. It is plausible to reckon that the fact of its fulfillment through the leadership of Haggai and Zechariah, Joshua and Zerubbabel, would be a factor in the community's holding that Haggai had indeed mediated Yahweh's message. The ongoing cleansing and preservation of the community that this restoration made possible, and the persistence of the restored temple as a place where Yahweh was present among the community for another six centuries, would offer evidence that Yahweh really did speak these words.

Additional Notes §3

2:14 / Whatever they do: the verb refers to their work on the temple in 1:14; 2:4, and logically Haggai might think that this building work is also defiled. But if that is his point, he seems to put them into Catch-22: they can only be cleansed if they build the temple and they can only build the temple if they have been cleansed. And defilement is arguably less of a problem with building work, the preliminary to offerings, than it is with the offerings themselves.

2:15 / More literally, "But now do apply your mind from this day and upwards. Before the placing of stone on stone in Yahweh's temple . . ." For **from this day on,** the NIV margin gives the alternative translation "to the days past," but the expression recurs in v. 18 and the NIV assumes that there it means "from this day on"; cf. the almost identical "from that day on" in 1 Sam. 16:13; 30:25. The alternative translation presumably issues from the fact that Haggai goes on to refer to the past in vv. 15b–17, but the NIV's dash in the middle of v. 15 rightly assumes that vv. 15b–17 form a kind of parenthesis, after which the repetition of the phrase in v. 18a resumes the future orientation of his words.

2:17 / **Yet you did not turn to me:** more literally, "but [there was] nothing you to me." "You" is *'etkem,* the pronoun with the sign of the object; but there is no verb to govern it. Meyers and Meyers (*Haggai, Zechariah 1–8,* pp. 61–62) suggest that a participle from *bo'* in the *hip'il* is understood: "but nothing brought you to me." The NJPS margin gives as the literal translation "there was not with you to Me," but this would require *'ittekem*.

2:18 / More literally, "Do apply your mind from this day and upwards, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, to from the day that Yahweh's temple was founded. Apply your mind . . ."

2:21–22 / As in vv. 6–7, the verbs that follow the participle in v. 21 are *w*-consecutives that take their significance from the participle. Only with v. 23 do we get an independent *yiqtol* verb (and thus begin a new train of thought).

Zechariah

Pamela J. Scalise

Introduction: Zechariah

Zechariah brings God's word to a people and to individuals who long to see God's reign in glory. They must learn, however, to live in faith and hope as they begin to see God's promises fulfilled—though they will not see their consummation. The book as a whole gives a theological response to the end of the 70 years of judgment prophesied by Jeremiah (25:11–12; 29:10). The three date formulas (in Zech. 1:1, 7; 7:1) and two explicit references to 70 years in the questions by the angel/messenger and the prophet (in 1:12 and 7:5) focus attention on the end of the period of judgment that began in 587 B.C. when the Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and the city, executed the royal family, and took thousands into exile. The impending completion of the seven decades was an occasion for heightened expectation among the faithful. By inviting readers to view its prophecy from the context of the second and fourth years of Darius, the book affirms that God was active in the developments of the late sixth century B.C. but makes clear that all of God's plans were not yet completed. The return from exile, the rebuilt temple, and the reestablished priesthood were true, but not final, fulfillments of earlier prophecy. Even after this Persian-period restoration of the covenant people to Jerusalem and Judah, the days were still coming when they would suffer under internal leaders and foreign powers. Zechariah affirms that the Lord will save them and will ultimately reign from Jerusalem, where people from all nations will come to worship.

Zechariah the prophet is known only from the book named after him and two brief references in Ezra (5:1; 6:14). All references agree that he prophesied to Jerusalem and Judah during the reign of Darius the Great (Darius I Hystaspes, 522–485 B.C.), specifically during the years when the temple of the Lord was being built (520–516 B.C.). Ezra places the prophets Haggai and Zechariah together at the beginning and the end of the project (5:1; 6:14). The overlapping dates in the books of Haggai and Zechariah also indicate that their ministries were contemporaneous. Haggai 1:1 begins with the first day of the sixth month of Darius's second year (corresponding to August 29, 520 B.C.).[1] Work on the temple began three weeks later, on the twenty-fourth day of the same month and

year (Hag. 1:15, September 21, 520 B.C.). Haggai 2:1 names the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the twenty-first day of the seventh month in Darius's second year (October 17, 520 B.C.). The earliest date in Zechariah comes next in chronological order (after Haggai 2:1), the eighth month of Darius's second year, but no day is named (late October or early November, 520 B.C.). The final date in Haggai (2:10, 20) follows, the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, three months after work on the temple began (December 18, 520 B.C.). The second date in Zechariah (1:7) is exactly five months after the start of temple rebuilding and only a few days before the New Year, the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month of Darius's second year (February 15, 519 B.C.). The final date in Zechariah (7:1) is the fourth day of the ninth month of Darius's fourth year (December 7, 518 B.C.), more than two years after the earliest date in Haggai. Neither book mentions the other prophet, however, so their personal relationship is unknown.

The meaning of Zechariah's name is a testimony—"Yahweh remembers," and answers prayers for help. For Zechariah and his audience, Yahweh's remembering was a recent experience. God had remembered the Jewish exiles in Babylon and had stirred up Cyrus of Persia to capture Babylon and free her prisoners. The Lord had remembered the promises to restore the people to the land and, following Cyrus's edict in 538 B.C., at least three expeditions of former exiles had returned to the territory of Judah, now the Persian province of Yehud, to resettle the area and rebuild the temple. The prophet's name on the book also serves as a reminder to its readers that God, who had begun to fulfill many promises, would remember the beloved people and fulfill all the promises.

The Historical Setting of the Book of Zechariah

"Haggai's Context" (in the introduction to Haggai, above) describes the historical setting of the second year of Darius. By his second year, 520/519 B.C., Darius had established his authority over the entire Persian Empire, including the province of Yehud that comprised part of the former territory of Judah. He may have received reports from his messengers and spies like the report in Zechariah 1:11 that the horsemen brought to the angel/messenger of the Lord: "We have . . . found the whole world at rest and in peace." In 519–518 B.C., however, because of an Egyptian revolt Darius had to return to Egypt to enforce his rule there. For some people in Yehud, the proximity of Persian troops and the increase in taxation may have called into question the assurances given by Haggai in the second year that the temple would be completed and Zion's leaders

would be restored. Others may have seen the Egyptian revolt as a crack in Persian imperial power, a sign that freedom from foreign domination was possible. The imminent end of the 70 years had put people on the alert for signs of the end.

The completed book of Zechariah comes from a later time. (See the introduction to Malachi, below, for a brief description of the following decades.) It addresses an audience who knows that, by any calculation, the 70 years of Babylonian hegemony were long over, yet the decisive overthrow of oppressive foreign powers had not occurred. The temple had been completed by 516 B.C., and a consecrated priesthood oversaw the worship of Yahweh there. Jews continued to return to Yehud. God had fulfilled promises but had not yet brought the consummation for which they longed. Persian rule remained firmly in place. Neither Zerubbabel nor any other descendant of David had been enthroned as Messiah in Jerusalem. The temple project in the sixth century and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in the fifth century (Neh. 1:1–7:3) were carried out only with the emperor's permission. The canonical book of Zechariah ministers to God's people enmeshed in empire, who still worship the Lord as creator and ruler of all.

Prophecy had always been involved with politics in Israel, and Zechariah's message was no exception. Zechariah 1–8, for example, supports the leadership of the high priest but denies the identification of Zerubbabel as the Messiah. The enduring obscurity of the prophecy in Zechariah 9–14 has prevented the development of any scholarly consensus about the political issues and historical circumstances in which the prophecies arose. Dates ranging from the eighth to the third centuries B.C. have been proposed for the origin of part or all of Zechariah 9–14. The mention of Assyria in 10:10–11, as well as the inclusion of both northern and southern kingdoms in the promises (9:10, 13; 10:6–7), suggest a date in the eighth century B.C. when Assyria conquered both kingdoms of Israel. The reference to the Greeks in 9:13 has led some scholars to locate the origin of these chapters in the fourth or third century B.C., after the conquest by Alexander the Great. More recent work has identified the thematic continuity and literary dependence of Zechariah 9–14 on chapters 1–8, and the similarity of its content to other postexilic prophecy. These factors, and the canonical placement of Zechariah 9–14 within the book of the twelve minor prophets, imply a relative chronology for the origin of these sayings between the fourth year of Darius (518 B.C.; Zech. 7:1) and the ministry of Malachi. Although this date cannot be proved, the book cues its audience to read these chapters from the

perspective of the date in the last superscription (7:1).

Neither does the book reveal the time when these prophecies will be fulfilled. Unlike the book of Daniel, Zechariah 9–14 gives no numerical calculation of the years before the day of the Lord's final victory and no indication that these chapters present a series of events in chronological order. The lack of a historical key to these oracles allows them to function as a portrayal of the pattern of divine action in the world during the intervening period of waiting. God continues to work toward the ultimate fulfillment that had not occurred when it was first expected in the sixth century B.C.—toward that day when people from all nations will worship the Lord as ruler over all the earth (Zech. 14:9, 16).

The Unity of the Book

Authorship of the whole book was attributed traditionally to Zechariah, whose name appears in the first three superscriptions as the prophet to whom the Lord's word came (1:1, 7; 7:1). Even before the rise of historical criticism some interpreters questioned Zechariah's authorship of chapters 9–14 because Matthew attributes a quotation from Zechariah 11 to Jeremiah. The citation in Matthew 27:9 is close to Zechariah 11:13, but Jeremiah's dealings with potters (18:1–3; 19:1) and his purchase of a field (32:6–15) suggest how the verse from Matthew could have been associated with him. One set of evidence for the separate origin of Zechariah 9–14 is the absence of the characteristic features found in Zechariah 1–8. These features include personal names, date formulas, angels/messengers, vision reports, references to the former prophets, and interest in the temple. In the early years of Darius's reign the mention of Assyria (10:10–11) appears anachronistically too late, while the mention of Greece (9:13) appears too early. Further analysis distinguished Second (chs. 9–11) and Third Zechariah (chs. 12–14) and eventually separated Zechariah 14 from the rest of this section. Some commentaries group Haggai with Zechariah 1–8, because of their common setting and date formulas, and Zechariah 9–14 with Malachi, because they carry similar headings.

The methods of historical criticism have not produced convincing results other than to establish the likelihood that chapters 9–14 include words given through prophets other than Zechariah and that an unnamed author composed the book. The diversity of genre, diction, and message in chapters 9–14 may be explained by attributing their origin to other prophets ministering in different circumstances. Anonymous oracles and unnamed composers of part or all of the canonical book do not detract from its inspiration or authority. The book of

Zechariah communicates a coherent and unifying message regardless of how many prophets contributed to its contents and composition.

We can describe the unity of the book of Zechariah both diachronically and synchronically. Reconstructions of the process by which the book was composed in its present form are one way of demonstrating its unified composition. An example of such an explanation is James Nogalski's reconstruction (*Redactional Processes,* pp. 278–79). Zechariah 1–8 had been part of a collection with Haggai, and that collection, in turn, became part of the Book of the Twelve (the Minor Prophets scroll). Zechariah 9–13 and 14 were included in the final stage of the formation of the Book of the Twelve, probably after 332 B.C. (the date of Alexander the Great's conquest). According to this analysis, Zechariah 9–14 was never part of an independent book of Zechariah; these chapters relate in various ways to the entire Minor Prophets scroll, not just to Zechariah 1–8. The reconstruction of the book's composition by Byron G. Curtis represents the other end of the spectrum (*Up the Steep and Stony Road,* pp. 273–75). Curtis acknowledges the differences between Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14 but argues that a single prophet over the course of a lengthy ministry could have produced all the diverse material in the book. According to his reconstruction, the prophet's role in society changed over time, so the form and content of his prophecy were different in the last stage of his ministry. Zechariah, he proposes, began as a reforming prophet and was successful for a time, as the people responded favorably to his call to rebuild the temple. Later, however, they rejected him and his message became that of a peripheral prophet who opposed the status quo.

A single author does not, in principle, have to produce a literary unity, however, and an anonymous author may compose a coherent written work that preserves the spoken words of more than one prophet. A discerning reader sees the book's unity in its structure and content, in the cues it gives its readers for making sense of the whole, and in its theological purpose. The inspired author of the book named Zechariah included words from God that other prophets, whose names have not been preserved, delivered.

After historical criticism had identified the parts of Zechariah, interpreters turned their attention to describing the unity of the final, canonical form of the book. Rex Mason's investigation of common themes in Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14 forms the core of many of these descriptions. He examines the following five main emphases: "the prominence of the Zion tradition; the divine cleansing of the community; universalism; the appeal to the earlier prophets; and the provision of leadership as a sign of the new age" ("Zech. 9–14," pp. 227–39, here

227). Brevard Childs has identified other examples of continuity between Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14, such as the outpouring of God's spirit that evokes transformation, the gathering of exiles, and the covenant formula used as a promise ("I will be their God; they will be my people"; *Introduction to the Old Testament,* pp. 482–84). As we read the book from beginning to end, we discern a development in the treatment of these themes.

Form and Structure

The book of Zechariah is a wonderfully diverse collection of prophetic forms and subjects with a coherent literary structure and theological purpose. In its short 211 verses this book recalls the work of the preexilic prophets, encourages faith and obedience among its readers, and makes a compelling case for maintaining hope in God while waiting for the consummation of God's redemption of creation. God's word through this prophet and this book reveals the living presence and power of God at work in history and creation.

Three superscriptions with dates and two with the title "oracle" (*massa'*) subdivide the book of Zechariah and provide guidance for the reader. We can group its four main parts into two pairs according to form and subject matter. Parts one (1:1–6) and two (1:7–6:15) parallel parts three (7–8) and four (9–14). Parts one and three call people to faithfulness to God's word and law, in contrast to their ancestors' rebellion. Parts two and four use vision reports and oracles to portray God's plans to fulfill promises, both old and new, in the coming days. Thus, in broad outline, the parallel halves of the book reveal what people must do and what the Lord will do until the reign of God is manifest on the earth. The dated superscriptions also establish the perspective from which to read the material that follows. The audience of the book knows that these dates immediately preceded the completion of the temple and the end of the 70 years of judgment. They also know that, by the second and fourth years of Darius, God had already brought about the defeat of Babylon, the return of exiles, and the rebuilding of the temple. The readers of the book, who continue to wait for the final accomplishment of God's will, are first invited to remember the past and acknowledge the truth and effectiveness of the prophetic words of judgment and salvation. They are then to conduct their lives in the present in accordance with God's will for righteousness and justice.

Part one (Zech. 1:1–6): This short initial section introduces a spiritual practice that should guide readers throughout the book. Like the prophet's first hearers,

readers of the book in every generation are called to turn to the Lord. The rhetoric of persuasion outlines the practice of hearing and responding to God's word. Remember how the living God has spoken through prophets in the past and continues to speak through the written records of dead prophets' ministries. Remember how your forebears rejected God's word, but others repented. Acknowledge the truth and effectiveness of God's word that brought judgment and salvation to your ancestors. Turn around, return, and join yourself to the Lord. Worship Yahweh who reigns from Zion. Serve and love the Lord by walking in the way set forth in torah.

The appeal to turn, return, or repent is a consistent OT theme. Part One of Zechariah expounds the summary of Israel's relationship with God found in 2 Kings 17:13–20 and several times in Jeremiah (7:25–26; 11:7–8; 25:3–4; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:15; 44:4–5). The Lord had sent prophets in every generation to call the people to turn back, but Israel had rejected them. The purpose of true prophets, who stood in the Lord's heavenly council, was to turn people to God (Jer. 23:22). The book of the twelve prophets reiterates the appeal to return from the beginning to the end. Hosea 14:1–3 invites return and provides appropriate words of confession and petition. Israel's return to the Lord will occur in the last days (Hos. 3:5). The king and people of Nineveh "turned from their evil ways" when they heard Jonah's preaching (Jon. 3:10). Zechariah joins the prophetic chorus and renews the invitation to return (1:2, 4). The return is both geographical and spiritual. Returning to Judah and Jerusalem to live or to worship is meaningless unless the people also turn their lives to walk faithfully in God's way.

Part two (Zech. 1:7–6:15): The literary framework places all the oracles and visions of the first eight chapters in the second and fourth years of Darius. Twenty years earlier, Cyrus the Persian had conquered Babylon and issued proclamations allowing for the repatriation of exiles. Many exiles had returned a few years previously, Jerusalem had been resettled, Zerubbabel was on the scene as governor, work on the new temple had begun, and the cult had resumed. Yet the visions look forward to a destruction of Israel's enemies (1:18–21), a regathering of Israel from exile (2:6–7), the reoccupation of Jerusalem under God's blessing (1:17; 2:4–5), the establishment of Zerubbabel's leadership (4:6–9), and provisions for the establishment of pure worship (3:3–5). Therefore, the dates for these promises and the repetition of phrases such as "in that day" cue the reader that these prophecies refer to something yet in the future, and not to

the events of 539 B.C. and following, regardless of what may be reconstructed as their original referents. The last days had not arrived in 519 B.C.; it was still only a "day of small things" (4:10).

The vision reports, supplemented by oracles, work on two levels. First, they reveal that God is with the people in the midst of the experience of imperial rule. Things that they encounter in everyday life appear in the vision reports as fantastic forms and circumstances. For example, residents of Yehud may have seen the emperor's messengers traveling on horseback and recognized them as evidence of Israel's continued suffering under God's judgment. Zechariah's vision report gives the residents of Yehud a different perception of the next mounted messengers whom they observe (1:8–17). Yahweh also has messengers who traverse the earth. The heavenly council considers their reports and then makes plans to save Jerusalem. Second, the reports, with their interpretive oracles, identify some people and things that appear in the visions as signs pointing to the fulfillment of God's promises. In the first vision, for example, the oracles give readers a hopeful word to remember when they see the emperor's messengers arriving in Jerusalem. Yahweh's anger has turned from Jerusalem toward the nations that oppress her, so the Lord has promised to return to Zion with mercy, comfort, and prosperity. The emperor's horsemen function as signs that the Lord's presence will supplant the imperial occupiers. The words of report, interpretation, and promise reveal God at work in the most discouraging circumstances.

A concentric literary structure unifies part two. At the center, two visions have to do with the consecration of priests (3:1–10) and the function of the temple cult (4:1–14). The vision reports put the temple at the center but show how God's rule extends to the whole earth. The outside circle, or envelope, comprises the visions of horsemen (1:8–17) and chariots that go out over the whole earth (6:1–8). Surrounding the temple visions are two pairs of visions that have to do with Jerusalem and God's people living between the temple and the peoples of the earth (1:18–21; 2:1–5; 5:1–4; 5:5–11). The structure of this section reaffirms Israel's role established at Sinai (Exod. 19:4–5) and promised to Abram (Gen. 12:3). The Lord's holy nation is a means for extending blessing to all the families of the earth.

Part three (Zech. 7–8): Once again, the date formula identifies the "now" from which one should read this section of the book. The date, in the fourth year of Darius (518 B.C.), is several months closer to the completion of the temple and

the conclusion of the 70 years than the previous date (519 B.C.) in 1:7. The men who come with the question about fasting want to know whether the consummation of God's promises will occur in just a few months' time. Will the completion of the temple and the conclusion of the 70 years mark the turning of the age, the establishment of God's visible, universal rule without rival? The concentric structure of these two chapters binds the narrative of the men's inquiry to the series of oracles that follow (see below, §16). When the direct answer to their question about fasts comes in 8:18–19, it is connected with the portrayal of the last days, when people from the other nations will seek the Lord in Jerusalem. By placing the answer to the question about fasts in the context of prophecies about the eschaton, Zechariah 7 and 8 reaffirm promises of restoration and consummation, but they separate them in time from the end of the 70 years of judgment.

The oracles collected in this part of the book call the people to be obedient to God's will and to live in a manner consistent with the portrayal of the peaceful, prosperous existence promised to the restored land and the holy City of Truth (8:3–5, 12). The prophet makes his case again by recalling the disobedient ancestors, the law that they refused to follow, and the judgment that befell them and the land (7:8–14). Zechariah 8 gives promises as encouragement to obedience. God's promise that the city and covenant people will be restored precedes the exhortations to "let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built" (8:9; cf. 8:13). The assurance that the Lord has "determined to do good again to Jerusalem" (8:15) introduces a second summary of the law (8:19). The text presents this time of waiting as another chance to become the people as God had desired from the beginning, people who pay attention to what the Lord says through the prophets and who "love truth and peace" (8:19).

Part four (Zech. 9–14): The conclusion of Zechariah 8 corresponds to the contents of chapter 14. In the last days the fasts will be turned into feasts, and the nations will come to the Lord in Jerusalem. Part four further portrays the future between the "now" of the fourth year of Darius and the final reign of God. Zechariah 9–14 uses familiar prophetic terminology and images to depict what such a time would be like. This part of the book also has an envelope structure. The first (9:1–8) and final (14:16–21) units portray God's victory over the other nations and the incorporation of their remnant peoples into the people of God. As in parts two and three, the second part of the envelope is an advance on the first, for Zechariah 14 is about worship in the end times. Between the two

envelope passages, sayings about leaders of the community ("shepherds" and prophets) alternate with units about wars in which God defeats Israel's enemies. Evil rulers will oppress and lead regathered Israel astray (11:5–6, 15–17), there will be an unclean spirit and false prophets in the land (10:2; 13:2), and the people will despise God (11:12–13) and make a martyr of his servant (12:10). All nations will make war against Jerusalem (12:2–3; 14:2), but the Lord will turn against them and destroy them (9:1–8, 14–15; 12:9; 14:3–5, 12–15). Only one third of Israel will survive (13:8), but this remnant will be purified and protected (9:9–10, 16–17; 10:7–10; 13:1–2, 9; 14:11) and those who will be left from the rest of the nations will join them in worshipping the Lord in Jerusalem (14:16–19). The remnant of Israel joined by the nations coincides with the concluding picture in 8:11–13, 20–23.

Zechariah 1:6 and 7:12 make explicit the truth and power of the divine word given through prophets. The same conviction is evident throughout part four. The oracles in Zechariah 9–14 are new inspired prophecies, but they have been composed by drawing from earlier Scripture in a wide variety of ways. They reaffirm, interpret, and transform God's authoritative word from the Pentateuch, earlier prophets, and the Psalms (see the list of examples of intertextuality throughout these 6 chs. in Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, pp. 40–43). These intertextual connections implicitly acknowledge the authority of earlier texts for the prophet and the audience, and they address their desire to understand the application of those texts in the new circumstances of the postexilic period. Hearers and readers recognize God's voice in the new revelation that employs traditional diction and imagery.

The adjectives "apocalyptic" or "proto-apocalyptic" have often been applied to Zechariah 9–14 to call attention to its similarities to the book of Revelation.[2] Looking back from the book of Revelation (*Apocalypse*) and other apocalypses of its period, passages such as Zechariah 9–14 appear to be ancestors of the later texts because they share some of their literary features and theological perspectives. Revelation draws on Zechariah and other OT prophecy in much the same way that Zechariah uses earlier texts to describe future worldwide disaster which will be followed by the Lord's rule over a renewed creation. Both books appeal to readers who believe in the truth of God's words through previous prophets and long to see how God will fulfill them. The consummation that they portray will involve the radical transformation of creation, the defeat of evil, and the visible, immanent, universal, personal reign of God in righteousness, goodness, and peace. The purpose of both Zechariah and Revelation is

theological and pastoral. They offer consolation to suffering people and assurance to those who seek to see God's hand at work in the chaos of world history.

§1 Introduction to Part One of Zechariah

Zechariah prophesied to a community that knew the fulfillment of prophecy as a fact of their lives. Earlier prophetic announcements of judgment had been proven true in the destruction of their nation. The prophet's ministry, and the ongoing ministry of the book, is to persuade its audience that the reliability of God's earlier words of judgment stands as evidence that God's promises and commands are also true. While fulfillment of salvation promises began in the early years of the reign of Darius, the consummation of God's reign was far off. God reaches out through the prophetic word and calls every generation to return in hope and faithfulness.

§2 Superscription (Zech. 1:1)

1:1 / Zechariah begins with a date one month before the latest date in Haggai (2:10, "the ninth month, in the second year of Darius"), **the eighth month of the second year of Darius.** This chronological overlapping, as well as the form of the date formulas, link the two books. Haggai 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20 and Zechariah 1:1; 7:1 are the only dates in the OT prophetic books given solely according to the reign of a foreign king. The Darius date formula epitomizes the condition of God's people throughout the Persian Empire. The threatened end of the Israelite kingdoms had come to pass and the Lord had granted the Persian emperor the right to rule the region. (In like fashion the date formula A.D., for anno Domini, "the year of our Lord," expresses for Christians the "already but not yet" character of the kingdom of God.) The Darius date formula establishes the present perspective from which readers are to understand the book of Zechariah. Darius reigns, but the Lord's word still comes to, and through, a prophet.

Verse 1 continues, **the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo.** This "word event formula" is a typical heading in prophetic books. It should be read as a heading rather than a narrative introduction to a following divine word. (Compare Jer. 34:8, where a third-person narrative about Zedekiah, and not a quotation of divine speech, follows the formula.)

Zechariah's name is longer here than in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14, where he is simply called "Zechariah the son of Iddo." Nehemiah 12:16 identifies Zechariah as the incumbent head of the priestly house of Iddo. Thus, Iddo was the ancestor after whom a particular line of priests was named. Zechariah the prophet was a descendant of Iddo, and we cannot determine the number of generations separating them. The Bible does not mention this Berekiah elsewhere, but he may have been Zechariah's father. The three generations included in Zechariah's name correspond to the three generations of God's people in Zechariah 1:2–6: a preexilic generation, represented by Iddo; a generation late in the exile, represented by Berekiah; and the present generation of Zechariah.

Additional Notes §2

1:1 / In the OT, only 2 Chr., Ezra–Neh., Esth., and Dan. have such dates. Jeremiah 25:1 gives regnal year dates for both Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim.

§3 The Call to Return to God (Zech. 1:2–6)

The initial word of warning and invitation summarizes the story of the Israelite **forefathers** and God's word to them through **the earlier prophets.** The wording of this retrospective summary resembles passages such as Jeremiah 25:4–11. But verse 6 adds two additional steps to the account of what had happened—divine judgment and repentance. The course of this history corresponds to the four occurrences of **your forefathers** in this unit. First, the **LORD was very angry with** them (v. 2). Verse 4, the précis of prophetic preaching which had called upon the ancestors to abandon their **evil ways** and **evil practices,** reveals the reason for this anger. The forefathers refused to repent (v. 4), and God's word of judgment was fulfilled (vv. 5–6). Several passages in Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 7:25–26) make it clear that the prophets' preaching and the ancestors' refusal to heed the divine word had extended over many generations. God's word to Zechariah's audience uses this part of the story as a cautionary example, **Do not be like your forefathers.** After the Babylonian conquest, another generation of ancestors did repent ("turn," as in v. 4), acknowledging the justice of God's judgment and identifying the cataclysm of 587 B.C. as a fulfillment of the divine word (v. 6b).

1:2–4 / The issue for Zechariah's audiences is their response to the Lord's invitation and promise, **"Return to me . . . and I will return to you"** (v. 3). Will they refuse to turn, like the preexilic generations (vv. 4–5), or will they turn, as had their ancestors who survived 587 B.C. (v. 6)? The repetition of the verb *shwb* highlights this choice and ties the past examples to the present decision. It is a decision that every generation and every individual must make. (The NIV translates *shwb* with 3 different English words and obscures this feature of the passage: **return,** twice in v. 3; **Turn** in v. 4; and **repented** in v. 6.)

Penitential prayer had become an important individual and communal practice in the time when the audiences of Zechariah the prophet and the first readers of Zechariah the book lived. These biblical prayers describe the transformation of understanding, commitment, and action involved in accepting the call to turn. The book of Lamentations and prose prayers such as those of

Daniel and Ezra acknowledge that the loss of land, temple, and monarchy was the result of the nation's rebellion and sin (Lam. 1:3–8; Dan. 9:7–11; Ezra 9:7; Neh. 9:16–18, 26, 29–30). Thus these prayers teach Israel to understand its identity and history in terms of the story of the failure of the disobedient Israelite kingdoms to realize the Lord's reign on the earth. Yet the story of Israel's failure is also the story of God's mercy, faithfulness, and commitment to justice and righteousness as expressed in the Torah.

After the end of royal rule from Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Israel was not able to act as a nation in the person of the king and his court. There was no longer a central authority or representative figure whose faithfulness or rebellion influenced or determined commitments and consequences for the people as a whole. God thus addresses the invitation to return to individual Jews, their households, and communities. Ezekiel 18 reviews the consequences for individuals of turning away from, or turning toward, God's way. Neither the sins of one's forebears nor one's own past unrighteousness would make it impossible for one to turn to God and receive life.

We must understand God's promise, "and I will return to you," against its OT background. Many Psalms, as well as Lamentations, express the perception of abandonment by God. God had turned his back on Israel, and, perhaps, had rejected [them] forever (Lam. 5:22–23). Ezekiel's elaborate vision of conditions in the Jerusalem temple (Ezek. 8–11) climaxed in the departure of the glory of the Lord toward the east (Ezek. 10:18–19; 11:22–23). Jerusalem had been left vulnerable to attack and destruction. The final vision, however, anticipates that the glory of the Lord will come to fill the temple once again (Ezek. 43:1–4). Zechariah 14:5 also uses the verb "come" for the Lord's promised return to Jerusalem.

At the same time that Zechariah was promising the Lord's return, Haggai was assuring his audience of God's promise that "I am with you" (Hag. 1:13; 2:4) and "my Spirit remains among you" (Hag. 2:5). This presence is like God's presence with Israel after the exodus (Exod. 33:14; Num. 14:7). Yahweh's powerful presence "with" Israel preserved them alive and brought them into the land. Doesn't this assurance contradict the promise to "turn/return"? If God is already "with" them, what is the meaning of the promise to "return" to them? Although being "with" seems to follow logically on "returning," the Lord's "return" belongs to a different set of ideas in its OT usage. The two concepts do not appear together.

Zechariah 1:16 reiterates God's promise, "I will return," but the destination is

Jerusalem. The results of God's returning to Jerusalem are the building of the temple, towns overflowing with good things, and comfort for Zion. This is like the return of the glory of the Lord to the temple in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 43:1–5).

Malachi 3:7 makes the same invitation with the promise, "Return to me, and I will return to you." The context indicates that the people's return consists in keeping God's statutes, from which they had "turned aside." Bringing the required tithes to the storehouse is an example of this return. The agricultural blessings God promised to the people who return are the blessings that follow God's turning to them (Mal. 3:10–12). God had announced this coming in glory in Malachi 3:1–5.

1:5–6 / The rhetorical questions here in verse 5 prepare the ground for the assertion about the enduring nature of God's word in verse 6. **"Where are your forefathers now?"** Many died at the hands of the Babylonians in the course of conquest and deportation in the early sixth century. Their deaths, according to the interpretation of the preexilic prophets, demonstrated the effectiveness of God's "words" and decrees, as "commanded" through God's "servants the prophets." Other ancestors survived in exile, or in the conquered land. The exilic generation who had repented had also been overtaken by God's word. They accepted the truth of the prophets' preaching as the explanation for their servitude to the conquering empire, and they committed themselves to keep the statutes of torah. **"And the prophets, do they live forever?"** No, for the prophets were mortal, like their audiences. Yet the messages they had carried from God endured. The living word of the living God does not lose its power and truth.

A third rhetorical question makes the point: **"did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?"** This question personifies not only words of warning and judgment, but also God's will expressed in law, as predators or enemy attackers from which the ancestors could not escape. The text does not mention here the human armies who carried out the attack. This sentence succinctly illustrates the relationship between God, prophetic messengers, and the people. Prophets set God's word loose in the world to accomplish God's will, generation after generation.

Then they repented reports what the succeeding generation did. Survivors of the Babylonian conquest, along with their children in exile and in the land, had accepted the prophets' explanation from God about the reasons for their defeat.

But they had also trusted in the divine words of promise. Jeremiah 31:18–19 is an example of such repentance. For Jews in exile, this turning to God could also require a long and dangerous journey back to Jerusalem. (See Ezra 8:15–32 for an account of such a journey decades later.)

God addresses the invitation, "return to me" (v. 3) to every generation of audiences of Zechariah's book. The book continues to look for a return from dispersion. Beyond physical return to the land is the constant call to everyone who believes in God to align their steps with the way of the Lord.

Additional Notes §3

1:3 / Return to me, . . . and I will return to you. The prophets do not have a consistent position on who should turn first. The *shwb* formula in Jer. 3:22 resembles this one. God says, "Return, faithless people, and I will cure you of backsliding." Ephraim's prayer in Jer. 31:18 asks God to act first: Turn me so that I will return. The key themes of warning by "your prophets" and ancestors who "did not listen" are also present in the penitential prayers in Neh. 9 (vv. 16, 30) and Dan. 9:6. Daniel Smith-Christopher describes these prayers as articulating "alternative values and a critical reading of history" (*A Biblical Theology of Exile,* p. 121). The national way of life in the period of the Israelite kingdoms must be replaced with another. Indeed, "the penitential prayer calls for nonconformity with the mistakes of the ancestors and a recommitment to what they rejected—the ethics of Moses" (Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile,* p. 121)—which is exactly the message of Zech. 1:2–6.

1:6b / "Then they repented and said, 'The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.'" The NIV includes this sentence within the quotation marks, indicating that it is part of the oracle. The NIV also begins a new paragraph with this half-verse. In this way the translators show that Zechariah is still addressing his audience in the second year of Darius, telling them about the previous generation's decision to repent. Thus, the audience has both negative and positive examples, the final kingdom generation that refused to repent and the exilic generation that did, and returned.

Other interpreters treat this sentence as a narrative about Zechariah's audience. He invites them to repent in v. 2, and v. 6b says that they did. The Heb. text has no quotation marks. Either interpretation is grammatically possible, but the first is to be preferred. The confession made by the people who repent suits the situation of exiles and survivors better than the situation of returnees to Jerusalem.

§4 Introduction to Part Two of Zechariah (Zech. 1:7–6:15)

Zechariah now describes a series of visions received during one night in the second year of Darius. These reports attach revelations of God's will and works to aspects of the people's experience as subjects of the emperor. Zechariah 3:8 provides the key to this way of reading part two of Zechariah when it calls the Jerusalem priesthood a *mofet,* a sign or portent for the "Branch" to come. In every episode of the vision there is some concrete, present reality that is given an additional purpose to serve as a sign of God's revelation and promises. The word of the Lord in these vision reports and oracles reveals the truth of God's reign in spite of the discouraging realities. It may look like the Persian emperor (or any of the oppressive pagan superpowers that succeeded him) is totally in control, but the prophet's words reveal the heavenly perspective of the Lord's universal reign.

Thus, the vision reports serve a pastoral purpose to keep hope and faithfulness alive in any circumstances. They provide a new spiritual discipline involving sight, memory, and imagination. For example, in the sixth vision report the prophet says he saw a flying scroll, a fantastic visionary version of a fairly common sight. This scroll brought the Lord's justice to hidden places. The report brings God's renewed promise, but it also provides a means to reevaluate the authority of ordinary legal documents. Imperial subjects knew the power of written imperial edicts to alter and even end lives (e.g., Daniel and Esther). One practicing this spiritual discipline might think something like this—"Every time I see an imperial edict, I think of the flying scroll and remember that God's word travels faster and farther to accomplish its purpose." By means of this practice one may resist the temptation to allow pagan or secular powers to define the truth.

§5 Superscription to the Vision Reports and Oracles (Zech. 1:7)

1:7 / The series of eight visions that Zechariah describes in the following chapters (1:8–6:15) are dated **On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month . . . in the second year of Darius,** which was **the month of Shebat** (15 February, 519 B.C.). This date is three months later than the date in 1:1 and two months after the date of Haggai 2:10, 18, and 20. The rest of the superscription is identical to 1:1, **the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo.** Revelation in the form of visions is introduced here as "the word of the Lord." This vision report section also includes additional oracles. Both what was seen and what was heard were from God.

§6 Vision Report: The Four Horsemen (Zech. 1:8–17)

1:8a / Zechariah begins, **During the night I had a vision.** At night kings flee (1 Sam. 19:10–11; 2 Kgs. 25:4), angels strike down enemies (2 Kgs. 19:35), women put in overtime caring for their households (Prov. 31:15), sufferers weep and pray, and people receive revelations from God. God granted Daniel's visions in answer to his prayer for Jerusalem (Dan. 9:20–23). Perhaps that night Zechariah had been crying out to God, like the psalmist (Ps. 88:1–2), Zion personified (Lam. 1:2; 2:19), the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 15:11), or Israel in the wilderness (Num. 14:1). Isaiah 26:9 quotes such a prayer, "My soul yearns for you in the night; / in the morning my spirit longs for you." What Zechariah reports having seen and heard during this night brought good news to a people who had many questions.

The NIV uses the singular "vision" to introduce all the reports in Zechariah 1:9–6:8. Zechariah saw all of the episodes in a single night, but the action in the vision does not take place at night, in the dark. Zechariah reports in 4:1 that the angel/messenger wakens him before he sees the next scene, so they were not dreams. The content of Zechariah's reports enables us to identify them as supernatural revelation.

In Jeremiah's visions ordinary objects appear in ordinary circumstances (e.g., a cooking pot on the fire and a blooming almond branch). Jeremiah's vision reports remind people of God's word whenever they see these ordinary objects. Zechariah's visions, however, remind people of God's word by putting ordinary objects in extraordinary scenes.

1:8b–9 / Zechariah's night of seeing begins with a vision of **a man riding a red horse!** The horse and rider were **standing** still **among the myrtle trees in a ravine.** It was a shadowed and secret location. The evergreen myrtle trees may suggest the king's garden, which was located near a gate through which King Zedekiah and the survivors of his army had been able to escape from the Babylonians who surrounded the city (2 Kgs. 25:4). The word translated "ravine" (*metsulah*) hints at a supernatural locale, a point of contact between heavenly and earthly realms.

Behind the mounted man **were red, brown and white horses.** It is clear from verses 10–11 that these horses had riders, too, since they reported in the first person plural. The text does not specify the number of additional horses, but the traditional count is one of each color. Four horses (a number symbolizing completeness) correspond to the four chariots in the final vision report (6:1–8). The four horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation 6:1–8 reflect the traditional interpretation of four mounted horses in Zechariah's first vision report. The colors of the animals in the three contexts are not the same, however. Color words are rare in Hebrew, and there are no technical terms for the colors of horses as there are in English (e.g., roan, bay). The colors themselves are probably not symbolic. The visual variety represents the wealth of the horses' owner, the ruler who had sent them out.

Zechariah reports his respectful inquiry, **"What are these, my lord?"** Having just described the whole scene, Zechariah's query must be about the purpose and meaning of the men and animals he has seen. **The angel who was talking with** him **answered** Zechariah. This messenger with this lengthy title serves as an interpreter, interrogator, and intermediary for Zechariah. He has no name and is always identified by his role with respect to Zechariah during this night of revelation. In Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi there is fluidity in the use of the term *mal'ak.* An angel/messenger may be a human prophet (Hag. 1:13; Mal. 1:1) or a supernatural member of the heavenly court (Zech. 3:1). The title *mal'ak* is functional, not ontological, so the English translation, "angel," is misleading. I will refer to each *mal'ak* in the book as an "angel/messenger." The interpreting angel/messenger promises in response, **"I will show you what they are."** This promise introduces a conversation among the figures in the vision.

1:10–11 / Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained who the horsemen were, saying, **"They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth."** Like an emperor, the LORD has "eyes" that traverse the earth and report what is going on throughout the realm. Zechariah listened as the mounted men **reported to the angel of the LORD, who was standing among the myrtle trees.** This is the third time that someone has been described as "standing among the myrtle trees." Are they three different persons standing in the same thicket, or is each reference to the same person? The first man among the myrtles (v. 8) is one of the horsemen, who are referred to as "they" in verse 10 by another "man standing among the myrtles," and verse 11 tells us that the angel of the Lord also "was standing among the myrtles." The "man" in verse 10 and the "angel" in

verse 11 could be the same individual. Other OT narratives begin by describing a "man" who turns out to be the angel of the Lord, as appearance gives way to recognition (e.g., Judg. 13:6–23). It is not crucial to decide this question. The role of each one, both man and angel/messenger, is to communicate an explanation to Zechariah. The important matter is the content of what is spoken, not the speaker. The vision report genre assumes that they are telling the truth.

The horsemen report their obedience, **"We have gone throughout the earth,"** as the Lord had sent them to do. The Hebrew word *'arets* also means "land," but the broader meaning suits the scope of God's worldwide realm implied in verse 15. They had **"found the whole world at rest and in peace."** By 520 B.C. Darius had subdued opposition to his rule and reorganized the administrative structure of his empire. (His account of these accomplishments can still be read in the monumental multilingual inscription at Behistun.) Darius could well have received a report like the one made by the horsemen to the angel/messenger of the Lord.

Peace on earth is a wonderful hope, but the NIV translation is misleading. The Hebrew word *shalom* ("peace, well-being, wholeness") does not appear in this verse. The whole earth is "settled and quiet"—that is, rebellions have been suppressed and submission to the emperor has been secured. *Shoqetet* is the word for "peace" that means "absence of war." This quiet results from military victory. In the OT it is always temporary, a respite before the next round of attack and defense (Josh. 11:23; Judg. 3:11) during which one might rebuild fortifications in preparation for the next assault.

Quiet in the absence of armed conflict is good, but it is a relative good. It is not the same as the *shalom* that the Lord's reign provides (Zech. 9:10). God's reign of *shalom* will not be a ceasefire brought about by preventing or suppressing rebellion by oppressed and subject peoples. It is a world of justice, security, and well-being for everyone, from the least to the greatest, under the blessing and authority of the Lord alone.

1:12–15 / Darius no doubt welcomed reports that his empire was settled and quiet. He fought for two years to overcome the forces of the usurper Gaumata and to establish his reign. The Lord, however, is angry with the conditions that his observers have found. The angel/messenger of the Lord responds to the genuine distress masked by the report of "all's quiet" by praying on behalf of God's needy people. Addressing God as **"LORD Almighty,"** the name that is especially associated with Yahweh's presence at the temple, the angel/messenger

laments, **"how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?"** The Minor Prophets collection (the Book of the Twelve) begins with God's announcement that: I will withhold mercy (*rkhm*) from the house of Israel (Hos. 1:6). Jeremiah 13:14 extends this judgment of "no mercy" to Judah and Jerusalem, where Nebuchadnezzar, the foe from the north, carried it out (Jer. 6:23; 21:7). The following verse in Hosea promises, "Yet I will show love (*'arakhem,* "I will show mercy") to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God" (Hos. 1:7, NIV). Jeremiah's prophecy had placed a limit of 70 years on Babylonian rule (Jer. 25:12; 29:10). The angel/messenger's prayer uses the 70 years motif to emphasize the extent of Judah's distress. Their suffering under divine anger has gone on for 70 years, how much longer must it last? Would it end after 70 years? These questions were surely on the minds of Zechariah's audience (e.g., Zech. 7:3).

God answers the brief prayer. **So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.** The angel/messenger of the Lord had prayed, but the answer comes to the interpreting angel/messenger in the form of a commission to Zechariah. The good and comforting words follow in a series of sayings that Zechariah is to **"Proclaim."** People who pray for help look for answers in the form of salvation oracles. The first one of these sayings addresses the issue of God's anger toward Jerusalem and the towns of Judah (v. 12) by showing that the objects of God's anger are now the very nations who had conquered them. Yahweh had been only **a little angry** with the preexilic generations, but now Yahweh is **very angry with the nations that feel secure.**

God was not aloof from the oppression of the weak and poor, from the unfaithfulness and rebellion of the nation whom the Lord loved and had graciously blessed with life and land, or from Israel's failure to make Yahweh's goodness and holiness known in the world. Because the Israelite kingdoms failed to live up to their calling as defined in covenant, the Lord had warned them through the ministries of prophets over many generations. Eventually Israel was brought to an end by military conquest, the northern kingdom in 721 B.C. and the southern kingdom in 586 B.C. This brief saying in verses 14–15 summarizes the postexilic understanding of that judgment, and the reasoning that enabled God's people to have hope for their future relationship.

"I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion." The Lord now expresses passionate attachment to Israel in the form of jealousy for the defeated,

demolished, and diminished city and temple. Compassion for beloved Zion had turned God's wrath against the nations that had conquered her and continued to oppress her people. This is the first principle for interpreting the Babylonian judgment: God hears and answers the prayers of sufferers, even ones who are suffering as a consequence of their sin. (Jer. 30:12–17 is a particularly good example of this perspective.) The same dynamic is found in prayers for help (laments) and other prophecy. We have already seen the second principle illustrated in verse 12: the extent of the judgment is limited. Seventy years, or the length of a good long life, is the period at issue for Zechariah's audience. Verse 15 expresses the third principle: God says, "I was only a little angry" with Judah and Jerusalem, but the nations who conquered and oppressed **"added to the calamity."** Nebuchadnezzar was called God's servant (Jer. 27:6), the instrument of judgment on Judah, but the Babylonians' greed for power had taken them beyond their warrant and made them liable for judgment (Jer. 50:17–18; 51:34–40, 49, 56). Therefore, "I am very angry," says the Lord, "with the nations that feel secure."

The horsemen had reported the absence of rebellion throughout the earth. The Persian Empire had taken over the Babylonian realms, including the land and people of Judah, in 539 B.C. Before that date, the consequence of God's anger against the nations that feel secure could be identified as the Persian conquest of Babylon. In the context of the book of Zechariah, however, the nations that are at ease are the Persian and subsequent empires that were able to keep the peace and feel secure by imposing their oppressive rule on subject peoples.

1:16–17 / Therefore introduces a surprising turn. Instead of a word of judgment on the nations with whom God is very angry, there is a promise of restoration for Jerusalem and the temple. **"I will return to Jerusalem"** echoes the promise in verse 3, but without condition. The return will be **with mercy,** reversing the 70 years of withholding mercy (v. 12). The word "mercy" comes from the same root as "womb" (*rkhm*), suggesting an association with the fierce loyalty and tender care that a mother feels for her children. The Lord's love for the people Israel is even greater than a mother's love (Isa. 49:15). As evidence of God's return, **my house will be rebuilt** in the holy city. Ezra 5:1–2 credits Haggai and Zechariah with encouraging the temple building project, and most of the book of Haggai is devoted to persuading the people to get to work on it. In the book of Zechariah, however, this promise in the passive voice is the only explicit mention of the rebuilding project. The emphasis falls on the rebuilt temple as

divine gift rather than human responsibility. As for the city itself, **the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem,** to see how much it will grow because of God's blessing. For **the LORD will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem.** Being chosen again as the dwelling place for God's name and glory is the first step in the restoration of the city. This promise is repeated in 2:12. The blessing of growth will extend beyond Jerusalem so that **"My towns will again overflow with prosperity."**

Each term in this promise has a rich background in OT prophetic literature and is further explained in the rest of the book of Zechariah. God is free to be present in Jerusalem or to choose to leave it. Jeremiah uses Shiloh as a cautionary example, "where I first made a dwelling for my Name." Yet Shiloh fell in judgment as Jerusalem would (Jer. 7:12–15). Ezekiel recounts a dramatic vision of the departure of the glory of the Lord in stages from the holy of holies to the mountain east of Jerusalem (Ezek. 10–11) and another vision of the glory coming back (Ezek. 43:1–5). God offers comfort (*nkhm*) in many ways to Jewish exiles through Isaiah 40–55. The section begins with a command to the prophet to "comfort my people," saying to Jerusalem that "her hard service has been completed, / that her sin has been paid for" (Isa. 40:2). Following a promise of return to Zion in Isaiah 51:11, God says "I, even I, am he who comforts you," and words of encouragement follow (Isa. 51:12–16). The prosperity and bounty of the land will be evidence of the Lord's blessing (Jer. 31:12–14; Zech. 8:12).

Zechariah's audience would have been aware of the work of Persian imperial messengers by whom the emperor imposed his will and demands on them and also of the spies who reported on their submission. They may even have marveled at the number and variety of their mounts, and the speed at which they could travel. Zechariah's vision report enables this daylight reality of the audience's experience to remind them of the divine reality of the Lord's reign over the whole earth. The Lord also has messengers who make their reports to the heavenly court and participate in the divine council.

Additional Notes §6

1:12 / Seventy years: Jeremiah is the first prophet to put a specific number on the duration of Babylonian hegemony (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). The fulfillment of God's promises of rescue and restoration would begin when Babylon's 70 years were complete. The number 70 is a round number. Jeremiah 27:7 describes the same period of Babylonian domination in terms of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and his two successors. The OT gives more than one interpretation of the beginning and end of the 70 years. The angel/messenger here in v.

12 apparently calculates that God's anger at Jerusalem began with the Babylonian conquest in 587 B.C., so the seven decades were nearly complete by the second year of Darius (520/519 B.C.). Second Chronicles 36:21–22 counts Cyrus's conquest of Babylon (539 B.C.) as the end of 70 years. The end date of Daniel's calculation is uncertain (Dan. 9:1–3).

§7 Vision Report: Four Horns and Four Smiths (Zech. 1:18–21)

The next vision report is comparatively spare and simple. There is little action and the figures within the vision do not speak. Yet this vision addresses the question of fulfillment of prophecy, divine governance, and the unwelcome quiet reported in verse 15. The vision of four horns and four smiths portrays the missing step between God's anger at "the nations that feel secure" and the restoration of Jerusalem God promised in the comforting words of verses 16–17.

1:18–20 / The prophet **looked up—and there before** him **were four horns!** The report lacks any description that would enable the reader to form a mental picture. What kind of horns are they? The text does not say "two pairs of horns," but just "four horns." If they are animal horns, they are no longer attached to sheep, goats, or oxen. Perhaps they are not animal horns at all. The projections at each corner of the altar of burnt offering in the temple were also called "horns" (e.g., Ps. 118:27). Excavated dressed stone altars from early first millennium B.C. Israel have stone "horns" at their corners. In the exemplar from Beersheba the horns are part of the corner blocks in the top course of stones. To be seen separately from the altar, the Beersheba altar horns would have had to be broken off rather than simply disassembled. The vision of the disconnected horns anticipates the fulfillment of the promise in Zechariah 2:4b. At the beginning of his vision Zechariah sees the results of the future action that is depicted in the second scene.

Zechariah's question, **"What are these?"** asks for the significance of the horns. **"These are the horns that scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem."** The interpreting angel/messenger indicates that the horns represent the nations that had defeated and exiled the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The horns are metaphorical, symbols of power and pride. (Compare Daniel's vision, in which a single horn represents each kingdom [Dan. 8].) In OT poetry, metaphorical horns are removed by defeat in battle by Yahweh and/or his armies (Ps. 75:10; Jer. 48:25). In Zechariah's vision, however, the metaphor includes action by the smiths. The symbolic horns have been reified and thus

men skilled in the use of tools are to remove them. So, in the second scene, **the LORD showed me four craftsmen.** Zechariah sees these four workmen approaching and addresses God with a question, **"What are these coming to do?"** Smiths are known by their work, and probably also by the tools they carry. Their approach implies that activity will follow.

1:21 / The Lord's answer interprets both scenes of Zechariah's vision—the four horns as well as the four craftsmen. These visionary sights refer to past and future actions that are part of God's plan for Israel. **"These are the horns that scattered Judah"** narrows the focus to Judah but expands the description. A nation cannot raise its head when it has been subjugated by force of arms (Judg. 8:28) and cannot raise an army (e.g., Ps. 83:2). This description fit Judah from at least 586 B.C. on. No one in Judah had been able to resist (Ps. 83:2). Like Job, they had been put to shame **"so that no one could raise his head"** (Job 10:15). Jews scattered in Diaspora hung their heads in shame while their conquerors raised their figurative horns in pride. The term "scatter" includes the initial exile after conquest as well as the conditions that fostered movement and settlements by subsequent generations. Descendants of the original prisoners of war had spread throughout the ancient Near East instead of returning to the land of Israel.

The second scene of Zechariah's vision means that **"the craftsmen have come to terrify them and throw down these horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people."** Craftsmen were skilled artisans who used tools to construct things from wood, metal, or stone. Craftsmen were also leading officials of the royal court. Second Kings 24:14 and Jeremiah 29:2 list them, along with the queen mother, princes, and other officials, as being among the captives taken away by the Babylonians in B.C. Craftsmen typically "make" or "work" (*ʿasah, paʿal*) rather than "terrify" (*lehakharid*). The latter verb usually has a military leader as its subject (e.g., Judg. 8:12; 2 Sam. 17:2; Ezek. 30:2). Other prophecies communicate God's intention to judge the nations that conquered Israel (e.g., Jer. 50–51; Zech. 10:11). This vision report belongs to the same prophetic theme. Zechariah 1:2–6 acknowledges that God's people were judged because they refused to turn back to God. This vision report, however, presents Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem as victims of the nations with horns, and it is those proud nations that will suffer judgment.

God explains the vision as a revelation of God's promises for the future. There will be other forces that will oppress and scatter God's people, but God will shatter their proud horns of power. God's justice hasn't finished its work. Action

must be taken to make it possible for the northern kingdom exiles to return (see Zech. 10:6–12). In the second year of Darius, Babylon was part of the Persian Empire, but the judgment announced in Jeremiah 50–51 had not been fulfilled. Cyrus had taken Babylon without destroying it in 539 B.C. The four horns do not refer just to the past conquests of Israel (by Assyria and its allies in 721 and 701 B.C.) and Judah (by Babylon and its allies in 597 and 587 B.C.). The rest of the book of Zechariah warns of future danger from armies and foreign rulers but assures that God will have the victory in the end (9:1–8; 12:1–9; 14). God's agents will cut off the horns of every power that will scatter Yahweh's people, no matter how many there will be or how long it will take. The number four represents the totality of nations over all time and space, rather than four particular nations or four particular conquests.

This vision report led Zechariah's audience to associate the smiths' work on the temple with God's victory over their oppressors. People would be used to seeing craftsmen at the temple construction site. This vision and its interpretation use familiar sights from restoration-period Jerusalem to remind the audience that God had already fulfilled promises of return and rebuilding. The Babylonians, who had conquered and destroyed the city and temple and who had taken exiles and refused to let them go (Jer. 50:33), had themselves been conquered. The work on the temple was proof of God's will and power to fulfill promises. As we have seen, smiths had been among the prominent exiles of 597 B.C., probably because of their role in warfare, fabricating weapons, and constructing engines of war (2 Kgs. 24:14; Jer. 29:2). Now the smiths had returned from exile. Perhaps they were carving new horns for the altar. In the atonement ritual, the priest applied blood to the altar's horns (Lev. 16:18; Zech. 9:15). Their work will be evidence of the fulfillment of past promises and God's mercy and faithfulness, justice and power. One might even say that rebuilding the temple was a way to throw down the horns of the conquering empires because the temple honored Yahweh as the king of kings. It would serve as the focal point for the return of God's scattered peoples as well as for the nations that will seek to know the Lord. Haggai s picture of this phenomenon emphasizes the tribute that the nations will bring to the completed temple (Hag. 2:6–9).

Smiths engaged in the peaceful pursuit of temple building while the country remained under Persian authority was a visible reminder to Zechariah's audience of the imperial reality. In subsequent generations the smiths continued to rebuild and repair Judah and Jerusalem, but they did not construct weapons and siege engines. The revealed reality for audiences of the prophet and the book, however,

is the overthrow of imperial power. Whenever they see a smith at work, they are to remember the promises that God had already kept and to renew their hope in the promises yet to be fulfilled.

§8 Vision Report: A Young Man Measuring Jerusalem (Zech. 2:1–5)

2:1–2 / Again, as in 1:18, Zechariah simply **looked up** and the vision was **before** him. He saw **a man with a measuring line in his hand!** During periods of intense building activity men with measuring lines must have been a relatively common sight around Jerusalem. They stretched out the line to mark the location of the structure and to measure its dimensions so that building materials could be acquired and prepared. Ezekiel's temple vision also includes a young man with a measuring instrument (Ezek. 40:3). The measuring line laid the foundation for hope before any stones were set in place.

Zechariah enters the vision by speaking to the man, asking, **"Where are you going?"** The man answers the prophet directly, **"To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is."** Zechariah 1:16 promised that "the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem"—a promise to rebuild the city as well as the temple. The man's interest in the size of Jerusalem and its layout anticipates its future extent. The defeat of the nations that had scattered Judah in the previous vision will clear the way for the dispersed people to return to the land and city. Ezekiel's vision of the tribes of Israel surrounding an enlarged temple includes a walled Jerusalem which measured 6,750 feet on each side (Ezek. 48:30–35). In the middle of the fifth century B.C. Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the city wall. This Persian-approved structure enclosed an area significantly smaller than preexilic Jerusalem, and much smaller than Ezekiel's city. Some people volunteered to settle in the newly fortified city, but others had to be drafted to leave their farms for Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1–2). Jeremiah does not promise a wall, but he does portray an extensive settlement, comprising a holy area (Jer. 31:38–40). Jeremiah 3:17 sets up an equation—the city will be to the land as the holy of holies had been to the temple. Zechariah 14 also looks forward to the multiplication of sanctity. All the cooking pots in the city and even the bells on the horses will be "holy to the Lord."

2:3–4 / The man with the measuring line was the angel/messenger who spoke to Zechariah (see additional note below). As he **left, another angel came to meet**

him and gave him a message to deliver to Zechariah, **"Run, tell that young man, 'Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it.'"** The Babylonian devastation had made Jerusalem "desolate and without men or animals" (Jer. 33:12), but an enlarged and well-populated Jerusalem is a regular theme of later prophecy (e.g., Jer. 3:16; 31:35–40; Ezek. 45:6). God's promises here call the people's building plans into question. Most Israelites had lived in undefended rural communities, vulnerable to attack. Ezekiel 38:11 and Esther 9:19 describe postexilic Jewish unwalled towns in the land of Israel and in Diaspora. One benefit of a period of peace and good leadership is that people who inhabit unfortified towns prosper and feel safe (e.g., Judg. 5:7; Ezek. 38:11). In the OT both people and livestock live in cities. Nineveh has cattle (Jon. 2:7–8), and Zechariah 14:20 mentions horses. People and animals had perished from inside Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians (Jer. 21:6; Ezek. 14:21). Jeremiah 31:27 and Ezekiel 36:11 promise the restoration of human and animal populations, and Zechariah 2:4 renews this promise.

2:5 / Jerusalem as a conglomerate of unwalled villages is a picture of potential vulnerability (cf. Gog's plans in Ezek. 38:11). But God's presence there will provide a protective perimeter, for **"I myself will be a wall of fire around it."** This image uses a concept known only in the imagination—a wall not of stone but of fire. God had promised to make Jeremiah a wall of bronze (Jer. 1:18; 15:20). Gideon's small force of trumpeters and torchbearers panicked the Midianites with a wall of noise and burning torches (Judg. 7:15–22). The pillar of cloud that protected the Israelites from the Egyptians through the night before they crossed the sea provides the closest analogy. A wall of fire around Jerusalem will keep out invaders, frighten them away, or spread out to consume them. It will also expand as the population grows.

The wall of fire surrounding Jerusalem is also a sign of the presence of the Lord's glory: **"and I will be its glory within."** The holy of holies will include the entire city (see Jer. 31:26–40; 3:17; Zech. 14:20–21). The glory of the Lord had filled the holiest place in the wilderness tabernacle (Exod. 40:34) and in Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 8:11). In Ezekiel's vision, the glory of the Lord returns to the envisioned new temple (Ezek. 43:1–5), and Jerusalem gets a new name, "THE LORD IS THERE" (Ezek. 48:35). The goodness of this gracious gift of divine presence cannot be overstated. The presence of the glory of the Lord in Jerusalem is a gift of joy and abundant life to God's people and, ultimately, to all nations and peoples.

Zechariah's Jerusalem audience lived in an impoverished unfortified town. The salvation portrayal of a Jerusalem made up of many such towns that enjoyed the presence and protection of the living God could have turned their attention from the ruined walls and buildings left from the destruction of 587 B.C. and helped them to see their modest settlement as a sign of the promised city. The fires of God's judgment, set by Nebuchadnezzar's conquering forces, had left their imprint in scorch marks and ash. God will replace those fires of judgment and purification with the flames of benevolent blessing and the Lord's protective presence.

Additional Notes §8

2:3 / The Heb. text is more ambiguous than the NIV translation. In Heb., both **the angel who was speaking to me** and the other angel are "going out" (*yotse'*). The NIV interpretation indicates that the angel who is speaking has been present from the beginning of the vision—either as a silent, unmentioned presence or as the man with the measuring line. The latter solution seems more likely since the angel who speaks "to me" regularly answers Zechariah's questions. This identification requires that **that young man** (*naʿar*, MT 2:8) who receives the message be Zechariah. The alternative solution is that the man with the measuring line and the young man are the same person. Resolution of this question is not essential to the message of the passage. The divine word in vv. 4–5 means the same thing regardless of the identity of the man with the measuring line.

2:4 / The noun translated **a city without walls** is plural, perhaps because unwalled villages were typically small, comprising only a few acres. Jerusalem would be of a size equivalent to many of these unfortified settlements.

2:5 / **I myself will be** is emphatic, with the subject pronoun preceding the verb: "I, I will be." The second word (MT 2:9), *'ehyeh,* "I will be," is part of the divine name in Exod. 3:14, "*'ehyeh* sent me to you." This verb occurs again in the second half of this verse, **I will be.** This verse constitutes a reversal of the judgment in Hos. 1:9, "I am (*'ehyeh*) not for you."

§9 An Invitation to Exiles (Zech. 2:6–13)

This oracle fills out the message of the previous three visions. Almost every line echoes prophecies from other parts of the OT. Descendants of Israel and Judah will resettle the land of Israel and its capital, Jerusalem. Further, people from other nations will also ally themselves with the Lord and will become part of God's people.

2:6–7 / The distant ancestor of this form of prophetic speech was used in time of war. Prophets representing the attacking army would call on the inhabitants to flee from the city because it was about to be conquered. This form of speech assured the attackers of victory and warned the civilian population to save their lives. God here offers this invitation first to the Jewish exiles, personified as **Zion,** who **live in the Daughter of Babylon.** God calls them to **"Flee from the land of the north,"** from Babylon, where they had been deported by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 3:18; 16:15; 23:8; 31:8). The route north around the Arabian desert to the Euphrates River initially took the exiles north, out of the land of Israel, and so their route back from exile was, naturally, from the north country.

These oracles combine elements appropriate to short-term and long-term summonses to return. The sixth-century exiles from Judah and Jerusalem had been removed to the region around the city of Babylon, and their descendants returned from the same place at the end of that century. But God's promise of return also extended to the descendants of the deportees from the northern kingdom who had been moved to various locations in the Assyrian Empire after 721 B.C. (see Zech. 10:6–12). During the Persian period, Jews moved to and settled in distant regions of the empire. **"I have scattered you to the four winds of heaven"** refers to these long-term developments. "Spread out" (*prs,* NIV "scattered") is an appropriate description of the growth and movement of communities in dispersion. It emphasizes survival rather than punishment. The form of this promise addresses the later audiences of the book of Zechariah. In the second year of Darius many exiles had already returned from Babylon, but many more would eventually come from all over the world. The short-term view was part of the life experience of the prophet's audience, while the worldwide invitation and promises look far beyond to the eschatological fulfillment of God's

kingdom. Theologically, both perspectives have Zion, the Lord's chosen dwelling place, as their destination.

2:8–9 / The announcement of judgment on their conquerors and captors, like the call to escape, functions as an oracle of salvation (see Jer. 50; 51). God will bring a measure-for-measure judgment against **the nations that have plundered** God's people, during which **their slaves will plunder them.** The worst plundering of the city of Babylon by Persia did not occur until 481 B.C. According to the Cyrus Cylinder, the city was not destroyed in 539 B.C. when Cyrus took possession of Babylon. Rebellions in the fifth century brought Xerxes against them, however, and he removed the wealth of the city. Although Israel and Judah had suffered the just consequences of covenant violation when they had been plundered and scattered, they will be saved because of God's love for and commitment to them. Verse 8 declares, **whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye** (see additional note on vv. 8–13, below). A blow that falls on Israel is like a poke in the eye of God. The fulfillment of these promises will validate Zechariah's ministry as a true prophet (Zech. 2:9b).

2:10–12 / God's people, affectionately personified as **Daughter of Zion,** are called to welcome the Lord with joyful shouts. **"I am coming, and I will live among you"** echoes the promise that accompanies the construction of the wilderness tabernacle: "I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God" (Exod. 29:45). "Live" (*shkn*) is the ancient action of the presence of God, pitching a tent in order to dwell in the midst of the tribes of Israel (Exod. 25:8). Indeed, for God to dwell among them had been the purpose of the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 29:46). The return from exile is portrayed as a second exodus.

Verse 11 begins with a stunning reversal of the judgment on other nations (v. 8), and the introduction of a major theme of Zechariah: **"Many nations will be joined** (*lwh*) **with the LORD in that day"** (MT 2:15; see also 8:20–23; 14:16). Jeremiah 50:5 anticipates that Judah and Israel will return to Jerusalem and will "bind (*lwh,* "join") themselves to the LORD by everlasting covenant." Isaiah 14:1 looks forward to the time when people from other nations will also bind themselves (*lwh*) to God. Non-Jews who join make a commitment to serve, worship, and love the name of the Lord, to honor the Sabbath, and to "hold fast to my covenant" (Isa. 56:6). These Gentiles receive assurance that God will bring them to the holy mountain, accept their offerings and their prayers, and give them joy (Isa. 56:3–8). "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all

nations" (Isa. 56:7). Here in verse 11 Zechariah also speaks of "nations," not just individuals. The Lord extends a covenant relationship to these nations. They **will become my people** is half of the covenant formula previously offered to Israel, "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (e.g., Exod. 6:7). Verse 11 repeats the promise from verse 10, **"I will live among you,"** as well as the prophetic validation formula from verse 9 (**"you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me"**). The future multination people of God will enjoy the blessings God promised to Israel.

Many nations will also become the Lord's people, but Israel retains its special place. Israel had inherited its land from God, and each tribe and family had received its portion. Verse 12 reverses this pattern as a metaphor for the Lord's unique relationship with the people of Judah. **The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land.** The designation "the holy land" or "the holy ground" (*'admat haqqodesh*, MT 2:16) is unique in the OT. It is, however, very close to the "holy ground" (*'admat qodesh*) at the burning bush on the mountain of God (Exod. 3:5) and is an extension of the concept of Zion, God's "holy mountain" (*har haqqodesh;* e.g., Zech. 8:3).

The Lord **will again choose Jerusalem** (see also 1:17; 3:2), and the holy city will expand far beyond its former boundaries (2:1–5). God first chose Jerusalem as the place where he will "put his Name there for his dwelling" (Deut. 12:5), but it had become "like Shiloh" (Jer. 26:6), an overgrown heap of ruins (Mic. 3:12). Choice implies God's presence and blessing. Yahweh will be worshipped in Jerusalem once more.

2:13 / This oracle sequence ends with an answer to prayer. The Lord **has roused himself from his holy dwelling.** The Psalms entreat God to "arise" or "rouse yourself" to help, rescue, and do justice (e.g., Pss. 7:6; 35:23; 59:4). The ones praying have been waiting for the Lord to act, "Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever" (Ps. 44:23). Zechariah's audience had also been waiting and counting the years (1:12; 7:3). The people would experience God's coming to save at the temple, where the glory of the Lord will be present to protect Jerusalem (3:15). Yet **all** "flesh" (NIV **mankind**) is called to respond in humble, awestruck silence: **Be still** (*has*). Habakkuk 2:20 also calls "all the earth" to "be still" (*has;* NIV **silent**) before "the LORD [who] is in his holy temple." The promise in Isaiah 40:5 is similar, "The glory of the LORD will be revealed, / and all flesh [NIV "mankind"] together will see it." The Lord sees the whole world from Zion, and all the nations will see the Lord's glory there. The appropriate response to

the revelation of divine glory includes worshipful acceptance of salvation and submission to God's will.

These oracles offer a précis of the prophetic message from the exilic period. On the one hand is the promised restoration of Israel to their land, centered around the temple and city of Jerusalem, where God's presence will dwell again. On the other hand is the promise to welcome other nations to the worship of God. Jerusalem, Israel, and the torah remain at the center of this multination people of God.

Additional Notes §9

2:8 / After he has honored me and has sent me . . . represents one solution to the enigmatic three words *'ahar kabod shelakhaniy.* The NIV has read the noun *kabod* as a verb "he has honored me"), coordinated to *shelakhaniy* with the addition of "and" ("and has sent me"). The placement of the quotation marks indicates that the NIV reads both verbs as part of the divine speech. There are several other ways to construe these words. Following are some of the possibilities. (1) *kabod* is the subject of *shelakhaniy,* and stands for God, "After Glory sent me." A paraphrastic variation, in which *kabod* is an adverb, is "After the Lord in his glory sent me." (2) *'ahar kabod* modifies *shelakhaniy,* "In pursuit of glory he [God] sent me." "Glory" may refer to the prophet's reputation, which will be secured when his prophecies come true (cf. the validation formula in v. 9). "Glory" may refer to the wealth of the nations that will flow to Jerusalem, as it does in Haggai. (3) "After glory" may be a temporal clause modifying "he sent me," in which "glory" stands for Zechariah's visions or the return of God's glory to the temple. (4) "After glory" is a scribal note, indicating that the following words should be inserted from the margin after the word "glory" in 2:5 or 1:21. The alternate translation in the NIV margin moves the initial quotation marks to the beginning of v. 9, so that all of v. 8 is the narrative introduction to the oracle in vv. 9–11. Thus the object of the verbs "honored" and "sent" is unambiguously the prophet. The punctuation of this NIV note, combined with either of the translations proposed in the first alternative above, fits the role of biblical prophets who deliver oracles against foreign nations, as in v. 9.

2:8–13 / The grammar of these sayings is confusing because of frequent alternation between first- and third-person forms and the absence of quotation marks in Hebrew. The problem begins in verse 8, after the messenger formula. Who has sent whom? God sends prophets, not vice versa. There is no evidence that Zechariah himself ever traveled back to Babylon or to other nations. Jeremiah is also said to have brought God's word to the nations (Jer. 1:10; 27:3). Here in verse 9a God **will surely raise** God's **hand against** the plunderers, but it is Zechariah who speaks in verse 9b. Verse 10 is clearly divine speech, marked with **declares the LORD.** Only two clauses in verses 11–13 have God speaking in the first person: they **will become my people** and **I will live among you.** It is not impossible for a message from God through a prophet to refer to the Lord in the third person, as in most of the rest of verses 11–13. Zechariah must be the speaker in the prophetic validation saying at the end of verse 11, **and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.** Textual variants give evidence of efforts to smooth out the inconsistencies, but the NIV has followed the MT.

§10 Vision Report: Zechariah and Joshua in the Heavenly Court (Zech. 3:1–10)

3:1–2 / Zechariah's next vision begins in the midst of a courtroom scene, a trial of **Joshua the high priest** in the heavenly court. He was **standing before the angel of the LORD,** and the accuser was **standing at his right side to accuse him. "Satan"** is not a personal name but a role. He is also a member of the heavenly court. The text does not report the charge that he has made against Joshua, but we can infer it from the rest of the report. The *satan* has questioned Joshua's qualifications because he still bears the marks of the judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. It is appropriate that the accuser's words are absent from the report. The Lord's **rebuke** silences him.

The Lord who chooses Jerusalem rebukes the adversary. A high priest was needed because **the LORD** had **chosen Jerusalem** long ago as the place where he will "put his Name there for his dwelling" (Deut. 12:5). Solomon had built the first house of the Lord there, and, when it was completed, "the glory of the LORD filled his temple" (1 Kgs. 8:10–11). Ezekiel, however, reports a vision of the glory of God departing the temple prior to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and Judah (Ezek. 8–11). In his final vision, Ezekiel sees the glory of God returning to the future temple in the rebuilt city (Ezek. 43:1–5). Twice in Zechariah the Lord has promised to choose Jerusalem again (1:17; 2:12). The Lord's particular attachment to Jerusalem and to the temple is the basis for rebuking the *satan* and speaking up on Joshua's behalf.

The rhetorical question is spoken in Joshua's defense, **"Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"** (Amos 4:11 also uses the image of the charred stick.) Joshua, the sooty survivor, symbolizes several things in this vision report. The Babylonians had set fires to destroy the city and temple (2 Kgs. 25:9; Jer. 39:8; 52:13). These actions fulfilled the metaphor of God's burning wrath (e.g., Jer. 4:4). The people who survived in exile and in Judah, and their descendants, were "brands plucked from the fire" of that destruction. The shame of being conquered, the sins of the intervening generations, and the impurity from contact with corpses and foreign places are all captured by the image of Joshua's **filthy clothes** (see also Jer. 2:34; Hag. 2:11–12).

3:3–5 / The text does not quote the *satan's* accusation. God's rebuke has eliminated it even from the report, but it can be inferred from verses 3–4. Joshua was not qualified to preside over the cult in the rebuilt temple because he bore the shame, guilt, and impurity of the whole people. How could the temple rituals resume when the high priest was not clean? The high priest was to wear a breastplate that symbolized the whole people (Exod. 28:29), and his turban would bear the people's sins (Exod. 28:36–38). Moses' ordination of Aaron and his sons in Leviticus 8–10 could not be repeated, but the members of God's heavenly court initiate this process and strip Joshua of his dirty clothes.

The angel/messenger interprets the significance for Joshua, **"See, I have taken away your sin."** Once cleansed, he would be reclothed. **"I will put rich garments on you."** Headgear was also part of the high priest's apparel (Exod. 28:4, 36–38; 39:30–31). As a true prophet, Zechariah is present in the heavenly council. Now he speaks up and, for the first and only time, enters into the action and conversation of the vision, saying, **"Put a clean turban on his head."** In Exodus 39, the priest wears a turban (*mitsnefet*) with a golden plate that bears the inscription, "HOLY TO THE LORD." The word here is different but from the same root—*tsanif* was an item associated with royalty in Isaiah 62:3 (NIV "diadem"). Thus the choice of this word begins the elevation of Joshua the high priest that continues in Zechariah 4 and 6.

3:6–7 / His sins forgiven, and garbed in a new uniform, Joshua is ready to receive his commission from God. First, he must **walk in my ways** as God expected every Israelite to do (Deut. 5:33; 10:12; 30:16). The second condition, **keep my requirements,** means to perform the service due to the Lord. This is a technical term in Leviticus, Numbers, and Ezekiel for the duties assigned exclusively to the priests and Levites. The descendants of Aaron alone were responsible for the sanctuary, altar, and offerings, "so that wrath will not fall on the Israelites again" (Num. 18:5; see also Num. 18:8; Lev. 22:9; Ezek. 40:46; 44:16; 48:11, which limit this service further to the descendants of Zadok). By the time of Malachi, several generations later, the priesthood had fallen into a pattern of neglect and failure (Mal. 1:10–2:1).

The high priest who was faithful to the will of God would have the authority over the temple precincts to **govern my house and have charge of my courts.** The final part of the promise, however, is new: **I will give you a place among those standing here—**that is, among the members of the heavenly court. The OT

portrays prophets in the heavenly council (1 Kgs. 22; Jer. 23:18, 22), but not priests. God's gift to the high priest of access to the divine council makes sense in light of the theological link between the temple courts and God's heavenly court. The audience of Zechariah in the Persian period and beyond witnessed the end of prophecy. It was profoundly reassuring to them that their priestly leader had been granted access to the Lord's council. The servants who stand in the Lord's council will have a true understanding of the Lord's will, and will turn people back to God (Jer. 23:22).

3:8–10 / Three brief oracles follow—one directed to Joshua (v. 8), and two to the larger audience (vv. 9–10). The first oracle provides a key to understanding the vision accounts (see the introduction above). God calls Joshua's attention to his **associates seated before you.** These men are "seated" and, therefore, they are not the same as "these standing here" in verse 7 (see Ezek. 8:1). Joshua is back in the earthly temple, where his associates are the other priests. The survival of the priestly line and their restoration to service in the temple are shown to Joshua and to Zechariah's audience as **men symbolic of things to come,** especially God's promise to **bring my servant, the Branch.** The audience of the book knows that messianic hopes had not been fulfilled in Zerubbabel. In this verse God answers the question posed in Psalm 89:49, "O Lord, where is your former great love, / which in your faithfulness you swore to David?" As the people wait in hope, they can recognize in the generations of priests serving at the temple a God-given guarantee that the Messiah will come.

A certain **stone, set in front of Joshua** at the temple, is significant in more than one way. First, it provides a surface or surfaces upon which God **will engrave an inscription.** This verb and its cognate noun (*ptkh*) may refer to writing. The names of the sons of Israel were inscribed on stones attached to the chief priest's vestments (Exod. 28:11, 21, 29, 36; 39:6), and the title "Holy to the Lord" was engraved on a plate attached to his turban. Exodus 28:38 explains that this inscription bears the people's iniquity "so that [the people's gifts] will be acceptable to the LORD." Stones for building could also provide writing surfaces. A common building block would have only six faces. Even if it stood alone, a maximum of five faces would be exposed. Yet this **one** stone has **seven eyes.** Second, the stone is significant because, regardless of what the stone looked like, the message to which it points is good news for God's people. **"I will remove the sin of this land in a single day."** One stone with "seven eyes" (*ʿenayim*) points to the one day, and to God's ability to look into the human heart. This verb (*ptkh,*

and its cognate noun) may also mean "open; opening." "Fountains," another meaning of *ʿenayim* (NIV "eyes"), are also associated with the removal of sin. Flowing water washes sin away (e.g., Zech. 13:1).

In that day, when sin has been removed, God's people will be able to find rest from danger. Everyone will **invite** their neighbors to **sit under** their **vine and fig tree.** A stable life, with time to tend vineyards and orchards, was part of the original promise of the land (cf. 1 Kgs. 4:25). Zechariah's oracle adds the element of neighborly accord that could and should result from keeping torah. A single sentence communicates the good news of the life that God desires to give.

Additional Notes §10

3:1 / Satan . . . accuse: In the OT, a *satan* is never an independent supernatural power who rules an evil realm. The noun (*satan*) and its denominative verb are regularly used of human adversaries. Rebels against kings (1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:22) and their opponents in war (1 Kgs. 11:14, 23, 25) are the subjects of this verb. Psalmists identify people who slander and accuse them falsely as *satan* (Pss. 38:21; 71:13; 109:4, 20, 29). In Ps. 109:6 the persecuted one prays that the enemy will be brought to trial, "let an accuser (*stn*) stand at his right hand." In this last case, the subject of the verb *stn* is on the side of justice. Similarly, the angel/messenger of the Lord "stood in the road to oppose (*stn*)" Balaam (Num. 22:22, 32).

The *satan* in Job 1–2 is also a member of the heavenly court who raises an accusation against Job. First Chronicles 21:1 is the only place in the OT where a *satan* tempts a person to do wrong. This verse interprets its source in 2 Sam. 24:1, where God is the subject of "tempt/test" (NIV "incite"). The Chronicler may want readers to imagine a back-story like Job 1–2 in which God allowed a *satan* to put David to the test.

This *satan* does not tempt Joshua to sin (cf. David in 1 Chr. 21), nor does he torment him to put him to a test (Job). The *satan* here brings an accusation against the human Joshua in God's heavenly court. The accusation brings the situation to a head so that there is a resolution. Filthy Joshua is cleansed.

3:2 / "The LORD rebuke you": If the quoted request is a jussive verb form, "May the Lord rebuke you," it is illogical to have God make a request of God. One possible emendation, based on the Syriac, resolves this difficulty by changing the identity of the speaker to "the angel/messenger of the Lord." The grammatical conflict resulting from God speaking about God in the third person is still present, but less acute, if the verb is read as an indicative, "The Lord will rebuke you." An instantaneous perfect would be expected, "I hereby rebuke you."

§11 Vision Report: Golden Oil (Zech. 4:1–14)

4:1 / An interval during which Zechariah was not alert ends when **the angel who talked with** him **returned and wakened** him. After his experience in the divine council Zechariah had not been asleep, but the angel/messenger had to rouse him forcibly, **as a man is wakened from his sleep.**

4:2–5 / In this fifth vision, Zechariah saw **a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top.** Excavations have discovered pottery versions of this sort of lamp stand in which a tubular base supports a reservoir of oil. The rim of this bowl holds **seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights.** The lamps were small bowls, with spouts for the wicks pinched in their rims. (The familiar seven-armed menorah has a very different shape.) There were **two olive trees, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.** This is a formal arrangement that gives prominence to the lamp stand with its seven times seven flames. Zechariah inquires of the angel/messenger, **"What are these, my lord?"** As we will see again in Zechariah 7–8, a series of oracles intervenes between the question and its logical answer in verse 10b. The angel/messenger gives Zechariah messages for Zerubbabel (vv. 6–7) and the people (vv. 8–10a).

4:6–7 / Zerubbabel, the civilian leader of the community and its temple-building efforts, receives a personal word of encouragement from God, **"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty.** "Might" (*khayil*) is a human attribute with a wide range of meanings, including wealth and military force. The wealth of other nations had not begun to flow to Jerusalem as Haggai had promised (Hag. 2:6–9; reiterated in Zech. 14:4), although the Persians had provided support for the building project. The Jews in Yehud had no army. The contrast with Solomon's circumstances is striking. Solomon's treasuries overflowed with gold and other precious objects, and his army had been equipped with the most up-to-date arms and chariotry (1 Kgs. 10:14–29). In spite of his poverty and powerlessness, however, Zerubbabel would be able to complete the task by the power of God's spirit. The possession of wealth and physical power is a strong temptation to forget God, and even to

think of oneself as god (Deut. 8:10–18; Gen. 11:1–9). God's people must remember the Lord, "who gives you the ability (*koakh*) to produce wealth (*khayil*)" (Deut. 8:18). The Lord's word to Zerubbabel strips things down to their source, the divine spirit, by whom the Lord created (Job 26:13; Ps. 33:6), saved (Exod. 15:8, 10), brought judgment (Job 15:30; Isa. 27:8), guided kings (1 Chr. 28:12; cf. Isa. 30:1), and inspired prophets (Neh. 9:30; Ezek. 11:24; 37:1; Zech. 7:12). To complete his task Zerubbabel had to rely on power from the Lord, not on resources from any human source.

The second word is an announcement of judgment against enemies that functions as encouragement for Zerubbabel and the temple-builders. This word addresses **O mighty mountain,** a symbol of all types of opposition to the temple-building project. The people of Yehud were reluctant to work (Hag. 2:1–5), and the neighboring peoples attempted to put a stop to the building (Ezra 4:1–5, 24). **Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground,** God's word tells the opposition. The removal of a mountain of difficulties is a powerful image of salvation (as in Isa. 40:4; 41:15; 49:11). The final victory will be the completion of the temple. Zerubbabel **will bring out the capstone** of the temple in a ceremony of completion, accompanied by shouts of prayer and praise.

4:8–10 / The third short message God gives to Zechariah to deliver to the people reiterates the previous one in plain language. What Zerubbabel had begun, **his hands will also complete.** Zerubbabel accomplished his work on the structure within the period of Zechariah's ministry. Audiences of the book knew that the second temple had been completed by 516 B.C., a fact that lent authority to the rest of Zechariah's message. When his audience witnesses the fulfillment of this specific promise, they **will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.** People would recognize Zechariah as a true prophet by the standards of Deuteronomy 18, just as the former prophets had been vindicated (Zech. 1:6). "Heed him" was God's command concerning the messages such a prophet brought.

The modest dimensions and decor of this temple disappointed some people. They were **small things** when compared with the memories of the first temple built by Solomon. Others may have disapproved of Zerubbabel's leadership. Zechariah promises a change of heart. They **will rejoice when they see** the stone **in the hand of Zerubbabel.** The NIV interprets this stone (*ha'eben habbedil*) as a **plumb line.** This is a tool for building, not one that is used at the end of the project. If it was a plumb line, then the rejoicing would have been over progress

made, not to celebrate the end of the job. A completion stone was part of an ancient Near Eastern ceremony that marked the transformation of a temple from building project to sanctuary.

An explanation of **These seven** may mark the return to the vision of the lamp stand. The seven lamps are **the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth.** Persian emperors had officials who bore the title, "Eye of the King." The light from the seven lamps enhances the symbolism that nothing is hidden from the Lord's sight. Second Chronicles 16:9 echoes this idea, "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." Nothing on earth escapes God's notice or authority. There is a second interpretation that fits the arrangement of the text. Zechariah 3:9 describes a strange stone with seven "eyes," set before Joshua the high priest in the temple. Perhaps that is the stone that Zerubbabel sets in its ceremonial position. If so, the stone has two sets of symbolism—the seven fountains (*ʿenayim*) that remove sin, and the seven eyes (*ʿenayim*) that comprehend and rule the earth.

4:11–14 / Zechariah questions the angel/messenger again and asks about the trees, **"What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?"** A second question focuses on the **branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil.** His queries provide more details of the vision. The extraordinary sight calls for unusual words. The Hebrew word translated "branches" does not name part of a tree anywhere else. It is a word for a head of grain, as in Pharaoh's dream (Gen. 41), so it focuses attention on the olives themselves. Bypassing the olive oil manufacturing process, golden liquid flows directly from the trees, through the golden pipes, to empty out into the reservoir of the lamp stand. Imagine the brilliance of seven (or seven times seven) flames reflected by the liquid gold in the bowl and the golden lamp stand itself.

The angel/messenger identifies the two trees or, more specifically, the two olive branches, as "the two sons of freshly pressed oil." Fresh oil (יצהר, *yitshar*), grain, and new wine are the basic agricultural products that God gives Israel from the land (Deut. 7:13; Hos. 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24). The people tithed these products (Deut. 12:17; 14:23; Neh. 10:38), stored them at the temple (Neh. 10:40), and gave them to support the priests and Levites (Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4). The Persian emperor also required that the people pay taxes in produce and in silver. Part of these taxes supported the local governor (Neh. 5:15). In times of drought the people had to borrow money or sell their children as debt

slaves in order to pay (Neh. 5:3–5). Nehemiah led a campaign to abolish usury. He persuaded the nobles and officials who had loaned money at interest to pay back the "hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil" (Neh. 5:11).

"Sons of freshly pressed oil" stops short of interpreting either tree as a symbol of the Messiah, although this is a traditional understanding of this vision, found in the NIV's **anointed ones.** This kind of new oil (*yitshar*) is never used for anointing kings or priests in the OT. (Neither the verb *mshkh,* "anoint," nor the noun *mashiakh,* "anointed one, messiah," appear in this passage.) In context, the two olive trees stand for the high priest and the civilian authority. Joshua and Zerubbabel filled these positions during Zechariah's ministry. Like the olive tree in Jotham's fable (Judg. 9:9), they did important things for **the Lord of all the earth,** but neither one of them became king. This title for the Lord (*'adon kol ha'arets*) is rare in the OT, but it is always associated with victory over enemies (Josh. 3:11; Ps. 97:5; Mic. 4:13; Zech. 6:5).

This vision report ends with a view of the future. The temple lamp stand is a sign of the presence of the Lord, who will bring the promise to fruition. Zechariah's vision moves the marker of God's presence in the temple out into public view. Incense burned in the holy place, but there was no ark of the covenant in the holy of holies. On the lamp stand, however, were flame and light in full view in the temple courts. The tithes and offerings of the community, given under the leadership of the high priest and the Jewish civilian authority, keep this flame of hope alive. Their gifts and payments from the bounty of the land are expressions of gratitude to and acknowledgment of the Lord. Israel's past unfaithfulness had resulted from, or consisted in, forgetting that the Lord was the one "who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil (*yitshar*)" (Hos. 2:8), and the produce of the land had been lost in the judgment (Hag. 1:11; Deut. 28:51). Tithes and offerings are also evidence of the promised productivity of the land after the people returned from exile:

> They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
> they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—
> the grain, the new wine and the oil,
> the young of the flocks and herds.
> They will be like a well-watered garden,
> and they will sorrow no more. (Jer. 31:12; cf. Hos. 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24)

The dynamic relationship of lamps, trees, and new oil in this vision symbolizes the dynamic of the temple service at the center of the postexilic community. God blesses the people with grain, wine, and oil which they bring as tithes and

offerings. The flowing gold represents these gifts. The lamp stand represents the temple building, and the trees are the leaders who funnel the people's tithes to the lamp. The second temple structure, the two leaders, and the people's contributions will function together in obedience to God's will so "that I may dwell among them" (see also the wilderness tabernacle, Exod. 25:8).

Additional Notes §11

4:7 / God bless it! God bless it! The NRSV clarifies the Heb. text, *khen khen lah,* translating it "Grace, grace to it!" as a petition to God to show favor to the rebuilt temple.

4:9 / The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation: Ezra 3:2–8 and Hag. 1:14–15 confirm this statement, but Ezra 5:16 attributes the laying of the foundation to Sheshbazzar. Since ancient times Sheshbazzar has been identified as the same person as Zerubbabel (see Josephus, *Ant.* 11:1.3).

4:12 / Branches: The "branches" of the olives are *shibbale.* This unusual word choice may call to mind the very similar word *shibboleth,* "flowing stream." This pun anticipates the pipes for liquid oil that seem to connect the trees to the lamp stand.

4:14 / In the NIV **to serve** certainly suits the interpretation of the trees as Joshua and Zerubbabel. This combination of the preposition *ʿal* and the verb *ʿmd* (*qal* active participle), however, does not mean "serve." The trees were "the ones standing by" or "over" the lamp stand.

§12 Vision Report: A Flying Scroll (Zech. 5:1–4)

5:1 / Zechariah continues the description of his visions with an account of the next thing he saw, **I looked again—and there before me was a flying scroll!** He does not mention any winged bearers (as he does in the following vision), nor is the scroll itself said to have wings—he does not specify the means of locomotion. The image calls to mind flying carpets, undulating through the air. As impressive as the Persian road system was, a flying scroll could move more quickly than any mounted messenger. And this scroll came from the Lord.

5:2 / The interpreting angel/messenger is still present, and he asks Zechariah to say out loud what he sees. The prophet's answer gives the exact dimensions of the scroll (information that one would expect to hear from the angel/messenger). **"I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide."** What did the flying scroll look like? Calling the object a scroll implies that it was still, or had been, rolled up. Its length, twenty cubits or thirty feet, is comparable to the length of the oldest known scroll of a biblical book, the Isaiah scroll from Qumran. The height of the scroll, ten cubits or fifteen feet, is far out of proportion to the eleven-inch height of the Isaiah scroll, however. There are two possibilities for what Zechariah saw. Meyers and Meyers calculate that a long scroll that was partially unrolled, as it would be for reading, would have a profile with a width twice as long as it was high (*Haggai, Zechariah 1–8,* p. 282). If this is the nature of the visionary document, then it is probably a giant scroll of the Law. The book of the Law found in the temple in Josiah's day was a scroll, and it was read aloud to the community (2 Kgs. 23:2). Two generations later, Ezra read the scroll of the Law to the assembled community (Ezra 8).

A single sheet that had been rolled for storage could be called a scroll (*megillah*) when unrolled. Royal decrees from the Persian court that are quoted in the OT could easily fit on a single sheet. Zechariah's audience may have been accustomed to seeing such documents and hearing them read. The visionary document is enormous, of course, but it could be a giant single sheet. The proportions, two to one, are close to the proportions of the Nash Papyrus, a single sheet containing the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2–17) and the Shema

(Deut. 6:4–5). (Both 1QIsa[a] and the Nash Papyrus have been dated 150–100 B.C.)

The vision report does not mention wings on the scroll, but the iconography of seals from Judah suggests this third possibility. One variation of the two-winged sun disc motif typical of Iron Age seals and stamps lacks the fine interior details of the circle of the sun with rays emanating above and below. It looks, instead, like the outline of a rolled scroll with wings attached at the middle. It is impossible to know, however, whether Zechariah or anyone in his audience would have thought of this design as a flying scroll.

The scroll in Zechariah's vision differs from known ancient examples in that it is apparently written on both sides (**on one side . . . on the other**), like the scroll that Ezekiel ate (Ezek. 2:10, *panim we'akhor*). Ezekiel's double-sided scroll was full of lamentation, mourning, and woe. Zechariah's scroll carried a curse.

The measurements of the visionary scroll correspond to specific features of Solomon's temple. The profile of the pair of cherubim overlooking the ark of the covenant was thirty feet wide and fifteen feet high (1 Kgs. 6:23–28). A feature of the temple more familiar to the average worshipper was the *'ulam,* the portico just outside the holy place (1 Kgs. 6:3). The scroll dimensions are identical to the dimensions of the porch of Solomon's temple. Perhaps this part of the temple provided background for the vision. The porch marked the boundary between the parts of the temple complex that were accessible to everyone (the courts) and the indoor spaces to which only the priests were admitted (the holy place and holy of holies). The scroll and the sworn curse that it contained also marked a boundary. Those who violated the terms written on the scroll were outside the community. The portico is also historically related to covenants and curses. The pillar next to which King Josiah stood as he read the book of the covenant was probably one of the pillars on the temple porch (2 Kgs. 23:1–3). There he led the people to renew "the covenant written in this book."

5:3 / This is the curse that is going out over the whole land, or earth. Zechariah and his audience may have been aware of readings of the scroll of the Law during the last years of the kingdom of Judah. Josiah's first public reading had taken place a century earlier (2 Kgs. 23; 621 B.C.), and the practice may have continued under his successors. The flight of the scroll that is a curse over all the land or earth addresses the question of the "reach" of the written covenant. It is not limited to the residents of Jerusalem but is powerful throughout the earth. The Hebrew word translated "land" also means "earth" (*'arets*), especially in this phrase, "the face of the whole earth." The flight of the scroll indicates that the

curse can travel great distances, even to Jews living in Diaspora throughout the empire. The enormous size of this scroll suggests that the writing upon it was also huge, so as to be legible from a distance (see Hab. 2:2). Neither Zechariah nor the angel read from the scroll, however. The angel/messenger identifies its function as a "curse," and so it was not necessary to "read the fine print" in order to understand how the document worked.

This type of curse was familiar to the first hearers and readers of this vision report. According to 1 Kings 8:31–32, a person suspected of harming a neighbor would take an oath (*'alah*) of innocence before the altar in the temple. This oath put the person under a curse. If he or she was guilty, God would bring the curse into effect. If innocent, the suspect would not be hurt. Lacking witnesses, this was the only way to decide the case. Deuteronomy 29:19–21 describes the effectiveness of the *'alah* curse to single out a person who pretends to be part of the people of Israel but worships other gods. This curse can refer to a legal method for bringing justice against an unknown person. An *'alah* placed on an unknown person who had stolen silver brought the thief out into the open (Judg. 17:2). Numbers 5:11–31 describes a more complicated version of this procedure as a way of resolving suspicion against a wife suspected of adultery. The priest puts the woman under an oath (Num. 5:21), but the oath is also written down and then the ink washed off to become one of the ingredients in a potion that she must drink (Num. 5:23). If she is guilty, the curse (*'alah*) enters her body and destroys it in a way analogous to the curse entering the thief's house and destroying it (as here in Zech. 5:4). To swear an oath of innocence when one is, in fact, guilty, is to swear falsely.

A person or a group of people would also swear an oath, and thereby put themselves under the sanction of an *'alah,* when they entered into a covenant agreement with others or with God. If they violated the terms to which they had sworn compliance, then God would bring the curse into effect against them because they had sworn falsely. The people of Israel who renewed the covenant commitment in Moab (Deut. 29:9–15), and who made a covenant to keep the Law's commands in fifth-century Jerusalem (Neh. 10:28–39), took such oaths.

Theft and false swearing ripped apart the social fabric of the community. They deprived people of their means of livelihood and life directly, by theft, or indirectly, by false testimony. Human judges made decisions in court on the basis of eyewitness testimony. Perjury undermined justice. Only God could read the hearts of the perjurers and expose them. Here in Zechariah, verse 3 describes the delay of this justice. Thieves have sworn oaths of innocence and been cleared

because no curse from God fell on them immediately.

5:4 / The Lord promises that justice will be restored. **"I will send it out** [the curse], **and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely. . . ."** God will single out and remove the violators of two basic stipulations of the covenant. The Lord will punish the guilty for the benefit of the community as a whole. Thieves and perjurers, together with idolaters, adulterers, and murderers, must be excluded from standing in the Lord's house and saying, "We are safe" (Jer. 7:9–11). **It** [the curse] **will remain in his house and destroy it, both its timbers and its stones.** The specific judgment on houses may indicate that real estate had been stolen. Deuteronomy 19:19 specifies this punishment for lying witnesses—do to them what they had planned to do to the one they accused. Who was entitled to the land? Had those who were never exiled stolen it from the absent exiles? Did some of the returnees who sued to take back land actually commit theft by swearing falsely? Leviticus 19:11–12 groups the commands "Do not steal" and "Do not swear falsely by my name" together. The latter violation is an example of "profaning the name of your God." Other sins that profane the Lord's name are punishable by death. They include idolatry (Ezek. 20:39), sacrificing one's children to Molech (Lev. 18:21; 20:3), and reneging on one's oath to keep the covenant law (Jer. 34:16).

Zechariah and his audience would have been aware of written communications from the king that traveled swiftly from the capital via the Persian "pony express" (see Esth. 3:13–15; 8:10, 14). The edicts of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes cited in Ezra and Nehemiah would have traveled by this means. God's written communication travels faster in this vision than any royal edict. While the audience sees the Persian king's edicts that exert power over their lives, this vision report reminds them of the authority of God's word and its "reach" into the secret places of people's homes and hearts.

Additional Notes §12

5:3 / Banished: The NIV's translation expresses a unique meaning for the *nipʿal* of the verb *nqh,* "be cleaned out, purged." Isaiah 3:26 is only somewhat similar. When Jerusalem is cleaned out the place remains, but its inhabitants have been removed. In the NIV's interpretation of this verse, the people who are cleaned out "from here/there" (*mizzeh*) are themselves removed, cut off, or "banished." The advantage of the NIV's interpretation is that it tells us what will happen to the perpetrators before their houses are destroyed.

An almost opposite meaning is possible and likely. According to this interpretation, this verse describes the miscarriage of justice that the scroll's action will set right. "Every thief is innocent of this [*mizzeh,* i.e., the activity of thieving or of swearing falsely] according to it [the procedures of the *ʾalah* in the scroll]." The verdict is *nqh,* "innocent." Thieves and false witnesses have "gotten away with" their crimes under the method set out in torah. In v. 4 God renews the commitment to enforcing oaths and announces that the curse will now come into effect. The curse will enter the houses of thieves and those who swear falsehoods and it will destroy them. This alternate interpretation does not reveal what happens to the people. Do they escape, or do we assume that they are crushed inside their falling houses?

On one side . . . on the other: *Mizzeh* occurs twice, in successive, parallel sentences. Double occurrences in the same sentence with reference to inscriptions on tablets mean "on one side" and "on the other side." The NIV interprets this verse in the same way. The giant flying scroll has writing about thieves on one side and about swearers of falsehoods on the other.

The commentary above, however, follows another interpretation. The verb *nqh*, in the *nipʿal* with the preposition *min,* means "innocent of" guilt, which is the object of *min.* The antecedents of the two demonstrative pronouns (*zeh*) are the guilt of theft and swearing falsely.

§13 Vision Report: Evil Exported in a Measuring Basket (Zech. 5:5–11)

5:5–6 / The interpreting angel/messenger calls Zechariah's attention to the next visionary object and tells him to **"Look up and see what this is that is appearing."** It is "coming out" (*yts'*, NIV "appearing"*),* like the flying scroll (v. 3, NIV "going out") and the four chariots (6:1), but we do not know its origin. The temple is the most likely point of origin for all of these objects. Zechariah does not report what he sees; he simply asks, **"What is it?"** The angel's first answer is too simple, **"It is a measuring basket."** Zechariah could have recognized this very ordinary item, a basket or vessel of a size that would hold an ephah of dry material, such as grain or flour. The angel's second answer reveals what is special about this particular container—**"This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land."** "Iniquity" means sin, the special nuance of this word being the residue of guilt and uncleanness after a crime has been punished or a wrong has been righted, and it also means punishment. Old Testament narrative and prayer depict the burden of iniquity in every sense (e.g., Gen. 4:13; Ps. 38:17–18). Divine action in 3:4 had removed the iniquity from Joshua the high priest. This vision reassures the prophet's audience that iniquity can, and will, be removed from the people also. "The land" (*ha'arets*) also means "the earth." This vision might also address a concern for the atonement of members of the houses of Judah and of Israel throughout the Diaspora. Only God can remove "their iniquity" in "all the earth."

5:7–8 / The next scene in the vision reveals the contents of the ephah container. First, there is a **cover of lead,** a *kikkar,* an ingot weighing a talent. In the next verse (8) the same object is called a "stone of lead" (NIV "lead cover"). "Stone" (*'eben*) is also a weight. When the cover **was raised** from **the basket,** the prophet saw that **in the basket sat a woman!** Here the realistic ephah-sized basket or jar transmutes to the unrealistic, fantastic possibilities of the visionary experience. An adult woman, even one from the sixth century B.C., would not fit inside a vessel of this size (a bushel, more or less). But this is not a human being. It is a personification of wickedness. The interpreting angel/messenger **said,**

"This is wickedness." "Wisdom" and "folly" are familiar female personifications of abstract concepts (e.g., Prov. 8–9), but this is the only female personification of wickedness (*rishʿah*) in the OT. Each of these Hebrew nouns is feminine in gender, accounting for the gender of the personification.

The personification of wickedness may be depicted as an idol, seated on a throne, rather than as a human being. An idol could fit in an ephah-sized container, and the actions in verse 11 are appropriate for handling an idol. Calling a female idol "wickedness" would be analogous to referring to Baal as "shame" (e.g., Hos. 9:10; Jer. 11:13). The Hebrew noun *rishʿah* is nearly an anagram of *ʾashera.* First Kings 23:7 describes women weaving houses for the goddess Asherah. The ephah could have been a woven basket. Worship of the Queen of Heaven (possibly Asherah) is one example of the people's preexilic wickedness. Jeremiah 44 gives a unique glimpse of Queen of Heaven theology about the Babylonian conquest and the reasons why some people returned to worshipping her after 587 B.C. The interpreting angel/messenger throws the **lead** stone (NIV "cover") on **its** (fem. sg.) **mouth** (v. 8). This may be an allusion to and reversal of the Mesopotamian ceremony in which the mouth of a newly-made idol is "opened" to qualify it for cultic service. The removal of *ʾasherim* was an essential aspect of the religious reforms of Asa (1 Kgs. 15:13), Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:4), and Josiah (2 Kgs. 23:4, 6, 7, 14, 15).

Idolatry is certainly wickedness, but it would be a mistake to limit the interpretation of this vision to this sin alone. Nowhere else in the OT is an idol, or an *asherah,* called a "woman" (*ʾishah*). If the ephah container is large enough to contain a woman, then it is much larger than a customary ephah and its cover would be larger than a talent. This exaggerated size may point to another example of wickedness—inaccurate weights and measures (e.g., Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:15; Ezek. 10, 11; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10). Individuals and governments cheat and oppress people by making them pay with a heavy weight or an enlarged measure. In the OT, "wickedness" (*rishʿah*) is a broad term, designating a person or nation that has rebelled against the full range of the Lord's laws and statutes (e.g., Ezek. 5:4). The interpreting angel/messenger "casts away" (NIV "pushed back"; the *hipʿil* of *shlk*) wickedness. The subject of this verb is in control, and, by this action, disposes of something that is almost always passive (e.g., corpses, a millstone, illicit altars). It is an appropriate term for sending away the ephah container of wickedness with its lead weight **cover.**

Zechariah's audiences would have known ephah-sized containers of grain because they held tithes and offerings stored at the temple, as well as taxes and

tribute that were sent to the emperor. During Nehemiah's governorship in the mid-fifth century, the people of Yehud complained of the burden of taxation. Taxes were collected in kind, both grain and wine (Neh. 5:4), from which the governor took his due before sending the collection on to the king. Nehemiah, out of love for God and compassion for the Jews, reduced taxes by not collecting the portion to which he was entitled (Neh. 5:14–19). In the sixth century, the Persian kings allowed some of the region's grain tribute to be assigned to the builders of the temple in Jerusalem. The metal cover for the container is also connected to the payment of taxes and tribute. The term *kikkar* referred to the ingots of silver and gold collected by the imperial treasury.

This vision report could have given the people a powerful imaginative tool. Haggai s prophecy of the wealth of nations pouring into the temple (Hag. 2:6–9) contrasted sharply with the reality of having to send their wealth to the emperor. As readers observed the discouraging parade of taxes and tribute being collected and sent to the imperial capital, this vision would remind them to think of it as something good—wickedness was being removed from the community. The talent of lead, rather than silver, was a way to visualize the payment of taxes as a trick played on the Persian powers. Lead is the base metal from which silver is extracted. Imagine sending the king a plug talent!

5:9 / The scene changes and Zechariah reports, **I looked up—and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork** and so were not human women. The Hebrew word for stork, *khasidah,* looks like a feminine form of the adjective *khasid,* "kind." Storks migrate each year between eastern Africa and Europe, where they hatch their young. Their path takes them north through the land of Israel in the spring. Thus they appear annually to be traveling the route to Mesopotamia and the Persian capitals east of there. (In order to go around the Arabian Desert one went north from Jerusalem, and then followed the Euphrates toward the southeast.) These combination creatures used their wings and **lifted up the basket between heaven and earth** to carry it away.

The two stork-winged women create a complex image, both positive and negative. From the perspective of the first scene of the vision they serve God by removing iniquity from the people and the land. Like the Lord's horses and chariots in the first and last vision reports, they are able to travel far abroad on the earth. The wind, which belongs to the Lord, carries them on their way. Like the cherubim, which carry Yahweh, or Yahweh's glory, in Psalm 18:10 and

Ezekiel 10, the stork-winged women move by means of their wings and carry something. In the final scene of this vision report (v. 11), however, the stork-winged women set the basket of wickedness in place to be worshipped. How could creatures that serve the Lord prepare a temple for an image?

5:10–11 / When Zechariah asks, **"Where are they taking the basket?"** the interpreting angel/messenger describes the third scene to him. It will take place in the land of "Shinar" (NIV margin). This is an ancient name for the Mesopotamian heartland, the location of Nimrod's kingdom (Gen. 10:10) and the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:2). It functions as an alternate name for **the country of Babylonia,** the area from which most of the returned exiles had come. The stork-winged women will bring wickedness-in-a-basket there **to build a house for it.** The house will be a temple. **When it is ready, the basket will be set there in its place,** or on its base, like the bases of the lavers in Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 7:27) and the base of the altar built under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:3).

The final scene continues the ridicule of imperial power and priorities, but the removal-of-iniquity theme is no longer present. In the implied comparison between the temple-building projects in Jerusalem and Shinar, the cult of the woman in the basket falls far short. The stork-winged women are the "economy" alternative to the cherubim. Their departure from Jerusalem carrying the ephah container is a shadow of the movement of Yahweh's Glory on the cherubim throne in Ezekiel's visions (Ezek. 1–3, 8–11). Personified wickedness departs in a small container made of reeds (or clay). In Shinar the people are experimenting with religious structures again (see Gen. 11:1–9), while in Jerusalem the ancient house of the Lord is being rebuilt in the chosen city. In Shinar they will worship the personification of wickedness contained in a grain basket covered with a lead ingot. They will set up a sign of their greed and oppressive power as an idol. These things have no place in the temple of the Lord of all the earth.

Additional Notes §13

5:6 / Iniquity follows the Septuagint reading. The MT has "eye," which the NIV margin interprets as "appearance." The two words differ in only one consonant (*ʿyn,* "eye," versus *ʿwn,* "iniquity"). Wickedness is revealed as the contents of the ephah in the next verse, so the reading *ʿwn* could be the result of an assimilation of ideas. On the other hand, forms of *ʿyn* occur frequently in Zechariah, often in unexpected contexts.

Of the people: The NIV interprets the third masculine plural possessive suffix on "iniquity" as referring to the people. This vision report may be closely related to the previous one, however. The antecedent of this suffix could be the thieves and swearers of falsehoods in vv. 1–4.

5:7–8 / Does this personification of wickedness as a woman mean that women are evil or the source of evil? No. This passage does not make a reasoned argument to this effect. Images are powerful, however. The personification of folly in Prov. 9 is also negative, but it is balanced in the same chapter by the woman of wisdom personification. There is no corresponding good female image in Zechariah, not even Jerusalem or Judah as "virgin daughter." All of the wicked people in the book are males or groups of mixed gender, and Zechariah does not portray the people or the city of Jerusalem as an adulterous wife (cf. Hos. 1–3; Ezek. 16; 23). These factors minimize the negative view of women in particular that may derive from the personification.

5:9 / The information about the migratory route of white storks was found online at: http://storks.poland.pl/about_stork/article,White_ Stork_migration_routes,id,234996.htm (accessed March 5, 2009).

§14 Vision Report: Four Winds and God's Spirit (Zech. 6:1–8)

6:1–3 / **Again,** and for the last time in this book, Zechariah reports that he **looked up.** He saw **four chariots,** each pulled by **horses** of a different color —**red, black, white,** and **dappled.** As in the first vision of red, brown, and white horses (1:8), there is no reason to think that the colors are individually symbolic. The variety of colors emphasizes the owner's wealth. In the ancient world, kings and emperors owned chariots and used them to exert their military power in war and their authority over conquered territory. These horses and chariots suited their purpose, for **all of them** were **powerful.** Israel's most powerful enemies had used chariots against them—Egypt (Exod. 14:25; 15:4) and the Canaanites at Hazor (Josh. 11:6, 9) and Tabor (Judg. 4:5; 5:28). Kings of Israel and Judah had owned chariots, but in postexilic Yehud the only chariots belonged to the Persian emperors.

6:4–5 / Zechariah's vision report gives his audience a different way of thinking about the Persian horses and chariots. The Lord has chariots, too (e.g., Hab. 3:8; Isa. 66:15). In Zechariah's vision the horses emerge **from between two mountains—mountains of bronze** (v. 1). These two peaks may be the heavenly counterparts of the bronze pillars that flanked the entrance to the holy place in Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 7:15–22). The angel/messenger identifies the visionary horses and chariots as **the four winds of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world** (earth). They had stood at attention (*ytsb*) there, presenting themselves as God's servants (see Deut. 31:14; Josh. 24:1). The Lord's authority extends throughout the whole earth, and even the winds are divine emissaries.

6:6–7 / The horses in the vision are eager to set forth, and they obey God's command with alacrity, **So they went throughout the earth.** The angel/messenger's interpretation describes the direction of their movement. There are four directions for the winds to blow, but from Jerusalem there are only two directions in which it is practical for chariots to travel in order to reach

the rest of the world. To the east is the desert and to the west is the sea. One chariot, **the one with the dappled horses,** is going **toward the south—**the way to Egypt. **The one with the black horses is going toward the north country.** Judah's conquerors came from the land of the north (Jer. 10:22), and united Judah and Israel will return from there (Jer. 3:18; 23:8). **The one with the white horses** went after them, also going to the land of the north.

6:8 / The land of the north was the location of exile and the homeland of Jerusalem's conquerors. The arrival of God's chariots of wind demonstrates the exercise of divine authority. One day the Lord's word will rest upon Damascus (Zech. 9:1). In distant lands the Lord's people will remember and return (Zech. 10:9). One day the Lord will be king over the whole earth (Zech. 14:9). God's word about the northbound chariots here anticipates all of these promises. They **have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.** The Lord's power and purpose will meet no further opposition. The peace that God brings will replace the quiet imposed by imperial oppression (Zech. 1:11).

Additional Notes §14

6:6 / Toward the west: The MT, however, has the preposition *'akhar* with the third masculine plural pronominal suffix, "after them." *'Akhar* alone, without a suffix, is the word for "west" or "westward."

6:6–7 / There are 4 chariots in v. 2, but in these verses there are only 3, and they go in only 2 directions—north and south. Scholars have proposed various complicated and ingenious emendations in order to restore 4 chariots and 4 directions. This is not necessary. A vision may combine a schematic picture and realistic geography. Four directions represent the whole earth, but north and south are the only practical directions for travel from Jerusalem to other lands. Compare this with Ezek. 47:13–48:29, where the boundaries between the tribal territories are east-west parallel lines but the borders of the country follow the actual topographical features.

§15 A Prophetic Sign-Act: A Crown for Joshua (Zech. 6:9–15)

The sequence of vision reports and oracles ends with the report of a symbolic action, the crowning of the Branch. Zechariah's instructions from the Lord are somewhat like the commands to Samuel and to Elisha's unnamed colleague to anoint kings. There were long waiting periods after the anointing of David and Jehu (1 Sam. 16:1–13; 2 Kgs. 9:1–13) before these chosen men were able to take their thrones (2 Sam. 5:1–5; 2 Kgs. 10:18–36). The delay in Zechariah's case will be much longer. He crowns a proxy rather than the new king himself. The priests who worked with Joshua have been called "men symbolic of things to come," of the coming of the Branch (3:8). In Zechariah's sign-act the high priest himself is the sign of the Branch and of the priest who will sit on the throne (6:13). The report of this prophetic sign-act and word from the Lord addresses the people's questions about unfulfilled hopes.

The people of Zechariah's audience were looking for the restoration of the king in David's line. When it did not occur in the sixth century B.C., questions remained—"How long?" and "Will God ever fulfill the promises?" Persistent questions are a way of maintaining faith.

6:9–11 / God commands Zechariah to perform a sign-act with the cooperation of several individuals in Jerusalem. (See also the account in Jer. 32 of Jeremiah's purchase of his cousin's field. He hires Baruch the scribe and several other men witness the transaction.) **"Take silver and gold from the exiles Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah, who have arrived from Babylon."** These men had been born in the land of captivity and returned to Jerusalem bearing evidence of the Lord's blessings and the exiles' enduring hope and faith. First, these men have testimony names, indicating their parents' faith. Tobijah means "the Lord is good" and Jedaiah means "the Lord knows." Second, these men represent returned exiles who support the restoration of worship at the temple. Furthermore, they returned with gold and silver. The Persian authorities permitted the Jews to bring gold, silver, and other valuables to help to build the temple (Ezra 1:4–6). In fact, their non-Jewish neighbors were to provide these

materials, as the Egyptians had given gold, silver, and clothing to the departing Israelites (Exod. 12:35–36). These exiles began to fulfill the prophecy in Zechariah 2:9, "their slaves will plunder them," as they brought a sample of the great quantities of gold and silver that will flow from the nations to Jerusalem (Zech. 14:14).

After assembling the people and the raw materials, Zechariah is to **"Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak."** This two-part crown (see additional note, below) will be placed on one head as a sign of the king and priest to come (v. 13). **Josiah, son of Zephaniah,** is apparently the smith who actually made the crown, and the symbolic coronation of Joshua may have taken place in his house with Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah as witnesses. No living person was made king by this act, and a public ceremony could have been interpreted as political rebellion against the empire.

6:12–13 / A word from the Lord customarily addressed the newly-installed king in the second person, as in Psalm 2:7b–9. Zechariah's installation oracle is in the third person—**"Here is the man whose name is the Branch"**—because Joshua was not himself the king; he was a performer in the sign-act. The title, "Branch" (*tsemakh),* was familiar from Zechariah 3:8 and the portrayals of the Messiah's reign in Isaiah 4:2–6 and Jeremiah 23:5–6, of "a King who will reign wisely" so that "Judah will be saved" and "Israel will live in safety." This title is also part of a play on words describing the vital growth of the Branch's authority, **he will branch out** (*yitsmakh*) **from his place** where **he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne.**

The Branch to come will also **build the temple** (*hekal*) **of the LORD.** This is not the temple that Zerubbabel was still in the midst of building in the second year of Darius. (Zech. 1:7 gives the date for Part Two of the book.) The Branch's temple will be built in the future. The book of Zechariah gives full credit to Zerubbabel for completing the temple, but it never identifies him as the Branch, the Messiah. He was well-qualified to be the focus for messianic hopes. He was a descendant of David and was appointed the official Persian governor. He had brought a group of exiles back from Babylon and, with Joshua, he led the rebuilding of the temple. Everything was in place, yet he was not the expected one. Surely Zerubbabel should have been the Messiah! Recent interpreters have not been immune to this impulse. Many of them have proposed that Zerubbabel was crowned in an earlier version of this sign-act and oracle but, when he did not

become king, the passage was revised. This commissioning passage does address the questions raised by unfulfilled Zerubbabel hopes. Its answer is typical of the book—the promise will be fulfilled, but not now, not yet. The present reality stands as sign and guarantee of the future fulfillment. For anyone who despised the sixth-century temple as "small things," there was a promise of a future sanctuary that would fulfill their glorious expectations, and a reiteration of the messianic promise.

A new element is present in this messianic prophecy: the priest who will be by or **on** the throne. Jeremiah 33:19–22 pairs the Branch prophecy with prophecy about the eternal line of Levitical priests. God had made, and would honor, perpetual covenants with both family lines. Psalm 110:4 designates the king in Jerusalem as "a priest forever, / in the order of Melchizedek," the ancient king and priest of Salem who blessed Abram (Gen. 14:18–20). Second Samuel 8:18 mentions at the end of a list of King David's officials that "David's sons were priests" (the NIV tries to remove the contradiction with Leviticus by translating *kohanim* as "royal advisers"). The Dead Sea Scrolls community, the *yakhad,* looked for two messiahs—one of Israel, also called the Branch of David and the Leader of the Congregation, and one Levitical, the messiah of Aaron, also called the Interpreter of the Law. In the New Testament, Jesus the Christ is a descendant of David (Matt. 1:1–17) and a priest "in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:11–17).

The ministry of Zechariah, both the prophet and the book, is to transfer, for the time being, the people's hopes for the Messiah to the completed temple and its priests. The temple is a sign, a guarantee that fulfillment had only been deferred.

6:14 / Finally, the gold and silver **crown will be given to Heldai, Tobijah, Jedaiah and Hen** to be stored in the temple **as a memorial** for the donors. The account of this sign-act and its interpretation will be remembered when anyone thinks of the gold and silver crown, worn briefly by Joshua. As a memorial to the men who returned from Babylon, the crown will suggest the following: (1) an earnest of the gold and silver of the nations that will be collected for Jerusalem; (2) a memorial in honor of Jews who returned to Jerusalem in faith and generosity; (3) a reminder that the temple priests are a sign of the Messiah to come; and (4) a tangible guarantee that God has not cancelled the promises of a glorious temple and monarchy.

6:15 / Those who are far away will come and help to build the temple of the LORD. This promise could apply to Zerubbabel's building project. It was still in process in the second year of Darius, and the three donors (Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah) who had just "arrived from Babylon" are evidence of ongoing emigration. It is more likely, however, that this promise applies to the temple-building project of the Branch. The book of Zechariah looks forward to the return of Jews descended from exiles from both the southern and northern kingdoms. It also anticipates the inclusion of Gentiles in the worship of God at Jerusalem. God's rule extends over the whole earth, so God's servants will come from afar to build the new temple under the leadership of the Branch.

God will validate Zechariah's status as true prophet when the Branch and his helpers from the four corners of the earth build this future temple. Then **you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.** These words are identical to the sentence in 4:9b. Zerubbabel's completion of the temple project in the sixth century validated the divine origin of Zechariah's prophecy—and God will validate it again. The sixth-century temple itself becomes a sign and guarantee of the temple that the Branch and his helpers will build.

The promise ends with a condition that is consistent with the message of the book: **"This will happen if you diligently obey the LORD your God."** God's will as communicated through prophets is always concerned with obedience to the enduring requirements of righteousness, justice, holiness, and compassion. For generation after generation of audiences for the Zechariah book, obedience to torah has been the way to prepare for the Branch and for the building. People who walk in their evil ways away from God will not come from far or near to help to build because they will have rebelled against the Lord of all the earth. Rebels have no place in the Lord's house.

Temple imagery is important in the NT: (1) Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," with reference to his death and resurrection (John 2:19–22); (2) Christians' bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20); (3) the NT depicts the church, including believers from all nations, as a temple, "a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Cor. 3:16–17).

Additional Notes §15

6:11 / The Heb. word for crown (*ʿateret*) is plural, but in v. 14 it is the subject of a singular verb. A plural noun in Heb. may refer to a single object that is composed of two or more parts. *Panim,* "face," is a common example. Silver and gold cannot be forged together, so the crown may have consisted of two circlets—one of silver and one of gold.

6:13 / **He will be a priest on his throne:** The NIV apparently understands the subject of this sentence to be the Branch, as in the preceding 6 clauses in vv. 12 and 13. One person will be both king and priest. This interpretation is in tension with the next sentence, **And there will be harmony between the two,** since the identities of the two are not clear. If the Branch is both king and priest, he is alone on his throne. With whom does he have peaceful dealings? The alternate interpretation finds a separate priestly figure in this verse. "There will be a priest by his throne." The Branch and the priest will join in peaceful counsel.

6:14 / It is surprising to find 2 different names in the second list of 4 exiles. The NIV's **Heldai** obscures one of these differences, where the MT has *khelem.* Here the son of Zephaniah is named **Hen,** "grace," the same word as the prayer or acclamation in Zech. 4:7. It is not unusual for a person in the OT to have more than one name. One may conclude that both verses refer to the same 4 men.

§16 Introduction to Part Three of Zechariah (Zech. 7–8)

A question about mourning the destruction of the temple introduces a series of sayings that address the present spiritual condition of the community, review the divine judgment on its ancestors, and declare God's promises of future blessings. A concentric literary framework holds these oracles together in a chronological and logical sequence that answers the practical question about religious observance and the underlying spiritual distress over the fulfillment of prophecy.

The first four elements in Zechariah 7, following the date formula, correspond in content to the final four elements of Zechariah 8, but with the order reversed. In 7:2–3 (A) a delegation arrives in Jerusalem to "entreat the LORD" and to ask a question about religious practice. God promises in 8:20–23 (A′) that many peoples will come to Jerusalem to "entreat the LORD." God gives one response to the question about the fast in 7:5–7 (B) and another in 8:18–19 (B′). Both 7:8–10 (C) and 8:16–17 (C′) give summaries of God's requirements for faithful living. God's judgment on the Israelite ancestors is the subject of 7:11–14 (D) and 8:14 (D′). This fourfold concentric frame binds together the various sayings in the two chapters and reinforces their logical connection. The whole collection of oracles in Zechariah 7–8 answers the initial question about the fast of the fifth month.

A Men coming to Jerusalem (7:1–3)
  B About fasts—what the Lord says (7:4–7)
    C What the Lord wants (7:8–10)
      D The ancestors wouldn't listen, were scattered (7:11–14)
        Five sayings: The salvation of Jerusalem (8:1–8)
        An oracle of salvation for the country (8:9–13)
      D′ The ancestors were punished (8:14–15)
    C′ What the Lord wants (8:16–17)
  B′ About fasts—what the Lord says (8:18–19)
A′ Men coming to Jerusalem (8:20–23)

In order to understand the logic of this collection one must also read it from

the perspective of the date given in 7:1. Promises that had been partially fulfilled by the fourth year of Darius are renewed for the future by reassigning them to that date. Darius's fourth year is "now," the time when God announces the plan "to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah" (8:15). This promise, and the prophecy that many foreign peoples will come to seek the Lord (8:20–23), frame the saying about fasts in 8:18–19. This arrangement implies that fasts will not become happy festivals until the nations come to Jerusalem to serve the Lord (see Zech. 14). There is no indication of how long this might take, however. The collection and arrangement of prophetic material in these chapters have opened up a period of unspecified length between the end of the 70 years of oppression and exile and the eschatological consummation of God's rule. People had hoped for this end soon after Darius's fourth year. The Lord was at work fulfilling promises and blessing the people, but the end had not arrived. God's plans have not reached their final fulfillment, but God's work has not ceased. Fulfillment is going on, but consummation is awaited. The other aspect of God's work—calling out a holy people who live justly, rightly, and compassionately—remains constant (1:3–4; 7:9–10; 8:16–17).

§17 A Query about Commemorative Fasts (Zech. 7:1–3)

7:1 / A final date formula marks the beginning of the third section of the book —**the fourth year of King Darius . . . on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev.** Twenty-three months have passed since the date in 1:7. The people have made progress on building the temple. Darius has solidified his hold over his empire.

7:2–3 / God's word comes to Zechariah in particular circumstances. **The people of Bethel had sent** several men to Jerusalem with a twofold mission. First, they were **to entreat the LORD.** One engages in entreating prayer in desperate conditions of illness (e.g., 1 Kgs. 13:6), in the face of threats from enemies (e.g., 1 Sam. 13:12; 2 Kgs. 13:4; 2 Chr. 33:12), or when fearful of God's judgment (Exod. 32:11; Jer. 26:19; Dan. 9:13)—in the hope that God will provide healing, deliverance, or relief from punishment. Second, the men brought a specific question for the priests and the prophets there. **"Should I mourn and** [consecrate myself] **in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"** The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the city and temple in the fifth month of the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs. 25:8–9), but the OT does not record a command to commemorate this day. The verb here for "consecrate" (NIV **fast**) is *nzr,* as in Nazirite (Num. 6:1–21). The answering oracle in verse 5 interprets this consecration as fasting (*tsom*). In Israel, individuals and groups initiated fasts to mourn the dead, to express repentance, and to accompany fervent prayer for deliverance. All of these elements may have been factors in the observance of "the fifth month." Nearly 70 years earlier, 80 men had traveled to Jerusalem from the ancient sanctuary towns of Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria with grain offerings and incense (Jer. 41:4–5). They had shaved off their beards, cut themselves, and put on torn clothing as expressions of mourning over the recent destruction of the temple. Their journey was an earlier example of spontaneous religious observances in response to the calamity of judgment. The five dirges in the book of Lamentations were probably composed in response to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. They include the

elements of repentance and mourning, and, implicitly, prayer for deliverance. God had promised to replace mourning with joy, and fasting with feasts. The members of this delegation were hoping to hear that the time of salvation, forgiveness, and blessing was about to begin.

The proper names in verse 2 here are significant to the message. "Bethel" had been the site of one of the illegitimate sanctuaries of the northern kingdom. Worship at Bethel and Dan was the sin that "he [Jeroboam] had caused Israel to commit" (see 2 Kgs. 13:11). It was one of the covenant violations that eventually led to the destruction of the northern kingdom. When people came from Bethel to Jerusalem to entreat the Lord and to consult the priests and prophets there, their journey was a return to the Lord. The journey, then, is emblematic of the reunion of the northern and southern Israelite tribes (Zech. 10:6–9). The two personal names, **Sharezer and Regem-Melech,** are Hebrew versions of Babylonian names. (Zerubbabel is also a Babylonian name.) They personify the return of Jews from Babylonian exile, and they anticipate the promise in 8:20–23 that people would come from afar to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

§18 A Sermon: Retrospective and Exhortation (Zech. 7:4–14)

7:4–6 / The prophet responds indirectly to the men's query by means of rhetorical questions about fasting. God instructs him to address these to **the people of the land and the priests.** Although the temple was under construction in Jerusalem in the fourth year of Darius, the city itself had few residents. Many decades later, Nehemiah still had to draft people to live there (Neh. 11:1–19). The non-priestly population needed to farm in order to support themselves and the builders.

The first question in this oracle mentions an additional fast, observed in the **seventh** month. The victorious Babylonians appointed a Jewish governor over the conquered territory (Jer. 40:5). Gedaliah ruled briefly from Mizpah, north of Jerusalem, but he was assassinated in the seventh month, following the destruction of the temple (2 Kgs. 25:25). His death brought indigenous local government in Judah to an end until the Persian period.

The people had practiced these two fasts **for the past seventy years.** The fourth year of Darius (v. 1) was almost exactly seven decades after the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, the year of Jerusalem's destruction and Gedaliah's assassination. There is more than chronological precision at stake in this comment, however.

The reference to 70 years transforms the question about religious ceremonies into a question about the fulfillment or nonfulfillment of prophecy. Two prophecies in Jeremiah assure God's people that Babylonian rule would be temporary, lasting only 70 years (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). These prophecies had focused the expectations of the people on the end of a precisely defined period of judgment. A plea from the angel of the Lord in Zechariah 1:12 indicated that the seven decades were complete, and the angel asked how long God would continue to withhold mercy. God answered with "kind and comforting words" (1:13). Daniel read Jeremiah and raised the same issue in his prayer, "O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary . . . do not delay" (Dan. 9:2, 17, 19). Daniel was given a recalculation, not 70 years but 70 weeks of years, and a series of visions of what would transpire before the Lord's final victory (Dan. 10–12). The book of

Zechariah as a whole addresses this question in three ways. First, the return from exile, the rebuilding of the temple, and the restoration of worship are already fulfilling God's words. Second, past and present fulfillments of the prophetic word reaffirm the reliability of divine promises that will only be realized in the far distant future. God is at work during the reign of Darius, but there will be many more struggles before God's reign becomes fully visible. Finally, God's will is fulfilled in the past, present, and future when the people walk in the Lord's way as revealed in torah.

As we have seen, in the fourth year of Darius Zerubbabel's governorship and the construction of the temple were well under way. Thus God had reestablished those institutions the people had been mourning by their fasts in the fifth and seventh months for the past 70 years. But the rest of the oracle does not tell the people and priests to stop. Instead, two questions ask them to reconsider the practice of fasting.

"When you fasted and mourned . . . was it really for me that you fasted?" Since God did not command these fasts, an answer of "no" may be proposed. If, however, the fasting was an expression of repentance, then the people engaged in it to indicate their sorrow for past rebellion and their return to the Lord. God here invites the people to examine their motives for an annual observance (cf. Matt. 6:16–17; a fast undertaken to gain admiration from others is illegitimate). The next question does not immediately clarify the matter. **And when you** are **eating and drinking,** are you not the ones who are eating and drinking? We can interpret the point of this tautology two ways. If the eater eats for his or her own good, then he or she may abstain from eating for God. Or, just as eating benefits the eater, so fasting affects only the one who abstains. The Law is very concerned with what Israel eats and does not eat. Both forbidden foods and required feasts set the holy people apart from other peoples. This book's eschatology is also concerned with these matters. Non-Israelites who become part of God's people will abstain from forbidden food and participate in required feasts (9:7; 14:16–19). This kind of eating and abstaining is "for the Lord." A more decisive answer to the question about fasting appears in 8:18–19. According to that word, the people will one day celebrate fasts as feasts—but not yet.

7:7a, 8–10 / The confusing questions of verses 5–6 prepare for a clear rhetorical question in verse 7: **"Are these not the words the Lord proclaimed through the earlier prophets . . . ?"** Together these three questions connect the issue of fasting to the demand for justice and compassion in verses 9–10. The

formula in verse 8, **the word of the LORD came . . . to Zechariah,** seems to separate "the words" in verse 7 from the admonitions in verses 9–10 (the NIV's **again** is not in the Heb. text). There is nothing in the earlier prophets like the questions in verses 5–6, but the words of verses 9–10 resemble summaries of torah in Isaiah 33:15; Jeremiah 7:5–6; and Ezekiel 18:5–9. Thus the third question, "Are these not the words . . . ?" (7:7), about the Lord's word through the earlier prophets, refers forward to verses 9–10 and not back to verse 6 as the NIV paragraph division implies. Therefore the oracle formula in verse 8 functions like a fanfare before the summary of the former prophets' teaching and presents this summary as a renewed word for Zechariah's audience. (NIV "again" does not appear in the Hebrew text.) This message has not changed. This passage does not repudiate the practice of fasting as decisively as Isaiah 58:1–14 does, but it ranks fasting as less important than justice and mercy. In the present time, until the day when God turns the fasts into feasts, one should be busy with doing what is good and right.

Administer true justice. A significant portion of prophetic preaching and legal material in the OT is concerned with justice within the community. Telling the truth under oath, showing no partiality in judgment, taking no bribes, and not manipulating the court system to oppress the poor are some of the specific requirements. From the lowest court at the town gate all the way up to the king's court, true justice preserves the peace and reflects the character of God, who hears the cries of the victims of injustice (e.g., Exod. 22:22, 24).

The second command is a much broader admonition: **show mercy** (*khesed*), the loyal love that should characterize relationships within the covenant, **and compassion** (*rakhamim*), the care one expresses toward a family member, exemplified by a mother's love for her child. These are qualities of God's character (e.g., Hos. 2:19; Jer. 16:5; Pss. 40:11; 103:4) that all Israelites are to show **to one another.** Mercy and compassion are more than attitudes or dispositions, they are motives for action.

The prohibitions in verse 10 give practical applications of these commands. People who demonstrate mercy and compassion to one another will not exploit the marginal members of society—**the widow, the fatherless,** and **the alien** were vulnerable when they did not belong to landholding Israelite households. The **poor** may have lost their inherited land or been on the verge of doing so. Their reduced social status threatened their access to the means of survival. The many legal protections, proverbs, and prophetic warnings in the OT like Zechariah 7:9–10 are evidence that more powerful people within Israel often defrauded and

hurt these classes of individuals (e.g., Amos 4:1). The final prohibition extends behind the actions to the desire and plans that give birth to such injustice. **"In your hearts do not think evil of each other."** Do not even think about hurting others. Occupy your mind and commit your will to live out the positive virtues of justice, mercy, and compassion.

7:7b, 11–14 / The earlier prophets had proclaimed these divine words (vv. 9–10) when times were good in Judah (v. 7b). **Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous,** free from the threat of human enemies and famine. Furthermore, **the Negev and the western foothills were settled.** The borders of Judah were at, or near, their greatest extent (see the tribal boundaries in Josh. 15). Peace and prosperity did not prompt the ancestors to grateful faithfulness, however. Their rejection of God's word was so thorough that here verses 11–12 use five different descriptions of their refusal to obey. They turned away, made their ears unresponsive, and resisted doing God's will like a draft animal resists the yoke (v. 11). They hardened their wills against God's commands (v. 12). The Lord's will had been made known to them in the law (torah) and in **the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets** (v. 12; cf. Isa. 11:2; 48:16; 61:1; Neh. 9:30). The divine source of the former prophets' message explains why the prophetic word remains effective even after the prophets who spoke them have died (Zech. 1:5–6). Ignoring God's word is infinitely worse than rejecting mere human requirements. **So the LORD Almighty was very angry.**

Stubborn resistance to God's call eventually had consequences: **"when they called, I would not listen."** Jeremiah 14:11–12 gives a specific example. The people fasted and prayed for the end of a drought, but God refused to give them relief and forbade Jeremiah to intercede. **"I scattered them with a whirlwind"** reports the fulfillment of Hosea 13:3, "they will be like . . . chaff swirling from a threshing floor." These two occurrences of the root *sʿr* are unique (one is in the *piʿel* and one is in the *puʿal*). The noun from the same root, "stormwind," occurs several times in descriptions of theophany (e.g., Zech. 9:14) and of God's wrath (e.g., Jer. 23:19). It is a fitting term for the judgment of exile and dispersion. The scattering of the people in judgment is portrayed as a great storm wind blowing them away to exile **among all the nations, where they were strangers** (lit., "they knew no one,") which implies a lack of committed relationships, not simply a shortage of acquaintances. The land that had supported a large and prosperous population (v. 7) **was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or**

go. The pleasant land, the land of Judah, was empty and dangerous. Zechariah 8:7 and 12 promise the reversal of this judgment.

Additional Notes §18

7:2–4 / The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men. Singular verbs and a compound subject raise questions about the syntax of vv. 2–4. The first verb in v. 2 (*wayyishlakh,* "he sent") is singular, as is the verb in the query brought by the delegation in v. 3 (*ʿasiti,* **I have done**). There are several masculine singular forms in the context that could be the subject. (1) We can eliminate both the Lord and Zechariah, since they answer the question. (2) There is no evidence that Darius commemorated the fall of the temple. (3) Perhaps a person named Sharezer sent Regem-Melech and his men to ask a question on Sharezer's behalf. "Bethel" is either adverbial ("from Bethel") or the first part of his name ("Bethel-Sharezer"). If the latter is the case, then the origin of the delegation isn't known. Sharezer stayed home, while Regem-Melech and his men made the trip. The *BHS* suggests emending Regem-Melech to Rab-mag (following the Syriac and the Syrohexapla), which is the title of an official known from Jer. 39:3 (NIV "high official"). Other personal names compounded with *melek* are found in the OT (e.g., Ebed-melech, Jer. 38:7). (4) The town of Bethel might be the subject of the verb, and Sharezer part of the delegation. The name of the town is grammatically singular, like the verbs, but it stands for its leadership or its inhabitants. The NIV follows this latter interpretation by translating "The people of Bethel."

§19 Five Oracles of Salvation for Jerusalem (Zech. 8:1–8)

8:1–2 / God had not abandoned desolate Judah (7:12–14). Verse 2 here echoes 1:14, **"I am very jealous for Zion."** The Lord's passionate attachment to Zion overcomes the wrath that the people's sin provoked (7:12). The nations that had been brought against Jerusalem for judgment had gone too far. "I was only a little angry, but they [the nations] added to the calamity" (1:15). God's wrath will turn against the conquerors in order to rescue Zion. **"I am burning with jealousy for her,"** God says. The final battles for Jerusalem, as portrayed in Zechariah 12 and 14, will demonstrate the Lord's zeal on Zion's behalf.

8:3 / The next oracle also echoes Zechariah 1:16, **"I will return,"** and adds the specific promise that God will **dwell in Jerusalem.** God had had the wilderness tabernacle constructed, promising that "I will dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8), and Solomon built a temple for the same purpose (1 Kgs. 8:12–13). This verse does not mention the temple. Its presence may be assumed, or this oracle may view the whole city as God's throne, as in Jeremiah 3:17.

Jerusalem-to-come has many names in the ot—for example, "the faithful city" (Isa. 1:21), and "THE LORD IS THERE" (Ezek. 48:35). **City of Truth** (*'emet*) is unique to Zechariah. This title ties together the commands to the people—"**administer true justice"** (7:9), "speak the truth to each other" (8:16), and "love truth and peace" (8:19), with God's promise, "I will be faithful (*'emet*) . . . to them as their God" (8:8). The **Holy Mountain** (or "his holy mountain") is a familiar term for the Temple Mount (e.g., Ps. 48:1). It is holy because God has chosen it, and because God's presence is there.

8:4–5 / The next saying portrays life in the city of truth: **men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets.** Peaceful conditions will make it safe and pleasant to sit outside in the public streets and squares, and for **boys and girls** to be **playing there.** The young and the very old and infirm are among the first to fall when cities are occupied and populations are deported. When families are destitute, then every member must work. God promises a restoration of ideal

circumstances from the past (**Once again**). The people who rebuild and resettle Jerusalem will grow old and will see their grandchildren. People in every generation hope to enjoy the blessings of long life and offspring. The least productive members of the household will be honored and cared for. (The elderly will even have canes.) The condition of the weakest members is a measure of the blessings that a community enjoys and the love, justice, righteousness, and mercy that they show toward one another (cf. Jesus' teaching in Matt. 25:40).

8:6 / "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" God asks Jeremiah (Jer. 32:27). The answer must be "no, nothing is too hard or marvelous for the Lord." The idea of having a baby in her old age seemed marvelous to Sarah, but it was not too hard for God to accomplish (Gen. 18:14). Jeremiah wondered how God could restore the people and rebuild the land that the Babylonians conquered (Jer. 32:13–15, 24–25). The salvation that Zechariah 8 portrays **may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people,** the survivors of judgment and exile who return to God. The Lord asks again, **"but will it seem marvelous to me?"** The answer is still "no, nothing is too hard for God." "You have made the heavens and the earth . . . Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17). All of these verses serve as background to Jesus' answer when the disciples ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus says, "All things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27; Matt. 19:26).

8:7–8 / The previous promises are empty if no one has returned to live in Jerusalem. So the Lord issues an announcement, **"I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west,"** from all the lands under the sun. Promises of return from exile typically include Israelites and Jews dispersed throughout the world (e.g., "the four winds" [2:6], "all the nations" [7:14]). Because God's rule encompassed the earth, no Judean or Israelite exile would be beyond God's reach and power to save. God, who had sent away the inhabitants of Jerusalem, promises that **"I will bring them back"** (the *hipʿil* of *bw'*). They will come and **live** (*shkn*) **in Jerusalem.** This parallels the promise that the Lord will come (*bw'*) and dwell (*shkn*) with them (Zech. 2:10–11 [MT 2:14–15]).

Before the Babylonians were allowed to conquer Jerusalem and carry off her people, the Lord had declared the Sinai covenant broken (Jer. 11:8, 10; 31:32). Now God reveals that the covenant will be made anew: **"they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God."** This is the familiar covenant formula (e.g., Jer. 24:7) in an expanded form. "I will be" translates the

imperfect form (*'ehyeh*) that is repeated in God's revealed name, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod 3:14). The pledge characterizes God's commitment as "true" or "faithful" (*'emet*) and "righteous." This short oracle promises a second exodus, followed by covenant making. Key words parallel accounts of deliverance from Egypt. I will save (e.g., Ps. 106:8) my people (e.g., Exod. 3:10) from the land (of Egypt, Exod. 20:2). I will bring them (to the land I swore to give to their ancestors, Exod. 6:8), and they will be my people (Exod. 6:7).

§20 Encouragement for Temple-builders (Zech. 8:9–13)

8:9 / Here God encourages the people who are in the midst of building the temple. The words **"let your hands be strong"** begin and end the oracle (vv. 9, 13). The promise of salvation and blessing will strengthen the people's hands for their work, **so that the temple may be built.** The date formula in 7:1 provides a specific starting point for the relative chronology in these verses. The **now** would be the fourth year of Darius, when **these words** were **spoken by the prophets.** The verse does not identify the prophets by name, but by the time of their ministry. They had been **there when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty.** Haggai and Zechariah are the only prophets from that time whom the OT names, but there could have been others. The rest of the oracle does resemble Haggai's message.

8:10 / This prophecy prods the audience with reminders of the difficult conditions **Before that time,** before the foundation was laid, and persuades them by promises of blessings to come when the project is completed. These three parts—retrospective, salvation announcement, and admonition—occur also in verses 14–17 and 18–19. Haggai 2:15–19 makes a similar argument but only implies the command. Before that time **there were no wages** (*skr*) **for man or beast.** Haggai's metaphor, that people "earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it" (Hag. 1:6), is a memorable way to describe the situation. The law requires that hired workers be paid every day (Deut. 24:14–15). The law also requires that draft animals be fed while they work (Deut. 25:4), and that compensation (*skr*) be paid when an animal is hired to work for someone other than its owner (Exod. 22:14). Thus a beast could receive "wages."

Dissension compounded poverty. **No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy,** or "there was no security from the enemy for the one going out and the one coming back." The word for "enemy," or "harasser," (*tsar*) appears frequently in the Psalms, where enemies seek to take the psalmist's life (e.g., Ps. 71:10–13). In the book of Esther, Haman, the enemy (*tsar*) of the Jews, tries to kill them all. The conditions that verse 10 describes resemble the period

of the judges, when enemies prevented the people from working their fields and from traveling, and even forced them to retreat to caves in the hills for safety (Judg. 6:1–6). Ezra-Nehemiah does not report attacks such as these, but it does tell how the Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel's leadership (Ezra 4:1–5). Even in the midst of restoration the people felt the ongoing effects of God's judgment, **"for I had turned every man against his neighbor.**"

8:11–12 / Immediately following this admission God announces a reversal: **"But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past."** First, God will restore the fertility of the land. The people will be able to harvest crops so that they, and their animals, can eat. The land had been the people's heritage from the Lord, and now **the remnant of this people** will possess it and its crops again. There had been no peace (*shalom*) before (v. 10; NIV "no . . . safely"), but after the crop there will be peace (*zera' hashalom, v. 12;* NIV **The seed will grow well**).

8:13 / God's people will also enjoy the reversal from being a curse to being a blessing. As part of the covenant judgment on Israel and Judah they were mocked and held in contempt (e.g., Deut. 28:37; Jer. 24:9; 25:18). Their sufferings had made them a byword among the nations so that their names were used in curses, "may you suffer like Israel and Judah." The Lord will **save** them from their humiliation and do so much good to them that they will **be a blessing.** The nations will want to be like them (cf. 8:23). **Do not be afraid** usually begins a salvation oracle. Here it comes almost at the end, to support the final encouraging word, **but let your hands be strong.** Because the Lord has promised to save you, do not be afraid to continue building the temple.

§21 Do These Things (Zech. 8:14–17)

8:14–17 / The fulfillment of judgment prophecies in the past confirms the reliability of God's word about the present and future. (**Just as I had determined . . . so now I have determined,** vv. 14–15.) The next oracle also combines the three elements of retrospective, salvation announcement, and admonition. Zechariah's audience was keenly aware that God's determination **to bring disaster** had been carried out. The former prophets had used these very words to announce judgment (*zmm* in Jer. 4:28; Zech 1:6; and *r'* in Jer. 25:29; 31:28). Zechariah 7:11–14 summarizes the rebellion of earlier generations. And **when your fathers angered me,** the Lord did not relent and revoke the punishment. God will not turn back from the plan **to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah.**

Do not be afraid typically comes at the beginning of a salvation announcement. Do not fear, because God is about to deliver you. Here in verse 15, "Do not be afraid" introduces a short list of laws. Because God is determined to save you, don't be afraid to do God's will. **These are the things you are to do.** This list in verses 16–17 resembles the list in 7:9–10. Two prohibitions follow two positive commands. These instructions are for God's people in their renewed covenant relationship (8:8). They represent their continuing obligation to live according to God's will expressed in torah. The first two Hebrew words of verse 16, "these are the words," are the same two words that begin the book of Deuteronomy.

The first command embraces the others. **Speak the truth to each other,** or "speak faithfully to each other." Accurate testimony was essential if the **courts** were to **render true and sound judgment.** The courts' decisions depended on the testimony of eyewitnesses rather than physical evidence (Deut. 19:15). One way to **plot evil against your neighbor** was to plan to bring false charges against another, and to bribe false witnesses. Jezebel brought such a plot to fruition against Naboth (1 Kgs. 21:1–16). Planning to harm another in any way was false to the relationship that should have been characterized by mercy and compassion. People who **love to swear falsely** also violate their relationships within the community and with God. Lying accusers and witnesses in court harmed others when they swore that their false testimony was true. Contracts

with other people and vows made to God were secured by oaths. When one failed to fulfill one's sworn commitments, one had sworn falsely. Of these false words and deeds, the Lord says, **"I hate all this."** The vision report in 5:1–4 reports the removal of false swearers from the land. This oracle begins with the truthfulness of the Lord's words and ends with the requirement of truth for human speech.

§22 Feasts Will Replace Fasts (Zech. 8:18–19)

8:18–19 / This brief saying is a third example of the three-part oracle consisting of retrospective, announcement of salvation, and admonition. The retrospective consists of a list of four fasts, each of which can be associated with an episode in the destruction of Jerusalem. In **the fourth** month Nebuchadnezzer's army had broken through the city walls (2 Kgs. 25:3–4; Jer. 39:2; 52:6–7). In the **fifth** month the Babylonians had destroyed and burned the temple and other buildings (2 Kgs. 25:8–10; Jer. 52:12–14). In the **seventh** month Gedaliah the governor had been assassinated (2 Kgs. 25:22–25; Jer. 41:1–3). This ending had begun in the **tenth** month, one or two years earlier, when the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem (1 Kgs. 25:1; Jer. 39:1; 52:1; Ezek. 24:1–2). God, who promised to turn fasts into feasts, and mourning into dancing (Jer. 31:12–14), announces that these occasions for fasting **will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.** The restoration of joy will mark the removal of the effects of judgment. Because God announces salvation, **"Therefore love truth and peace."** This positive command is the logical counterpart to God's hatred and rejection of false oaths and evil plots (v. 17).

This oracle comes closest to providing a direct answer to the initial question in 7:3 about commemorating the fifth month. The Lord will put an end to the practice of fasting in memory of the judgment on Jerusalem and will replace fast days with festivals. The context of the answer in Zechariah 7–8 implies that this transformation had not yet taken place in the fourth year of Darius. The verb is imperfect, with a future sense. Would it occur when the temple building was completed, or at some later time, when Jerusalem will be filled with God's people living there unafraid and with peoples from the whole world who will come there in search of God? (See the introduction to Zech. 7–8, above.)

§23 Peoples And Nations Will Seek the Lord (Zech. 8:20–23)

8:20–23 / The final two oracles portray the promise given in Zechariah 2:11, "Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people." Verse 20 promises that **inhabitants of many cities will yet come** to Jerusalem. There will be a movement throughout the world. People from **one city will go to another** and urge the inhabitants to join in the pilgrimage. They will have two goals. The first will be **to entreat the LORD**, to ask God graciously to accept them. They may hope for forgiveness, rescue, and healing (as, e.g., in Exod. 32:11, 1 Kgs. 13:6; 2 Kgs. 13:6; Jer. 26:19). Daniel's prayer defines the way to entreat the Lord, "by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth" (Dan. 9:13).

The second goal will be to **seek the LORD Almighty.** People who seek the Lord also "pursue righteousness" (Isa. 51:1) and "understand justice" (Prov. 28:5). This is the action of followers of God, not of "seekers" in the contemporary sense. Israel and Judah together will "seek the LORD . . . and bind themselves to the LORD" (Jer. 50:4–5), but these oracles are not just about the return of Jewish exiles from around the world. This prophecy is about **many peoples and powerful nations,** the inhabitants of the lands and cities among which God's people are dispersed, who will say to the Jews, **"Let us go with you."** Isaiah 2:2–4 (and Mic. 4:1–3) gives a stirring picture of many peoples coming to the Lord at the temple in Zion in order to learn to walk in the Lord's ways.

The portrayal in the final oracle (v. 23) is on a more personal level, **ten men from all languages and nations** and **one Jew.** Genesis 10 gives a verbal map of the world in terms of its nations, families, and languages (Gen. 10:5, 20, 31). People divided by their different languages (Gen. 11:1–10) will be drawn together by following a Jew to find the presence of God. The number "ten" here may be an allusion to Genesis 18:22. The Lord agreed to spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous men, but ten men could not be found. Many, many people (many multiples of ten) from the other nations will seek the Lord. In a bold move, they will grasp **the hem of** one Jew's **robe.** This physical action lays claim to a desired relationship (cf. Ruth 3:9; 1 Sam. 15:27; Ezek. 16:8). By faith the woman suffering

a long-term hemorrhage touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed (Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). The hem of a garment was an extension of a person's identity (1 Sam. 24)—a place where evidence of sin (Jer. 2:34), or consecration to God (Num. 15:37–40), might be found.

The people engaged in the worldwide movement to seek the Lord will latch onto the returning Jews **"because we have heard that God is with you."** Rahab of Jericho explains her reason for helping the Israelite spies in similar terms. "We have heard," she says, how the Lord dried up the Red Sea and defeated Sihon, Og, and two other kings (Josh. 2:10–13). When God is with a person or nation they are saved and protected from harm (e.g., Exod. 3:12; Josh. 1:5; Isa. 8:10). The various promises in Zechariah 8 are all examples of what God, who is with Israel, will do for them. People from other nations will long for God's salvation also. They will come to the Lord in Jerusalem to find gracious acceptance, safety, and participation in the faithful community.

§24 Introduction to Part Four of Zechariah: Two Oracles (Zech. 9–14)

The arrangement of the various prophetic sayings in Zechariah 7–8 has opened up a space between the return to the land and the promised age to come. God has reaffirmed the cherished promises but moved them into the future relative to the fourth year of Darius, thereby encouraging the waiting community to hold on to its hopes. Meanwhile, God makes clear to them that the Law and the earlier prophetic preaching still define their relationship to God. Even after coming through the experience of exile Israel still had the potential to sin, still needed to be cleansed, and still might be punished as a nation and scattered again. The anonymous oracles included in Zechariah 9–14 expand on these themes by giving both a vivid picture of what is yet to come with the ultimate establishment of the Lord's reign and also a fuller description of what conditions will be like in the intervening time.

These chapters were a rich source for the NT authors for understanding and portraying Jesus' triumphal entry and passion. Even following Jesus' death and resurrection, the church continues to live in an age of fulfillment but not consummation. Like the earlier audiences of the book of Zechariah, Christians wait in hope.

§25 The First Oracle (Zech. 9–11)

The superscription is printed separately—"An Oracle"—to acknowledge its function as a heading for chapters 9–11. Zechariah 12 has the same superscription. The first three words (*massa' debar YHWH*) of Zechariah 9:1 and 12:1, **An Oracle: The Word of the LORD**, also begin Malachi 1:1, and this particular sequence of words appears in the Oz only in these three verses. As the date formulas connect Zechariah to Haggai, so these headings link Zechariah to Malachi.

§26 The Lord's Word Regarding the Neighboring Nations (Zech. 9:1–8)

Zechariah 9 has no date formula. As we saw above, Zechariah 7 and 8 have extended the time of waiting for the realization of God's reign into the uncalculated future. We should now read the rest of the book, Zechariah 9–14, as prophecy about this time of waiting between the fourth year of Darius and the consummation that God will accomplish. In Zechariah 9 the *pax Persiana* is over. God reappears as the divine warrior who saves the people.

This "oracle" begins with an announcement of judgment against Israel's neighbors to the north and west, naming seven places familiar from earlier OT traditions. The order of movement, from north-northeast of Yehud/Jerusalem (Hadrach, Damascus, and Hamath), west to the Mediterranean Sea (Sidon and Tyre), and south along the coast (the Philistine cities of Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and Ashdod), follows the route of conquerors who approached the land of Israel from the north. The goal of this divine expedition will be to reverse the earlier judgment and to reoccupy and protect the city.

The sequence of places also reflects conceptions of the boundaries of the promised land. The outline map in Numbers 34 and Ezekiel 47 includes the Philistine territory by extending to the western sea and reaches northeast and north to Lebo-Hamath and Damascus (Ezek. 47:16–20; also Num. 13:21; Josh. 13:5; Judg. 3:3). God had not allotted land to any Israelite tribe in the territory of Hadrach, Damascus, or Hamath. David's empire, according to 2 Samuel 5, included the land of the Philistines, extended to Damascus, and enjoyed good diplomatic relations with Tyre. Amos 1 asserts the Lord's authority to judge Damascus (1:3–5), the Philistine cities (1:6–8), and Tyre (1:9–10). Collections of oracles against foreign nations in Jeremiah 25 and Zephaniah 2 also include Damascus, Philistia, and Tyre and Sidon. Only Hadrach is unknown in other OT sources. Like Hamath, it lay beyond the border of the most extensive "maps" of Israel (cf. Mal. 1:5, "Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!"). For the prophet of Zechariah 9:1–8, past threats of judgment on the nations of Syria-Palestine, even if they had been fulfilled by the military conquests of Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian emperors, also portray future divine actions.

This unit, like other collections of oracles against foreign nations, also anticipates the survival and transformation of a remnant of non-Jewish neighbors. They will become part of God's own people, whom the Lord will protect from future oppressors (vv. 7–8; cf. Amos 1–2, where Judah and Israel conclude the list of nations under judgment).

9:1–2a / Hadrach, Damascus, and **Hamath** are the objects of the divine word. Indeed, the word **will rest upon** Damascus. The kingdom of Aram, with its capital in Damascus, had sometimes been an ally of Israel and Judah, and it was often an enemy (e.g., in the Syro-Ephraimite War, 2 Kgs. 16). The pacification of Aram was essential to the defense of Jerusalem that God promises in verse 8. The resting place (*menukhah*) of Israel (Deut. 12:9), the ark (1 Chr. 28:2), and God's own presence (Ps. 132:14) are all within the boundaries of the land of Israel. A resting place for God's word outside the land may be at least a partial fulfillment of the vision reported in Zechariah 6:8 ("those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest [*nukh*] in the land of the north").

When the divine word (and spirit) find a resting place in Damascus, in the bordering region of Hamath, as well as in the land of Hadrach, what will happen? The words "oracle," "Damascus," "eyes" (*ʿayin*), "men" (*ʾadam*), and "Israel" connect this verse to the oracle against Damascus and Ephraim/Jacob in Isaiah 17:1–7. The Isaiah passage promises that, following the destruction of Damascus and Israel, "men (*haʾadam;* humankind, male and female, made in the image of God, Gen. 1:26–28) will look to their Maker / and turn their eyes (*ʿenayw*) to the Holy One of Israel." By looking to the Lord they will turn their backs on other gods (Isa. 17:8). If Zechariah 9:1 echoes Isaiah 17:1–7, then **the eyes of men and all the tribes of Israel are on the LORD** means that the divine word will turn Israel and also peoples beyond her borders to the worship of Yahweh. Zechariah 8:20–23 (and 2:10–11) has spelled out this promise. The divine word that will make its resting place in Aram will turn Hadrach, Damascus, and Hamath to the Lord, just as the divine word overtaking the Israelite ancestors had resulted in their repentance (Zech. 1:2–6).

9:2b–4 / The description of judgment on **Tyre and Sidon** is more graphic. The divine word is **upon** (or "against") them also, **though they are very skillful** (cf. the tabernacle and temple artisans who were skillful at construction; Exod. 28:3; 31:6; 35:10; 36:1, 2, 4, 5; 1 Chr. 22:15; 2 Chr. 2:6, 12, 13). Their skill in building fortifications and accumulating wealth is not an adequate defense. The very

name "Tyre" (*tsor*) evokes the idea of their **stronghold** (*matsor*). The punning with *ts* and *r* continues in **she has heaped up** (*titsbor*) **silver** and **gold** (*kharuts*). This euphonious motto expresses civic pride and self-sufficiency founded upon military strength and economic success. The announcement of judgment completes a chiasm by reversing the order. First, her material prosperity will be lost because **the Lord will take away her possessions** (the *hipʿil* of *yrsh*). This reversal of status recalls the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:7–8, "The LORD sends poverty [the *hipʿil* of *yrsh*] and wealth . . . He raises the poor from the dust [*ʿafar*]," as in Zech. 9:3. The NIV interprets the next line of verse 4 as the destruction of Tyre's navy, **and destroy her power on the sea.** The Hebrew has a double meaning. Without any change it may also be read, "and strike her wealth into the sea." Safe shipping on the Mediterranean Sea had made Tyre's commercial success possible. The city itself was located on a fortified island, connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway that was covered at high tide. The consumption of the city **by fire** recalls Amos 1:9–10, where fire is the penalty for selling "whole communities of captives to Edom" in violation of "a treaty of brotherhood." Although Ezekiel warned of the overthrow of Tyre by Babylon (Ezek. 26–27), the Persian Empire was the first that had been able to exert its rule over Tyre. It was Alexander the Great who finally undermined her fortifications and broke her economic power.

9:5 / The final cluster of foreign neighbors consists of the Philistines in their four cities Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and Ashdod. All four belonged to the allotted tribal territory of Judah in the promised land of Israel. David's kingdom included the region, but Judah had never succeeded in incorporating them permanently. These four cities also appear in the oracles against foreign nations in Amos 1:7–8; Zephaniah 2:4; and Jeremiah 25:20.

The threats in Zechariah 9 regarding each city are typical punishments known from the rest of the OT and sharpened by paronomasia. **Ashkelon will see it** (*tereʾ*). The Hebrew has no direct object ("it"). The context suggests that Ashkelon, another port city, would quickly perceive the significance of Tyre's downfall. The wordplay with the following verb, **and fear** (*tiraʾ*), binds the actions even more closely (cf. the same pair of verbs in Exod. 20:18; Deut. 28:10; Isa. 41:5; Pss. 40:3; 52:6). This pair of responses to divine action, seeing and fearing, may result in trembling incapacity (Isa. 41:5) or in trust (Ps. 40:3). **Gaza,** a name related to the word *ʿoz,* or "strength," **will writhe in agony,** like a person approaching death (Ps. 55:4) or like peoples facing the day of the Lord's

judgment (Isa. 13:8; Jer. 51:29; Joel 2:6). In Isaiah 23:5 it is Egypt that writhes upon hearing the report of Tyre's fall. **Ekron,** at the center of the chiasm in this verse, will also writhe, **for her hope will wither.** The loss of the **king** of Gaza would be essential preparation for incorporating Philistia into Judah again. The negated verb in the last sentence of verse 5 may indicate a lack of inhabitants (*yshb,* "sit, dwell"), as in the NIV, **Ashkelon will be deserted,** or a lack of royal rule (*yshb,* "sit on a throne, rule"). The latter interpretation is close to the previous sentence and makes more sense in the context of verses 5–7. Why should Ashkelon alone be emptied and excluded from the remnant in verse 7?

9:6 / **Foreigners** is a euphemistic rendering of *mamzer,* "one born of an illicit sexual union" (Deut. 23:2). Both this noun and the verb *yshb,* "sit," as in verse 5, are singular, so this sentence could also refer to the ruler of the city. The NIV has given the verb its more common meaning, **will occupy.** According to Nehemiah 13:23–24, the intermarriage of Jewish men with the women of Ashdod produced children who were not part of Yahweh's people. Whether or not verse 6 has Nehemiah 13 in its background, the use of the term *mamzer* establishes the conditions God will overcome in order to incorporate the Philistines (v. 7). According to Deuteronomy 23:12, a *mamzer* and his descendants to the tenth generation were excluded from Yahweh's congregation.

Third-person references to God in verses 1 and 3 give way to the first person in verses 6b–7a. God promises to **cut off the pride of the Philistines.** In Amos 1:8, God threatens to "cut off" (NIV "destroy") Ashdod's king, suggesting that "pride" here refers to Philistine rulers (cf. "pride" as sovereignty in Ezek. 32:12; Isa. 13:11, 19; Zech. 10:11). In this sense, this sentence summarizes verses 5b–6a. The political autonomy of the Philistines would have to be removed before the region could become part of God's people. "Pride" is also an attitude of heart and mind, a disposition of character that precedes idolatry (Ezek. 7:20), neglect of the poor (Ezek. 16:49), or mockery of the Lord's people (Zeph. 2:10). This line serves as a pivot in the passage—on the one side is political subjugation and on the other side spiritual transformation and cultic purity.

9:7 / The removal of **blood from their mouths** will bring the Philistines into conformity with the obligation Genesis 9:4 placed on all humankind not to eat "meat that has its lifeblood still in it." The priestly law calls foods designated unclean for Israel *sheqets,* "detestable things" (Lev. 7:21; 11:10–13, 20, 23, 41–42), but another noun from the same root appears in the next line (*shiquts,* "detested

thing"). The NIV interprets this word as an alternate term for *shiquts,* **forbidden food,** but no other occurrence of the word refers to food. Most often this word means "idol" (e.g., Deut. 29:16), but the grotesque picture of an idol **between their teeth** is a startling way to refer to sacrificial meals that are part of idolatrous worship. An accusation against Israel in Ezekiel 33:25, 28 may be a source of this combination of ideas: "Since you eat meat with the blood still in it and look to your idols . . . should you then possess the land? . . . I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud strength (*ge'on,* as in 9:6) will come to an end."

Verse 9:7b gives a promise in line with Noah's blessing in Genesis 9:27. Japhet, the ancestor of the Philistines, will dwell in the tents of Shem, Israel's ancestor, by reversing Amos 1:8b, "I will turn my hand against Ekron, / till the last [*she'erit*] of the Philistines is dead." The new word in Zechariah is that **Those who are left** [*nish'ar*] **will belong to our God.** The purification and spiritual transformation God carries out (vv. 5–7a) prepares Philistia to become part of God's people, and even **leaders in Judah.** This title for tribal leadership (*'aluf*) is absent from prophetic literature except for Zechariah 9:9 and 12:5–6, where "the leaders of Judah" acknowledge the strength of Jerusalem because "Yahweh is their God." Ekron will become **like the Jebusites,** a historical analogy to the earlier population of Jerusalem whom David incorporated into Judah (cf. Amos 1:8b). The site of the temple was purchased from the Jebusite, Araunah (1 Sam. 24:16–18).

9:8 / The passage reaches its goal in Jerusalem, at God's house. The Lord continues to speak in the first person, "I will encamp (*wekhaniti*) at my house because of an army (*mitsabah*)" (the NIV paraphrases this first sentence). This promise reverses the threat against Jerusalem in Isaiah 29:3, "I will encamp (*wekhaniti*) against you all around; / I will encircle you with towers (*mutsab*)." God promises to **defend my house against marauding forces** ("one who crosses over and returns") **/ Never again will an oppressor overrun my people.** This, too, is a reversal of the threats in Zechariah 7:14 and Ezekiel 33:28. The desolation of divine judgment on the land had left it empty of people, of anyone "who crosses over and returns." God's protective presence, encamped in Jerusalem, will keep invaders out of the secured borders of the land. The Lord speaks the final line, **"for now I am keeping watch."** The Hebrew repeats the word "eyes," literally "indeed now I see with my eyes," forming an inclusio with verse 1. The people's eyes are toward the Lord, and the Lord's eyes are on them.

Two themes from the first half of the book begin the second half: the themes

of God's renewed choice and protection of Jerusalem and the nations' coming with Israel to the Lord (8:20–23). God will secure the boundaries of the land by making the regions of Syria look to the Lord, by breaking Sidon and Tyre's proud independence, and by transforming the Philistines into members of Judah. In the process, former judgments will be reversed and old promises fulfilled again.

Additional Notes §26

9:1 / An Oracle: "Oracle" appears many times in headings, such as those to the oracles against foreign nations and Israel in Isaiah (Isa. 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6) and in the superscriptions of the books of Nahum and Habakkuk. In the majority of its uses in headings and in other contexts the content of the divine word designated "oracle" includes judgment. The derivation of the noun "oracle" (*massa'*) from the verb *ns',* meaning "lift, carry," suggests that it is a metaphor. The picture is of the Lord's message, which often consists of a collection of individual sayings, as a concrete burden that a prophetic or scribal porter transports and delivers to its audience.

Against the land of Hadrach: The NIV interprets the word as a threat, in line with the theme of vv. 2–6, but there is no specific indictment or announcement of judgment, and a more neutral interpretation of the Heb. is also possible ("the word of the Lord is in the land of Hadrach").

9:5 / Her hope will wither: Ekron's "hope" probably refers to reliance on allies—as in Isa. 20:5–6, the only other occurrences of this noun. If so, then the MT (the *hipʿil* of *bwsh,* "confound") is preferable to the NIV's reading from *ybsh,* "wither," as *bwsh* also occurs in Isa. 20:5.

§27 The King Is Coming to Zion (Zech. 9:9–10)

9:9 / God's word announces the arrival of Jerusalem's new king by calling the **Daughter of Zion** and the **Daughter of Jerusalem** to **Rejoice greatly** and **Shout.** The city under threat and judgment had often been addressed in this personification (e.g., Jer. 4:31; 6:2; and esp. Lamentations). A female figure carried connotations of dependence and vulnerability, especially in war. Verse 9 here reverses Zion's loss of majesty (Lam. 1:6). Zephaniah 3:14–17 and Zechariah 2:10 (MT 15) are similar in form, commanding "Daughter Zion" to rejoice at the arrival of her King, the Lord. Here in verses 9–10 the divine king promises the restoration of a human king who will again reign as the Lord's regent.

This messianic announcement reformulates earlier promises and psalms that articulate the royal ideal. The coming king will be **righteous,** like the king in Isaiah 9:7; 11:4, 5; 32:1. This adjective indicates the legitimacy of his reign as well as the character of his rule in promoting justice among his subjects. Jeremiah 23:5 promises a "righteous Branch" (*tsemakh tsaddiq*) for David, "a King who will reign wisely / and do what is just and right in the land." Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12 call the future Messiah "Branch" (*tsemakh*), and verse 9 picks up the other term, "righteous," from Jeremiah 23. Psalm 72 celebrates the ideal king whom God has endowed with "righteousness" by which he will judge the people, "defend the afflicted . . . and save the children of the needy" (Ps. 72:1–4). The king's righteous administration is the ground on which his people and land will flourish and the nations will acknowledge his rule (Ps. 72:5–11). The suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53:11 is also "righteous" and, in addition, will make many righteous (the *hipʿil* of *tsdq*).

This king will also be "saved" (the *nipʿal* participle of *yshʿ*, NIV "having salvation"). Zechariah 9:9 clarifies that this salvation will come from the Lord to the people and to the king. God will save, or vindicate, this king like the Suffering servant (Isa. 49:4; 50:8–9; cf. 53:11–12).

The expectation regarding the ideal king was that he would save (*yshʿ*) the afflicted (*ʿoni*) who had no help (Ps. 72:12, 13), but the coming king here in verse 9 will himself be "saved" and "poor" (*ʿoni,* NIV **gentle**) (cf. Pss. 34:6; 18:27). An *ʿoni* is someone in need—impoverished, vulnerable (Zech. 7:10), or afflicted by

enemies (or by God, Isa. 53:4). As such, the "poor" are ones who know that they need God's help (Ps. 34:6). The *ʿoni* is the opposite of the proud (Prov. 3:34; 16:19; Ps. 18:27). The NIV's translation "gentle" is based on this contrast. This king will not rule by condescending to his subjects but by identifying with them.

The king's procession to Zion, **riding on a donkey,** follows an indigenous monarchic tradition found in Judges 5:10; 10:4; 12:14 and 2 Samuel 16:2. David's return to Jerusalem after putting down Absolom's revolt provides the background for this picture. He had left the city almost as a fugitive, reviled by his enemies and humbled by the treachery of his favorite son. He returned, having been saved in battle. The picture of the donkey-mounted monarch also interprets this promised king as the ruler in Genesis 49:8–12, who tethers "his donkey to a vine, / his colt to the choicest branch." Here in verse 9, as in Genesis 49:11, the **colt** in the second line specifies the kind of "donkey," purebred and not previously ridden. It does not name a second animal. That ruler from the tribe of Judah will hold "the obedience of the nations" (Gen. 49:10). A blessing once fulfilled in the Davidic monarchy is here renewed as an eschatological promise.

In comparison with the Persian emperors riding on horses (e.g., Ahasuerus in Esth. 6:8), the donkey's colt must have seemed a quaint, humble mount, unsuitable for a triumphant monarch. Yet this is precisely why it suits the king that God will bring to Jerusalem. The Lord's true kings had no use for war horses (cf. Isa. 2:7; 31:1; Mic. 5:10; Hag. 2:22). The donkey's colt traditionally points to royal authority in Israel, but it is also a reminder that the Lord's Messiah will not be a duplicate of the Persian emperor with his armed might.

9:10 / The Lord will disarm Ephraim, the northern kingdom, and Jerusalem, representing Judah. The promises, **I will take away** (*krt*) **the chariots . . . and the war-horses,** echo the beginning of the long divine speech in Micah 5:10–13 [MT 9–12].

Although the LXX, followed, for example, by the NRSV, makes the king the subject ("he will take away"), the first-person verb in the Hebrew is consistent with other promises that the Lord will establish peace by removing the tools of warfare (Mic. 4:3; Isa. 2:4; Pss. 76:3, 6; 46:9).

The king **will proclaim peace to the nations.** Peace is central to OT messianic expectation (Isa. 9:6–7). Yet this peaceable speech contrasts with the monarch's belligerence in Psalm 2, for example. The word *shalom* has occurred four times in Zechariah 8 with its various meanings. The fourth occurrence, "love joy and

peace" (8:19), precedes the promise that peoples and nations will seek the Lord in Jerusalem (8:20–23). The ideal king brings prosperity in a prayer for peace (Ps. 72:6–7, 16). Furthermore, the ideal king will be a means of blessing for all nations (Ps. 72:17b). This peace the king announces here in verse 10 will be made possible by God's victory and sustained by righteousness.

This verse also turns the psalm's description of the king's realm into prophecy. He will rule **from sea to sea / and from the River to the ends of the earth** (*ha'arets*)—the exact wording of Psalm 72:8. There are two possibilities for mapping these boundaries. They may be the outline of the Davidic-Solomonic empire, from the Gulf of Eilat to the Mediterranean (cf. the eastern and western sea in Zech. 14:8), and from the Euphrates River to the end of the land (*ha'arets*) in the southern desert. The same terms, "from sea to sea," may also indicate the entire known earth, bounded by the seas. In the second line, the image of the cosmic river flowing out from the temple to the extremities of the world (*ha'arets;* Ezek. 47:1–12; Zech. 14:8) expresses the same worldwide realm. The former interpretation fits the geography of Zechariah 9:1–8, but the latter reading corresponds to the belief in the Lord's universal reign, centered in Jerusalem (Zech. 8:20–23).

The king riding on a donkey may be the most familiar and beloved picture in the book of Zechariah. Matthew 21:5 and John 12:15 cite Zechariah 9:9 as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They identify him as the righteous and rightful king who will proclaim peace to the nations and rule from sea to sea. Christians recognize the fulfillment of this prophecy in Jesus' arrival on that first Palm Sunday, and believe in his second coming to secure his universal reign.

Within the network of background passages described above, the rest of verses 9–10 are also part of the gospel writers' testimony to the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry. The reasons to "shout" and "rejoice" at the coming of the king go beyond being on the winning side or seeing the fulfillment of God's promise. The people who greeted Jesus with the prayer "Save us" *(hosanna,* from *ysh'*) included the afflicted and needy who longed for all the blessings of the righteous king's reign. He will exercise dominion over the whole earth, while also ensuring that city streets are safe for children and the elderly.

Additional Notes §27

9:9 / The ancient translations use active nouns (e.g., *sozon,* "savior" in the LXX; cf. Ps. 72:13 and the description of God in Isa. 45:21). The *nipʿal* "saved" occurs only two other times. In Deuteronomy 33:29 the people are "saved by the LORD" who is their "shield and helper" and "glorious sword." Psalm 33:16 asserts, "No king is saved by the size of his army," it is the Lord who delivers from death, who is "our help and our shield" (Ps. 33:20). Jeremiah 23:6 promises that, at the time of the righteous Branch, "Judah will be saved."

§28 Freedom for Prisoners (Zech. 9:11–17)

The theme of the Lord's universal reign from Jerusalem returns in Zechariah 14, but this passage and the other chapters in between reveal a period of danger from corrupt leadership and external attack. It is not possible to ascertain a specific chronology, and even the relative chronology is not precise. The context and arrangement of Zechariah 7–8 had opened up an indeterminate length of time between God's restoration of the Jewish community in the sixth century B.C. and the end times. The prophecies in Zechariah 9–14 reveal that future in terms of existing OT texts. Before the king's worldwide reign of peace can begin, war resumes in order to free the diaspora Jews to return to the land.

9:11 / God continues to speak in the first person, addressing Daughter Zion/Daughter Jerusalem (**you,** feminine singular). The ground for this promise is **the blood of my covenant with you** ("my" is not in the Heb. text). A sacrifice and sprinkling of its blood on the altar and on the people seals the Sinai covenant between God and Israel (Exod. 24:8). "This is the blood of the covenant" occurs only in Exodus 24 and Zechariah 9. The second-person feminine singular suffix points to God's covenant with personified Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 and Isaiah 49:8–23; 54:1–10. The end of Ezekiel 16 interprets the marriage-like covenant with Jerusalem as a figure for the Lord's covenant with Israel. The people had broken (*hpr*) the covenant made with blood (Jer. 31:32), but the Lord will remember it and establish an everlasting covenant with "you" (feminine singular, Ezek. 16:60; cf. "with them" in Jer. 32:40 and Ezek. 37:26). Along with Exodus 24:8 and Jeremiah 31:31–34, verse 11 provides background for the words of institution for the Lord's Supper, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood . . ." (1 Cor. 11:25).

I will free your (fem. sg.) **prisoners**—not prisoners held by Zion, but Daughter Zion's children who remain in exile. Jeremiah 50:33 says that the captors of Israel and Judah "hold them fast, / refusing to let them go" (see Jer. 30:8). Since Zechariah 9:13 specifies the Greeks as the enemy, Joel 3:4–8 also provides an explanation. The Lord judges Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia who "sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks." Zion's prisoners were held in a

waterless pit like Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37:24) and later held in Pharaoh's dungeon, for which Hebrew had no word other than "pit" (*bor,* Gen. 40:15; 41:14). In a society that built no prisons, an empty cistern was a handy place for confinement (see Jer. 38:6). "Pit" (*bor*) has even more ominous associations when it appears as a metaphor for the grave (Pss. 28:1; 143:7; Isa. 38:18; Ezek. 26:20; 32:25, 29, 30) or is paired in poetry with Sheol, the place of the dead (e.g., Pss. 30:3; 88:5; Prov. 1:12). The imprisoned exiles needed the Lord to redeem and "free" them (see Isa. 61:1).

9:12 / Return (*shwb*) is an unusual term in the genre of summonses to captive exiles. "Leave" (*yts'*), "flee" (*nws*), and "depart" (*swr*) are more typical (e.g., Isa. 48:20; 51:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6; Zech. 2:6, 7). The book of Zechariah begins with a call for repentance, "Return (*shwb*) to me," and a promise of reconciliation, "and I will return (*shwb*) to you" (1:2). Although the command to "return" here in verse 12 has a place as its destination, **your fortress,** this sense of spiritual restoration is also present, as in Jeremiah 31:21. Jeremiah 3:14 makes the connection explicit, "'Return, faithless people,' declares the LORD, . . . 'I will choose you . . . and bring you to Zion.'" The unique term "fortress" is a metaphor for Zion and, perhaps, also for God. The military tone of the term suits the context.

The address, **O prisoners of hope,** presents a startling contrast. The Jews in exile may be the prisoners of other peoples, but they are also held captive by the hope God has given to them. This hope enables them to resist the temptations to succumb to idolatry and to assimilate to the way of life of their captors. Promises to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:1 and 31:17 assure them that their descendants will return to the land. Zechariah repeats this promise. To be held fast by the God-given hope of redemption and homecoming is a captivity which no one would wish to escape—except by having that hope fulfilled.

The Lord announces fulfillment of the double promise in Isaiah 61:7, "my people will receive a double portion . . . they will inherit a double portion in their land." God **will restore** (the *hip'il* of *shwb*) **twice as much** to Zion. This context implies that her double portion will consist of people. Jews in Diaspora, the prisoners of hope, will return and fill the land. In this way God will reverse the double punishment for Israel's sins (Jer. 16:18; Isa. 40:2; 51:19; cf. Job 42:10).

9:13 / God promises to brandish a reunited Israel, **Judah,** and **Ephraim,** like a strung and loaded **bow,** and **Zion** like a **sword** against the Diaspora's captors.

Greece represents the most distant reaches of Israel's dispersion (Isa. 66:19–20; see also Gen. 10:2, 4) and stands accused of purchasing people of Judah and Jerusalem from the Phoenicians and Philistines (Joel 3:6). The restored people, centered in Jerusalem, will be a sign to the nations of God's power. This verse presents bow and sword in a belligerent stance, but God does not loose them upon the sons of Greece.

9:14–15 / This third-person depiction of a storm theophany clarifies that the Lord's actions will protect the people, not their army or armaments. Accompanied by **lightning, trumpet** blasts, and **storms** (cf. Exod. 19:16–18; 2 Sam. 22:8–18; Ps. 29; Hab. 3:3, 11), **the LORD Almighty will shield** Ephraim and Judah. The verb "shield" describes God's defense of Jerusalem against Assyria during Hezekiah's reign in four of its eight occurrences (Isa. 37:35; 38:6; 2 Kgs. 19:34; 20:6).

They will destroy literally means "consume, eat." Victors in battle "consume" or "destroy" the conquered, and they may celebrate by eating a victory meal. Since it has no object, this Hebrew verb may indicate both activities. As a military action it goes with **overcome** in verse 15a, and as feasting it belongs with the drinking in verse 15b. They will also overcome **with slingstones.** The NIV interprets "slingstones" as instrumental, "with" (see additional note, below). This is how the sons of Zion will defend the city.

Wherever the fighting will take place, God's people will celebrate a victory. They will **drink** enough to become boisterous and **roar as with wine.** The blessing of wine to make the heart glad will reverse the poverty of Haggai 1:6. It will be a mark of God's goodness (see also v. 17). The OT does, of course, warn of the danger of wine (Prov. 20:1). At the temple, the priests collected the blood of the atonement sacrifices in large bowls and then sprinkled it on the corners of the altar (Exod. 38:3; 1 Kgs. 7:45; Lev. 4:7; Zech. 14:20). The **bowl,** referring to a standard of measure here in verse 15, is the same kind of capacious cultic vessel from which Amos's audience drank to their own destruction, because they did "not grieve over the ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:6). The punishment of exile they suffered will be reversed when God fulfills the promises of Zechariah 9:1–17.

9:16 / This prophecy also promises a reversal of Amos 5:8, 18, for the Day of the Lord will mean salvation for Israel. In the Psalms, **the flock of his people** is a ubiquitous image reflecting God's relationship to Israel as royal leader and provider (e.g., Pss. 79:13; 95:7; 100:3). As the psalmists know, the Lord "will save

them," like a shepherd rescues and preserves the flock. This metaphor of the Lord as the good shepherd also prepares the way for the shepherd passages about human leadership in Zechariah 10, 11, and 13.

God's people Israel restored to **his land** will be evidence of the Lord's sovereignty (see Ezek. 28:25). There they will **sparkle** (the *hithpoʿel* of *nss*). The noun from the same root, *nes,* means "standard, flag." Perhaps one should picture colorful flags fluttering in the wind and catching the sunlight. A standard could mark a route for traveling or indicate the presence of an army as in Psalm 60:4, the only other occurrence of the verb (see also Isa. 5:26; 11:12; 49:22). The people will not flutter like pennants; they will sparkle **like jewels in a crown.** A crown (*nezer*) is a sign of royal power in 2 Samuel 1:10 and 2 Kings 11:12. The psalmist in Psalm 89:39 complains of the loss of the Davidic king, accusing God, "You have renounced the covenant with your servant / and have defiled his crown [*nezer*] in the dust." The precious stones are the direct point of comparison, however. Twelve stones on the breastpiece of the high priest's ephod represented the tribes of Israel (Exod. 28:17–21). The people who had once been "sacred gems . . . scattered at the head of every street" (Lam. 4:1) will sparkle throughout the land. The Lord's people will adorn the land where the Lord reigns. Revelation repeats this image, portraying the church as jewels in the crown of "a woman clothed with the sun" (Rev. 12:1).

9:17 / Zechariah 9 has restated major promises that had not been fulfilled in the immediate aftermath of the exile, asserting that God's word had not died (cf. 1:6). God will secure the borders of the land of Israel, bring a new king to Judah, restore the population, and defeat their enemies. The final verse of this chapter describes God's perspective on this future, renewed Israel—**"How attractive and beautiful they will be!"** The lover in Song of Songs 4:10 and 7:1, 6 describes his beloved in similar terms.

They will be beautiful because they will enjoy the bounty of the land. Zechariah 8:12 made a similar promise. **Grain** and **new wine** summarize those fruits, as in Genesis 27:28, 37; Deuteronomy 11:14; and Psalm 72:16. Plentiful crops will reverse the conditions of want described in Haggai 1:11. The verse also implies a fulfillment of Isaiah 62:8. Because they will have plenty of food, vigorous young adults, **young men** and **young women,** will **thrive.** This rare verb implies offspring. The people will continue to fill the land, as will the fruits of their work and characters (Prov. 10:31; Ps. 92:14).

Additional Notes §28

9:15 / Slingstones: These stones could also be the object of the verb, "they [the sons of Zion] will tread down the slingstones." Such stones were thrown from city walls against attackers. If those stones were ineffectual, leaving the attacking forces unscathed, one can picture those forces climbing over the fallen stones to reach and breach the city walls. This interpretation puts Israelite men on the offensive against the cities of their enemies and thus seems less likely in the context of the invitation to return to "your fortress" (v. 12).

Like a bowl used for sprinkling the corners of the altar: The NIV interprets a difficult group of words in a way that keeps blood out of the mouths of the celebrating people. A stilted, literalistic translation of v. 15b would be, "They shall drink. They shall roar like wine. They will be full like the bowl, like the corners of the altar." The NIV margin, "bowl, / like," is close to this rendering. The priests filled the bowl with blood and smeared the corners of the altar with it. For God and Israel, drinking blood was an abomination. All flesh, human and animal, was forbidden to consume blood (Gen. 9:4).

§29 The Lord's Compassionate Care for Judah and Joseph (Zech. 10:1–12)

10:1–2 / Two verses forge a connection with the abundant crops of 9:17, that needed God-given rain (v. 1), and also connect with the unreliable shepherds (v. 3) who did not fill the leadership vacuum of verse 2. In these verses, both a hymnic description of divine provision (v. 1; cf. Job 38:25–27) as well as a critique of false intermediaries who do not give God's word (v. 2) support the admonition to rely on the Lord alone.

Seeking rain from the right deity in the right way, and seeking divine guidance from the right intermediary by the right method, had been closely related core issues in Israel's relationship with God. The northern kingdom had credited Baal with the gift of food brought to fruition by the rain (Hos. 2:5, 8), and they had also engaged in the forbidden practices of divination (Deut. 18:9–14; *terafim* are used for divination in Judg. 17:5; 18:14–20; Ezek. 21:21). **The idols** [*terafim*] **speak deceit, / diviners see visions that lie; // they tell dreams that are false, / they give comfort in vain.** False leadership and empty consolation had left God's people Israel wandering **like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd.** Elsewhere in the OT this simile means that the people lacked a king (1 Kgs. 22:17 = 2 Chr. 8:16; Ezek. 34:8, 23). The book of Zechariah presents other non-royal leaders as shepherd figures (e.g., 11:4–14).

By praying to the Lord for help and guidance Israel accepts the leadership of their true divine shepherd, **the LORD who makes the storm clouds** and **gives showers of rain to men.** In the end times, as portrayed in Zechariah 14, only the nations that serve the Lord will receive rain. This command to **ask the LORD for rain** also reverses the judgment in Jeremiah 14. In a time of drought the people asked the Lord for help, but God denied their request. No one's intercession would be effective (Jer. 14:11; 15:1), because the Lord refused to relent and call back the judgment that had been set in motion. That judgment has now been fulfilled, and the Lord will hear prayers and send rain again.

10:3–5 / Promise follows admonition. This promise develops a theme found in other prophetic collections: the restoration of the northern kingdom exiles. Old

Testament prophecy interprets the conquest and exile of the northern kingdom by Assyria in the eighth century B.C. as divine judgment on a rebellious, unfaithful kingdom (e.g., 2 Kgs. 17) and presents it as a warning to God's people in Judah (Jer. 3; Ezek. 23). Yet, according to the prophets, God does not forget Israel (e.g., Hos. 14; Amos 9:14–15; Jer. 3:11, 18). There is no evidence that the people from the north who were exiled by the Assyrians retained their Israelite identity or ever heard or read these restoration promises. The faith stated in Zechariah 1, that God's word does not die but catches up with its subjects, stands behind this salvation portrayal. The exile of northern and southern kingdoms, and the return of Jews to Jerusalem, proved the living effectiveness of God's word. Therefore, this oracle reaffirms the earlier promises of reunification of God's people in the land of Israel. God is restoring Judah, so God will certainly restore Ephraim also.

First, verses 3–5 envision God strengthening Judah, who will have something to do with the deliverance of Israel (v. 6). Then, God's **care** for (*pqd*) the people, the flock, will include taking care of (*pqd ʿal;* NIV **punish**) the harmful leaders pictured as **shepherds** and, literally, "he-goats" (NIV **leaders**). The interpretive pun is a reminder that rescue may result in harm to the oppressors. (Compare the threats against the bad shepherd leaders in 11:1–3, 15–17.) This verse extends the pun in Jeremiah 23:1–4, where God threatens to punish (*pqd ʿal*) the shepherds who failed to care for (*pqd*) the sheep. Neither does Ezekiel 34, an extended metaphor of the Lord as good shepherd, find any logical contradiction between the images of God's people as a flock that "lacks a shepherd" (Ezek. 34:8; Zech. 10:2) and as a flock with shepherds who care only for themselves (Ezek. 34:8; Zech. 10:3).

This pastoral image undergoes a surprising transformation at the end of verse 3. The **house of Judah** will become like the divine warrior's **proud horse in battle.** From Judah God will provide other leaders, described in familiar pictures. The **cornerstone** is a metaphor for tribal and military leaders (Judg. 20:2; 1 Sam. 14:38; Isa. 19:13). In Psalm 118:22 the word refers to the king, and the NT applies it as a prophecy of Christ (Matt. 21:22; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17). The cornerstone, or "capstone" (Zech. 4:7), stabilizes a building or other stone structure. It is made from the same material as the rest of the building, but its position makes it prominent and essential. The **tent peg** secured a tent to the ground (Isa. 54:2) or even served as a handy weapon (Judg. 5:26), but Isaiah 22:23–24 uses a peg driven into a firm place as a simile for the promised leadership of Eliakim, who would hold up the weight of his family's honor until

the day that he, as the peg, was sheared from the wall. The **battle bow** is not used anywhere else in the Oz as a metaphor for an individual, but Zechariah 9:13 likened Judah to a bow. Literally, **every ruler** is "every oppressor" (*nogesh,* as in 9:8). As the battle bow is used against an enemy, so the leader of the army seeks to oppress the opposing forces. In a time of war the demands of the military (taxation, the draft) may even become oppressive to the homeland. These four terms, representing long-term stability (cornerstone and peg) and military might may refer to an unspecified number of individual leaders or to qualities of leadership that God will provide. In this way, the Lord "will care for his flock, the house of Judah, and make them like a proud horse in battle" (v. 3).

Prophetic elaboration of the divine promise in verse 3 continues in verse 5. The house of Judah, including their leaders, will become **like mighty men,** like warriors whose purpose was to save their people (see Jer. 14:9). On foot, they will trample **the muddy streets** of conquered cities and even **overthrow the horsemen,** the dreaded cavalry of imperial armies (cf. Zech. 10:3, where Yahweh rides a warhorse, and Zech. 1 and 6, where horses and their riders maintain the Persian emperor's control over his realm even in peacetime). **Because the LORD is with them** the fighting and the victory will happen. The Lord's presence is the most basic answer to the people's need. (Zech. 9:14–16 names some benefits of the Lord's presence.)

10:6–7 / The beginning of verse 6 links the two parts of this passage, 10:1–12. **"I will strengthen the house of Judah"** summarizes God's promises regarding Judah in verses 3–5. "Strengthen" is from the same root (*gbr*) as "mighty men" (v. 5). Together, Judah (the leading tribe in the southern kingdom) and Joseph (the leading tribe of the northern kingdom) stand for the people of Israel as a whole. In Hebrew, a chiasm binds the two parts of the verse closely together: "I will strengthen the house of Judah / the house of Joseph I will save." The rest of the unit, however, does not further explain this hint that Judah, armed for battle, will be God's tool for saving Joseph. Only God's actions appear in verses 6–12.

God's promise to **save the house of Joseph** is an apt introduction to the many promises that follow. The good news for the Israelite exiles begins with liberation from their captors (Isa. 49:25). Verses 6b–7 describe the effect of this salvation on the people and their relationship to God, and verses 8–12 describe the process. The first effect is God's promise, **I will restore them.** The Hebrew verb combines the spelling of two different roots: the *hipʿil* of *shwb,* "bring back, cause to return," and the *hipʿil* of *yshb,* "to resettle, cause to dwell." The LXX translates

the latter, but the former follows "save" in Zechariah 8:7 and Jeremiah 31:7, 9. The translation "restore" captures both ideas. The remainder of verse 6 also recalls Jeremiah 31:18–20. When Ephraim prays, "Restore me" (the *hipʿil* of *shwb*), God says, "Is not Ephraim my dear son, . . . Therefore . . . I have great compassion [*rkhm*] for him." This **compassion** is the Lord's reason for rescuing, returning, and resettling the scattered people of the house of Joseph—and, no doubt, the people of the house of Judah who remain in Diaspora as well. This compassion is mother-love, the passionate caring of a woman for the child she nurtured in her womb (*rekhem*), as articulated in Jeremiah 31:20, "I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns [lit., my internal organs writhe] for him." (see also Jer. 31:9c). Such maternal mercy is the opposite of rejection. God had "rejected" (*m's*) the Israelites of the northern kingdom and banished them from their land because they had abandoned the life of faithfulness (2 Kgs. 17:20) and rejected (*znh*) the good (Hos. 8:3). Here verse 6 replaces the political term *m's,* "reject," with the more personal verb typical of the lament prayer, *znh,* "reject" (as in Ps. 77:7). God promises to reverse this rejection and erase its effects: **"They will be as though / I had not rejected them."** The reason for this transformation and renewal is the covenant, as we saw in 9:11, summarized here by this statement of Yahweh's part in it, **"I am the LORD their God"** (as in Exod. 20:2). God's compassionate commitment to the covenant with Israel reverses Hosea 1:6–9 and fulfills Hosea 2:23. The final promise, **"I will answer** [*ʿnh*] **them,"** also echoes Hosea 2:21 and 14:8, "I will respond [*ʿnh*]," and reverses the threat in Micah 3:4. Isaiah 41:17, "The poor and needy search for water . . . I the LORD will answer them," suggests a connection between the command in verse 1 to "ask the LORD for rain," and the promise to answer in verse 6. This promise is analogous to Jeremiah 29:12, addressed to the first Judean exiles in Babylon, "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you." God's answer could also be in the form of a prophetic oracle (e.g., Jer. 33:3). Although separated by hundreds of miles and hundreds of years, Zechariah 10 affirms that God will not forget the descendants of the northern kingdom exiles.

The long-lost **Ephraimites,** like the Judahites (v. 5), will also become **like mighty men** (v. 7). Zechariah 9:13 had joined Judah and Ephraim together as God's weapon, yet here in verse 7 this development is not followed by battle, as in verse 5, but by rejoicing with **hearts . . . glad as with wine. Their children,** furthermore, **will see it and be joyful.** As Jeremiah 30:12–13 promised, joy will replace the exiles' sorrow when God has restored them to Zion. Joy is the new natural condition of people whom God has redeemed, restored, and brought

home again.

10:8–9 / As God had signaled ("whistled") for the nations from the ends of the earth to attack Israel and Judah (Isa. 5:26; 7:18), so God **will signal** for the long-exiled Ephraimites to turn home to the land of Israel. They will not return by their own strength, for the Lord will **gather them in** like a shepherd, reversing the scattering they had suffered (Jer. 23; 30:10). God's promise to **redeem** Ephraim likens their return to the exodus from Egypt (Deut. 7:8; see Jer. 31:11; Zech. 10:10).

In the book of Hosea the judgment on Israel includes threats of sterility (Hos. 9:11b, 16a) and the loss of children (Hos. 9:12–13, 16b; 13:16b). The promise in verse 8 that Ephraim will be **numerous** (*rbh*) is another example of reversal. It is also a fulfillment of Hosea 1:10 and of Jacob's blessing on Ephraim, "may they increase greatly upon the earth" (Gen. 48:16). Ephraim's increase will be **as before,** a reference to the way the Israelites "were fruitful and multiplied [*rbh*]" in Egypt (Exod. 1:7). **Though I scatter them** is the NIV's translation of an imperfect form of the verb "sow, plant" (*zrʿ*). This promise is also about multiplying population, as in Hosea 2:23; Jeremiah 31:27, and Ezekiel 36:9–10. In this case, however, the increase will take place **among the peoples** in exile, rather than in the land of Israel. The incomplete sense of the verb "sow, plant" indicates that the promised ingathering will not be in the immediate future. The promise, **They and their children will survive,** also implies a longer wait for Ephraim's return. To paraphrase, "I will gather them at some time in the future. Meanwhile, I will make their population increase wherever they are living in exile and dispersion, as the descendants of Jacob's sons multiplied while they lived in Egypt. If they remember me, by turning their lives to serve me even in exile, so that their children are raised as my people, then they will be ready to return to the land when I gather them in." To **remember** God is much more than a mental act of recollection or reminiscence. To remember God in one's time of distress is to lay hold of hope, to have faith that God can and will save, as in the past (Jon. 2:8). Remembering involves actions that reestablish a relationship. For example, when God remembered Noah the flood began to abate. Remembering God is an antidote to pride and idolatry (Deut. 8:14, 18–19). The Ephraimites in exile will need to remember the Lord by giving thanks for the blessings of children given to them by God.

10:10–11 / These verses describe their eventual return typologically as a

second exodus. In the book of Hosea, Assyria to the east and Egypt to the west are the two places where Israelite exiles will be taken, and they are the two powers that will hold them in thrall (Hos. 7:11; 8:13; 11:5). Here God promises to reverse that judgment by bringing them back from both places (v. 10; see also 8:7–8), and by removing **pride** and sovereignty (**scepter**) from both nations (v. 11). In order to arrive at **Gilead and Lebanon,** however, the returning exiles will have to overcome obstacles as the first exodus people had done—but God will be with them. **They will pass through** is plural and follows the LXX and Old Latin. The verb in Hebrew is singular. The NIV's "they" refers to the Ephraimites, but the MT's "he" probably refers to the Lord, who will once again lead the way. The obstacles these verses list are all water: **sea, sea,** and "streams" (NIV **Nile**), as in Isaiah 11:15–16. These terms may each refer to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Assyria, the Reed Sea, and the Nile. These bodies of water were actual barriers for exiles returning to the land of Israel, but they also function metaphorically to describe the oppression of captivity and to suggest the mythic import of the powerful primeval sea. The sea **of trouble** is specifically a sea that "binds up, restricts," yet God and God's people will pass over it and escape. God will "smite" (*mkh,* NIV **be subdued**) the "sea of waves" (NIV **surging sea**) to make a way for the returnees to pass. Finally, the promise to **dry up** [*ybsh*] the **depths** is a promise of a second exodus, as celebrated in Exodus 15, when Pharaoh's forces sank into the "depths" (Exod. 15:5) after Israel had crossed the sea on "dry ground" (*yebashah,* Exod. 15:19).

10:12 / God speaks in both the first and third person in verse 12 and includes the Ephraimites in the promise made to the house of Judah in verse 6, **"I will strengthen them in the LORD."** United by God's power, as "mighty men" (vv. 5 and 7), the restored exiles will be able to **walk** hither and yon, in freedom by the authority of the Lord's **name.** The form of the verb, "walk" (the *hithpaʿel* of *hlk*), suggests more than a single journey from places of exile back to the land of Israel. They will travel far and wide throughout the divine domain as the Lord's agents (see also Job 2:2; Gen. 3:8; Zech. 1:10, 11; 6:7).

Additional Notes §29

10:4–5 / Ruler. Together they will be: The NIV follows the suggestion of *BHS* to read the final word in v. 4, *yakhdaw,* as part of v. 5. The first verb in v. 5 is also emended slightly for this reading, from *wehayu* to

yihyu. The placement of *yakhdaw* "together" does not significantly affect the meaning of these verses. The NIV margin maintains the MT verse division.

§30 A Taunt Song against Arrogant Powers (Zech. 11:1–3)

11:1–3 / This taunt song warns the trees of the bordering lands on the north and east about destruction and wailing. Readers may take the warning on a concrete level as an announcement of God's intention to clear the forests to the north, northeast, and east to make room for the returning exiles to settle (10:10). On another level, trees (**cedars, pine tree, oaks**), **shepherds,** and **lions** are all metaphors for leaders. They will be **ruined** and **cut down,** and their habitats **destroyed.** This song reaffirms the prophecy of the Day of the Lord in Isaiah 2:12–18, when the "cedars of Lebanon" and the "oaks of Bashan" will be among "the proud and lofty" who will "be brought low." The Jordan's **lush thicket** translates a word (*ga'on*) that elsewhere refers to the majesty or pride of nations, based on their wealth and power (Zech. 9:9; 10:11). The removal of the proud rulers of Lebanon, Bashan, and the Jordan valley prepares the way for the returned Ephraimite exiles to settle in Lebanon and Gilead (10:10). The shepherd metaphor in verse 3 also links this brief song to the passage that follows about the removal and rejection of shepherd-leaders. Together they reiterate the message of the taunt song in Jeremiah 25:34–38, that shepherds and their pastureland will be destroyed, and the lion's habitat will become desolate.

§31 Prophetic Sign-Acts: Two Shepherds (Zech. 11:4–17)

Scholars regularly name this passage as one of the most difficult in the book. Part of the reason for this assessment is that it frustrates the reader's initial expectations. It appears to be a narrative report of prophetic sign-acts commissioned by God and performed by the prophet, who narrates in the first person. The two commissions (vv. 4, 15) and divine words of judgment that interpret the sign-acts (vv. 6, 16) fit this pattern well. Yet God's words of explanation to the prophet in verse 5 go beyond what the prophet could orchestrate on his own initiative. They warn him that his ministry will be futile to save the flock from slaughter (see Isa. 6:9–13). It is impossible to identify the buyers and sellers, or even the flock on their way to be slaughtered. Other prophetic sign-acts in the OT have plausible historical settings provided by the larger context of the book, enabling the reader to grasp the aptness of the sign-act's message for its audience. Zechariah 11:4–17, however, has no context to suggest names or dates. The wide range of proposals, from the Assyrian period in the northern kingdom to the Hellenistic rulers of the second century B.C., provides evidence that this passage effectively portrays a pattern of exploitive leadership, rejection, and judgment that can be apprehended in many episodes of God's dealings with Israel and Judah. The prophet's symbolic actions recall the long-past division of David and Solomon's empire into northern and southern kingdoms (breaking the staff named "Union"), the more recent Assyrian and Babylonian exiles (breaking the covenant staff named "Favor"), and the kings who had been wicked shepherds (Ezek. 34; Jer. 25), thus providing background for the restoration promises we have just read in Zechariah 9–10. Prophets preached kings off their thrones and nations from their lands by exposing their failings and announcing God's will to remove them (Zech. 11:6, 8; 1 Kgs. 12; Amos 7; Jer. 22). The oppression of the poor by the rich was one of the many sins for which they were sent away.

The whole passage uses shepherd and flock symbolism. Even God's explanation of the second commanded sign-act in verse 16 maintains the pastoral imagery, although verse 6 does not. In this way these verses resemble the

extended metaphors in Ezekiel 16 and 23 that use consistent marital imagery to indict Jerusalem and Judah for unfaithfulness to the Lord. Both of these passages have to do with the past and its consequences in the present and immediate future. In the examples from Ezekiel the first-person narrator is God, not the prophet.

There are at least two levels of difficulty in interpreting the account of the prophet's first assignment. Understanding the actions of the story is the first problem. Over several months the prophet, as shepherd, first acts as the flock's protector, but then grows weary of them and rejects them. Shepherd and flock are metaphors, and it is not clear what precise role the shepherd holds. The story is told in the first person, but the identity of the speaker seems to shift. Verses 7b–10 and 14, in which the shepherd rejects the flock and breaks the two staffs symbolizing the covenant with God and the unity between northern and southern kingdoms, could be read with God speaking as the shepherd. In the remaining verses, however, the Lord speaks to the narrator, and the shepherd speaker is the hired employee of the merchants of the flock (vv. 11–13) who recognize the Lord's word. The second level of difficulty is understanding the relationship of this symbolic action to the experiences of the community. The account seems to include details that might refer to subsequent historical events, but it has been impossible to identify them. The NT connects one part of the account with a significant detail of Jesus' passion, but the story as a whole does not correspond with Jesus' ministry.

11:4–6 / God commissions a sign-act (vv. 4–5) and gives its interpretation, introduced by "for" (*ki,* v. 6). God gives Zechariah ambiguous instructions —**Pasture the flock marked for slaughter.** A good shepherd would typically protect members of the flock from death so that the sheep could continue to provide their wool and the goats could continue to give milk. This flock has been marked for killing, however. There was no factory farming in ancient Israel. The population of some place had been marked for death. Someone had sold them at a profit, and his only thought was to celebrate his new wealth, saying, **"Praise the LORD, I am rich!"** This praise would have been repugnant to the Lord, who condemned nations that sold communities (Amos 1:6, 9) and celebrated the ruin of their kin (Amos 6:6). The fact that the **buyers** killed the people with impunity and were not charged with any crime is not surprising, since the victims' leaders (shepherds) did not intervene to **spare them.**

One would expect God to assign the prophet acting as shepherd to rescue the

flock, but that is not God's plan. Instead, the interpretation of the act is an announcement of judgment on **the people of the land.** Each one will be handed **over to his neighbor and his king** and **They will oppress the land.** Like their shepherds (v. 5), God will not spare them or **rescue them.** The purpose of the prophet's shepherding is not clear.

11:7–9 / Beginning in verse 7, the prophet describes how he carried out the commission, showing by his actions how he went from caring for the flock to rejecting them. This account seems to explain what happened between the commissioning of the shepherd for the endangered flock (vv. 4–5) and God's decision to bring them under judgment (v. 6).

The prophet began by caring for the doomed flock, **particularly the oppressed of the flock.** A good shepherd strengthens the weak and binds up the injured (see Ezek. 34:4). The shepherd used staffs as implements for guiding and defending the flock. The symbolic names for these staffs, **Favor** and **Union,** bode well for the survival of the flock under this shepherd's care.

Verse 8 moves into the political sphere, as the shepherd turns against other shepherds. The shepherd's voice appears now to be the voice of God, for the actions that follow are beyond the ability of a human prophet. As in Ezekiel 34:10, the Lord removed bad shepherds in order to save the flock. God removed **three** human leaders of the community in **one month.** In spite of this precise detail, it has been impossible to connect this account to any known historical events.

Following the removal of these leaders, God's relationship with the flock broke down completely, so that the shepherd refused to care for them: "**I will not be your shepherd."** With God's protection removed, the flock was free to tear itself apart, and even to **eat one another's flesh.**

11:10–11 / We return to the prophet's sign-act with the symbolic breaking of the staff named **Favor,** but God gives the interpretation in the first person —**revoking the covenant I** [God] **had made with all the nations. The afflicted of the flock,** the prophet's audience, **knew** that the sign-act and its interpretation were **the word of the LORD.** While this symbolic act took place in the past, it reveals something about the present or future. Zechariah 2:11 anticipates that "Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people." Perhaps the nations, like Israel, will experience covenant making, breaking, and renewal.

11:12–14 / The people in charge of the shepherd understood that God was the one who made the decision to sever the relationship. The prophet acting as shepherd also severed his relationship with the ones watching him. His pay, or perhaps payoff, rewards him for leaving the flock unprotected. (Compare this with Judas' betrayal of Jesus to the temple authorities in Matt. 26:14–16.) The reparation payment to the owner for a slave that had been gored by an OX was **thirty pieces of silver** (Exod. 21:32). It is a miniscule payment in relation to the size of the flock of Israel and Judah. The prophet discarded the insulting payment by throwing it **into the house of the LORD to the potters.** There is no indication, however, that his action is an expression of remorse, like Judas' (Matt. 27:3–5). The prophet-shepherd broke his second staff, called **Union, breaking the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.** The return of the long-departed northern kingdom exiles to join Judah in the restored Davidic kingdom of Israel is part of the eschatological hope. The shepherd's action annuls its fulfillment.

11:15–17 / Verses 15–16 fit the pattern of a sign-act commissioning report. God commands the prophet to perform a symbolic act (v. 15), to carry the implements **of a foolish shepherd.** The explanation of the sign-act's meaning is the divine word in verses 16–17, introduced by **For** (*ki*). The **shepherd** that the Lord will establish in **the land** will be an anti-shepherd, a predator rather than a caretaker. The **foolish** shepherd's tools may be the remaining pieces of the broken staffs from verses 10 and 14, rendered ineffectual for helping the sheep. Verse 16 suggests that the antishepherd's tools may even be the implements of one who slaughters and eats the sheep.

The description of this foolish shepherd reverses the expectations of shepherdly care that the OT expresses elsewhere. A good shepherd protects the flock from wild animals that will kill and devour it, but the anti-shepherd will **eat** them himself, even down to the **hoofs** as the wild beasts do (see Amos 3:12). A good shepherd seeks and finds the lost sheep, and tends to the injured, but the worthless shepherd will refuse to perform these duties. This anti-shepherd closely resembles the one who speaks in verse 9, but he proves to be even worse. God pronounces judgment on the worthless shepherd **who deserts the flock** in verse 17 by means of a woe oracle. A battle (a **sword**) or disease (**withered**) will render the shepherd's working **arm** and aiming **eye** useless. Three other shepherds had been eliminated in one month (see also Hos. 8:4; 2 Kgs. 15–17). This worthless one will also be terminated.

§32 The Second Oracle (Zech. 12–14)

The superscription—An Oracle—is printed separately as the heading of chapters 12–14. The first three words of Zechariah 12:1 (*massa' debar YHWH*), **An Oracle: This is the word of the LORD,** appear in the OT only here and at the beginning of Zechariah 9:1 and Malachi 1:1. This repeated formula links the books of Zechariah and Malachi. (See the introduction to Zechariah and also the additional note to 9:1, above.) This superscription marks off a section that is also bound together internally by its focus on Jerusalem and by the formula "on that day." This phrase occurs seven times in Zechariah 12, three times in chapter 13, and seven times in chapter 14, but only one other time (9:16) in the whole of part four (chs. 9–14). (The NIV does not translate the second occurrence of this phrase in 12:8.)

§33 The Creator Will Defend Jerusalem (Zech. 12:1–8)

12:1–7 / Zechariah 12–14 focuses on Jerusalem, Judah, and the other nations, and these chapters reveal God's purposes on behalf of the covenant people **Israel.** A short hymn introduces the Lord as the one **who stretches out the heavens** and **lays the foundation of the earth** (see Isa. 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 52:13). These verbs echo prophecies from the first half of the book about the measuring line stretching out over Jerusalem (1:16) and the laying of the temple foundation (4:9). The temple and the city are signs pointing to the Creator. The Lord whom the people worship in Jerusalem is the source of life for all humankind, **who forms the spirit of** humankind. It is Yahweh the Creator who wields authority over all the peoples of the earth (see Jer. 27:4–7).

When **all the nations of the earth are gathered against** Jerusalem, they will suffer because of their aggression. There are two metaphors for the way God will bring this about. First, God says, **"I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling."** Attacking Jerusalem will be like drinking wine or strong drink so that the attackers become incapacitated and humiliated (see also Isa. 51:17–23; Jer. 25:15–16; Hab. 2:16). Then, God says, **"I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations." All who try to move it will injure themselves** and the city will not fall to their assault. The nations will bring judgment on themselves, and God will act against them. **"I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness,"** and **"I will blind all the horses of the nations."** Horses were the armaments of wealthy and powerful nations. Victory against them could only be achieved with God's help because only the Lord could afflict soldiers and their horses in such ways.

Judah has an ambiguous position in this oracle about the defense of Jerusalem. Many interpreters believe that the sentences about Judah were added in an inspired expanded edition of the oracle. Jerusalem had been part of the tribal allotment to Benjamin (Josh. 18:28), but David was the first to take the city from the Jebusites. He made it the capital city of the united kingdom of Israel, and it remained the seat of his descendants, the kings of Judah (2 Sam. 5:6–12). One can speculate about conflicts between the capital city and the towns and villages

of postexilic Yehud that this complex prophecy may address. At the very least, the final form of this passage responds to the question, "If the nations attack Jerusalem, what will happen to Judah?" Yehud surrounded Jerusalem geographically so that any army besieging Jerusalem will have conquered and encamped in Judah. If Judah joined the attackers, it would become like a siege wall enclosing Jerusalem. If Judah stood to protect the city, then it would be like a defensive rampart. Various translations and interpretations represent each reading of the awkward and ambivalent construction here in verse 2. (Compare, e.g., the NIV **Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem** with the NRSV "it [the cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling] will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem.") Since, in the midst of judgment on the aggressive nations, the Lord **will keep a watchful eye over the house of Judah,** it appears that Judah is on Jerusalem's side. Verse 5 asserts that **the leaders of Judah** will acknowledge that the Jerusalemites **are strong, because the LORD Almighty is their God.**

Two similes express the role of Judah's leaders in the defense of Jerusalem. These leaders, **like a firepot in a woodpile** and **like a flaming torch among sheaves,** will set a fire that will **consume . . . all the surrounding peoples**—the same peoples who drink the cup of judgment in verse 2. The conflagration will not disturb Jerusalem (v. 6), but what will happen to all the settlements in Judah? **The LORD will save** them. In fact, God will deliver **the dwellings of Judah** first, in order to honor Judah equally with **the honor of the house of David and of Jerusalem's inhabitants.** This relative chronology of rescue begins, logically, in Judah, whose leaders set the fire. The concern to equalize honor, however, hints at competition between Judah and Jerusalem. Such honor or glory (*tif'aret*) is associated with high rank or fame. Esther 1:4 is another example of this usage.

12:8 / Extravagant reassurance of protection for Jerusalem follows: **the LORD will shield those who live in Jerusalem.** The city will be above the fray, behind God's protective shield. The verb "shield" (*gnn*) occurs only three times in the OT, twice with Jerusalem as its object (Isa. 31:5). The related noun, "garden" (*gan*), refers most often to the garden of Eden, hinting again at the foundational significance of the city. In Jerusalem, David had become more powerful "because the LORD God Almighty was with him" (2 Sam. 5:10). **On that day,** God promises, even **the feeblest among them will be like David.** Raising up the weak and downtrodden is a consistent aspect of God's activity (e.g., Ps. 113:7–9; 1 Sam. 2:4–8; Luke 1:52–53). Unlike the leaders in these biblical songs, however,

here the royal family will not be overthrown. David's descendants will still lead. If the people will be like David, then **the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the LORD going before them.** Mephibosheth flatters David as he defends himself, saying, "My lord the king is like an angel of God" (2 Sam. 19:27). This description of David's house is reminiscent of Moses, who was "like God" to Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1), and the angel whom God provided to lead Israel to the promised land (Exod. 23:20–22).

God's commitment to defend Zion and maintain the house of David lies behind this passage (2 Sam. 7; 1 Kgs. 11:34–36; 15:4; 2 Kgs. 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). The singing of hymns such as Psalms 46; 48; 68; 76; and 132 kept alive the people's hope for the inviolability of Zion. The book of Isaiah includes several depictions of God delivering Jerusalem from attackers (e.g., Isa. 17:12–14; 29:1–8; 30:27–33; 31:4–5). Zechariah has prophesied God's renewed choice of Jerusalem, the inheritance of Judah, jealousy for the oppressed city, and wrath against its conquerors (1:14–15, 17; 2:12). All of these themes find expression again in 12:1–8.

§34 Mourning for One Who Was Pierced (Zech. 12:9–13:1)

12:9–11 / This next section is laden with grief. The root "mourn" (*spd*) occurs five times in as many verses (12:10–14). Yet this mourning is God's good gift, a necessary accompaniment to repentance (see also Joel 2:12; Isa. 22:12). This blessing will enable the people of Jerusalem to turn back to God. While God sets out **to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem** (v. 9), God will transform **the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem** (vv. 10–14). Then the Lord will provide them with the means **to cleanse them from sin and impurity** (13:1).

While the basic outline of this plan to save Jerusalem is clear, there are many confusing features. The oracle says nothing about assassinating or executing someone with the sword or javelin. Therefore we, the readers, do not know how or why someone was pierced, and the grammar also obscures the identity of the pierced one. In the NIV translation of verse 10, **the one they have pierced** is the speaker who says, **"They will look on me,"** and who is the antecedent of the third-person pronoun in **they will mourn for him.** Since the Lord is speaking, "me" identifies God as the pierced one. Could the people's rebellion have hurt God so severely that it could be expressed in this metaphor of stabbing? The description of physical distress in Hosea 11:8c comes close (cf. Simeon's prophecy to Mary, "a sword will pierce your own soul too," Luke 2:35). The first hearers and readers, however, definitely would not have understood how God could be the object of mourning for one who is dead. The Lord, the God of Israel, is the living God. An alternate translation of the MT is preferable here: "they will look to me concerning the one they have pierced."

Looking to the Lord (the *hipʿil* of *nbt*) indicates commitment and awareness of God's power (see Ps. 34:5; Isa. 22:11), and their mourning demonstrates remorse for the killing. The people will be able to regret their sin and look to the Lord, because God **will pour out on** "the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem" **a spirit of grace and supplication.** God's gracious gift will come first, and repentance will follow. Pouring out implies a generous gift, distributed to all.

The concept of "spirit" includes both desire and ability. God will inspire and empower the people to pray for God's merciful acceptance and help. "Supplication" is the kind of prayer uttered by people who confess their sinfulness (e.g., Pss. 130:2; 143:1; Jer. 3:21; 31:9; Dan. 9:3, 17, 18, 23), and that of their ancestors (Dan. 9:4–6). Fasting, sackcloth, and ashes accompany Daniel's supplications (Dan. 9:3).

The mourning will be as intense as anyone can imagine. They will **mourn for him as one mourns for an only child** (cf. the same simile in Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10). The only son who is identified by this noun (*yekhid*) in the OT is Isaac (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16). After Abraham sent away Ishmael and Hagar in the previous chapter (Gen. 21:8–12), Isaac was his only remaining son and the elderly Sarah his only wife. Isaac was apparently Abraham's last son, the only one who could continue Abraham's lineage. The people will **grieve bitterly for** the pierced one **as one grieves for a firstborn son.** Naomi (Ruth 1:20) and Job (Job 27:2) are the only other OT figures who are subjects of this verb, "grieve bitterly" (the *hipʿil* of *mrr*), and every one of their children had died. Firstborn sons were raised to take over the leadership of their families and to be responsible for the family land and other assets. The death of the firstborn could endanger the family's survival. On the occasion of the first Passover the Egyptians experienced this loss in every household (Exod. 12:29–30). Furthermore, God had a claim on the firstborn of every womb in Israel, human and animal (Num. 3:11–13). The final simile is less clear. Does **the weeping of Hadad Rimmon** refer to an otherwise unknown ritual dedicated to the Canaanite storm deity Hadad, something like the mourning for Tammuz at the temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 8:14)? Or is Hadad Rimmon a place **in the plain of Megiddo** (Armageddon) where King Josiah was mourned (2 Chr. 35:20–27)? Either practice could have exemplified **great** weeping for the original audience of this prophecy. Each of these similes is about mourning someone's death. By God's grace, none of their tears will be shed out of fear over their own punishment.

12:12–14 / The mourning will be great and also extensive. The God-given spirit of supplication will inspire in every segment of the society a unanimous response to the pierced one's death. No one will be left out, yet each group in the society will mourn **by itself,** separated from and not coerced by the other groups. It is not surprising that verse 12 specifically mentions "their women" (NIV **their wives,** see additional note). Women were recognized experts who led laments for the dead (e.g., Jer. 9:17–22), and men and women singers performed the

lamentations composed for Josiah (2 Chr. 35:25). **David** and **Levi** were the founders of covenanted royal and priestly houses (e.g., Jer. 33:19–22). The other two named clans fill out the picture of complete participation. One of David's sons was named **Nathan** (2 Sam. 5:14), and **the clan of Shimei** is listed in the third generation of the tribe of Levi (Num. 3:18). Because the text identifies them in this way, these names may represent the extension of weeping to the second and third generations. Nathan and Shimei were also the names of contemporaries of King David. They would represent other leaders in the community, including people from the tribe of Benjamin, Shimei's tribe (2 Sam. 16:5–14; 19:15–23). Verse 14 tells us that **all the rest of the clans and their wives** fill the rest of the land that will mourn over the death of the one who was pierced.

The intensity and extent of the mourning suggest that the dead man was a fallen leader, one whose death brought a premature end to Jerusalem's hopes. The pierced one could be a descendant of David, a candidate for the kingship. According to 1 Kings 14:13 and 18, all Israel mourned (*spd*) for Jeroboam's son when he died prematurely, before he could succeed to the throne. The Gospel of John calls attention to the way Zechariah 12:10 anticipated an unusual detail of Jesus' crucifixion, "as another scripture says, 'They will look on the one they have pierced'" (John 19:37). A soldier had pierced Jesus' side with a spear to ascertain that he was really dead (John 19:34). John does not claim that Jesus was the only "one they have pierced," however. Without citing Zechariah 12:10, Luke 23:48 briefly notes that spectators at the crucifixion "saw what took place" and then "they beat their breasts and went away." This reaction does not approach the intensity of mourning that verses 10–14 portray, however. There is an ancient tradition among Christians of expressing grief over Jesus' passion and remorse for the human sin that sent him to the cross. The familiar hymn by Bernard of Clairvaux articulates this piety, "Mine, mine was the transgression / But thine, the deadly pain."

13:1 / For the last time in the book of Zechariah God makes a promise regarding **the house of David.** The promise also includes **the inhabitants of Jerusalem.** This is the eighth of seventeen promises in chapters 12–14 that begin with the phrase, **on that day. A fountain will be opened** in Jerusalem. Ezekiel 47:1–12, Joel 3:18, and Zechariah 14:8 describe an eschatological water source that will flow out of the temple and water the land. This fountain in 13:1 has a ritual purpose **to cleanse** [the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem]

from sin and impurity. Water purifies people and objects from uncleanness that results from contact with the dead, according to the torah in Numbers 19 and 31:23. The water of cleansing prepares the Levites for service by making them ceremonially clean (Num. 8:7). God promises to gather Israelite exiles from the nations and to cleanse them from impurities and idols by sprinkling them with clean water (Ezek. 36:25). None of these purification rituals include animal sacrifices. The Lord, who is "the spring [or fountain] of living water" (Jer. 2:13; 17:13), is the ultimate source of the cleansing water and the purification that it accomplishes.

Additional Notes §34

12:10 / Me, the one they have pierced: The direct object marker, *'et,* can introduce an adverbial use indicating cause (GKC §118). The house of David and the inhabitants will look to the Lord because they had pierced someone.

12:12–14 / The NIV's **their wives** is too narrow. Each clan's women included unmarried daughters and widows in addition to wives.

§35 The Lord Removes Falsehood (Zech. 13:2–6)

13:2–6 / This section addresses two sources of apostasy which God promises to remove **On that day.** Calling foreign deities **the names of the idols** rhetorically reduces them; they are merely names given to dead objects made by human hands. Even their names will be banished **from the land** and **will be remembered no more** (see Hos. 2:17). People will not worship them, pray to them, or swear oaths in their names. When they are forgotten, even their illusory power will disappear. The **prophets** associated with **the spirit of impurity** must be false prophets. The capital charge against these prophets is, **"you have told lies in the LORD's name."** God promises to **remove** them **from the land.**

After this, if anyone prophesies again, his own **father and mother** will charge him with false prophecy, saying, **"You must die,"** and will put him to death by piercing him. Deuteronomy 13:6–9 requires that even the closest relative or friend of one who advocates worship of other gods must lead the community in stoning him. Even a person who presumes to bring a message in Yahweh's name that the Lord has not commanded must be executed as a false prophet (Deut. 18:20). The enforcement of these laws and their own sense of shame will force people who had claimed to be prophets into hiding. If they receive visions they will not be from God, so they will not dress in the typical garb of prophets and report them publicly. Elijah wore "a garment of hair . . . with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kgs. 1:8), and Samuel could be recognized by the robe he wore (1 Sam. 28:14). To wear such a robe would be to **put on a . . . garment of hair in order to deceive,** as Jacob had done (Gen. 25:25). Using a revised version of Amos's disclaimer (Amos 7:14), future prophets will claim to be farmers rather than prophets. Genesis 2:5 and 15 imply that God created human beings to till the ground. In an economy where almost everyone was **a farmer,** the prophet's denial in verse 5 will mean, "I am an ordinary person, just like you. I've been supporting myself by working the ground since I was a child."

People will question the **wounds** on their torsos, suspecting that they have beaten themselves to achieve an ecstatic state, as false prophets of both types did (the prophets of Baal in 1 Kgs. 18:28, and a prophet who spoke presumptuously in 1 Kgs. 20:35). Their answer will be open to more than one interpretation: the

wounds I was given at the house of the ones who love me (the *piʿel* participle, masc. pl., of *ʾhb,* NIV **my friends**). Future prophets who try to hide their prophetic activity are not likely to admit that their family and friends had wounded them to keep them from prophesying. The most common use of the *piʿel* participle of the verb "love" in the OT is to refer to the idols and foreign allies of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem in the passages that portray them figuratively as the Lord's adulterous wife (e.g., Hos. 2:7, 10–13). Could an individual, especially a male individual, refer to idols as "my lovers"? It is only slightly less likely that prophets who were ashamed of their prophesying would admit to worshipping false gods. The future prophets seem to be claiming that they were beaten in a family dispute or in the ancient equivalent of a barroom brawl. Generations of commentators have seen through this vague excuse to the interpretations indicated above.

Additional Notes §35

13:5 / The land has been my livelihood: The NIV translates a slightly emended Heb. text, *ʾadamah qinyani.* The alternate translation, found in the NIV margin, translates the MT *ʾadam hiqnani,* "a man sold me." Whether he is a landowner or a debt slave, he still works the ground.

13:6 / On your body: "Between your hands," in the NIV margin, is a more literal translation. In 2 Kgs. 9:24, the only other occurrence of this phrase, an arrow entering this part of the body reaches the heart. The Heb. word, *yad,* can refer to the hand and lower arm, from fingertip to elbow, leaving the upper arms, shoulders, and torso "between the hands."

§36 Strike the Sheep (Zech. 13:7–9)

This brief poem sketches a long story. God's judgment falls on the leader so that the people are scattered and two thirds of them die. God refines the remaining third in the fire and they emerge repentant so God restores the covenant relationship with them. Standing alone, these lines could summarize the message of the preexilic prophets. The poem's context and vocabulary set it apart from them, however. The function of the poem in this book is to introduce Zechariah 14 and draw attention to the parallels between the recent past and the eschatological future. There is a strong element of warning in this summary. Many will die, and the rest will suffer. But in the end they will be Yahweh's people and the Lord will be their God.

13:7 / The poem does not give a reason for the death of the shepherd and the harm to the sheep. The preceding verses have, however, given ample reasons for judgment—idolatry, a spirit of impurity, and false prophets. God deals first with the leaders of the people by commanding the sword: **Awake, O sword, against my shepherd . . . Strike the shepherd.** The shepherd must be a leader, and is probably a member of the house of David. Jeremiah 23:1–4 and Ezekiel 34:1–24 also use the shepherd metaphor for community leaders without calling them "king" or "messiah." The book of Zechariah is confident that the line of David will endure, even if the monarchy is not restored for a very long time. The other title of the shepherd figure, **the man who is close to me,** is appropriate for royalty. The "man who is close to me" translates a word found elsewhere only in Leviticus (*ʿamiti*). It is a legal term for people who share the same rights and protection, who are part of the same community. Only the Davidic king, the Lord's adopted son (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7), would be so close to God.

"Strike the shepherd," / and the sheep will be scattered sounds like a truism, a proverbial statement, but the verb "strike" is also an imperative. God had commanded the sword to "awake" and to kill the shepherd. If a human person is to wield the sword, he is not identified. The initiative comes from God throughout the poem. Thus **the little ones** of the flock will not just be scattered,

as before (Jer. 23:3; Ezek. 34:5–6); God **will turn** God's **hand against** them in an act of judgment (cf. Amos 1:8; Ps. 81:14).

13:8–9 / As in Isaiah 1:25, the purpose of this judgment is to purify and refine the remnant of this people (v. 9). Fully **two-thirds** of the sheep **will be struck down and perish** by the stroke of God's hand. The remaining third will also suffer by being brought **into the fire.** The first conquest and exile had come to be understood as discipline and purification for the surviving remnant (e.g., Isa. 1:25–26). The image of smelting implies a positive outcome, for things of value remain. (Ezek. 22:17–22, however, says specifically that all Israel was dross.) Here verse 9 mentions two steps. God will **refine them** to remove the dross, and then **test them** to reveal their purity (see Ps. 66:8–12). Malachi 3:2 promises that Yahweh's messenger will be like a refiner's fire that will purify the priesthood. The future fires of judgment will smelt out the dross—whatever would keep them from returning to God. The positive product, the **silver** and **gold,** are people who **will call on** the Lord's **name.** To address the Lord in praise or petition is an act of faith and hope. Elijah, for example, called on Yahweh's name in the contest with the Baal prophets. When the Lord answered by fire, the people acknowledged that the Lord is God (1 Kgs. 18:24, 36–39). The refining fire that verse 9 prophesies will also inspire faith. The Lord **will answer them** and **will say, "They are my people."** Then the people **will say, "The LORD is our God."** By means of this familiar formula God promises a renewed and restored covenant (cf. Zech. 8:8 and the same promise after judgment in Hos. 2:23). The committed relationship between Yahweh and Yahweh's people is the eschatological hope of this poem.

This brief prophecy does not identify the shepherd. He is not called the Suffering Servant or the Davidic messiah. The NT offers a transformed understanding of this passage in light of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus uses the proverbial shepherd saying from verse 7 to warn his disciples that they would be scattered and put to death when he was arrested (Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27; see also Matt. 25:56; Mark 14:50). The shepherd who dies becomes, in Jesus, the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and who will gather all of his sheep (John 10:14–18).

Additional Notes §36

13:8 / According to Meyers and Meyers (*Zechariah 9–14,* p. 391), these proportions, two-thirds and one-third, correspond to population estimates for Judah in the sixth century. Early sixth-century Judah had approximately 30,000 inhabitants, but the population was only about 10,000 at the end of the century. Verse 8 prophesies another reduction before the eschatological restoration of the covenant.

§37 The Lord Will Reign (Zech. 14:1–21)

Zechariah 13:7–9 prophesied eschatological death, destruction, survival, answered prayer, and renewed covenant in familiar language. In the final chapter of Zechariah the same story includes bizarre images that describe the overthrow of the world as we know it. There is no clear chronological arrangement of the material in Zechariah 9–14, but this chapter brings us to the consummation of the book's eschatology. The Creator will reshape the creation and will rule from Jerusalem as king over all the nations of the earth.

Zechariah 14 resembles other OT passages in which God announces the intention to bring nations against Jerusalem for the purpose of defeating them there (e.g., Isa. 29:1–8; Ezek. 38–39; Joel 3). These passages share complete faith in the revelation of prophecy and psalmody that the Lord's reign will be acknowledged and experienced universally. Actions against the nations and changes in the shape of the inanimate creation will be visible indications of Yahweh's royal rule.

14:1–2 / Although the book of Zechariah includes many promises to defend Jerusalem (e.g., 2:5), this prophecy announces a final, successful assault on the city. This Day of the Lord will begin as "darkness, not light," as in Amos 5:18, for the attackers will subdue the city and divide its plunder there. After describing the end of the attack in verse 1, the Lord goes back to the beginning and fills in the details. God will initiate the action by gathering **all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it.** There is, however, no mention of wrath or judgment against Zion as the motivation for this battle. Nations that had made war on Israel and Judah in the past had pursued their own ambitions while God used them to bring judgment (e.g., God calls Assyria "the rod of my anger" in Isa. 10:5). Their actions are typical of victorious armies. Then **the city will be captured, the houses** will be **ransacked, and the women raped.** Isaiah 13:16 prophesies the same sufferings for Babylon. Conquerors take possession violently of the most private and precious places and treat the most vulnerable ones with contempt. **Half of the city will go into exile.** This, too, was a typical aftermath of war. Both Samaria and Jerusalem had suffered such deportation. Yet, **the rest of the people**

will not be taken from the city. A remnant will remain.

14:3–5 / Zion's defeat is only the first scene in this portrayal of the last battle for Jerusalem. It sets up the description of God's victory. Beginning in verse 3 a third-person description succeeds the first-person announcement. **Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations,** the ones gathered against Jerusalem. This announcement parallels Zechariah 12:2–6 (though that chapter does not mention Jerusalem's fall).

Instead of a battle, the promise of theophany follows. **On that day,** having gone out from the heavenly court, the Lord's **feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.** The elders of Israel had seen the Lords "feet" above them as they looked up from Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:9–10), and in Isaiah's vision the hem of God's robe filled the temple (Isa. 6:1). The implication of Yahweh's enormous size is also present in this anthropomorphic description suggestive of a colossus astride the higher ridge east of the city (cf. Amos 4:13; Mic. 1:3; "the LORD . . . treads the high places of the earth"). Yahweh's appearance on the Mount of Olives fulfills Ezekiel's vision of the return of the glory of the Lord to the temple from the east (Ezek. 43:1–5). Mountains move in various ways when the Lord appears upon them (e.g., Exod. 19:18; Nah. 1:5; Ps. 97:5; Mic. 1:4; Hab. 3:6; Isa. 40:4). In this theophany the mountain **will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley.** The parts will separate, with **half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.** God will provide this valley, extending eastward **to Azel,** as a route over which the surviving inhabitants **will flee.**

The comparison to flight **from the earthquake** indicates a complete evacuation, away from the fires and falling buildings that follow major tremors. The **earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah** (in the first half of the 8th century B.C.) was apparently widely known. It even left its mark on the book of Amos (Amos 1:1). The Lord will not make this appearance alone. The prophet declares with joy, **the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him** (the members of the heavenly council, Ps. 89:5, 7). Their presence points to the holiness of the city where God reigns (Zech. 14:20–21).

14:6–7 / On that day there will be further transformations of creation. In fact, this prophecy envisions an undoing of creation to the point before light was created. Even without light, there will be **no cold or frost.** Since light is necessary for the alternation of day and night, this single **unique day** will also be **without daytime or nighttime. When evening comes,** at the end of this light-less,

unmarked day, **there will be light** again at the time that it is supposed to be dark. Constant light without excessive temperatures would multiply the growing time for crops. These remarkable changes, on **a day known to the LORD,** will mark the end of the postdiluvian world maintained by God's pledge after the flood, "As long as the earth endures, / seedtime and harvest, / cold and heat, / summer and winter, / day and night / will never cease" (Gen. 8:22). The constancy of day and night, maintained by covenant with God, serves as a guarantee of the durability of the Lord's covenants with David and Levi (Jer. 33:20–21): the era of counting days and years will come to an end.

14:8 / The Psalms and prophecy picture the temple as the source of a river (e.g., Ps. 46:4; Ezek. 47:1–12; Joel 3:18). The four rivers flowing out of the garden of Eden are also part of the biblical background of verse 8 here. The temple had a large source of standing water, the bronze sea, and the city had one constant spring that flows to this day, the Gihon. Zechariah 13:1 has already promised a cleansing fountain flowing from the temple. On the Lord's Day, two rivers of **living water will flow out from Jerusalem.** In the land of Israel most rivers flow only during the winter rains and dry up in the summer. These waters will flow constantly, **in summer and in winter—half** will run **to the eastern sea,** the Dead Sea, and **half** will run **to the western sea,** the Mediterranean. The elimination of darkness and drought, those forces of death, will maximize the productivity of the land and promote life.

14:9 / The prophet succinctly states two core beliefs about God that are central and pervasive in the OT; the Lord is king, and the Lord is one. The consummation will come, as the prophets have declared, because these things are true. And when it comes, these truths will be known everywhere. **The LORD will be king over the whole earth is an assertion that** repeats a theme from prophecy and the book of Psalms (e.g., Jer. 3:17; Pss. 93; 96; 97; 99). The nations of the earth will respond with worship and serve the king (Zech. 14:16). **On that day,** furthermore, **there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.** The emphasis on the Lord as one and only is most familiar from Deuteronomy 6:4. The names of the idols will have to be removed (Zech. 13:2), and the peoples of the earth will acknowledge the Lord alone as God.

14:10–11 / Jerusalem is the symbol of the Lord's exclusive reign, and the alterations to its topography this verse describes will communicate its meaning more clearly than ever. The **Arabah** is the plain that includes the lowest point on

earth, the shores of the Dead Sea. **The whole land . . . will become like** the Arabah, low and flat. **Geba,** several miles to the north, and **Rimmon, south of Jerusalem,** probably in the Negev, attach this eschatological vision to points near the Persian-period borders of Yehud. As the surrounding hills are brought low, **Jerusalem will be raised up and remain in its place.** The elevation of Jerusalem usually accompanies the nations coming to Jerusalem (e.g., Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1). Verse 10 lists structures around the city that are almost all known from Jeremiah and Nehemiah. The gates and tower were located on the north and west sides, and **the royal winepresses** may have been in or near the king's garden at the southern tip of the city. This Jerusalem has a familiar location and shape. The final word in the book about Jerusalem's security is very brief. **It will be inhabited.** The refugees who will flee (v. 5) will return and settle in the city. God promises that **never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure.** There will finally be an end to the cycle of conquest and restoration. The Lord who reigns from Zion will make it safe (recall Zech. 2:5; 8:3–5).

14:12–15 / The Lord will deal with **all the nations that fought against Jerusalem** (see vv. 1–3). This threat follows a familiar pattern in the OT. Yahweh had used Assyria and Babylon as weapons against Israel and Judah but then announced judgment to come on them, also. After winning the final battle for Jerusalem, God will **strike** these nations and their animals with **plague** and **with great panic.** The plague is a particularly gruesome flesh-rotting disease in which the destruction of the body will be accelerated so that it takes place **while they are still standing on their feet.** In addition, **the animals in those camps** that will suffer a **similar plague** will be military mounts and cargo-bearing creatures. This panic from the Lord will also incapacitate these armies—for example, the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and the Philistines (Exod. 14:24; Deut. 7:23; Judg. 4:15; 1 Sam. 14:20). **Each man,** in their fear and confusion, **will seize the hand of another, and they will attack each other,** as the Midianites had done when Gideon's men blew their trumpets (Judg. 7:22).

Judah's involvement is surprising. God will not need them to bring plague and panic against the nations, but their location will involve them in the battle **at Jerusalem** (see Zech. 12:1–9). They will also participate in collecting the **wealth of all the surrounding nations.** This will fulfill Haggai s prophecy that the silver and gold of the nations will fill the Lord's house (Hag. 2:6–9)—**great quantities of gold and silver and clothing** will be collected from the nations. This list of spoils from the nations parallels the devoted things (*kherem*) that Achan stole

from Jericho, "a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels" (Josh. 7:20–21). Receiving the wealth of other nations will reverse the plundering of Jerusalem at the beginning of the chapter.

14:16–19 / The eschatological display of divine power will turn foes into fellow worshippers. **Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty.** They will be required **to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles,** also called the Feast of Booths or the Festival of Sukkot (or Ingathering). If any people neglects their annual pilgrimage **they will have no rain,** and no rain ultimately means death. Egypt is watered by the Nile and does not depend on direct rainfall, so the threatened punishment will include **the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.** Perhaps the plague in verse 18 has this lengthy title in order to distinguish it from the "plague" that will strike the attacking nations (v. 12). The Feast of Tabernacles falls in the seventh month, in September/October, at the beginning of the rainy season. The giving or withholding of rain would soon become apparent.

Participation in the Feast of Tabernacles is emblematic of inclusion in the people of God. The feast has many aspects of significance in the OT. First, it acknowledges the Lord's provision of food. It is "the Feast of Ingathering" (Exod. 23:16), after gathering grain and grapes (Deut. 16:13). Second, its purpose is to commemorate the Lord's provision for Israel in the wilderness "when I brought them out of Egypt" (Lev. 23:43). Third, this festival is associated with temple building. Solomon's temple was completed in the seventh month and the people celebrated its dedication at the Feast of Tabernacles (1 Kgs. 8:2, 65–66). Centuries later, Joshua and Zerubbabel set up the altar at the temple site in Jerusalem, and then the people celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:1–4). Fourth, Deuteronomy 31:10–13 calls for the reading of the Law every seventh year during the Feast of Tabernacles. Following Ezra's reading of the book of the law at the beginning of the seventh month the people set out to obey the command to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 7:73b; 8:13–17). Finally, the eschatological observance of this feast gives the ultimate answer to the pilgrims' question about fasting in 7:3–5. The fast of the seventh month will become a joyful and glad occasion and happy festival (cf. Zech. 8:19) for Judah and the whole world. Jesus' teaching at this feast employs another theme from Zechariah 14, the "living water" that will flow from the temple (v. 8). He promises the gift of

the Spirit, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38–39).

14:20–21 / The portrayal of the radically altered eschatological world in terms of familiar, everyday items makes hope for the consummation more accessible. The reshaping of creation (vv. 3–8) is almost beyond imagining, but in the same chapter the prophecy provides portrayals of eschatological Jerusalem with its familiar gates and tower, prayers for rain, annual feast, horses, and cooking pots. No one will need warhorses after Yahweh's final victory, so **the horses** for royal messengers and war chariots will be retired into holiness. They will wear **bells** and the inscription HOLY TO THE LORD. These details mark a spectacular increase in holiness, for the high priest's vestments had included the same items (Exod. 28:33, 36–37). God will elevate the **cooking pots** in the temple to a status of consecration as high as **the sacred bowls** used **in front of the altar.** All the cooking **pots** throughout Jerusalem and Judah will be **holy to the Lord** so that the multitudes of pilgrim worshippers from throughout the world may use them for sacrificial meals at the temple. This brief saying functions something like the vision reports in Zechariah 1–6. Aspects of everyday life under the rule of the imperial power become signs pointing to the Lord's revealed rule and plan.

The final feature of this eschatological portrayal is dense with allusion: **on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty.** Merchants were sometimes called Canaanites (Ezek. 17:4). The removal of commerce from the temple precincts was a part of Jesus' ministry (Matt. 21:12–16; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:4–47; John 2:13–16). The earliest mention of Canaanites in the OT is in the curse on Canaan and the corresponding blessing on Shem, "May Canaan be the slave of Shem" (Gen. 9:25–26). Perhaps this promise means that there will be no more slaves and masters in eschatological Jerusalem. Deuteronomy and related OT literature forbade Israel to establish relationships with the Canaanites who lived in the land. They were viewed as the chief source of temptation to worship other gods (Deut. 7). Perhaps this promise points to the obvious truth that idolatry will have no place in the temple in the Day of the Lord. There will no longer be any person in the Lord's house who does not worship Yahweh and who tries to turn the Lord's people away from their true service.

Additional Notes §37

14:5 / "My mountain valley will be blocked and will extend to Azel. It will be blocked as it was blocked because of the earthquake." This alternate translation in the NIV margin follows the LXX and Targums, reading a different verb, *stm.* The blocked valley would not be the cleft through the Mount of Olives, but the existing Kidron and Hinnom valleys. If *stm* can mean "fill," then this action would contribute to the leveling of the landscape and the city.

Azel: The NIV treats *'atsal* as a place name, but its location is not known. Micah 1:11 mentions Beth Ezel, but its location is not clear either. With the addition of a possessive suffix, as the *BHS* note recommends, it would be the common noun, "its [the mountain's] flank."

14:6 / No cold or frost: As written, the MT means "precious things [*yqr*] shall congeal [*yeqippa'on*]." Baldwin's suggestion is that this clause refers to the stars dimming (*Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi,* p. 203). The NIV's "cold" (from *qrr*) and "frost," an otherwise unknown word, translate slight emendations: *weqarut,* the plural of "coldness," and *weqifa'on,* "congelation."

14:18 / They will have no rain: The NIV supplies "rain" (*geshem*) from the end of v. 17, *welo' 'alehem [geshem].* The variant in the NIV margin, "part, then the LORD," results from removing *welo' 'alehem* as an accidental dittography from the previous verse.

Malachi

Pamela J. Scalise

Introduction: Malachi

Malachi brings God's word to a people and to individuals who see their lives as pale shadows of the hopes they once held. Faith has faded into cynical disappointment, holy ritual has decayed into futile exercises, and covenant commitments seem costly and pointless. Yet Malachi's message reminds Israel that the common matters of their everyday lives had profound significance in God's sight. Every offering, every payment of tithes, every marriage, and every act of justice toward their neighbors was a way to give honor to the Lord's name and to acknowledge Yahweh's royal rule over all nations. God, whose covenant love and faithfulness had preserved Israel alive as a people, still invites them to return.

The book of Malachi ends the two ancient sections termed "the Law and the Prophets" in the Hebrew Bible, and it is the last book in the OT in Christian Bibles. A sequential reading of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible in its customary printed order brings one next to Psalm 1 at the beginning of the third section of the Hebrew Bible, "the Writings," and its beatitude on the person whose "delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 1:2; cf. Mal. 4:4). In the Christian Bible, moving from Malachi into the first book of the NT one soon encounters John the Baptist, who is identified as the Elijah promised in Malachi 4:5 (Matt. 11:10–14). But Malachi is more than a literary bridge. Its contents, epitomized in the final three verses, look forward to the coming Day of the Lord but also point the reader back to a review of the Pentateuch, to Israel's family history and the covenant at Sinai/Horeb. Malachi prepares its readers to wait for the Lord's coming. People who fear the Lord, and therefore live faithfully in relationship to God and to other members of the covenant community, will be ready for the Day of the Lord.

Form and Structure

Between its superscription (1:1) and concluding coda (4:4–6) the book of Malachi is comprised of six complex speeches sharing the same basic structure. The chapter divisions are not a reliable guide to the main sections, which are as follows: 1:2–5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10–16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6–12; and 3:13–4:3. (The final 6

verses in the NIV and most printed English Bibles are listed as 4:1–6, but the MT numbers these final verses 3:19–24.) Each speech begins with an opening statement, an announcement of good news or an accusation against the audience. These opening statements may be brief or complex, but they all address their topics in broad terms. The speaker then cites a question from the audience, introducing it with "you say." Some speeches have more than one quoted question. The response to the first question raises a second query. The speaker, and not the narrator, asks these questions, and thus they are part of the rhetoric of each speech. The questions challenge the opening statements, calling for evidence or explanation, and they function as introductions to the main parts of the speeches, which then respond. The opening statements and responses use a variety of forms. God and the prophet alternate as the implied or specified speakers.

The rhetorical effect of this format has three aspects. First, it engages the audience and draws them in by voicing the very thought that gives them a reason to stop listening—and then provides a specific answer. Second, this form itself demonstrates that God hears them and knows their questions and doubts. The audience questions are not transcripts of actual conversations. They are part of the divine word spoken through the prophet. Third, each quoted question provides a transition from a broad opening statement to a concrete example. This demonstrates that Malachi's specific issues are more than narrow, parochial concerns. These concerns relate to the major themes of Israel's faith expressed in the opening statements.

Interpreters have noted the following features in identifying the genre of the six speeches: the "statement-question-response" structure; the contentious style that the quoted audience questions creates; and the subsequent frequent use of rhetorical questions in most of the speeches. Many interpreters have called them disputations, discussions, or controversies.[1] Malachi's purpose is to teach, but also to provoke repentance. By citing questions from the audience he demonstrates their resistance to the prophetic word, but this rhetorical technique can also have the effect of opening them to the possibility of hearing and accepting the divine word that follows.

The speeches in Malachi have no introductory formulas which report how the prophet received them or how God commanded him to speak them. Such formulas are common in some other prophetic books. For example, almost every unit in Ezekiel is labeled as a word from the Lord to the prophet—rather than the words the prophet spoke to his audience. Such narrative formulas report the

reception of the word but not their delivery to the people. Some of the passages that commission a prophet to speak include anticipated questions from the hearers. For example, "'Every wineskin should be filled with wine.' And if they say to you, 'Don't we know that . . . ?' then tell them, 'This is what the LORD says: . . .'" (Jer. 13:12–13). In Malachi, even the superscription does not mention Malachi's reception of the divine word. Without these narrative formulas, the Malachi speeches appear to be the fulfillment of commands to prophesy, the delivered form of commissioned prophecy. The OT has used both forms (of introductory formulae) to preserve and transmit the prophetic word, and they appear to relate to each other like a stamp to its imprint. Only the ancient messenger formula punctuates Malachi's speeches. The presence and personality of God's prophetic messenger is almost invisible.

Beyond the basic "statement-quoted question-response" pattern, each unit in Malachi is a unique composition. In most cases the prophet's own voice only announces the speaker of the various quotations which comprise the speech (e.g., "says the Lord," "but you say"), as in 1:2–5. Of the 55 verses in the book, all or part of 45 verses take the form of direct address from God. In 1:9a the prophet either quotes a prayer of the people or utters one himself as an ironic challenge to his priestly audience. The speech in 2:10–16 also begins in the first person plural, with the prophetic speaker including himself among the covenant people who have broken faith with one another. The accusation against Judah in the third person begins in 2:11. Verse 12, then, is in the form of an imprecatory prayer, so this verse may also be heard as the prophet's voice. The NIV marks the beginning of the quotation of divine speech in verse 16, where the messenger formulas appear ("says the Lord"; vv. 13–15 refer to God in the third person). The narrative in 3:16 is unique in the book. It tells about part of Malachi's audience who responded to God's word and made themselves known as "those who feared the LORD." By inserting this account and returning to second-person address between 3:18 and "you who revere my name" (4:2), the author of the book presents the Yahweh-fearers in Malachi's first audience as a model for subsequent audiences of the book to follow.

The Prophet and His Setting

All that we can know about Malachi we must infer from the book. The superscription does not name his father, indicate the time when he ministered, or identify him as "the prophet" (cf. Zech. 1:1). Even his name looks more like a

title, "my messenger," than a personal name. The Septuagint, in fact, translated it as "his messenger" (i.e., God's messenger). There is no narrative of his call or any subsequent commission to prophesy. The book names familiar figures from Israel's past—Jacob, Esau, Levi, Moses, and Elijah—but withholds Malachi himself from view.

Other personal names of this type (nouns with the first person singular possessive suffix) do occur in the OT (e.g., Beeri, "my well," Gen. 26:34 and Hos. 1:1; and Ethni, "my gift," 1 Chr. 6:41). "Malachi" in 1:1 is unique. Hebrew personal names for men typically are sentence testimonies by the parents (e.g., Zechariah, "Yahweh remembers"), so it is hard to imagine why a child would be named "my messenger."[2] The appearance of "through [*beyad*] Malachi" in the superscription to the book indicates that we should read it as a personal name (cf. Hag. 1:1, "the word of the LORD through [*beyad*] Haggai"; cf. also Isa. 1:1 and Jer. 1:1). There are many messengers in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Haggai is called a messenger (*mal'ak*). The angel (*mal'ak*) of the Lord, and "the angel [*mal'ak*] who spoke with me," appear in Zechariah's visions. Malachi describes the ideal priest, "the messenger [*mal'ak*] of the Lord Almighty," and also promises the eschatological "my messenger [*mal'ak*]" and "messenger [*mal'ak*] of the covenant" to purify the priesthood. We are obviously to distinguish in time the Malachi through whom God gave the prophecy from the eschatological messenger. Many individuals may fill the role of God's messenger. In Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, members of the heavenly court, prophets, and priests are all messengers. Whether Malachi is a name or a title, it tells us nothing more about the prophet as an individual.

We must likewise infer the date of Malachi's ministry from the contents of the book. The second temple had been in service long enough for priests and people to become disappointed and embittered over failed hopes connected to its completion in 515 B.C. The prophecies of Haggai (2:6–9, 20–23), dated in 520 B.C., promised prosperity for the people and splendor for the temple when it was rebuilt. Malachi's audience had not seen the fulfillment of those words. There is no standard timetable for decaying hope. How many decades passed before priests and people came to regard their rituals of worship as a meaningless burden? It is impossible to know. Neither does the description of Edom's destruction (1:3–5) help to determine a date. Not enough is known about Edom's history in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. to match Malachi 1:3–5 to a particular year or decade. Some interpreters have tried to relate Malachi' s message to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.[3] Even if Malachi and Nehemiah 13 do exhibit

similar interests, Malachi's concerns might fit as well or better in the period between 515 B.C. and the arrivals of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century B.C. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah skip this period. It is impossible to fix a more exact date, given the present state of knowledge of the fifth century B.C.

There is little evidence of a long period of growth for the book. Some interpreters have identified 1:12–14; 2:11–12; 3:1b–4; and 3:13–4:3 as subsequent additions to the original speeches. The form and content of the speeches are not sufficiently fixed or uniform to support confident identification of additions, however. These proposed additions can be dated no more easily than the rest of the book. The six speeches are complex compositions even with the proposed additions taken out. The commentary below attempts to describe and explain the six compositions in their canonical form.

Interpreters commonly recognize the final three verses of the book as one or two late additions (4:4 and 4:5–6) suited to the book's position at the end of the prophetic corpus. The themes of these verses coincide with Malachi' s emphases on obedience to covenant law and the role of prophets (and priests) as God's messengers to turn people back to God. Their form of direct address by God conforms to the rest of Malachi. The vocabulary of 4:4–6, however, comes from Joshua and Kings. Malachi, either alone or as the final book in the Minor Prophets collection (frequently called the Book of the Twelve), could logically have been given an appendix which linked it to the Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings). Compare Jeremiah, which is connected to the Former Prophets by its final chapter, 52, that quotes 2 Kings 24:18–25:21, 27–30. Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets are also tied to the books of First and Second Kings by means of the superscriptions that synchronize the prophets' ministries with the reigns of Israelite and Judean kings (Jer. 1:1; Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1, Zeph. 1:1). It is not this three-verse coda that binds Malachi to Hosea through Zechariah, but rather numerous intertextual references in the body of the book. No consensus exists regarding a date for the final form of Malachi with 4:4–6 at the end. If these three verses were part of the earliest form of the book, it may have been complete by the latter part of the fifth century B.C.[4] If, however, they were added to Malachi as part of the composition of the Minor Prophets, then the date of Malachi's completion could have been considerably later in the Persian period. [5] No precision is possible.

Malachi ministered to Jews in the Persian Empire province of Yehud. Archaeologists estimate a population for the province of approximately 10,850 people during the Persian I period (538–450 B.C.), increasing to 17,000 during the

next century.[6] A governor appointed by the crown ruled locally. The names of the governors between Zerubbabel (Hag. 1:1, 14) and Nehemiah (Neh. 5:14) are known from archaeological sources—Elnathan, Yeho'ezer, and Ahzai.[7] The content of Malachi does not reflect particular cases of Persian oppression, but taxation certainly burdened the struggling community. Darius, who ruled 522–485 B.C., organized the empire into 20 huge administrative districts headed by satraps to facilitate the collection of taxes and tribute. Yehud was part of the satrapy referred to as "Beyond the River." Darius' building projects and the military expeditions he and his successor, Xerxes (485–465 B.C.), mounted against Greece were surely immensely expensive. During the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 B.C.) the crown had to bear the cost of suppressing revolts in Egypt and Syria. The people in Malachi's audience were not prosperous or content. Other people, the wicked, seemed to prosper (3:15), but they could calculate no gain for themselves (3:14). They saw no evidence of God's love (1:2). Malachi affirms that they were under a curse (3:9) which had stifled productivity. Yet this book makes no references to imperial military or political events that impinge directly upon Yehud. The Lord is the only king with whom the book is concerned (1:14).

A central aspect of the Persian dealings with Yehud had been their sponsorship of the temple reconstruction (Ezra 3:7; 6:1–12). The Jerusalem temple and its services became the one area of Jewish life where they could experience a measure of autonomy and could maintain their unique identity as Yahweh's people. The promises of Haggai (2:6–19) to the effect that the completion of the temple would usher in a new age of glory, peace, and blessing remain unfulfilled. Nevertheless, Malachi portrays his audience as people who have been seeking the Lord's favor and acceptance while they participate in various rites and observances at the temple (1:9; 2:13; 3:14). Malachi delivers a devastating judgment on the quality and efficacy of their cultic actions, but he does not deny that the temple was the center of their religious lives.

The role of the priesthood was also enhanced as the temple and its priests filled some of the vacuum left by the suspended Davidic monarchy. It is fitting that the longest speech in Malachi addresses the priests (1:6–2:9). Many commentators have attempted to use the contents of this speech to link Malachi to particular reconstructions of the history of the postexilic priesthood. Many scholars recognize the presence of two groups of priests—the Zadokites, who traced their lineage to Aaron, and the Levites. The Zadokites claimed exclusive rights to service at the altar because of their descent from Aaron (as in Exod.

28:1; Lev. 6:8, 14, 19, 25; 8).[8] The contrast in this speech is not between these two contemporary groups but between present "priests" and a personification of the ideal priest who faithfully discharged a wide range of priestly duties in the past. Malachi uses the name "Levi" for this personification, the eponymous ancestor of the tribe from which both Aaronide priests and Levites were descended. This "Levi" represents past faithfulness, a priest whose ministry fulfilled God's will for the life and work of priests, in contrast to the priests ministering in Malachi's day. If anything, Malachi seems to try to overcome the division among contemporary groups. His description of "Levi" draws from both Deuteronomy 33:8–11, the blessing of Levi, and Numbers 25:10–13, the covenant with Phinehas, Aaron's grandson. The final section of this speech, 2:1–9, is an admonition (*mitswah*) to the priests to repent and reform. It does not announce the victory of one side over the other. We cannot say with any certainty that Malachi was a Levite or a priest. His message regarding the high standards for the wide range of priestly duties suited the needs of the postexilic period, when the temple priesthood became the central institution for providing spiritual leadership to the Jewish community under the authority of God's word.

Message

All of these conditions—small population, submission to Persian imperial authority, a merely adequate economy, and corrupted temple worship—belie the eschatological hopes that had once attached to the restored Jewish community in Jerusalem (cf. the promises in Hag. 2:6–9.) Yet the audience questions quoted in the six speeches are all concerned with the present condition of their relationship with God, not with unfulfilled prophecy (cf. Zech. 7:3). Malachi does reaffirm the truth of God's earlier promises by means of new eschatological prophecy, but each promise of future divine intervention has a counterpart in his communication of God's word and will for the generations of Israel living in the time before the end. Malachi demonstrates how to live in anticipation and preparation for the coming Day of the Lord. Malachi reaffirms the consistency of God's word and way with Israel, which the following assertions summarize: "I have loved you" (1:2), and "I the LORD do not change" (3:6). The same God, Yahweh, and the same people, Israel, are still related by the same covenant. Obedience to the covenant (law) and loyalty to Yahweh define the path for returning to God in the present and they will be the standard of judgment on the day when the Lord comes (3:5).

The ministry of Malachi the prophet and the book named after him is to call

hearers and readers of every generation to turn to God as people who fear the Lord. To honor Yahweh's name by daily living faithfully with each other is noble and courageous service to the sovereign God of all creation.

§1 The Superscription (Mal. 1:1)

1:1 / The superscription, or extended title, of the book of Malachi has two parts. First, it is called **an oracle** (*massa'*). This term also heads the books of Nahum (1:1) and Habakkuk (1:1), but elsewhere it appears in the headings of shorter units of speech, such as the oracles against the nations in Isaiah 13–23 and Zechariah 9–11 and 12–14. The word does not denote any particular type of content or literary genre. The same word also means "burden," communicating the sense of the prophet's responsibility to deliver the Lord's words.

The book is also titled **The word of the LORD to Israel,** the audience, **through Malachi,** the prophetic messenger. Although Malachi's audience was a community of Jews living in and around Jerusalem in the province of the Persian Empire called Yehud, this title calls them by the name of God's ancient covenant people, Israel (cf. Deut. 1:1; Ezra 3:1; 7:10). This name is not a political one but rather comprises their theological identity; it is a reminder that they must acknowledge God's authority. The name Israel is also a reassuring reminder of God's enduring love. As we have seen in the Introduction, Malachi is unique in the OT as a proper name. It means "my messenger." This is an appropriate name for a prophet. Haggai, for example, is called a prophet (Hag. 1:3) and "the LORD's messenger" (1:13). Malachi 2:7 describes a faithful priest as "the messenger of the LORD Almighty." Although Malachi's name and the title of the eschatological figure in 3:1 ("my messenger") are identical, they are not the same person. The prophet in the fifth century B.C. cannot have been the eschatological messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord's Day. There is, however, a continuity of ministry among the prophet, the priest, and the messenger to come. Each of them has a part in preparing the people Israel for the Lord's coming by helping to restore them to covenant faithfulness.

§2 God's Enduring Love (Mal. 1:2–5)

Other prophets addressed Israel during times of crisis involving the superpowers in the ancient Near East. Malachi, however, has God's word regarding the decline of a small neighboring nation. Edom had little significance in the vast Persian Empire, but Esau's land and descendants had profound meaning for Israel as a sign of God's faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

1:2 / "I have loved you," says the LORD. The people Israel, to whom the book of Malachi is addressed, hears God's declaration of love which embraces all of them, across space and time. The pronoun, "you," is plural, and the tense of the verb includes the present. It doesn't mean "I used to love you," but rather, "I have loved you and I still do." The Lord's love for Israel was the first subject in the Minor Prophets. Hosea was commanded, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness" as a sign-act to reveal God's enduring love for the unfaithful people who had turned to other gods as their "lovers" (Hos. 1:2). Parental love was also a metaphor for divine love in Hosea, as in 11:1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him." Malachi 1:6 and 2:10 call God Israel's father. The assurance of this enduring divine love should set the tone for the whole book. Whatever else is said in this book has its source in God's love. The first quoted question from the audience, however, asks for evidence: **"How have you loved us?"**

The divine word points Malachi's audience back to a time before they became a nation, to the story of their eponymous ancestor Jacob and his twin brother Esau (Gen. 25:19–34). God **loved Jacob** in the sense of choice, or election. Before the twins were born an oracle granted to their mother Rebekah revealed that the younger one, Jacob, would be stronger than his older brother, who would serve him (Gen. 25:23). God had **hated** Esau by choosing Jacob to carry the promise previously given to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:13–15; Rom. 9:10–13; see also additional note, below). Although he had despised his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and married unwisely (Gen. 27:46), Esau became wealthy and powerful in his own land of Edom (Gen. 32:3–8; 33), and he never carried out his vow to kill

Jacob for cheating him out the blessing due to him as the firstborn (Gen. 27:41; 33). Meanwhile, beloved, chosen Jacob was living as a dependent in the household of his father-in-law, far from the land he had been promised. While Jacob's descendants lived and were enslaved in Egypt, Esau's descendants were chiefs in the land of Edom (Gen. 36:1–30; Deut. 2:4–5). Long before the Israelites put their first king on the throne, Edom was a monarchy (Gen. 36:31–39). Being God's loved and chosen people did not guarantee Israel's political independence or domestic security. Jacob and his descendants, however, did have the assurance of God's presence with them in Haran (Gen. 28:15; 31:5–7, 42), in Egypt (Gen. 46:3–4), and on the way to the promised land (Exod. 33:14–17). God did make Jacob's descendants a great nation and gave them the land of Canaan, as promised.

1:3–4 / Once the nation Edom was settled in its own land, which God had given them (Deut. 2:2–4, where Seir and Esau are other names for Edom), it appears in the OT only as a threat to Jacob's descendants (Num. 20:14–21) or as a subject people (2 Sam. 8:13–14; 1 Kgs. 22:47). David conquered Edom (2 Sam. 8:14–15) and Amaziah captured the city of Sela (2 Kgs. 14:7), but the conquest that turned Edom's mountainous homeland southeast of the Dead Sea into a **wasteland,** gave his **inheritance to the desert jackals,** and turned their cities into **ruins,** took place much closer to Malachi's time. Neither the OT nor extrabiblical sources describe the end of the Edomite monarchy. When the Babylonians made their final assault on Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Edom was a safe place for refugees (Jer. 40:11). According to Josephus, Nebuchadnezzar subdued the neighboring lands of Ammon and Moab five years later, but Edom is not mentioned (*Ant.* 10.9.7.181). Nabonidus, the last ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, conquered the Edomite city of Bozrah in 552 B.C. while he fought to secure control of trade routes in western Arabia. Over the course of the next two centuries nomadic Nabateans infiltrated Edomite territory and gradually established themselves as the dominant sedentary population. The kingdom of Edom was never rebuilt. Malachi's first audiences could have been aware of these events.

This divine word interprets contemporary events as judgment on Edom and fulfillment of prophecy. Joel 3:19 and Ezekiel 35:3–4 promise that Edom will become a "wasteland," as in Malachi 1:3. Isaiah 34:6 pictures it becoming a habitat for many wild animals, including "jackals" (as here in v. 3). Only the prophecies against Edom in Malachi, Obadiah, and Jeremiah 49 call the country "Esau." Obadiah and Malachi are also the only two prophecies about Edom that

refer to her **mountains.** Edom's punishment will **always** remain (Mal. 1:4; Obad. 10).

Edom may make plans to **rebuild,** but the Lord will thwart them because Edom has earned the title **the Wicked Land** and the epithet **always under the wrath of the LORD.** Edomite encroachment on Judah's southern frontier had begun following the conquest by Assyria in 701 B.C. During the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Edom had rebuilt and occupied Judean cities and fortresses in the Negev and the Hebron hills. There are several prophetic indictments that support the judgment "Wicked Land," but there are no OT or extrabiblical accounts that explain the circumstances in more detail. Amos charges Edom with buying whole communities as slaves (Amos 1:6) and mercilessly pursuing his brother with a sword (1:11). Edom had taken revenge on Judah (Ezek. 25:12–13) and planned to devour Israel (Ezek. 35:1–15). The Edomites had shed innocent blood and done violence to the people of Judah (Joel 3:19). Obadiah places the violence done by Esau to his "brother Jacob" on the day when strangers conquered and plundered Jerusalem while the Edomites cheered them on, rejoiced in Judah's loss, joined in the looting, and even laid a trap to catch the people who had been able to escape (Obad. 10–14). Esau's shout on the day Jerusalem fell rings in the psalmist's memory, "tear it down to its foundations!" (Ps. 137:7). Edom's current calamity, as Malachi describes it, answers the psalmist's plea to remember it against them (Ps. 137:7). But the calamity is the consequence of Edom's own wickedness, not the result of God's choice of Jacob.

The answer to Israel's question, "How have you loved us?" comes when they perceive events in their world in the light of God's word. In answer to prayer and in fulfillment of prophecy, a bitter enemy who had violated the bonds of brotherhood was vanquished. The Edomites had held their land as a gift from the Lord (Deut. 2:2–4), but now they had lost it permanently because of their sins. No attempt to rebuild their cities or their nation would succeed. The descendants of Jacob had also lost their God-given land because of their sins, but they had been granted the grace of return and restoration. Their very existence and everything they had built were proof of God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

1:5 / When the people see things as God sees them they will find reason to praise, **"Great is the LORD."** In the Psalms this testimony is an acknowledgment of God's salvation (Pss. 35:27; 40:16; 70:4) and of divine kingship (96:4). Judgment on Edom demonstrates the Lord's greatness and authority **beyond the borders of Israel.**

Additional Notes §2

1:2–3 / Scripture expresses the choice of Jacob over Esau in stark opposites, **loved** and **hated,** as in Deut. 21:15. Although God had granted Esau/Edom its own land, to which Israel had no right (Deut. 2:4–5), that inheritance had now been lost. The language here in vv. 3–4 implies that the loss was due to covenant violation—"inheritance," "the wrath of the LORD," and "mountains" (the last from Deut. 2:4–5)—but does not specify the nature of the violation. The charges against Edom elsewhere in the OT suggest that they had betrayed an alliance with Israel in various ways (Amos 1:11; Ezek. 25:12–13; 35:1–15; Joel 3:19; Obad. 10–14). "Love" and "hate" are part of the language of international relations. For example, 1 Kgs. 5:1 calls Hiram of Tyre an ally (*'oheb*), a "lover," of David.

1:3 / Desert jackals: Land and cities bereft of population and overrun by vegetation and wild animals constitute a typical OT judgment, or curse. Therefore, "desert jackals" is a logical reading of *tannot midbar,* in spite of the unusual plural ending, *-ot,* and the LXX translation, *domato erēmou,* "wilderness dwellings."

1:4 / Always: Although it is traditionally rendered "forever," the phrase *ʿad ʿolam* can also mean "for a lifetime" (1 Sam. 27:12) or "long-enduring" (Gen. 49:26).

1:5 / Beyond the borders of Israel: The Heb. phrase also means "over the territory of Israel." The claims in Mal. 1:11 and 14 about the greatness of the Lord's name among the nations support the NIV interpretation. This phrase, with its double meaning, may be another allusion to the book of Obadiah. The last 3 verses of that book are concerned with the reestablishment of the old extent of the territory of Israel, over which the Lord will reign (Obad. 19–21). Ezekiel 47:13–22 has a similar concern.

§3 Reverence for God's Name (Mal. 1:6–2:9)

The second speech continues the theme of family relationships and domestic life as a metaphor for Israel's life with God. Verse 6 introduces the Lord as a father figure and master of a patriarchal household. By the contempt they have shown for the Lord's table and the food placed on it, the priests have fouled their own home, hurt the other family members, and brought the name of the Lord, their father and master, into disrepute. Yet an opportunity for restoration and renewal accompanies Malachi's rebuke.

1:6 / An accusation against the priests begins the next section, **"you . . . show contempt for my name."** Contempt for God's name is contempt for God. "My name" stands for God's self eight times in this speech. The Jerusalem temple was, in the theological idiom of Deuteronomy, the place where the Lord had caused his name to dwell (Deut. 12:5, 11). The priests ministered there in the name of the Lord (Deut. 18:5, 7) and were responsible to live holy lives and conduct their sacral duties properly so as not to profane the Lord's name (Lev. 21:6; 22:2). Yet Malachi charges the priests in his audience with turning the worship in the temple on its head by taking the name they were to hold in highest regard and treating it as base and worthless. "Show contempt" (*bwz*) is not a narrow cultic term. Esau "showed contempt" (*bwz*) for his birthright when he traded the inheritance that would have provided his livelihood for a bowl of stew to satisfy a temporary hunger (Gen. 25:34; note the link to Mal. 1:2–5). Contempt for one's oath may be at the root of covenant violations (Ezek. 16:59).

The priests' actions evidenced a fundamental error; they devalued God's name, treating it as powerless (cf. 1 Sam. 10:27). This speech repeatedly contrasts the contempt for the Lord that the priests exhibited with the honor and reverence which is due to God. It begins with a description of generally accepted social relationships: **A son honors his father, and a servant his master.** The commandment in Exodus 20:12 (and Deut. 5:16) requires Israelites to honor mother and father, and other laws enforce the obedience of slaves (e.g., Exod. 21:2). A rebellious son could even be put to death (Deut. 21:18–21). The rhetorical questions that follow, then, use these social ties as metaphors for God's

relationship to the priests. They sharpen the charge of contempt: If everyone acknowledges that even human parents and masters must be honored, how much more ought one to honor and reverence God (cf. the reasoning in Isa. 1:2–3)? These domestic metaphors also introduce a certain intimacy, a reminder of Israel's special status with the Lord. (The father metaphor also appears in Mal. 2:10, and 3:17 combines the idea of father and master.) In contrast, among the nations the Lord is "a great king" (Mal. 1:14).

1:7 / The priests' quoted question asks for an explanation of the charge, **"How have we shown contempt for your name?"** (v. 6). God's one-sentence response focuses on a specific aspect of the priests' ministry: **"You place defiled food on my altar."** Israel's offerings were foodstuffs for them—meat, grain, and oil—and they could be called, metaphorically, God's "food" (Lev. 21:6). A second quoted question requests further clarification, **"How have we defiled you?"** The altar (1:12) as well as the offerings here are objects of this rare verb, "defiled," but here God is the object. This question reveals the heart of their problem: their failure to honor God in their ministry at the altar has deposed God. The Lord is not being worshipped.

1:8–10 / In rapid succession, the following verses present three vehement verbal attacks on the priests' contemptuous attitudes. First, verse 8 leads the priests, by a series of rhetorical questions, to acknowledge their guilt. Proper responses to these questions may be stated in the indicative: yes, it is wrong to bring **blind, crippled,** and **diseased** animals for sacrifice (Lev. 22:18–25; Deut. 15:21; cf. Mal. 1:13). The lay worshippers brought sacrificial beasts from their own flocks (Lev. 7:28–30; Deut. 12:26–27), but it was the priests who were responsible to reject unacceptable animals such as these. This is an example of the way the priests have "caused many to stumble" (2:8). Ordinary prudence should have kept them from offering such animals. The Persian provincial **governor** would not **accept** such a flawed gift. He would be displeased with the giver. In their actions the priests have exhibited their true attitude toward the Lord's altar; it [the altar] is **contemptible** (v. 7). Calling the altar a **table** carries on the food metaphor from the beginning of verse 7. The donor and the priests also ate parts of non-expiatory sacrifices (Lev. 7:31–36; Num. 18:11, 18–19).

In verse 9 the prophet addresses the priests first as a worshipper and then as a prophet, yet both sentences are part of the divine word, as indicated by the formula **says the LORD Almighty.** In this first sentence the prophet voices a

typical request of worshippers to priests, speaking in the first person plural as one of the people (cf. 2:10). In this context the request is sarcastic, since the point of the argument in verses 7–10 is that the priests have made their prayers ineffectual. If the Persian governor would reject such flawed, lazy, selfish gifts, how much more would God refuse them? The final rhetorical question in verse 9 concludes the accusation and personalizes it. The second quoted question from the priests in verse 7 addressed God, "How have we defiled you?" In verse 9 the other side of the relationship comes to the fore, **"will he** [the Lord] **accept you?"** The priests have failed in their responsibilities to the people and they have damaged their own relationships with God.

In the final verbal attack in this series God reveals the futility of the sacrificial cult being practiced at the temple by calling for it to end. The Lord wanted the priests to **shut** the doors of the gates in the walls surrounding the inner court, where the altar stood, so that worshippers could bring no more blind, crippled, or diseased animals to be offered up by **useless** fire. Lest there be any doubt about the meaning of the rhetorical questions in verses 8–9, the Lord rejects the priests directly, echoing the vocabulary of verse 8: **"I am not pleased with you . . . and I will accept no offering from your hands."** With the temple closed and the priests fired, the means of atonement would be lost and the grace of God's presence with them would be withdrawn. What God had so mercifully given, the priests had spurned and had taught the people to despise. The book of Malachi promises the purification and restoration of sacrificial worship, however (3:3b–4). Readers of Malachi must recognize how devastating the loss that verse 10 threatens would have been to Malachi's first audiences (cf. 2:13). Temple worship had been restored in 515 B.C. with great joy and anticipation. Although it would eventually be replaced (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 7–10), the sacrificial worship at that time had been divinely ordained (Ezra 3:2–4; 6:18). God's purpose through Malachi included the continuation of the covenant with Levi (2:4). Malachi 1:10–11, therefore, does not announce the termination of priesthood and sacrifices in the fifth century B.C. These verses are, however, a reminder of divine freedom. The Lord had been Israel's God without a temple in the past and could be again (cf. 2 Sam. 7:6).

1:11 / The book of Malachi looks forward to the time when Israel and the other nations of the world will acknowledge the Lord's worldwide sovereignty. The Lord's judgment on Edom will lead Israel to this knowledge (1:5). The nations will also recognize what the Lord will do to bless Israel (3:12). Israel's

sacrificial worship should be a witness to the fact that the Lord's name is **great among the nations.** The promise here in verse 11 goes beyond 1:14 and 3:3–4 as it describes a radically transformed practice of worship. Nations throughout the world, **from the rising to the setting of the sun,** that is, wherever the sun shines, will acknowledge that the Lord's name is great. Commensurate with this universal adoration will be new worship, different from the current practices in at least two ways: First, it will be done **In every place** and not just in the one place, the Jerusalem temple. Second, the gifts will be **pure offerings,** rather than the blemished animals that the priests in Malachi' s time were bringing. This verse is a devastating conclusion to the charges against the priests because it follows logically from the closing of the temple doors and the rejection of sacrifices made there. The primary purpose of this verse is to complete the condemnation of the priests by eliminating their sense of permanent unique privilege as the ministers of God's only legitimate sanctuary. While doing so, verse 11 also offers a glimpse of the future worldwide worship of the God of Israel. Within Malachi's relative chronology, however, legitimate offerings made outside of Jerusalem do not lie in the immediate future. First, this speech serves as an admonition to the priests in Malachi' s audience (2:1) to honor God's name and reform their ministry. Then the messenger of the covenant will come to refine the Levites so that righteous and acceptable offerings will be made again at the temple in preparation for the day when the Lord will come (3:1–5). Malachi 3:3 uses the same terminology as this verse, "the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness." Finally, the time when the nations will honor God's name and bring offerings to the Lord will follow (as in Isa. 2:2–4; 19:18–25; 49:6; 66:19–21; Ezek. 37:28).

1:12–13 / These verses parallel verses 7–11 in their content and arrangement. The priests **profane** the Lord's name by their attitude to sacrificial worship. They consider the **table,** or the altar, to be **defiled** and the **food,** or sacrifices, to be **contemptible.** (Verse 7 uses the same terms but reverses the adjectives.) As we have seen, the priests knew enough to bring proper gifts to the governor appointed by the Persian emperor (v. 8), but they didn't care enough to refuse **crippled, diseased,** and **injured** beasts (i.e., those torn by predators; Lev. 7:24; 17:15) as sacrifices to the sovereign Lord. Their attitude was much worse than ennui or boredom. They thought of their cultic duties as a **burden** (*mattela'ah*), a term the OT uses elsewhere only to speak of the hardship Israel had suffered at the hands of Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian oppressors (Exod. 18:8; Num.

20:14; Neh. 9:32; Lam. 3:5). They viewed holy privilege as tribulation.

1:14 / The opportunity to ensure blessing for the people has, by the priests' error, resulted in curse. By permitting laypeople to cheat on their vows by offering blemished animals when they had acceptable ones available, the priests failed in their duties of teaching and discernment and deprived the people of God's acceptance. In this they had caused the people "to stumble" (2:8). The juxtaposition of this specific example from the normal practices of worship, the making and paying of vows, with the assertion of the Lord's universal reign, exposes the falsehood of the priests' ministry but also reveals the relevance of prescribed acts of worship. By God's grace the Israelites had been given a means to acknowledge God's rule over all of life and to participate in the truth that the Lord's **name is to be feared among the nations.**

In the book of Malachi "fear" summarizes the response God desires from Israel (1:6; 3:16), the priests (2:5), and the nations (1:14). This fear is not terror or panic; rather, it is a desire to show honor, respect, and love to the Holy One. This fear does not create a need to hide or to put distance between oneself and God, but it results in a longing to live in the presence of the Creator. Fear does not produce an anxious compulsion to live within the rules, but a grateful embrace of God's will, graciously revealed to humankind.

2:1–2 / One expects **And now** to lead into a judgment announcement following the enumeration of the priests' sins in 1:6–14. Instead, verse 2 introduces a conditional threat of judgment as an **admonition.** To avoid the **curse** sent by God the priests must **listen,** or obey, and **set** their hearts to **honor** the Lord's **name.** "Honor" links this verse to the beginning of the passage (1:6), and a commitment to give attention to honoring the Lord's name is the opposite of their contemptuous words and practices (1:6–10, 12–14). The conditional sentence implies an opportunity to repent, but the next sentence in verse 2 announces that they had failed to change. Therefore the Lord had **already cursed** their **blessings.** This announcement is consistent with Malachi 3:9. The whole nation is under a curse (*me'erah,* the same rare word here in verse 2 and also found in Deut. 28:20). These blessings may be the agricultural prosperity of the land, which would have increased the bounty on the priests' tables, as their share from offerings, sacrifices, and tithes would have been greater. It seems more likely, however, that these are the blessings the priests pronounce on the people (Num. 6:23–27; 9:22; Deut. 18:5; 21:5). They were to bless the Israelites by

reciting the blessing preserved in Numbers 6:24–26. In this way they were to "put [*sim*] my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Num. 6:27). The priests in Malachi's audience, however, had shown contempt for and profaned the Lord's name, and they had not set (*sim*) their hearts to honor it (so v. 2, here; see also 1:6, 12). When they uttered blessings in a name they did not reverence or esteem, they mediated no benefit to the people. The Lord had cursed these recited blessings, rendering them ineffectual. As we have seen, priestly sins and their punishment harmed the people by depriving them of effective ministry and the benefits that God granted them by means of the practice of worship at the temple.

2:3 / Through the priests' ministry the people hoped to gain God's acceptance, literally that God would "lift up" (*ns'*) their "faces" (as in 1:9, NIV "accept you"). Judgment on the priests will include having the ritually unclean **offal** from the sacrificial animals **spread on** their **faces.** Any contact with offal would have disqualified them from leadership in the ritual. They themselves would be defiled and desecrated (Exod. 29:14; Lev. 4:11–12; 8:17; 16:27–28; Num. 19:5; the offal had to be removed from the temple courts). This punishment would be profoundly humiliating and repulsive (cf. 2:9). Compare their dung-soiled countenances with Moses' shining face after speaking with the Lord (Exod. 34:29–35). The final clause in verse 3 echoes the verb "lift up" (*ns'*), translated here as **carried off.** The outcome of the ministry of these priests would not be God's acceptance of the people's offerings, lifting up their faces. Instead, the priests themselves would be lifted up and carried off to the refuse heap with the offal from the sacrifices spread on their faces. With the priests expelled to the dump there would be no **festival sacrifices.**

The Lord's **rebuke** is a powerful word that turns back or dries up the sea (Ps. 106:9; Nah. 1:4), prevents insects from devouring crops (Mal. 3:11), and destroys nations (Ps. 9:6). The object of God's rebuke here in verse 3 is literally "your seed," a word which means "offspring" or "grain." The NIV translation, "I will rebuke **your descendants,**" and the NIV margin, "I will blight your grain," reflect these two meanings. The priests' punishment is sterility—of families or fields. They would lose God's life-giving blessing (as in Gen. 1:28; Deut. 28:1–6).

2:4–5 / As a result of this punishment the priests would **know** that God had sent **this admonition** (see also v. 1) with a purpose—that the Lord's **covenant with Levi,** which the priests had "violated" (v. 8), might **continue.** God was not

ready to abolish the priesthood but intended, by means of judgment and the prophetic word, to reform the priests. The ministry of Malachi, the prophet and the book, was to call the priests back to their covenant obligations (vv. 5–7), to call them to work in the interim toward the purification to be completed in days to come by "the messenger of the covenant" (3:1–4).

There is no account in the OT of the making of this covenant with Levi, but Jeremiah 33:20–26 and Nehemiah 13:29 also speak of it. Several passages stand behind Malachi's formulation (cf. the marriage covenant in Mal. 2:14). According to Deuteronomy 18:1–8, the entire tribe of Levi had been set aside for service at the sanctuary. Like Malachi 2, the blessing of Moses (Deut. 33:8–11) personalizes the tribe of Levi as an individual. Levi was "the man you [God] favored," who "watched over your word and guarded your covenant." According to Deuteronomy 33:10, Levi carries out the priestly duties of offering incense and whole burnt offerings, as well as teaching God's precepts and law (*torah)* to Israel. "True instruction" (*torah*) is a major priestly responsibility in Malachi 2:6–7. Leviticus 1:10–11; Deuteronomy 17:8–12, 18; 21:5; 24:8; and 27:14–26 all speak of the requirement to teach and make decisions according to the law (*torah*). God had granted to Phinehas, a descendant of Aaron, and to his descendants a covenant of lasting priesthood, a covenant of peace, because of his zeal for God's honor (Num. 25:10–13; cf. Mal. 2:2, 5). But Malachi gives the label "covenant" to the special obligations and provisions for all the priests, who are Levites, as set forth in the law (e.g., Deut. 17:8–13; 18:1–8; Num. 18). The ideal priest **revered** the Lord and **stood in awe of** the Lord's **name,** for God had kept covenant by giving him **life and peace**—the best gifts of God to humankind, gifts no one else can bestow.

2:6–9 / A comparison of the indictment of Malachi's priestly audience (v. 8) with the description of the ideal priest (vv. 6–7) reveals the profound hurt they had caused by depriving Israel of true priestly ministry. Instead of walking with God in **peace and uprightness** they had **turned from the way.** The people relied on the priests to provide **True instruction** (*torah*) and to **preserve** (*shmr,* v. 7) **knowledge** of God's will that had been entrusted to them. Malachi's priestly audience, however, had not **followed** (*shmr,* v. 9) God's **ways,** so God had revoked (v. 2) their privilege to pray, "The LORD bless you and keep [*shmr*] you" (Num. 6:24). They had **shown partiality in matters of the law** (*torah*) by failing to apply it with integrity. Approving blemished offerings was probably only one example of this failure. God's ultimate concern was not with the quality of

sacrificial flesh, but with the lives of God's people. The ideal priest **turned many from sin,** but the priests of Malachi's audience had **caused many to stumble.** This English word is misleading. The metaphor indicates much more than a temporary loss of balance. The priests had brought God's people down to spiritual ruin. God had made the priests **despised,** as they had despised the Lord's table, **and humiliated before the people** as a divine demonstration that their teaching and cultic administration had not been from God.

Malachi's ministry, that of the prophet and of the book, is to convince the priests of their sin, give them opportunity to repent, and direct them back to God's ways so that the covenant with Levi may remain in effect. God does not intend indictment, judgment, and punishment to annihilate, but rather to restore (cf. 3:3).

Additional Notes §3

1:11 / Incense and pure offerings: The word translated "incense" is a unique noun (*muqtar*) from a verbal root meaning "make sacrifices smoke." Exodus 30:7 and 40:27 describe an altar in the tabernacle where "fragrant [*sammim*] incense [*qetoret*]" was burned. Second Chronicles 26:16 recounts how Uzziah burned incense on the altar of incense in the temple. Since it is paired with the broad term *minkhah* ("tribute; offering"), it is likely that *muqtar* refers specifically to incense. Although an animal may be offered as a *minkhah,* neither of these offerings is specifically an atonement sacrifice.

Will be: The Heb. of verse 11 does not express a tense, except in the concluding formula, **says the LORD Almighty.** The rest of the verse consists of verbless clauses with an adjective or a participle in the predicate. The NIV bases its future tense on three considerations: (1) The last clause in v. 10 is in the future tense, "I will accept no offering from your hands." Verse 12 is also verbless, but it clearly describes the current situation, as in vv. 6–9. (2) The participle frequently refers to the future, especially in prophetic literature. (3) A present tense interpretation is not consistent with the rest of Malachi. Malachi's insistence that priests can make proper sacrifice only in God's personal name, Yahweh ("the Lord"), rules out the proposal that, at his time, worship by other nations of various high gods was accepted as worship of the Lord, the God of Israel. The identification of Jerusalem as the site of "the sanctuary the LORD loves" (2:11) contradicts the suggestion that v. 11 approves Jewish temples outside of Jerusalem, such as the temple at Elephantine in Egypt (6th–5th centuries B.C.). Malachi consistently promotes observance of the law. It is unlikely, therefore, that he would advocate the violation of Deut. 12:5–14. Finally, the context renders unlikely the spiritual interpretation that incense and offerings were the prayer and praise Jews and/or proselytes living in Diaspora among the nations offered to God. Malachi's concern with concrete sacrificial gifts continues in vv. 12–14.

1:13 / You sniff at it contemptuously. In this translation the NIV follows the MT. Ancient scribes, however, have softened that text. The pronoun *'oto* is one of the 18 *Tiqqune Sopherim* in the Hebrew Bible. These ancient emendations were made in order to avoid potentially blasphemous expressions (Kelley, Mynatt, and Crawford, *The Masorah,* p. 39). The NRSV, e.g., translates the original, unemended text, "you sniff at me [God]."

2:1, 4 / The word *mitswah* (NIV **admonition**) normally means "command" or "commandment," yet the verses that follow in 2:1–9 are not in that form. They contain a conditional threat followed by an announcement that the threat has been carried out and that more judgment is coming. Verses 2–3 are more like a sentence pronounced on a guilty party than a commandment. A description of the covenant with Levi and the ministry of the ideal priest (vv. 5–6) and a further sentence of judgment on Malachi's priestly audience (vv. 8–9) do not fit the commandment form either. Yet God has sent this *mitswah* so that the covenant with Levi will "continue" to exist (v. 4). In spite of the judgment the priests currently suffer, this *mitswah* offers them hope for the future. If they will minister as priests according to God's command (v. 7), then the covenant with Levi will continue. It is in this sense that this passage functions as **admonition,** or command.

2:3 / Rebuke: The LXX translation, "banish," suggests a Heb. text *gdʿ,* "hew," or *grʿ,* "trim." (*Resh* and *dalet* are frequently confused because of their similar appearance.) This text may be behind the NIV's alternate translation, "cut off." The MT's (and NIV's) "rebuke [*gʿr*] your descendants" seems to be a weak curse, but if the verb and noun are read together as a metaphor from agriculture, analogous to "rebuke the sea" (i.e., dry it up), then the clause as a whole is about seed that does not come to fruition. The full metaphor would mean the end of priestly family lines.

2:6 / He walked with me: Walking with God includes the sense "serving God," as in Mic. 6:8, as well as a personal spiritual relationship.

§4 Do Not Break Faith (Mal. 2:10–16)

This third address is different in form from the others in the book, and it includes several obscure Hebrew phrases and sentences. In the prophet's opening statement he speaks initially in the first person plural as one of the people (v. 10). He then goes on to accuse Judah (in the third person, vv. 11–12) and his audience (in the second person, vv. 13–15). He quotes the Lord's word in verse 16. This address ends with an admonition, while the others conclude with either judgment or promise. Yet this address does follow the usual pattern of raising and answering the audience's question (v. 14). It also moves from the broad subject of the opening statement—breaking faith with other members of the covenant people—to concrete instances from everyday life, specifically here intermarriage with non-Jews and divorce of Jewish wives.

2:10 / Malachi and his Jewish audience had **one Father** (1:6; 3:17), the Lord, who had created them as a people (Isa. 43:1, 15). The creation of the nation Israel was accomplished by the **covenant** that God offered and the **fathers,** the ancestors of Malachi and his audience, accepted at Sinai/Horeb. The prophet accuses his community of profaning that covenant. The term **profane** is a ceremonial one, a violation which makes a holy thing unholy and ritually unacceptable (Mal. 1:12; 2:11). The people's treachery toward each other had desanctified Israel's covenant with the Lord. They had broken **faith with one another** by failing to live according to the commitments inherent in their relationship as members of the covenant community (cf. Exod. 21:8; Judg. 9:23; Job 6:15). The failures of the priests (1:6–2:9) would be one example, and the offenses that 3:5 lists would be another. Malachi s particular examples in this passage have to do with marriage to non-Jews and divorce from Jewish wives. Both men and women were members of the covenant people (Deut. 31:12), although only men had the privilege of making or dissolving marriages (Deut. 24:1–4).

2:11–12 / Malachi explains the charge in verse 11. **A detestable thing** is a rite or practice that belongs to another deity and is illicit for worshippers of the Lord

(Deut. 7:25–26; 13:15; 32:16; Isa. 1:13; 44:19; Jer. 6:5; 16:18; Ezek. 8:6; 11:18) such as idolatry (Deut. 27:15), sacral prostitution (Deut. 23:10), and other Canaanite rites (Deut. 12:31). Such things obviously would have **desecrated** ("profaned," as in v. 10) **the sanctuary,** that is, the temple (cf. Ezek. 8:10, 14, 16), and violated the covenant. The "sanctuary" (lit., "holy one") could also refer to Israel, the holy people whom the Lord **loves** (Deut. 7:6–8). The particular desecrating practice Malachi names is **marrying the daughter of a foreign god.** There is no evidence that weddings took place in the context of worship, so religious rites associated with the marriage ceremony are probably not the issue here. By marrying and bringing into his household a woman who did not worship the Lord alone, an Israelite man violated the covenant (Deut. 7:3–4). Malachi skillfully uses the particular language of verse 11 to point to the spiritual reason for the prohibition against intermarriage. The verb, "break faith" (*bgd*), is also the key word in Jeremiah 3:6–18, which portrays Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah as sisters who were the unfaithful wives of Yahweh. They had broken faith by false worship. God's covenant with Israel is likened to a marriage with the Lord as husband (Jer. 3:14; 31:32). Malachi says that to marry outside the covenant people is to break faith with God and with Israel. In this passage Malachi addresses individual Jewish men who have married non-Jewish women. By calling the non-Jewish wife a "daughter of a foreign god" Malachi focuses attention on the danger of apostasy (Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3–4). Just as the Jewish husband calls the Lord his "Father" (v. 10), so the non-Jewish wife is the "daughter" of the god she worships (Num. 21:29). Her loyalty to her own god is spiritually dangerous to her Jewish husband and his household, who will be tempted to offer worship to her god as well as theirs (cf. 1 Kgs. 11:1–13; Ezra 9:1–2, 10–12; Neh. 13:23–26). This spiritual bigamy is impossible. A man might continue to bring **offerings to the LORD Almighty,** but he would no longer be a member of the covenant people Israel. Deuteronomy threatens destruction for Israel if they intermarry with the peoples of the land of Canaan (7:4), and death to any family member, including "the wife you love," who entices one to worship other gods (13:6–11). (An Israelite or Jewish woman who had abandoned Yahweh to worship a foreign god could also be called a "daughter" of that deity.) Malachi prays for judgment on **the man who does this.** He calls for a punishment of excommunication from the people of Israel so that no helpers, human or divine, will rouse themselves to come to the man's aid or defense from **the tents of Jacob,** or the families of Israel.

2:13–14 / Verses 13–14 introduce **Another thing you do,** a second example of breaking faith, with a second opening statement, this time in the second person. Malachi describes the people's despair because the Lord ignores and rejects their offerings. They shed **tears,** and **weep and wail** at the altar (cf. 3:14). Such expressions of anguish typically accompany prayers for help, such as Psalm 6. Yet their distress has not been relieved (see Mal. 3:9, they are under a curse). Malachi voices their question: **You ask, "Why?"** There are many reasons why the Lord would refuse offerings. The priestly malpractice that 1:6–2:9 exposes is one reason. But Malachi points to another specific offense that explains God's rejection: men have **broken faith** with their wives.

The understanding of marriage in verse 14 breaks new ground in the OT. First, when a man "breaks faith" with his wife repercussions extend beyond his household. Because he is breaking faith with another member of the covenant people, his wife, he profanes the covenant God had made with Israel's ancestors. It is not a private matter. Second, the marriage itself is a covenant between the husband and the wife, who is called **the wife of your marriage covenant.** Proverbs 2:17 also portrays marriage as a covenant. There is no OT narrative or ritual of a covenant marriage ceremony, but, like the covenant with Levi (see above on 2:4–6), the concept of a marriage covenant between a wife and a husband has its roots in older traditions: (1) Laws regarding the conduct of wives and husbands were part of Israel's covenant obligations (e.g., Exod. 20:14; 21:10; Deut. 5:18). (2) The Lord's marriage to Israel serves as an image of the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai/Horeb (e.g., Hos. 1–3; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:8, 59, 60, 62; 23). (3) Women were also members of the covenant community (Deut. 31:12; Neh. 8:2). Malachi may have been the first to apply this truth to the understanding of marriage. The Lord's role as **witness** to the marriage covenant involved knowing the details of the promises the wife and husband had made to each other; warning them to keep them; and bringing accusations against them when they fail (cf. the role of Solomon in 1 Kgs. 2:41–46). Here in verse 14 the husband is the guilty party and the Lord acts on behalf of the wife.

Also, (4) the woman is called **the wife of your youth.** This term evokes the proverbial joys of the early days of mutual discovery and marital bliss (Prov. 5:18; Song of Songs). It also may call to mind the man's and the woman's families of origin, who had arranged the marriage, as well as their children. (5) Malachi also calls the wife her husband's **partner** (*kheberet*), from a verb meaning "unite, be joined." The feminine form of this noun occurs only once in the OT—here in verse 14. The masculine form expresses the similarity and solidarity between

companions and colleagues (Pss. 45:7; 119:63; Prov. 28:24; Song 1:7; Isa. 1:23). It is an apt term for the spouse who works alongside to sustain the life of the family. It acknowledges that both the wife and the husband are essential contributors to their shared goals of survival and prosperity.

2:15 / Finally, verse 15a completes the description of marriage. The relationships among these eleven Hebrew words are very difficult to determine, as they do not follow the usual patterns of Hebrew sentences. Making sense of the first eight words depends on the meaning of the final three: **seeking,** literally, "the seed of God"—that is, **godly offspring.** The phrase includes the children born to individual families who will be raised to follow the Lord's ways as well as faithful members of the covenant people Israel who call God their "Father." This half-verse probably explains what God has done in order to encourage the creation of godly families. The book of Malachi promotes faithful worship of the Lord alone, faithfulness within the family, and reconciliation between the generations. The two occurrences of the word **one** in a context about marriage suggest a reference to Genesis 2:24, "they will become one flesh." Therefore, the NIV has interpreted these first three words of verse 15 (lit., "and not one he made") as a rhetorical question, **"Has not the LORD made them one?"** God, the one creator (v. 10), is the most likely subject for the verb "made." Because God made them, and because God made them one, wife and husband belong completely to God. By remembering who gave them life; who made them part of the covenant people; who witnessed their own marriage covenant; and who made them one flesh, wife and husband may live in a manner commensurate with this knowledge and establish a godly household. A husband who betrayed his wife would shatter this unity, however. Therefore Malachi gives a warning: **"So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth."** This emphasis on the husband's fidelity to his wife reflects the perspective of Genesis 2, but it is almost unparalleled in the rest of the OT (Job 31:1; Prov. 5:15–23; Hos. 4:10). (A wife's infidelity is a more common image in the prophets, as in Hos. 1–3; Jer. 2–3; Ezek. 16; 23.)

2:16 / What specific act of betrayal constitutes breaking faith with one's wife? In verse 16a it is **divorce,** which is called an act of **violence.** In OT law only the husband could divorce. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 implies that it was a simple procedure within the household by which the man sent the woman away with a written document attesting his action. The bill of divorce protected the woman

from charges of deserting her husband and freed her to marry someone else. Until she remarried, however, she was left homeless. The grounds for divorce are vague ("something indecent about her," Deut. 24:1), and they were still a matter of dispute in Jesus' day (Matt. 19:3–9). **Hate** is the only reason given in Malachi 2:16 for the husband's action. It refers to his desire to send away his wife but names no grounds based on her behavior for divorce: If he hates and divorces . . . then he covers his garment with violence . . . (See the additional note, below).

The strong disapproval of divorce that verse 16 expresses is unique in the OT. It is based on Malachi's definition of the nature of marriage as a covenant relationship between adult partners who were individually members of the covenant people Israel. Ruth 3:9 and Ezekiel 16:8 both refer to the corner of the husband's garment in a gesture to pledge marriage, and in Deuteronomy 22:30 it is a symbol of the exclusive relationship between husband and wife. According to verse 16 here, the evidence of "violence" will cover the husband's **garment** if he divorces the wife of his youth. The evidence of his infidelity will be visible to all. In a similar way, violence may be pictured metaphorically as in or on one's hands (Isa. 59:6; Job 16:17; 1 Chr. 12:17) or in one's mouth (Prov. 10:6, 11) when hands and mouths are the instruments of harm. In Genesis 6:13 God sends the flood because "the earth is filled with violence." "Violence" may refer to a wide range of malicious harm, from injustice created by false testimony or lies (Exod. 23:1; Ps. 35:11) to bloodshed (Judg. 9:24). Malachi is the first to put divorce on this list of offenses that disintegrate society and damage individuals.

Some men in Malachi's audience may have divorced the wives of their youth in order to marry daughters of a foreign god, but both offenses (divorce as well as marrying outside the covenant people) are individually instances of broken faith that profanes the covenant. Malachi puts the highest possible value on marriages between women and men who are part of the covenant people of the Lord. (Jesus' teaching on divorce is found in Mark 10:2–10 and Matt. 19:3–9.)

The end of verse 16 repeats the admonition from verse 15: **So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.** Perhaps Malachi is also applying the "golden rule" of Leviticus 19:17–18 to marriage: Do not hate your wife and divorce her, but love your wife as yourself.

Additional Notes §4

2:10 / Father: Hebrew has no capital letters, so the translation in the NIV margin, "father," reads the

same Heb. word but interprets it as a reference to Jacob or Abraham. Although the OT speaks of God as Israel's Father, it does not associate this image with the creation of humankind. God created Israel by instituting the Sinai covenant with their ancestors.

2:12 / The NIV translates the pair of Heb. words, *ʿer weʿoneh,* as **whoever he may be.** The words are both participles. The first word means "one who rouses himself" and the second means "one who answers." The NIV understands this phrase to be in apposition to "the man who does this" and interprets it as an idiom referring to all people. The alternate translation in the NIV margin has adopted a slight textual emendation of the first word to *ʿed,* "witness," and interprets the pair of words as the object of the verb "cut off": "May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob anyone who gives testimony in behalf of the man who does this." It is best, however, to retain the MT and interpret the object of the punishment as "the man who does this." Both verbs, "rouse oneself" and "answer," are used in cries for help addressed to human beings and to God (e.g., Judg. 5:12; Pss. 7:7; 59:5; 44:23; Isa. 51:9; and Gen. 35:3; 2 Sam. 22:42; 1 Kgs. 18:37; Isa. 41:17; Jer. 33:3; Zech. 13:9). They are similar in meaning and so may be an instance of hendiadys. Verse 12a may be translated, "May the LORD cut off from the man who does this one who rouses himself and answers from the tents of Jacob," or, to paraphrase, "May the LORD deprive the man who does this of anyone in Israel who will answer his call for help."

2:14 / The wife of your marriage covenant: Gordon Hugenberger devotes an entire chapter (*Marriage as a Covenant,* pp. 27–47) to demonstrating that *ʾeshet beritekah,* "your covenant wife," refers to the understanding of marriage as a covenant between husband and wife. The syntactically parallel *ʾanshe beritekah,* lit. "the men of your covenant" (Obad. 7, NIV **allies?**) is a key piece of evidence in his thorough argument.

2:15 / In flesh and spirit they are his: The NIV translation results from two small emendations to the Heb. text, lit., "and a remnant of spirit is his." It is not possible, however, to speak of a "remnant" of "spirit, breath" (*ruakh*). The word "remnant" (*sheʾar*) refers to survivors of a larger group of individuals, e.g., trees (Isa. 10:19) or people (Isa. 16:14). With the substitution of one vowel, the word "remnant" becomes the word "flesh" (*sheʾer*). The words in Gen. 2 translated "flesh" (*basar*) and "breath" (*neshamah*) are different than the two words in this clause, but the concept is similar. A human being is made of flesh enlivened by breath or spirit (Gen. 2:7; Ezek. 37:4–10). Malachi s word for "flesh," *sheʾer,* can also mean "close relative" (Lev. 18:6, 12, 13, 17), so it emphasizes the closeness of the married couple.

While the NIV translates **And why one?** the Heb. interrogative (*mah*) means "what?" It is better to read a longer question and a shorter answer than the NIV does. "And what is the one seeking? Godly offspring." "The one" is God, who is the "one Father" and the one creator in v. 10. But "the one" may also be the man and woman made one by God.

The NIV margin's alternate translation "But the one who is our father did not do this" interprets the first half of v. 15 as being about Abraham, who serves as an example of a faithful husband. The first three words of the verse, rendered word-for-word, are "and not one he made." The alternate translation retains the MT *sheʾar* and reads it as an infinitive absolute of *shʾr,* "remains," that substitutes for a finite verb in the next clause, "not as long as life remained in him." The "not" repeats the negation from the previous clause. Abraham sought godly offspring, the promised child of the covenant, for much of his long life. He lived to see Isaac reach adulthood.

2:16a / The syntax of this verse is also very obscure. Only the two notices of divine speech are clear (**says the LORD God of Israel . . . says the LORD Almighty**). Although these formulas punctuate v. 16a, there are no first-person verbs. The Heb. text does not have the verb **I hate.** The verb is in the third person, "he hates" (*saneʾ*), as is "he covers" (*kissah*). The husband is the most likely subject. The following verb, "send away" (*shallakh*), means **divorce** (Deut. 24:1, 3; 22:19, 29; Jer. 3:1). It is an infinitive and may express the result of the hating, "When he hates so that he divorces . . ." The second clause, "he covers his garment with

violence," gives a strongly negative evaluation of divorce by means of a unique metaphor (see above; Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger,* pp. 82, 109–13, and Hugen berger, *Marriage as a Covenant,* pp. 67–76, give a full explanation of this interpretation of the syntax).

"I hate divorce" is the traditional interpretation of the spare and somewhat awkward three-word sentence that is identified as God's word. The emendation to the first person, "I hate," is not based on manuscript evidence. The solution that Glazier-McDonald and Hugenberger have worked out is the most convincing. Verse 16 is a conditional sentence, "If he hates and divorces . . . then he covers his garment with violence . . ."

Both the NIV and the alternate translation in the margin are expansive interpretations of the MT "he covered his garment with violence." The NIV supplies a direct object for the verb, either "himself" or, in the alternate translation, "his wife." The preposition *ʿal* has been interpreted in the sense of addition, "with violence in addition to his garment." Both of the NIV translations make sense. A man covers himself with his garment daily, and the man who cavalierly divorces his wife wears violence every day also. His offence is always visible in the community. The alternate translation has been influenced by the gesture of a husband covering his bride with the "wing" of his garment. The verb and noun in Ezek. 16:8 and Ruth 3:9, *prs,* "spread out," and *kanaf,* "wing, hem," are different than the vocabulary of Mal. 2:16, although *ks'* does appear in Ezek. 16:8, "I . . . covered [*ks'*] your nakedness." The image here, however, is closer to Jer. 2:34, "On your clothes [*kanaf*] men find the lifeblood of the innocent poor."

Does Mal. 2:16 go beyond Deut. 24:1–4 and prohibit divorce categorically? Not necessarily. There are at least three possible interpretations: (1) "If he hates and divorces" or "If he rejects and sends away" might be an expansive description of any divorce, perhaps esp. from the wife's point of view. (2) Stuart ("Malachi," p. 1343) argues that these terms together refer to "aversion divorce," the kind that is not permitted under the law of Deut. 24:1–4. Deuteronomy permits divorce for cause ("something indecent"); Malachi condemns divorce except for cause. (3) An even narrower interpretation of condemned divorce associates it directly with marrying the daughter of a foreign God (2:11). Divorcing one's Israelite, Yahweh-worshipping wife in order to marry a non-Israelite woman who worshipped other gods would be the crime in this interpretation. The structure of the passage, however, separates the two offences, marriage and divorce, and puts them in reverse order.

§5 The God of Justice Will Come (Mal. 2:17–3:5)

The fourth speech is closely related to the second (1:6–2:9) and the sixth (3:13–4:3). The opening accusation resembles the charge of "harsh" words in 3:13, and the people's queries about God's justice are also similar (cf. 2:17 and 3:15). Their words parallel the priests' failure of discernment—crippled and diseased animals are acceptable as offerings (1:6) and "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD" (2:17). The second (1:6–2:9) and fourth speeches both deal with the priests; the second by means of admonition for the present (2:1–9) and the fourth by a promise of purification in the coming day of judgment (3:3–4).

2:17 / This address begins immediately with an accusation by the prophet, **You have wearied the LORD with your words,** followed by a quotation of the people's question, **"How have we wearied him?"** Our sins may be said, anthropomorphically, to weary God (Isa. 43:24), but God does not tire of hearing our prayers, even when they are laments. Malachi substantiates the charge by quoting their complaints. The first sentence sounds like gossip, **"All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them."** Malachi s audience observed that evildoers were surviving and prospering, and they believed that such success was a mark of divine favor (as in Pss. 37:22; 41:11; cf. Mal. 3:6–12). They concluded that God delights in evil and doesn't care about morality. Their concern is legitimate. Their reasoning, however, was false, and their conclusion was a lie. The Lord delights in steadfast love, justice, and righteousness (Jer. 9:23–24), but not in wickedness (Ps. 5:4).

The question, **"Where is the God of justice?"** may express doubt, desire, or discontent. "Where is the God who is supposed to set things right by punishing evildoers and vindicating or rewarding us?" The people seem to be asking this question among themselves instead of addressing their needs to God, so they are undermining their community, playing a role like the enemies in the Psalms who ask, "Where is your God?" (e.g., Pss. 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2; cf. Ps. 42:1–5).

One answer to their question is implicit in the context—God is with them by means of the prophetic word, which exposes sin for the purpose of restoration.

The Lord has heard their complaints and has sent an answer. This answer reveals what God will do on that future day of judgment, but it invites a response in the present, a response that will enable Malachi's audience to see the work of the God of justice in their own lives. God's future judgment will be based on the divine word that they already know (3:5 contains a short list of covenant laws).

3:1–5 / Verse 5 gives the explicit answer to their question, "Where is the God of justice [*mishpat*]?" God promises, **"I will come near to you for judgment** [*mishpat*]," but prior to this, the Lord will send **my messenger** (v. 1). This word is identical to the name of the prophet in 1:1 (*mal'aki*), but it does not refer to that historical individual (see the introduction). The purpose of this messenger from the Lord will be to **prepare the way before me,** in other words, to clear away obstacles from the road, as when forerunners prepare the way for a monarch to enjoy a smooth journey. Isaiah 40:3 uses the same expression, anticipating God's return to Jerusalem: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD." The obstacles in Malachi's use of the image are ritual and spiritual, the impurity of the priests and the temple services.

Interpreters disagree about the identities of the Lord and the messenger of the covenant, in verse 1, and the subject of the verbs in verses 2–4. In 3:1a God speaks in the first person of "my messenger" and "the way before me." The first person returns in verse 5, so God is the one who "will come near you for judgment." Verses 2–4, however, refer to the Lord by name in the third person, and they lack the formula **says the LORD Almighty,** as in verses 1 and 5. Furthermore, verse 1b also describes God's own sudden coming. The adverb, **Then suddenly,** indicates that **the Lord . . . will come** following God's sending and the messenger's preparation (v. 1a). "The Lord" (*ha'adon*) is the ordinary noun, not the customary substitute for the divine name (*yhwh,* read *'adonay*), so it does not necessarily refer to God. The rest of the description is less ambiguous, however. In this context, the Lord **you are seeking** would be an ironic reference to the people's question, "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17). The reference to **his temple** must be the Lord's temple. The word here is not the more common "house" (*bayit*), but the less used "palace" (*hekal*). This term continues the royal procession imagery from the beginning of verse 1 (cf. 1 Kgs. 21:1; Isa. 39:7). It also plays on the specific use of *hekal* for the holy place in the temple, where only the priests were permitted to go (e.g., 1 Kgs. 6:1, 2, 17). God can be speaking of God's self as "the Lord," but who is **the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire?** He may be the same as "my messenger."

The best solution is to recognize that verses 1–5 describe twice what is to come, first briefly and then at length. The short version is in the first part of verse 1: God's messenger will prepare the way and then the Lord will come. The second telling explains what each one will do. The messenger of the covenant (v. 1b) will refine and purify the Levites (vv. 2–4), and then God will come to judge the people (v. 5).

The title "the messenger of the covenant" is unique in the OT, yet both prophets and priests could be called the Lord's messengers (as in Hag. 1:13; Mal. 1:1; 2:7), and both offices were part of the Sinai/Horeb covenant (Deut. 18). It would have been a fitting title for Moses. Malachi 4:5 promises that Elijah will return before the coming of the Lord's Day. The wording, "See, I will send [*sholeakh*]" (4:5) is nearly identical to 3:1. Although he is not called a messenger and the covenant is not specifically mentioned, his ministry in 4:6 does prepare for the Lord's coming. A priest who teaches God's law (*torah;* 2:7), and a prophet who preaches repentance (*shub;* 4:6), both minister to the covenant people.

Traditional Christian interpretation of this passage, based on the doctrine of the incarnation, has found prophecies of John the Baptist and Christ in these verses. Calvin, for example, identifies the four figures in 3:1–5 as follows: (1) "my messenger" is John the Baptist, according to Matthew 11:10, and the first-person reference is to Christ; (2) "the Lord" and (3) "the messenger of the covenant" are both Christ, who is King, so the temple is "his," and Christ is also reconciler of the people (vv. 2–4); (4) God is the one who will come to judge (v. 5; Calvin, *Commentaries,* pp. 567–70, 576).

The ministry of the messenger will be to **purify the Levites** so that they, as priests, **will bring offerings in righteousness.** God's decision to reject their offerings (1:10) will be reversed. The images of purification, **like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap,** emphasize the high value of the material they are cleaning (Isa. 1:25; Dan. 12:10). Removal of dirt and dross results in beautiful, usable garments and precious metals, both silver and gold. The processes are painful and difficult, however, as the rhetorical questions at the beginning of verse 2 indicate: **"who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"** The priesthood will survive, however, to carry out a purified ministry (v. 3b) so that **the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD.** The situation that 1:6–14 and 2:9 describe will be set right. The ministry of priests like "Levi" in 2:5–7 characterized the **days gone by,** or **former years.** Purification of priests and the process of worship will prepare for the Lord's sudden coming "to his temple" (3:1). Similarly, priests were installed and the

tabernacle was constructed in the wilderness to prepare for the presence of the glory of the Lord (Exod. 40:34). The people also need to be purified before their offerings will be accepted (2:13; 1:14), and so the Lord will come to judge them all (3:5).

The Lord's coming to judge will answer the people's question in 2:17, "Where is the God of justice?" God will **come near,** as in battle (cf. Zech. 14:3), to establish justice. God **will be quick to testify** against people who have violated their covenant obligations. God serves as witness by identifying their sins (cf. 2:14). All of the guilty parties listed in verse 5 have violated prohibitions found in the Pentateuch: against sorcery (Exod. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:14); adultery (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18); perjury (Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; Deut. 5:20); defrauding **laborers** (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14–15); oppressing **widows and the fatherless** (Exod. 22:22–24; Deut. 24:19–32); and depriving **aliens of justice** (Exod. 22:21). Those who do such things **do not fear** the Lord. Similar short lists appear in the Psalms, as requirements for worshippers at the temple (Pss. 15:2–5; 24:4), and in other prophets, as the standards for God's judgment (Jer. 7:5–7; 22:3; Ezek. 18:5–13; Amos 5:14–15) or descriptions of the way of life God wills for Israel (Isa. 1:16–17; 58:6–10; Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8; Zech. 7:8–10; 8:15–17). The good news in verse 5 for Malachi's audience was that they already knew what was required of them as the Lord's covenant people. Judgment would not be arbitrary or unexpected.

The same laws were also God's way of bringing justice in the interim, before the day of judgment. The laws to which verse 5 refers all protect people from harm and loss when others gain and use unfair advantage over them. Sorcerers and perjurers use false words to deprive others of life, health, and property. Adulterers betray their own covenant marriages and invade other marriages to destroy them. People who defraud laborers of their full daily pay, oppress landless widows and orphans, or deprive aliens of justice all use their superior wealth and standing in society to cheat poorer, powerless folk out of what God has granted them under the covenant. The promise of future divine judgment on the basis of such laws serves as a warning for the present, a stimulus to build their life together on justice and faithfulness, for the Lord does not change (3:6).

Additional Notes §5

3:1 / The conjunction "and" (*we*) precedes **the messenger of the covenant** in the Heb. text, indicating

that he is a separate individual from **the Lord.** The NIV, nevertheless, interprets the two clauses as parallel, omitting the conjunction, so "the Lord you are seeking" and "the messenger of the covenant" are the same person. This reading is possible, according to Heb. grammar. God may be called "Lord" (*'adon*), but only in the blessing of Jacob (Gen. 48:16) is God called "the messenger." The NIV is probably following the traditional Christian interpretation, described above, in which "the Lord" and "the messenger of the covenant" both refer to Christ.

3:2 / Launderer's soap is a dynamic equivalence translation. Soap as we know it had not been invented. The cleansing agent this verse mentions (*borit*) contained potassium carbonate and was made from wood or plant ashes (King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel,* p. 71).

§6 Return to Me (Mal. 3:6–12)

The fifth speech returns to the present with an appeal for repentance demonstrated in a concrete act of obedience, tithing. This obligation contributes to proper worship at the temple and to feeding even the poorest of the people. The Lord, who loves Israel, offers them reconciliation and promises blessing.

3:6–7a / The opening statement of this address is a stunning non sequitur, **"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."** The Lord has remained the same God known to Israel since the time of their ancestor Jacob. This is the same God whose will had been known through the law (torah), who abhors violence, judges evildoers, and commands reverence. In the preceding verse one reads the promise of God's coming day of judgment (3:5). God's justice and integrity should have required the end of Israel because of their habitual unfaithfulness: **"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them."** Yet the consequences of God's stability are just the opposite from what his hearers assume. The use of the name Jacob takes the hearer or reader back to the first speech (1:2–5), which begins, "I have loved you" and "I have loved Jacob." For as long as they have been turning away, even that long and longer, God has loved them (cf. Hos. 11:1–11). Therefore, God urgently calls, **"Return to me, and I will return to you."**

The invitation to return in verse 7 is a call to repentance. Because of God's unchanged fidelity and forbearance, God's people have the opportunity to repent and to be restored to relationship with God. The invitation and promise echo Zechariah 1:3**,** and God's word to (Jer. 15:19) and through the earlier prophets (Jer. 31:20–22; Hos. 14:1–8). Indeed, OT prophecy views Israel's history as the arena in which God, through the prophets, called on Israel over and over to return (e.g., 2 Kgs. 17:13; Jer. 25:4–7; 35:15; Zech. 1:6). This promise of reconciliation provides another answer to the question in 2:17. The God of justice turns to those who repent and walk in God's way.

3:7b–10 / The people's quoted response is a practical question, **"How are we**

to return?" God's response is also practical, identifying a particular offense from which they can turn back. God does not, however, meet their question with tenderness but instead addresses them with a cleansing accusation: **"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me."** The choice of words emphasizes the difference between the two parties, God the creator and *'adam,* "human being" (NIV "a man"), the creature. No domestic metaphor softens the contrast. God is charging Israel with the unthinkable. They rob God by withholding their **tithes and offerings.** These dues were to be paid out of the produce of the soil, which God had provided to humankind as food. The land itself belonged to God, and the Israelites were "aliens and . . . tenants" (Lev. 25:23). The offerings named here are contributions for the support of priests and Levites (e.g., Num. 5:9; 18:8, 11, 19). Laws requiring the gift of the tenth are found in Numbers and Deuteronomy, and they do not reflect a uniform requirement. Deuteronomy calls for tithes of crops to be brought annually to Jerusalem, to be eaten there as a feast to the Lord (12:6–7, 11–12; 14:22–27). Every third year they were to be set aside at home to feed widows, orphans, resident foreigners, and Levites (14:28–29; 26:12–15). These landless people had no way to raise their own food, but they could come to the towns to obtain provisions (14:29). Numbers 18:21–24 assigns all tithes to the Levites as their inheritance from the Lord in lieu of land and in payment for their service at the tent of meeting. Malachi 3:6–12 does not mention priests or Levites, so their worthiness to receive this support is not the issue in this passage. The purpose of bringing the tithes to the temple **storehouse** (as in Neh. 13:12) is **that there may be food in my house.** The word for "food" (*teref*) is rare (Ps. 111:5; Prov. 31:15), but the idea is similar to that in Malachi 1:12, which calls sacrifices "food" (*'okel*). This concept is not common in the OT and it should not be understood as a claim that God needs sacrifices or offerings as nourishment (Ps. 50:9–13). The landless were fed by tithes paid in grain, wine, and oil (Deut. 14:23; Lev. 18:27; Neh. 10:37) and, according to Leviticus 27:32, from the flock and herd. They were to "eat and be satisfied" (Deut. 14:29; 26:12).

The divine word interprets the straitened circumstances of the **whole nation** of Israel in terms of the Sinai/Horeb covenant. They are **under a curse** because they have violated covenant obligations by withholding part or all of the required tithes and offerings (Lev. 27:32; Num. 18:8, 11, 19, 21–24, 27; Deut. 12:6–7, 11–12; 14:22–27). The nation under covenant accepted the threat of being cursed for their disobedience (Deut. 28:15–19) along with the promise of blessing if they obeyed the Lord (Deut. 28:1–6). Rain and abundant crops are among the primary blessings of the covenant (Lev. 26:3–5; Deut. 28:4–5, 11–12).

The Lord's offer, **"Test me in this,"** is made within the context of covenant. Israel will carry out the test by obeying the covenant requirement to bring the **whole tithe,** the full ten percent, and they will see the results when God gives them **blessing** (v. 10), as Deuteronomy 14:29 promises. This is not just a test of God's power and will to do them good; it is specifically a test of God's faithfulness to the covenant with Israel. For this reason, individuals who desire to demonstrate their own faith in God's power and goodness by asking for some personal benefit cannot simply take up the invitation to "test me." Israel's tithes fed people who had no land on which to raise their own food and God's covenant blessings were for the whole nation. Furthermore, it is dangerous to test God (Ps. 95:9). God invites this examination of divine integrity only two times in the OT—here in Malachi 3:10 and in Isaiah 7:12, where Ahaz is encouraged to ask for a sign to confirm the prophet's word.

Two unusual expressions describe the blessing that God will **pour out.** Through **the floodgates of heaven** the waters flooded the earth in Genesis 7:11, but this picture of destruction is an image for an abundance of food in 2 Kings 7:2, 19 and Malachi 3:10. It will be a veritable flood, **so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.** Storehouses at home and at the temple will overflow with provisions. Paul extends a similar promise in 2 Corinthians 9:6–15; generous giving to supply the needs of God's people will overflow in blessing to the giver and in thanksgiving to God, because such generosity is consistent with faith in the gospel of Christ.

3:11–12 / Furthermore, God promises to **prevent pests from devouring your crops.** "Prevent" (*gaʿar*) is also used in Malachi 2:3, where the NIV translates it "rebuke." God's wrath will be turned against the agents of the covenant curse, the devouring insects, to paralyze them, thereby reversing the curses in Deuteronomy 28:38–39, 42 and Leviticus 26:20. The book of Joel parallels the movement in Malachi 3:9–12 from curse to return and blessing. Joel 1 gives a detailed description of destruction by locusts and promises recovery from this loss after the people return to God with mourning and prayer (2:12–27). God also promises that the **vines . . . will not cast their fruit.** This verb (*shikkel*) is used elsewhere only of women and female animals and means "miscarry." The grapes will ripen to harvest, because neither drought nor pest will interfere. Such blessings will cause other nations to admire and envy Israel, and to pronounce a beatitude on them (**call you blessed**), for such a fertile country will truly be **a delightful land**—one to be desired for the bounty and pleasure it provides.

Israel's fame among the nations and the fertility of the land are both important elements in the OT portrayal of end-time blessings (e.g., Isa. 62:1–5; Amos 9:13–15).

Deuteronomy provides the text of a confession of obedience to be recited by the Israelite who had brought the third year tithe for Levites, resident foreigners, orphans, and widows. One was to confess ritual purity and obedience, "I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them" (Deut. 26:13; cf. Mal. 4:4). The text ends with a prayer for blessing and thanks for the land God had promised to their ancestors and had given to them, "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut. 26:15).

The best result of this concrete act of repentance will be the restoration of Israel's relationship with God. Malachi 3:6–7 prevents any reading of the covenant as a way for Israel to manipulate the Lord. From earliest times they had failed to remain faithful and to fulfill their obligations. But God remained committed to them and continued to offer the covenant as a way to return (Deut. 4:25–31; 30:1–10).

> When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath. (Deut. 4:30–31)

§7 Those Who Fear the Lord (Mal. 3:13–4:3)

3:13 / The final address returns to the question of justice. God charges the people of Malachi's audience with saying **harsh things against me.** The reflexive verb form in verse 13b, **"'What have we said** [*nipʿal* of *dbr*] **against you?'"** indicates that they had said these words to one another rather than addressing them to God in prayer. Yet in verses 14 and 15 God reveals their strong words and the false conclusions they express.

3:14–15 / They have said, **"It is futile to serve God."** They do not observe any concrete benefit that they had expected from the God they served. The rhetorical question in verse 14b expresses the same idea. They looked for **gain** from their service, a word that most often means "ill-gotten gain" (as in Ezek. 22:27). They claim to have served God **by carrying out his requirements**—a general term for obedience to God's law, as in Deuteronomy 11:1, or a designation for particular priestly duties (e.g., Lev. 8:35; Zech. 3:7)—and by **going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty,** that is, by exhibiting gestures of repentance (as in Ps. 38:4–6; Joel 2:12–17; cf. Mal. 2:13). The book of Malachi mentions several times that Malachi's audience brings offerings, makes and pays vows, and prays for God's acceptance. Yet actions that seem to them, and to their priests, to be carrying out God's requirements were worse than doing nothing (1:10). The accusation of the people is that "the arrogant" (those who seem, in comparison to themselves, to be godless and rebellious), enjoyed prosperity in their families, flocks, and fields. So Malachi's audience formulates a beatitude: "**we call the arrogant blessed.**" Their beatitude is the opposite of God's promise in 3:12, "Then"—after you have returned and been obedient—"the nations will call you blessed." Furthermore, they say, **"the evildoers prosper"** and **"those who challenge God escape."** "Challenge" translates the same word as "test" in 3:10 (*bakhan*). In the previous speech God had invited them to "test me," but here the people recall the danger of doing so (as in Ps. 95:9). The reasoning behind the statements in verse 15 serves as a warning against a mistaken reading of 3:10. Malachi's audience was wrong. One must not conclude from the success of other people that they are right with God, and then deduce God's standards from their

conduct. The audience's theological argument would destroy the distinction between the righteous and the evildoers. This difference, they think, is not being sustained by God's character ("All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD," 2:17), nor by divine power ("even those who challenge God escape," v. 15).

3:16 / At this point the usual format of the speeches in Malachi leads one to expect a word of judgment or promise from God. Instead one finds a narrative in verse 16 about the response of part of Malachi's audience. It is the only narrative in the book. After hearing this much, **Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other.** They talked among themselves, just as the larger audience had done in 3:13b. Although Malachi does not quote their words, their identification as Yahweh-fearers provides the key to understanding them. "Those who fear the LORD" is a typical designation in the Psalms for worshippers (e.g., Pss. 22:23; 66:16; 115:9–13). In Malachi it epitomizes the response God desires from the people (1:6, 14; 2:5–7; cf. 3:5). It is the goal of Malachi's ministry that the people to whom the prophet and the book speak may come to fear the Lord. They will recognize and honor God as parent, master, and great King over all nations and will turn themselves and others away from sin and toward God. This "fear," then, is not a feeling of terror or panic at the prospect of punishment. It is the product of genuine encounter with, and knowledge of, God—a fitting response to God's holiness, power, and love. As this spiritual relationship matures, an increasing sense of awe and reverence for the greatness, goodness, and grace of God nourishes a growing love for, and desire to serve, God.

Verse 16 then tells us that **the LORD listened and heard** the conversation of the God-fearers, but there is no divine word addressed directly to them. (Verses 17–18 are about the God-fearers but are addressed to the larger Malachi audience.) **A scroll of remembrance was written** for them instead, in the Lord's presence. Malachi does not specify the author or scribe of this document, and the writing **in his presence** (i.e., before the Lord), could have taken place in heaven or at the temple. But the purpose of the book was as a remembrance for those who feared the Lord **and honored his name** (see the additional note).

The OT refers to various objects and specific worship practices as a "remembrance" or "memorial" (*zikkaron*) for Israel. For example, the twelve stones erected at Gilgal after the ark and the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground were to be a remembrance "to the people of Israel forever" (Josh. 4:7). They were to perpetuate teaching about what the Lord had done for them there, so that they might "always fear the LORD" (Josh. 4:24). Worship practices such as

paying atonement money (Exod. 30:16), blowing trumpets (Num. 10:10; Lev. 23:24), and Passover observance (Exod. 12:14) are also called remembrances or memorials for Israel "before the LORD," reminders of what God had done for them and what they were to do for God. The celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be a remembrance "that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips" (Exod. 13:9). One other remembrance in the OT is also a written document. After a victory over the Amalekites, the Lord commands Moses to write a divine word of promise in a book as a remembrance and to read it to Joshua. It is at least possible that the scroll of remembrance here in verse 16 was part of the biblical book of Malachi. Other prophets had been commanded to prepare written documents, including Isaiah (8:1, 6), Jeremiah (30:3; 36:2, 28; 51:60), and Habakkuk (2:2). The implication is that these documents were included in the canonical books that we possess. Part or all of the book of Malachi could function as a remembrance to sustain the covenant relationship between God and faithful Israel. As a concrete object its existence was a memorial of God's presence with the postexilic Jewish community and of the commitment some of them had made to fear the Lord. As a practice, reading the book aloud supports the participation of each subsequent generation in this life-giving relationship with God, by reminding them of God's will (torah) and God's promises, and by calling them to return.

3:17–4:1 / Malachi 3:17–4:1 addresses the concerns of Malachi's audience directly. God promises that, "in the day when I act" (v. 17, NIV margin), **you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not** (v. 18). On the day of divine judgment, the arrogant will not seem to be blessed and the people who challenge God will not escape (3:14–15). The **arrogant** and **every evildoer** will be destroyed by fire until there is no possibility of recovery or revival: **Not a root or a branch will be left to them** (4:1). Their survival and prosperity will no longer stand as evidence against the justice of God. The ones who will escape on that day will be the people who fear the Lord, because God will **spare them** (3:17). The God-fearers who had made a public witness to their faith (3:16) are the subjects of the promise in 3:17–18. God describes them in terms previously used for the whole people of Israel, **my treasured possession** (Exod. 19:5; the king's private treasure, as in 1 Chr. 29:3–5), and **his son who serves him** (Exod. 4:22–24; cf. the descriptions of Christians in 1 Pet. 2:9 and John 1:12). The wider Malachi audience, addressed in 3:17–4:1 as "you," is shown a future judgment in which

two groups, the righteous and the wicked, will be distinguished. They had thought of themselves as God's servants (3:14) and did not count themselves among the arrogant and evildoers. But in 3:17–4:1 the God-fearers of 3:16 are God's servants and the ones who will be spared. The Malachi audience addressed as "you" belongs for a moment to neither group. In that moment the Malachi audience in every generation has an opportunity to choose: Will they be among the arrogant evildoers or will they choose to follow the example of the God-fearers? Will they, and we, heed the message of Malachi and live as the Lord's servant daughters and sons?

4:2–3 / The salvation promise in 4:2–3 is for the Godfearers of 3:16 and for every subsequent believer. God addresses them together as **you who revere my name,** that is, "you who fear the Lord." They will have no cause to be afraid in "the day" (4:1) when the Lord acts (cf. Isa. 33:5–6). That day will be for judgment (4:1, 3; cf. Joel 1:12–14; 3:1–16; Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:14–2:3; Zech. 14) and also for healing (Deut. 32:39).

The rising of **the sun of righteousness . . . with healing in its wings** makes use of a common symbol of deity in the ancient Near East, the sun disc with wings. Explicit sun imagery for Yahweh is very rare in the OT (Ps. 84:11 is one exception). In fact, in some of the prophecies in Isaiah God's glory outshines or replaces the sun and moon (24:23; 60:17–22). Isaiah 35:1–7 promises that the glory of the Lord will be seen and the Lord will come to save and heal (Matt. 11:3–5 describes Jesus' ministry in similar terms). The sun image in Malachi 3:2 is specifically a picture of God's righteousness (*tsedaqah*). "Justice" (*mishpat*) and "salvation" (from the root *ysh'*) are the words most often paired with righteousness in the OT. God establishes justice by putting things right and thereby saves the needy and oppressed (e.g., Mic. 7:8–10). This is God's requirement for human kings (2 Sam. 23:3–4; Jer. 22:2–3, 15–16; Ezek. 45:9) and the way the promised Messiah will reign (Jer. 23:5–6). In Luke 1:76–79, Zechariah the priest applies Malachi 4:2 to Christ, "the rising sun will come to us from heaven . . . to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Malachi calls the result of righteousness rising "healing" (*marpe'*), a rare word used in Jeremiah to characterize the restoration of life and wholeness to the land and people after its devastation at the hands of the Babylonians. It is associated with peace, security, and the absence of terror (Jer. 33:6; 8:15). The simile of **calves released from the stall** fits this scene of fecundity, freedom from enemies, and other reasons for thanksgiving. The calf let out of the stall where it was

fattening for slaughter is also a symbol of escape from death (3:17).

The context of Malachi 4:1–3 makes clear that the God-fearers will not themselves destroy the wicked by trampling them underfoot. The simile of 4:2 does not extend into verse 3 as a cattle stampede. Those who in the end suffer divine judgment will be reduced to **ashes** (4:1). The action of the God-fearers in 4:3 is not a vengeful gesture but rather evidence of freedom from danger. Like calves who **go out and leap** they will be free to enjoy fullness of life in the safe pasture that the Lord will provide.

Additional Notes §7

3:13 / "You have said harsh things against me": The Heb. sentence uses the same terminology as 2 Sam. 24:4, "the king's word . . . overruled Joab." Verse 13 here could be translated, "Your words have overruled me." As David's decision prevailed over Joab's counsel, so the people's opinions had overruled God's commands. They followed their own counsel rather than God's will.

3:16 / The NIV translation, **A scroll of remembrance was written** before the Lord **concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name,** interprets this scroll as a document about the Yahweh-fearers, either a list of names, as in the book of life in Exod. 32:32 and Ps. 69:28, or a record of deeds (Neh. 13:14; Dan. 7:10). Such a list would be consulted to determine who would be spared on the day of judgment (3:17; cf. Rev. 20:12, 15; 21:27). This administrative list does not fit well with the family imagery in 3:17, however. A father knows "his son who serves him" without consulting a list. Furthermore, the Heb. preposition *le* most often means "for" or "to." The meaning "concerning" is rare. The expressions "remembrance (for Israel)" and "in his presence" (lit., "before him") should receive more emphasis in assessing the significance of the scroll, as discussed above.

3:17 / The noun *segullah,* "treasured possession," lacks the markers that would clarify its relationship to the rest of the sentence. The NIV understands it as the object of the verb "make up" because it follows immediately after the verb (a participle): **I make up my treasured possession.** The possessive "my" has been added for clarity, but the noun has no possessive suffix in the MT. The alternate NIV translation in the margin interprets *segullah* as a predicate nominative, connected to the first two words in the sentence, "they will be mine . . . my treasured possession."

§8 The Law and the Prophets (Mal. 4:4–6)

The final three verses in the book serve as a coda to the whole, and as a link to the Pentateuch and to the other prophets in the biblical canon. This divine speech summarizes the various emphases of the book and ties them together in a common chronology. The new terminology in these verses relates Malachi's message to other parts of the OT.

4:4 / Those who fear the Lord or revere the divine name (3:16; 4:2) are known by their adherence to God's law (*torah*). The ideal priest in Malachi 2:5–6 "revered" the Lord and taught "true instruction" (*torah*). Violators of God's law, epitomized in 3:5, are identified as people who do not fear the Lord. The admonition to **Remember the law** describes the way of life required of Godfearers who will be spared on the day of judgment (3:17). To "remember the law" one must live under its authority and guidance. This combination of verb and object are unique in the OT, but Numbers 15:39–40 and Psalms 119:51–56 and 103:18 use similar expressions. The terms **decrees and laws** designate particular requirements, such as the ones listed in 3:5 and the decrees regarding tithing (3:8–10). Malachi 3:7 accuses all Israel in every generation of turning away from God's decrees and failing to keep them. This admonition to remember the law embraces the full range of covenant obligations which must be learned and kept.

The Lord's torah is called **the law of . . . Moses.** This title appears only a dozen times in the rest of the OT, half of them in the postexilic books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel. Exhortations to obey "the Law of Moses" occur at significant junctures in Joshua and Kings. Joshua's farewell address calls Israel and her leaders to "obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses" (Josh. 23:6). On his deathbed David gives the same advice to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:3. Joshua and Kings also each report one instance of obedience specifically to "the Law of Moses." Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal "according to what was written in the Book of the Law of Moses" (Josh. 8:31–32; Deut. 27:1–8), and Amaziah refrained from executing the sons of the men who had assassinated his father because the Book of the Law of Moses forbade this (2

Kgs. 14:6; Deut. 24:16). Josiah, however, is the one leader of whom it is written that he "turned to the LORD . . . in accordance with all the Law of Moses" (2 Kgs. 23:25).

The few words of Malachi 4:4 call to mind the gift and obligation of the covenant as well as the major figures in the Pentateuch and Former Prophets—Moses, Joshua, David, and Josiah. Malachi 4:4 repeats their valedictory wisdom to the people of God in the fifth century B.C. and beyond. References to covenant law abound in the short book of Malachi, although they are not labeled "the law of Moses." Malachi even builds upon an understanding of the relationships created by the covenant to go beyond the letter of the law (e.g., the marriage covenant). Verse 4 does not mention covenant, but the decrees (*khuqqim*) and laws (*mishpatim*) are the ones God **gave him** [Moses] **at Horeb for all Israel.** This is a clear reference to the making of the covenant with Israel at Sinai/Horeb on the basis of God's words and laws (*mishpatim;* Exod. 19:5–6; 24:3–8) or decrees (*khuqqim*) and laws (*mishpatim;* Deut. 4:9–14). The account of covenant making in Deuteronomy 4 shares Malachi's emphasis on learning to fear or revere the Lord: "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me" (Deut. 4:10). Membership in the covenant people extended to all Israel—the leaders, ordinary men and women, and children and other dependent persons (Deut. 29:9–13)—and it continued generation after generation to include Malachi' s audience and the ones that followed. Remembering God's will made known in torah is something that God's people can do in the present to return to the Lord and to fear Yahweh's name, and that they can continue to do until the Lord's day of judgment.

4:5 / An eschatological promise complements the admonition. God will **send . . . the prophet Elijah** before the Lord's Day. Elijah seemed to be available to return because he had been taken up into heaven (2 Kgs. 2:1–11). Malachi stood in a long line of prophets with Elijah at the beginning and the end. Deuteronomy 18:15–16, 2 Kings 17:13–14, Jeremiah 25:4–5, and several other passages describe the succession of prophets like Moses whom God sent to call Israel to repentance and to faithfulness to covenant law. The ministry of prophets to God's unfaithful, wavering people continues even after the prophets die because God's word remains alive and effective (Zech. 1:5–6). This continuity between covenant law and the ministry of the prophets is symbolized by the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus at his transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36).

The coming of Elijah is promised in terms that echo the promise of "my

messenger" in 3:1: "See, I will send [*sholeakh*] . . ." The messenger in Malachi 3 will purify the Levites, while Elijah will prepare the whole people for the Lord's coming. Interpreters disagree as to whether the messenger in 3:1 and Elijah are the same person. (Matthew 11:10 and 14 identify the messenger of Mal. 3:1, as well as Elijah of 4:5, as John the Baptist, but in John 1:21 the Baptist denies that he is Elijah.) Both serve as forerunners, graciously sent so that God's people may be prepared to survive the Day of the Lord. Subsequent interpretation expanded the scope of Elijah's ministry. The Septuagint of verse 6 adds "neighbors"; Sirach 48:10 says he is to "restore the tribes of Jacob" (NRSV); and in Matthew 17:11 and Mark 9:12 Elijah is to be the one who "restores all things."

Malachi includes other promises about the day when the Lord will come and act, but this is the first time in the book that he uses the title **the day of the LORD.** This term is familiar from the rest of the Book of the Twelve, especially Joel (1:13–20; 2:1–11, 28–32), Amos (5:18–24), Zephaniah (1:7–2:3), and Zechariah (13:7–9; 14). Joel (2:31b; 2:11) describes that day in the words of 4:5 as **great and dreadful.** Terrifying phenomena in the heavens and earth will accompany the worst of wartime experiences. The guilty will not escape (cf. Mal. 3:17; 4:1). Yet God will provide ways for people to find refuge in order to survive that day. Elijah's ministry is one of those ways (cf. Joel 2:32; Zeph. 2:3; Zech. 13:7–9).

4:6 / On the Day of the Lord those who do not turn to God will be struck **with a curse.** "Curse" translates the word *kherem,* the ban of utter destruction. God had threatened Israel with this before, for refusing to submit to Babylon (Jer. 25:9) and for apostasy. An Israelite town that turned away to worship other gods was to be destroyed totally (Deut. 13:16). Elijah's ministry of turning will offer Israel an opportunity to avoid this curse.

Elijah, when he comes, **will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.** This twofold description of Elijah's work has layers of meaning. The key word "turn" (*shub*) and the reciprocal actions echo God's promise in 3:7, "Return to me, and I will return to you." God is called Israel's "father" in Malachi 1:6 and 2:10, and other prophets picture the theme of restoration and reconciliation in terms of divine parent and human children (e.g., Jer. 31:18–20; Hos. 1:6–9; 2:23). Yet the plural "fathers" is inconsistent with this interpretation. Perhaps the most obvious understanding of verse 6a is that intergenerational conflicts will be resolved. This concern is a corollary to the admonitions about marriage in 2:10–16. Malachi is interested in faithful relationships within the family. The Hebrew words translated "fathers"

(*ʾabot*) and "children" (*banim*) also mean "ancestors" and "descendants." Malachi sometimes recalls the ideal conditions of the distant past, the time of the ancestors (2:5–6; 3:4). The generation of the forerunner, Elijah, will be brought into conformity with the faith and life of the founding generation (cf. Hos. 2:15). Beth Glazier-McDonald has proposed reading the preposition *ʿal* (NIV "to") as "together with," which is one of its several meanings (Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi,* p. 256). The reciprocal clauses would then emphasize the extent of Elijah's ministry to the whole people, young and old, while using the familial language typical of Malachi. The destination of their hearts' turning can only be God. Perhaps the promise of Jeremiah 24:7 should be heard in the background of Malachi 4:6: "They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart."

Additional Notes §8

4:4 / Horeb is the name favored in Deuteronomy for the location of the mountain of God, while Sinai appears most often in Exodus–Numbers. They are alternate names for the same place.

4:5–6 / Elijah also had several things in common with Malachi. Brevard S. Childs makes the following list from 1 Kgs. 18: both prophets addressed an Israel fragmented over faith (18:21; Mal. 2:17); the land was under a curse (18:1; Mal. 3:9); Elijah and Malachi called people to choose God (18:21; Mal. 3:7, 18); Elijah's challenge to the people involved a right offering and fire falling from heaven (18:30–39; Mal. 3:3; 4:1; Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament,* pp. 495–96).

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Notes

Introduction: Zechariah

[1]. Equivalent dates from the Western calendar come from the chart in C. Meyers and E. M. Meyers, "Haggai, Book of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 3:23.

[2]. Interpreters disagree about the definition of the term "apocalyptic" and its applicability to particular OT passages. How many characteristics of an apocalypse from the Hellenistic or Roman period must be present in an OT text for the adjective "apocalyptic" to apply? Zechariah 9–14 lacks some concepts that are typical of later apocalypses, such as postmortem rewards and punishments for individuals, an underworld inhabited by supernatural evil powers, and revelation to a seer accompanied by an interpreting angel. Also, the potential that the nations will disobey God remains even after the final battle for Jerusalem (14:17–19).To complicate matters further, the adjective "apocalyptic" may describe literary features, a worldview, or a particular group within society. Because these disputes over definition remain unresolved, this commentary will instead focus on the particular features of chs. 9–14.

Introduction: Malachi

[1]. Elizabeth Achtemeier understands the whole book in quite a different way as the record of a trial (Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi*, pp. 171–72). David Petersen suggests the designation "diatribe-like" (Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, p. 31). As in the Greek diatribe form, the speaker quotes the other party in a stylized way for a didactic purpose.

[2]. There is no evidence, however, to prove Kaiser's suggestion that Malachi is a shortened form of Malachiya, "the messenger of Yahweh" (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Preacher's Commentary Vol. 23: Micah through Malachi* [Nashville: Nelson, 2002], p. 13).

[3]. E.g., Verhoef finds a remarkable degree of correspondence between Malachi and Nehemiah's concerns during his second term of service in Jerusalem, beginning in 433 B.C. (Neh. 13 in Pieter A. Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi* [New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], pp. 159–60). Malachi 1:8 refers to the "governor" (*pekhah*) who accepts tribute, and Nehemiah had relinquished his right to such gifts (5:1–8). For these and several other reasons Verhoef dates the prophet's ministry to the period between Nehemiah's two terms as governor of Yehud. Jon Berquist sets Malachi s ministry during the reign of Xerxes (486–465 B.C.), who had reduced funding for the temple in Jerusalem (Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, p. 94).

[4]. B. Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* (SBLDS 98; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), p. 263.

[5]. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, p. 212.

[6]. Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14*, p. 24.

[7]. E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 265.

[8]. In David Petersen's reading of 1:6–2:9, the "priests" are the Zadokites whom God is about to remove from temple service (2:2). He identifies the non-Zadokites with the ideal priest, "Levi," in 2:4–7, although Malachi never uses the term "Levites" (Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, pp. 189–93). The hypothesis that Malachi was himself a Levite is a corollary of this partisan reading. His interest in tithes, which were the Levites' portion, provides further support (Neh. 13:5). Petersen's reading is not conclusive, however. Malachi does not use the terminology that emphasizes this distinction between priestly groups ("Aaron,"

"Levites"), nor does he employ Deuteronomy's term, "priests who are Levites" (e.g., Deut. 18:1).



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