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JEREMIAH

(And the Minor Prophets Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk)

The Land of Milk and Honey was more like vinegar and alum in the days of Jeremiah and his contemporary prophets. Wise judges, who lead the Israelites during their first two centuries in the Promised Land, gave way to kings – some good, many bad – and the United Monarchy was divided after the death of Solomon. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been captured and dispersed by the Assyrians and, by 640 BC, more than five centuries after entering Canaan, Judah had been ruled for forty-seven years by the selfish and corrupt kings Manasseh and, briefly, Amon, who had decimated the letter and spirit of the Law of Moses.

When the minor prophet Zephaniah (whose name meant “Yahweh Protects”) was born, Manasseh was the king of Judah and Zephaniah, as a child, likely saw the idolatrousness of the king and his son and successor Amon. It must have affected him greatly. By the time Zephaniah started his public ministry, King Josiah, Amon’s son, had become king of Judah but the evil of the previous reign continued during Zephaniah’s career. He poetically prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole world believing that the world was simply not worthy of Yahweh’s love because of its sin (Holman, Zephaniah):

Zephaniah 1:16-17 (NRSVA)

¹⁶a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. ¹⁷I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.

Zephaniah was the likely author of the book, or he dictated it, around 630 to 621 BC – after the beginning of Josiah’s reign but before the king’s reforms that began about 621. However, it is probable that a later author added parts of the third chapter (CSB, p. 364) because,

while Zephaniah encourages Judah to repent and possibly avoid punishment, verses 8-20 seem to be quite positive and hopeful toward Israel in a song of praise:

Zephaniah 3:14-15 (NRSVA)

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

There is little Messianic prophecy in the material and he is only quoted once in the New Testament in Matthew 13:41 (JBC, p. 290). The Roman Lectionary proclaims Zephaniah at two Sunday Masses and one daily Mass (CSB, pp. 1711-1716). Until the 1970 revisions of the Roman Missal, the hymn *Dies Irae* (“Day of Wrath”), inspired by 1:2-18, was used in requiem Masses (Wikipedia, *Dies Irae*):

Zephaniah 1:2-3 (NRSVA)

²I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD.
³I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the LORD.

About the same time Zephaniah’s career ended, Jeremiah’s began. Jeremiah, who was born about 646 BC and was a young adult witness to the pagan ways of the kings before Josiah’s reforms in 621, following his discovery of the Deuteronomy scroll in the temple, is the second most important major prophet in the Old Testament and his book is the longest. His call, in 626 BC, twelve or thirteen years after the beginning of the reign of Josiah (Asimov, p. 556), was formulaic: He was called by God, was reluctant because of his youth, was reassured, and, finally, he accepted:

Jeremiah 1:5-6, 9 (NSRVA)

⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” ⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”
⁹Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

At the outset, idolatry was still the norm and Jeremiah spoke loudly against it saying that Judah would surely be destroyed by invaders from the north (JBC, p. 301). He equated idolatry with adultery believing that Yahweh's covenant with Israel was like a marriage between a man and a woman, a powerful and illustrative simile.

Josiah's reforms beginning in 621 BC, were, in Jeremiah's view, inadequate. What seemed to bother him most was the reliance on the temple at Jerusalem and the forms and rites attached to it instead of the lessons of the Torah, faith in a loving God, and conversion (Witherup, p. 107). He was a powerful speaker and made many enemies with his condemnations of Judah and Jerusalem, especially with his "temple sermon" in Jer. 26; as a result, he was threatened with death, was ill-treated, and is now known as the quintessential "suffering prophet." Jeremiah's condemnation of Judah became bitter after Josiah was killed in 609 BC and the resumption of idolatry by Josiah's son and successor Jehoiakim and he was even imprisoned for his outbursts.

Jeremiah may have been the first "peace-nik." When he was captured and whisked away to Egypt for his own safety by conquering Babylonians in about 597 BC, he wrote, through his scribe Baruch, that Jews exiled in captivity in Egypt and those left in Judah should submit to the will of their captors and cooperate peacefully until they are delivered (Asimov, p. 573). Jeremiah was stoned by his own countrymen because of his severe attacks and died in Egypt as a martyr about 556 BC (CE, "Jeremias").

Jeremiah is cross-referenced to the New Testament sixty-five times (NJB) and is read at five Sunday Masses and eleven daily Masses (CSB, pp. 1711-1716). Christians see his prophecies as having been fulfilled in Christ (Witherup, p. 109). His message of redemption through Yahweh's love is an inspiration to all modern Christians. His acrostic Lamentations, transcribed by Baruch, is a dirge, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, and clearly exposes the

prophet's pain over the loss. The Book of Jeremiah consists of lamentations, biography, and oracles (JBC, p. 302).

Nahum - his name means "comfort, encourage" (Witherup p. 124) or, perhaps, "Yahweh consoles" (JBC p. 293) - and Habakkuk - his name means "to embrace" - were contemporaries of Jeremiah but there is little, if any, evidence that they knew him or each other even though they both use language and phrases common in Jeremiah. Nahum, who prophesied shortly before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC (CSB), wrote vivid poetic messages in acrostic testifying the vengeance and the wrath of God:

Nahum 1:2-3 (NRSVA)

Aleph

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

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

Also, in a very graphic, nearly epic passage, Nahum predicts total destruction of Nineveh for the many "debaucheries" its citizens commit:

Nahum 3:2-3 (NRSVA)

²The crack of whip and rumble of wheel,
galloping horse and bounding chariot!

³Horsemen charging,
flashing sword and glittering spear,
piles of dead,
heaps of corpses,
dead bodies without end—
they stumble over the bodies!

Nahum is never referenced in the New Testament except for an oblique paraphrase in Revelation 6:17 (NJB) and does not appear in the Roman Lectionary.

Habakkuk's prophesies took place after the fall of Nineveh at a time when Chaldea (Babylon) was growing strong and seemed, at least to Habakkuk, to threaten Judah. His book is a

beautifully written hymnal dialogue between himself and Yahweh. He complains that Yahweh has turned a deaf ear to the problems of Judah:

Habakkuk 1:2-3 (NSRVA)

²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

Then Yahweh answers him:

Habakkuk 1:5 (NSRVA)

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

But Habakkuk does not like God’s answer that he is sending the Chaldeans to overrun the nation and, so, complains even more, wondering why sinful people should be destroyed by those even more sinful than themselves (JBC, p. 296). Finally, realizing the greatness and splendor of God and convinced that the evil ones will pass away and the faithful will live on, Habakkuk ends his writings with a song of praise, which was to be accompanied by stringed instruments:

Habakkuk 3:18 (NRSVA)

¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

St. Paul uses Habakkuk’s declaration that “the just (righteous) shall live by his faith” (2:4) and takes it as a “central element in his theology” (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). According to Holman, this passage “came alive for ... Martin Luther, setting off the Protestant Reformation...” (Holman, Habakkuk). The Roman Lectionary makes no reference to any of the book.

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