CFM: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Micah

Overview[1]

Old Testament prophets are frequently categorized as "Major" or "Minor," according to the size of their writings rather than their quality. Though the book of Micah is relatively short, the prophet's words should not to be relegated to the status of minor importance. Some of his teachings are of major concern and value to us.

The name Micah (Hebrew, *mika* מִיכָה) is an abbreviated form of Micaiah (Hebrew, *mikayah* or *mikayahu*), meaning, "Who is like Jehovah?" He was a Morasthite (Micah 1:1; Jer. 26:18), one who came from Moreshethgath, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Judahite Shephelah, near the border between Judah and Philistia (near Mareshah; see Map 9, LDS Bible). His ministry was during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and especially Hezekiah, as corroborated in Jeremiah 26:18-19. He was, therefore, a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Hosea and somewhat later than Amos. All of their ministries reflect the same social and political backgrounds, and their messages necessarily depict the same social ills in the Israelite kingdoms. Micah's message concerned the capital cities Samaria (Israel) and Jerusalem (Judah). He prophesied the captivity of northern and southern Israelites, their ultimate restoration to the land, and the coming of the Messiah.

The book of Micah is written in polished Hebrew poetry with particular use of parallelism and word-play, a typical form and style for the prophets of Israel and Judah. Bible scholars have proposed various ways to describe the organization of the book.[2] The following outline can be considered an excellent example of how to structure the text.

Three prophetic addresses:

Micah 1 through 3 — denunciations and punishments

Micah 4 through 5 — hope

Micah 6 through 7 — combination of doom and hope

Unlike some scholars,[3] Ogden asserts that the prophets pronounced both doom and hope — that condemnation and devastation were necessarily followed by consolation and restoration.[4]

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[1] Much of this overview comes from D. Kelly Ogden, "The Book of Amos," *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi*, Deseret Book, (ed. Kent Jackson), 2004.

[2] See Paul J. Achtemeier, gen. ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 633; John Merlin Powis Smith, *International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), pp. 8-9; Henry McKeating, *Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah* (London: Cambridge University, 1971), pp. 10-11; W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 359-64.

[3] Brettler and Berlin cite reasons why some scholars attribute Micah to a time after the exile. One reason is that Micah makes an explicit reference to the Exile (Micah 4.10). *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1205.

[4] It must not be overlooked that ***there is a pattern visible in Hebrew literature of pronouncing curses, judgments, and destruction followed by a message of hope.*** See D. Kelly Ogden's analysis of this idea as he discusses the book

Condemnation of Samaria and Jerusalem

The first three chapters of Micah contain a catalogue of the crimes of Samaria and Jerusalem. Though the two capital cities were supposed to be spiritual centers, Micah denounced them as sin centers, accusing them of countenancing and even inviting the worship of graven images and idols (Micah 1:7). There could be no greater affront to the God of Israel. The first two of the Ten Commandments that were thundered from Sinai were "No other gods" and "No graven images," yet Jeroboam had set up his golden bulls, and Ahab and Jezebel had erected a house of Baal right in Samaria. Ahab's sister (or daughter[5]) Athaliah married the king in Jerusalem, where the same worship was instituted. Micah continued: Israelites were working evil on their beds (Micah 2:1), coveting and violently taking family properties (Micah 2:2), and forbidding true prophets to prophesy (Micah 2:6). Leaders were stripping and devouring the temporal and spiritual possessions of their people: "Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel; Is it not for you to know judgment? Who hate the good, and love the evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; Who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces" (Micah 3:1-3).

Micah accused the Israelites of encouraging false prophets to deceive and misguide the people (Micah 3:5), and he condemned the leaders who abhorred justice and who perverted equity, judging and teaching for money, and prophets who divined for money (Micah 3:9-11). Because of all these spiritual crimes, Micah pronounced specific catastrophes to overtake the two capital cities: "Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, and as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover [i.e., lay bare] the foundations thereof" (Micah 1:6). "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps" (Micah 3:12).

One needs only to visit the site of ancient Samaria to view the literal fulfillment of the prophet's words. The foundations of Samaria were laid bare by the Assyrian conquerors in 721 B.C. — during Micah's ministry — and Jerusalem, though spared for another century, was eventually desolated by the armies of Babylon (and centuries later, the Temple Mount was literally plowed by the Roman soldiers of Titus). In the predicted destruction of both cities, Micah used the word heap, which in Hebrew means "ruin." Both Samaria and Jerusalem were left a pile of ruins, the latter several times over.

Promise of Restoration

According to the prophetic pattern, Micah then shifted from doom and devastation to a message of hope. Though Zion, or Jerusalem, would certainly become a heap of ruins, yet just beyond that dark cloud that would hang heavy over the city, a ray of hope would shine forth. Zion would "go even to

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of Amos in "The Book of Amos," *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi*, Deseret Book, (ed. Kent Jackson), 2004.

[5] 2 Kgs. 8:18 and 2 Chron. 21:6 seem to have Athaliah as the daughter of Ahab, though the passages may refer to someone else. But 2 Kgs. 8:26 and 2 Chron. 22:2 explicitly identify her as the daughter of Omri and thus a sister or half-sister of Ahab. John Bright points out: "Since her son was born ca. 864 (2 Kgs. 8:26), she could not have been the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, who could scarcely have been married over ten years at the time. She may have been Ahab's daughter by an earlier marriage, or . . . a daughter of Omri who was raised by Ahab and Jezebel after the former's death." John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), p. 242, n. 38.

Babylon [but] there shalt thou be delivered; there the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies" (Micah 4:10).

Zion had to return from Babylon; she could not remain in the strange land. Before other great prophecies could be fulfilled she had to be reestablished in her own land. Micah now projected his vision into the latter-day future when the mountain of the house of the Lord (the temple) would be established in the top of the mountains, and many people and nations would flow to it to be taught of the ways of the God of Jacob, when the law would go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Micah 4:1-2). Micah went on to preview the millennial era, when instruments of war will be turned into implements of agriculture, and nations will not "learn war any more" (Micah 4:3), when "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (Micah 4:4), a figurative and formulaic expression of living comfortably, safely, and securely. We know that almost identical predictions of an era of peace and prosperity were voiced by Isaiah (Isa. 2:1-3). Indeed, the prophets Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries and likely knew each other's writings, but whether one prophet originally gave utterance to this millennial scenario and the other prophet borrowed from those teachings is not known.

Prophecy of the Messiah

Micah again turned his prophetic eye to the future, this time somewhat closer to his own day. The Messiah, God's own Son, would come to earth, and it was Micah who specified the location of his birth. All of the prophets wrote and prophesied of the Messiah (Jacob 7:11; Mosiah 13:33), but in the biblical writings of none but Micah do we have preserved the specific prediction of his birthplace: "But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). There can be no mistaking: there is only one Bethlehem in Judah and there is only one ruler in Israel whose origins are from eternity. Even the chief priests and scribes understood clearly the prophecy when they quoted it upon Herod's inquiring where the Messiah should be born, and Herod was obviously convinced of the possibility, because he proceeded to issue his infamous order to exterminate the children around Bethlehem: "And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule [Greek, "shepherd," "tend," "nurture"] my people Israel" (Matt. 2:4-6).

Micah Quoted Elsewhere

We may judge some of the most valued parts of Micah's teachings by what was later quoted by others. Besides the possible quotation in Isaiah 2:1-3 and the one in Matthew just cited, we have a note in the book of Jeremiah, a century after Micah's time, affirming that Micah's ministry was effective in deterring the people from their predicted fate: "Micah the Morasthite prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and spake to all the people of Judah, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest. Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him at all to death? did he not fear the Lord, and beseech the Lord and repent? and the Lord turned away the evil which he had pronounced against them" (JST Jer. 26:18-19).

Two passages from Micah were referred to by the Savior when he appeared to the Nephites and Lamanites. The first is from Micah 4.12-13 (cited in 3 Ne. 20.18-19), wherein the Lord, finding other nations gathering against Jerusalem and eyeing her as prey, declared: "But they know not the thoughts of the Lord, neither understand they his counsel: for ***he shall gather them as the sheaves into the floor***. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion: for I will make thine horn iron, and I will make thy hoofs brass: and thou shalt beat in pieces many people: and I will consecrate their gain unto the Lord, and their substance unto the Lord of the whole earth."

The Lord was assuring his people that his purposes would be fulfilled. They will return from exile; they will be planted again in their land; they will exert their strength (as iron, brass, "beating in pieces," etc.) with the protection of the Lord, because his people must persist in the land in order to realize the promises to the fathers—for instance, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and would minister to his people in their land. This bringing of the *sheaves into the floor* has temple connotations. This floor is the *goren* (גֹּרֶן) or the threshing floor. You can see this connected to Ruth 3.1-4, 2 Samuel 24.16-17, 1 Kings 6.19, 8.1-9, 2 Chron. 3.1. The "Jebusite" who "sold" this threshingfloor to David has a name that is related to the Ark of the Covenant. His name is *Ornan* – אָרְנָן (H771), similar to *Arown* – אָרוֹן (H727), the name for the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant will eventually find its way on the *goren* when the temple is constructed in Solomon's day. It is placed on the threshingfloor, the place where the sheaves are gathered and the seeds are separated from the rest of the plant material. This is all about seeds and life, and this is all related to and coming out of ancient Egypt.[6] Indeed, ***the threshingfloor was the origin of theatre, which was all connected to the temple and the New Year's festival***. As Aranov explains:

> In the process of time, 'theatre' became entirely secularized utilizing non-sacred scripts directed towards entertainment of 'the masses.' Hence, what had originated as a cultic reenactment of the mythology of vegetation ritual performed with the intention of promoting crop fertility eventually proceeded to provide a visual enactment of the dramatic experiences of the gods which afforded a rationale for the seasonal calendar.[7]

The other passage that the Savior Jesus Christ quotes to the Nephite nation is from Micah 5:8-15 (cited in 3 Ne. 20:16-17; 21:12-21, also quoted by Mormon as well – Mormon 5.24)[8], similar in tone to the previous one: "And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles in the midst of many people as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver. Thine hand shall be lifted up upon thine adversaries, and all thine enemies shall be cut off."

In contrast to the threatening, forceful imagery of these verses, the previous verse in Micah states that "the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon

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[6] Maurice Moshe Aranov, The Biblical Threshing-floor in the light of the Ancient Near Eastern evidence: Evolution of an Institution. Dissertation New York University, 1977. See also: Noegel, The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant, in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, Springer International Publishing, 2015, p. 223-242.

[7] Aranov, p. 204-205.

[8] Mormon writes, "Therefore, repent ye, and humble yourselves before him, lest he shall come out in justice against you—***lest a remnant of the seed of Jacob shall go forth among you as a lion, and tear you in pieces, and there is none to deliver***" (Mormon 5.24).

the grass" (Micah 5:7). In biblical imagery, dew and showers always suggest nourishment, peace, relief, and blessing. Apparently the remnant of Jacob in the latter days will also be a blessing to the Gentiles and promote the righteous life. But in ancient America, the Savior focused on the might and terror which he through the remnant of Jacob (now another branch of the house of Jacob) would strike in the hearts of their adversaries among the Gentiles (see 3 Ne. 20:16-19; 21:12-21).[9]

Great Teachings from Micah

Possibly the most sublime counsel the prophet Micah penned for the benefit of all generations was his rhetorical question of the Lord's expectation for his children, and the prophet's answer: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . . He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:7-8).

Man was expected to emulate his God. Were the people of Judah and Israel just and merciful and walking humbly with God? Another catalogue of crimes suggests that they were not: they used wicked balances and deceitful weights (Micah 6:11), rich men were full of violence and lies (Micah 6:12), and they followed the statutes of Omri and the works of the house of Ahab (Micah 6:16). 5 These crimes bring on the punishment of desolation, hissing, and reproach (Micah 6:16).

Notwithstanding the crime and the punishment, God would show his people how to be just and also how to be merciful. Perhaps it is at this point where the name of the prophet Micah figures in his message: "Who is like Jehovah?"—for greatness and mercy and compassion? In the end he will fulfill all the Abrahamic covenants, he will bestow all the promised blessings upon Israel. Micah concluded: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old" (Micah 7:18-20).

Nahum

Overview[10]

Nahum was a prophet of the kingdom of Judah who prophesied late in the seventh century B.C., perhaps shortly before the fall of Nineveh in 612.

Written after 663 (destruction of Thebes) and before 612 (destruction of Nineveh)

The text does not set the book in any particular period in monarchic Judah. From the perspective of the intended readership, the only restriction was that Nahum must have lived before the destruction of the

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[9] Many of the predictions of such ancient prophets of Israel as Micah, Isaiah, and others have multiple fulfillment or multiple adaptation. Prophetic utterances are sometimes used in different contexts in different dispensations. Micah's words about the remnant of Israel could very well apply both to antiquity and to futurity. For further discussion of the context of Micah's words in the Book of Mormon, see Joseph F. McConkie, "The Final Gathering to Christ," in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Eight: Alma 30 to Moroni,* ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988), pp. 185-87.

[10] Much of this overview comes from Kelly Ogden, "The Book of Nahum," *Studies in Scripture*, Vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi, Deseret Book, (ed. Kent Jackson), 2004.

city, because prophetic characters in a prophetic book are supposed to prophesy about what will be, not what has already happened. The date of the composition of the book is another matter. Some scholars argue that the vivid description of the destruction of Nineveh (612 BCE) indicates that the author of the book must have written it (or a portion of it) soon after the events; others disagree. The reference to the conquest and sack of the Egyptian capital of Thebes (No-amon) as a past event in Nahum 3.8 indicates that the book was composed later than this event (663). The question of how much later remains open.[11]

The book of Nahum may not appear to be very inspirational or uplifting. Its three brief chapters present a harsh description of the destruction of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. Its tone is accusing and vengeful, seemingly bereft of ethical and theological empathy. **Nahum's words almost burn with anxiety to see judgments poured out on the barbarous Assyrians**.

It is so important for us to remember the context of Nahum's words. Understanding the depravity of the Assyrians is vital to see how these people were in the fulness of iniquity. The Prophet Joseph Smith has given us this advice when approaching scriptural texts, "I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?"[12]

Jonah and Nahum have something in common. Both were called to pronounce a burden, or message of doom, on Nineveh, to lift the warning voice to those children of Heavenly Father. **The brutality and violence of the Assyrian warlords was widely known and widely deprecated**. They were famous for atrocities committed upon conquered peoples, such as forcing prisoners to parade through the streets with freshly decapitated heads around their necks, or, as depicted on the Lachish siege panels[13] from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, capturing and impaling prisoners on sharpened poles.[14]

Jonah at first wanted nothing to do with the assignment to preach repentance to such people. He was bitter toward Israel's enemy and was reticent about the thought of giving them opportunity to repent and be spared (see Jonah 1.1-3; 4.1-3). We do not know about Nahum's personal attitude toward the Assyrians, but it seems to be intentional that his prophecy does not fit the usual pattern of doom

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[11] *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1219.

[12] Joseph Smith, *HC*, 5:261; *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 276.

[13] Sennacherib's wall panels are currently in the British Museum and can be see here and depict the 701 BCE siege of Lachish.

[14] James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament,* 3d ed. with Supplement, Princeton: Princeton University, 1969, pp. 276, 288, and 291.
These lines from Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.) are a further example of the **brutality of the conquering Assyrians**: "I built a pillar over against his city gate and ***I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted***, and I covered the pillar with their skin. Some I walled up within the pillar, ***some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes***, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar . . . And I cut the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled. . . . Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From *some I cut off their noses, their ears and their fingers, of many I put out their eyes*. I made one pillar of the living and another of heads, and I bound their heads to tree trunks round about the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire. Twenty men I captured alive and I immured them in the wall of his palace. . . . The rest of their warriors I consumed with thirst in the desert of the Euphrates." Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia,* University of Chicago Press, 1926, vol. 1, nos. 445, 455, and 472, emphasis added. Number 445 is on p. 146-147; 455 is located on p. 153; 472 on p. 161-162.

followed by hope. Nineveh would be destroyed forever. Unlike Israel and Judah, it would never enjoy a later restoration, so there was no hope to prophesy about in Nineveh's case (Nahum 1.9).

After the Assyrians' cruelties perpetrated on Israel and Judah during the decades prior to Nahum's ministry, the prophet was called to pronounce the Lord's condemnation on the Ninevites. The God of Israel and of all the earth was about to unleash his fury and vengeance on his adversaries (Nahum 1.2). The word of the Lord is always strong and harsh against wickedness. Nahum's high and polished poetry, his fiery figures and white-hot images, graphically depict the deserved destruction in the streets of Nineveh. The reader vividly conjures up the clashing chaos: the chariots raging in the streets, jostling one against another and running like lightning, the noise of whips, of rattling wheels, of prancing horses and jumping chariots, horsemen with bright swords and glittering spears; then numberless carcasses, no end of corpses, stumbling on corpses (Nahum 2.4; 3.2-3).

The destruction of Nineveh that Nahum envisioned was brought about by the combined forces of Babylon and Media in 612 B.C. The destroyers were the armies of Nebuchadnezzar's father, Nabopolassar.

The third chapter of Nahum addresses the question, Why was Nineveh's fate deserved? "Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts" (Nahum 3.4). The Lord asked, "Art thou better than populous No?" (Nahum 3.8). The Egyptian city called No, or No-Amon, or ancient Thebes—one of the greatest, most splendid cities of antiquity — was sacked by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C., a few decades before Nahum's vision of Nineveh's own fall. And what had the Assyrians done to Thebes? "Her young children also were dashed in pieces at the top of all the streets: and they cast lots for her honourable men, and all her great men were bound in chains" (Nahum 3:10). The message is unmistakable: Nineveh would suffer a similar fate.

One of the foremost messages of Nahum is a warning to all nations against strident militarism, seeking to conquer and get gain. Jesus later taught, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26.52). The message was clear to Assyria: "Behold, I am against thee, saith the Lord of hosts; and I will discover [i.e., uncover] thy skirts upon thy face, and I will shew the nations thy nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame. And I will cast abominable filth upon thee, and make thee vile, and will set thee as a gazingstock. And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee from thee, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her? . . . There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the [report] of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?" (Nahum 3.5-7, 19).

The vision of the destruction of Nineveh is another illustration of the Book of Mormon teaching that "the words of truth are hard against all uncleanness" (2 Ne. 9.40) and the word of God "speaketh harshly against sin" (2 Ne. 33.5).

Nahum's message, however, does not end there. It is clear from his writings that Nineveh is a type of things to come, just as Babylon and other cities were types (see Isa. 13-14; 1 Pet. 5:13; Rev. 14:8; 17; 18; D&C 1:16; 133:5, 7, 14). The Lord declared several times in modern scripture, "What I say unto one I say unto all" (D&C 61:18, 36; 93:49). The hard message of Nahum to Nineveh is a hard message to nations and peoples in all ages, particularly in these last days preceding the Second Coming (Nahum 1). As Rudyard Kipling pleaded poetically: "Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre!" "Lord

God of Hosts, be with us yet, lest we forget, lest we forget."[15] Nahum's three recorded chapters stand as a forceful warning to people everywhere to repent and walk in the path of the Lord — or suffer the vengeance of a just God.

Nahum 1

The Burden of Nineveh (Nahum 1.1).[16]

The Lord is slow to anger (Nahum 1.3).

He dries up the sea (Nahum 1.4).[17]

The mountains quake… the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence (Nahum 1.5). This indicates that the Lord has great power, enough to cause these things to occur (see verses 3-4).

There is one come out of thee, that imagineth evil against the Lord, a wicked counsellor (Nahum 1.11).[18]

Nahum 2: The Carnage in the Destruction of Nineveh

The shield of the mighty men is made red (Nahum 2.3). This probably refers to the destruction that Nineveh will soon face when Babylon takes their city.[19]

The fir trees are terribly shaken וְהַבְּרֹשִׁים הָרְעָלוּ (Nahum 2.3).[20]

The chariots rage in the streets (Nah. 2.4). Total chaos reigns in this war passage.

He shall recount his worthies (Nah. 2.5).[21]

They stumble… make haste… the palace shall be dissolved (Nah. 2.5-6).[22]

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[15] Kipling, "God of our Fathers, Known of Old," Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, no. 80.

[16] ***Unlike the other prophets, Nahum concentrates exclusively on the impending fate of Judah's enemy and includes no rebuke of his own people***. The focus on the imminent destruction of the capital city of Assyria would place these prophecies close to 616 B.C.E., when Nineveh was conquered by the Medes and the Babylonians. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 2, W.W. Norton & Co, 2019, p. 1321, emphasis added.

[17] There is a kind of *a fortiori* argument here: if God is so powerful that he can dry up the sea and wither Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon, He can surely overwhelm Assyria. Alter, p. 1321.

[18] מִמְּךָ יָצָא חֹשֵׁב עַל־יְהוָה רָעָה יֹעֵץ בְּלִיָּעַל The verse (Nahum 1.11) may be translated as follows: "From you has come forth a plotter of evil against the Lord, a lawless counselor." This counselor is identified as an Assyrian king, or as an "archetypal Assyrian king," and in the Jewish tradition in particular, as Sennacherib (see 2 Kings 18.13-19.37). Readers would associate the figure of this counselor with that of the leader of whatever group they are opposing. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1221.

[19] Several modern translations have understood this as the color of the shields and of the warrior's garments. But the first of these two Hebrew words means "reddened," not "red," and in light of the havoc of battle evoked in the next few lines, it makes far better sense to see this as a depiction of the fighters and their shields splattered with gore. Alter, p. 1324.

[20] וְהַבְּרֹשִׁים הָרְעָלוּ is translated by Alter (p. 1324) as "the cyprus shafts are poisoned," indicating that these shafts are spears.

[21] יִזְכֹּר אַדִּירָיו "He will remember his majestic chieftans" (my translation). Here the king of Nineveh is marshalling his warriors for battle.

[22] The bit may be translated: "He calls (or assigns) his mighty men (or commanders); they stumble as they go;

Huzzab shall be led away captive, she shall be brought up (Nah. 2.7).[23]

She is empty and void and waste… the faces of them all gather blackness (Nah. 2.10). The Jewish Study Bible renders this: "Desolation, devastation, and destruction! Spirits sink, knees buckle, all loins tremble, all faces turn ashen!"[24]

Nahum 3: The Pride and Fall of Nineveh

Woe to the bloody city! (Nah. 3.1).

Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts (Nah. 3.4).[25]

I will discover thy skirts upon thy face, and I will shew the nations thy nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame (Nah. 3.5).[26]

And I will cast abominable filth upon thee, and make thee vile, and will set thee as a gazingstock (Nah. 3.6).[27]

Are you better than No? (Nah. 3.8). This city (Thebes in Egypt) was conquered by the Assyrians in 663 BCE. The sack of Thebes was a momentous event that reverberated throughout the Ancient Near East.[28] Both Nahum (Nah. 3.8-10) and Isaiah referred to this event.[29]

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they hurry to her wall [Nineveh's wall], and the siege shelters [to protect the troops from the weaponry of the besieged) are set up." The language stresses the speed of the actions. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1222.

[23] The reference to Huzzab (הֻצַּב) is unclear. Given the reference to her maidservants, one may assume that the verse contains a reference to an Assyrian woman of high status, either metaphorically or not. The Targum, Rashi, and other medieval interpreters understood the term as "queen." *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1222. Robert Alter gives this explanation of וְהֻצַּב גֻּלְתָּה הָעֲלְתָה ("And Huzzab shall be led away captive, she shall be brought up" KJV) here: "**The Masoretic Text is not coherent here**. It begins with a masculine verb, *wehutsav,* "and it was stationed, set up," followed by two feminine verbs. This translation is based on a frequently proposed emendation, but without great confidence, and there are no ancient versions that reflect it." Alter, p. 1324.

[24] The English reflects the striking alliteration of the Hebrew: בּוּקָה וּמְבוּקָה וּמְבֻלָּקָה "*bukah umevukah umevulakah*." *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1222.

[25] The association of a female metaphor for the city with the negative, female imagery of harlotries and sorcery is obvious. Such metaphors were common in the societies in which biblical texts were written and first read, though problematic to many readers today. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1223.

[26] The condign punishment for the promiscuous woman is to publicly expose her sexual parts. This is a recurrent trope in the Prophets. Compare, for example, Ezekiel 16:37. Alter, p. 1326.

[27] The whoring Nineveh is first shamefully exposed and then has filth piled on her.

[28] The Rassam cylinder of Ashurbanipal (located in the British Museum) reads: "***This city, the whole of it, I conquered it with the help of Ashur and Ishtar***. Silver, gold, precious stones, all the wealth of the palace, rich cloth, precious linen, great horses, supervising men and women, two obelisks of splendid electrum, weighing 2,500 talents, the doors of temples I tore from their bases and carried them off to Assyria. ***With this weighty booty I left Thebes***. Against Egypt and Kush I have lifted my spear and shown my power. With full hands I have returned to Nineveh, in good health." This cylinder chronicles the exploits of Ashurbanipal of Nineveh, last of the great Assyrian kings (he reigned from 668-627).

[29] We read in Isaiah: Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt's shame. Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be dismayed and put to shame (Isaiah 20.3-5).

There is no healing of thy bruise; they wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit (report) of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually? (Nah. 3.19).[30]

Habakkuk

Overview[31]

Habakkuk was a Judahite prophet who lived during the time when Jeremiah, Lehi, Nahum, Zephaniah, and other prophets taught in Jerusalem (see 1 Ne. 1:4). Habakkuk questioned the Lord about the decadence of his people and the power which the wicked seemed to have over the righteous (Hab. 1:1-4). He was also concerned about the ominous Babylonian (also called Chaldean) threat which the people of Judah were experiencing, and he was even more worried about the promised destruction of his country by Babylon. Very little is known about his life and background, although scholars are united in dating his pronouncements around 600 B.C.[32]

The three brief chapters of Habakkuk are easily outlined as follows: the first dialogue between Habakkuk and the Lord (Hab. 1:1-11), the second dialogue (Hab. 1:12-2:5), a taunt song against Babylon (Hab. 2:6-20), and a prayer-psalm (Hab. 3:1-19).

The First Dialogue between Habakkuk and the Lord (Hab. 1:1-11)

The book of Habakkuk in the King James Translation begins on a heavy note by describing the writings of Habakkuk as a "burden" which he saw (Hab. 1:1). The Hebrew word translated "burden," *massa'*, is commonly rendered as "oracle." Usually the word refers to prophecies of doom. Thus the book of Habakkuk contains the ominous prophecy or revelation that the prophet saw and which was later recorded.

Reflecting on conditions around 605 B.C., the prophet began with some weighty concerns as he asked the Lord why He had not responded to his outcries against the wickedness surrounding him. The people of Judah had not internalized the religious reforms of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Instead, they were quickly reverting to the evil practices fostered by King Manasseh (687-642 B.C.), including idolatry, rampant immorality, human sacrifice, and social corruption (see 2 Kgs. 21:1-15; 23:26-27). Habakkuk had witnessed many acts of violence and injustice, and although he had petitioned the Lord concerning them, the wicked were overpowering the righteous, and evil seemed to be prevailing. He asked if the Lord were going to do anything about the deteriorating situation.[33]

Starting in Habakkuk 1:5, the Lord answered Habakkuk's question, telling the prophet to expect the unusual, something unbelievable, as a response to his prayers for justice. The unbelievable is that the

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[30] On clapping hands for joy, cf. Ps. 47.2. Everyone has suffered because of Assyria and now rejoices in its permanent fall. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1224.

[31] Much of this overview comes from Victor Ludlow, "The Book of Habakkuk" *Studies in Scripture*, Vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi, Deseret Book, (ed. Kent Jackson), 2004.

[32] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, Eerdmans, 1990, pp. 34-38.

[33] This concern for why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer is frequently found in the Old Testament. An appeal to God for an explanation of his apparent injustice or indifference is expressed more fully in Job, and the question is also raised by Habakkuk's contemporary prophet, Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 12). It is also addressed at various times in Psalms, as various psalmists wondered why the wicked prevailed and the Lord did not seem to respond (see Psalm 13; 73-74; 79; 89:46-52; 94).

Lord would raise up the Chaldean horde from Babylon to deliver justice upon the wicked citizens of Judah. Instead of calming Habakkuk's fears, however, the Lord's message generated even more anxiety as he described the awesome power and speed of the Chaldean forces. They are "terrible and dreadful," as described in Habakkuk 1:7-10. This Babylonian judgment would be much more disastrous than ever expected. Habakkuk's Judahite audience may have wondered how any people could stand up to the Chaldean juggernaut. But the Lord revealed a fatal flaw in the Babylonian attitude in verse 11. As this conqueror marched swiftly on, he offended the Lord either by giving credit for his conquests to his strange, foreign, idol god (KJV) or by relying so much on his own power that his own might and strength became his god (NIV; RSV). 3 The independent power and arrogance of the Babylonians is suggested in verse 7, as they "proceed of themselves," without any divine help or power. By verse 11 it is clear that they had taken too much credit for themselves and in their misplaced pride had become guilty. The implication is that the Lord, and not any nation, would bring about Babylon's downfall.

The Second Dialogue between Habakkuk and the Lord (Hab. 1:12-25)

Habakkuk protested that an everlasting, holy God would not allow the wicked Babylonians to gain power over God's own people, unrighteous as they might be. After all, Habakkuk complained, how could the wicked heathens prevail over those who are more righteous? Habakkuk asserted that even the wicked Judahites were better than the Chaldeans. He reminded the Lord, You are pure and they are evil, so why do they have power over the more righteous? (see Hab. 1:13).[34]

There are some reasons why this condition may have existed. In absolute terms, the Babylonians were likely more wicked than the Israelites. Yet God also measures wickedness in relative terms, according to the level of light and truth that a people have. Thus, lesser sins by Israelites, who should have known better because of their rich prophetic and scriptural background, would bring greater condemnation than the gross wickedness of a people who lacked the revealed light.[35] The real question was not as much an evaluation of the external moral behavior of a people as a measurement of how large the gap was between public behavior and private accountability. That is, God is able to judge the difference between one's actions and one's knowledge and understanding of right and wrong.

Another possible explanation is that God can choose whatever resource he wants as an instrument of judgment upon his wicked children, much as he allowed the more wicked Lamanites to chasten and punish the somewhat rebellious but more accountable Nephites at one point in Book of Mormon history (2 Ne. 5:19-25). **Habakkuk 1 is very similar to Isaiah 10, in which the Assyrians, who are first called the instrument of the Lord's anger, are later spoken of in terms of chastisement and judgment** (Isa. 10:5-

[34] The text assumes a readership (and authorship) that was aware that Babylonia was the main power in the area at some point. For readerships that were also aware of the fall of the Babylonian (or Chaldean) empire-as any Persian period readership would be-the book is not so much about why justice does not emerge, but is rather about living under injustice. How do readers relate the known attributes of the Lord to an international system in which the dominant imperial power "slays nations without pity," or "seizes homes not their own" and which surely does not place its trust in the Lord? How is a pious person supposed to deal with this situation? **From the perspective of such readers the fact that Babylonia has already fallen makes a prominent contribution to the persuasive power of the book and its message**. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1226, emphasis added.

[35] For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation. (D&C 82.3)

20). Vengeance is the Lord's, and although the Babylonians would have temporary power over Judah, eventually the Babylonians would receive retribution for their own wickedness.

Habakkuk continued his questioning complaint as the picture of the marauding power resumed (Hab. 1:14-17). With hooks and nets the enemy would harvest his prey and rejoice over his conquests. Echoing the Lord's comments in verse 11, the prophet also mentioned their misplaced pride, telling how the Chaldeans sacrificed to their nets and offered incense to their dragnets, as though these things were the source of their power. Regardless, their power seemed unending, and Habakkuk asked how long they would continue to mercilessly slay the nations (Hab. 1:16-17).

Finally, in a mood of desperation and resignation similar to that of Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:1-14), Job (Job 31), and Mormon (Morm. 3:9-16), Habakkuk stepped aside, retreated to his watchtower, and awaited the Lord's response. Like Abraham (Gen. 18:32), Habakkuk had pushed the Lord as far as he dared and sensed that he might even have gone too far. So he now waited for the Lord's answer or reproval (Hab. 2:1).

The marvelous pronouncement Habakkuk received is of such importance that he was commanded to write it succinctly and plainly on tablets in large enough letters that even a runner could see and read it without stopping (Hab. 2:2). The Lord's response was that Habakkuk should be patient, because the Chaldeans would eventually meet their own doom. The righteous, in contrast, would be preserved by their "faith."[36] The promise that "the just shall live by his faith" was probed by Paul in his New Testament epistles (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) and was amplified in Hebrews 10:36-38, in which the principle of national deliverance for a righteous people was applied to spiritual salvation for the faithful. This phrase of the just living by faith later became a rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation.

The Lord continued characterizing Babylon's arrogance, which was comparable to death, hell, and its legions (Hab. 2:5). He explained that Babylon's tyranny would lead to self-destruction, portrayed in a taunt song containing five "woe oracles." These five divine judgments could apply to all wicked people and societies.

A Taunt Song against Babylon (Hab. 2:6-20)

The taunt song comprises two parts, each of ten Hebrew lines (Hab. 2:6-14, 15-20). Both conclude with a significant, positive theological statement (Hab. 2:14, 20). Three "woes" are in the first part, and two are in the second. Together, the five oracles provide a picture of how the wicked would bring about their own demise.

First, Babylon's oppression and selfishness would breed selfishness and insurrection from her subjects (Hab. 2:6b—8; cf. Isa. 5:8-22; Esth. 5:9). Second, greed and loftiness would be no security, because the inner core and foundation of their society were corrupt (Hab. 2:9-11; cf. Isa. 14:13-15; Prov. 8:36). Third, cruelty begets cruelty, and the wicked would ultimately destroy themselves until only those recognizing the Lord's glory would remain on the earth (Hab. 2:12-14; cf. Micah 3:10-12; Isa. 11:9). Fourth, those who seek to degrade others would bring about their own degradation (Hab. 2:15-17; cf. Nahum 3:5; D&C 109:29). And finally, idols and false gods would be worthless, whereas the living God would rule the earth from his holy temple (Hab. 2:18-20; cf. Isa. 44:9-20). The song ends with the same counsel that is

[36] More accurately, "faithfulness." The New Testament references change the emphasis from the intent of the Hebrew word—"faithfulness," "firmness," "steadfastness."

recorded in Habakkuk 2:3: Wait patiently and silently and you will see what the Lord is going to do (see Ps. 46:10; Zech. 2:13).

The Prayer-Psalm of Habakkuk (Hab. 3:1-19)

Perhaps relieved that he had not been chastised by the Lord and grateful that God would vindicate the righteous, Habakkuk composed a prayer-psalm of praise to God for his glory and might. It comes complete with musical instructions (Hab. 3:1, 19) and functions as a hymn.

Other ancient and modern prophets have also composed psalms or hymns. The Old Testament contains examples attributed to Moses (Deut. 32; Ps. 90), Isaiah (Isa. 42; 49; 50; 53), and Jeremiah (Lam. 1-5). The contemporary Latter-day Saint hymnbook contains inspirational words from a variety of modern General Authorities. Many of God's servants have used music or verse as a means of expression.

Habakkuk's psalm is a hymn of praise to God for his deliverance of his people in times of oppression. The prophet recounted the redemptive acts of the Exodus as an example of the Lord's power for future deliverance. In the context of his questions and dialogue with the Lord about the problem of suffering, this psalm expresses Habakkuk's trust in God during a time of anxiety. The psalm is easily divided into four segments:

1. Introduction (Hab. 3:1-2). In memorable words, the prophet appealed to the Lord to renew his awesome work of salvation and mercy for his people.

2. The divine manifestation (or theophany) in the past (Hab. 3:3-7). In ancient times, God came out of the southern desert to deliver his people (cf. Deut. 33:2; Judg. 5:4-5).

3. The conflict between God and the forces of the earth (Hab. 3:8-15). God comes to defeat his enemies and the foes of his people, represented by the elements, especially the waters. The purpose of the storm is to subdue the earth, overthrow the enemy, and rescue God's people.

4. An affirmation of faith in the Lord (Hab. 3:16-19). The prophet's fear changed to faith, and he knew he would experience joy despite the adversity he was facing. Verses 17 through 19 are memorable phrases, expressing joy in God's salvation and confidence in his strength.

The book of Habakkuk raises a universal question of humankind: Why do the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer? Our response should include the realization of two things: first, the wicked sow seeds of self-destruction with their prideful behavior, and second, God's deliverance in past times brings faith in his future salvation. As Habakkuk delivered a magnificent expression of the victory of faith over the unrighteous aggression of evil, he presented this issue in a compact, poetic message that finds relevance in our modern society.[37]

Habakkuk 1

Why do the bad guys get ahead?

[37] See Ralph L. Smith, *Micah—Malachi,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32, Word Books, 1984, pp. 91-117. For historical background on Habakkuk's day, see John Bright, *A History of Israel,* 3d ed., Westminster, 1981, pp. 310-30.

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he? (Hab. 1.13).[38]

Habakkuk 3

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet upon Shigionoth (Hab. 3.1).[39]

God came from Teman: Habakkuk 3.3

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran אֱלוֹהַ מִתֵּימָן יָבוֹא וְקָדוֹשׁ מֵהַר־פָּארָן (Hab. 3.3).[40]

Frank Moore Cross has analyzed the earliest texts in the Hebrew Bible and made connections between them. In these he has found that there is a motif of the storm god marching from the south throughout these texts and that Habakkuk 3.3 sits squarely in the tradition of these early texts. He explains that "Exodus 15.1-18 treats both Exodus and Conquest; Deuteronomy 33.1-3, 26-29; Judges 5.4-5; Psalms 68.8-9; and Habakkuk 3.3-7, ***all describe the Divine Warrior marching in conquest from the Southland***. In these poems one finds the language of **the theophany of the Divine Warrior** utilizing mythical elements from the theophany of the stormgod as warrior."[41]

Theodore Lewis examines the origins of Yahweh from the oldest texts that we have.[42] He admits that "95 percent of our information is missing,"[43] but works to paint a picture of the earliest revelations of Yahweh coming from the south, near where Moses had his first experiences with Yahweh. An inscription from Kuntillet ʿAjrud Pithos B mentioning "[Ya]hweh of Teman and his asherah" (*lyhwh tmn wlʾšrth*) has been discovered.[44]

After his analysis of the texts at our disposal, Lewis concludes that "The best conclusion with regard to the origin of the deity Yahweh would be one that is appropriately agnostic and yet adventurous enough to articulate which data and which scenarios are more likely to be on the right path. It should be

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[38] As stated previously by Dr. Ludlow, this is a fundamental question of the Hebrew Bible. See: Alma 14.8-11; Jeremiah 12; Psalm 13; 73-74; 79; 89:46-52; 94. See also Paulsen, Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil.

[39] This is actually a psalm, celebrating the power of YHWH as a warrior god. **It looks very much like an editorial coda attached to Habakkuk's prophecies, perhaps because whoever assembled the text felt that these brief poems needed a kind of rounding out**. **Some of the references are mythological and archaic**, leading one to suspect this could be a much older poem. At several points the text looks badly scrambled, either because a scribe did not understand all of its archaic language or he tried to alter its mythological content. **The identity of the Shigyonot is unknown**. As is often the case in the Book of Psalms, ***the identity of this musical instrument is not known, although the verbal stem could suggest a rhapsodic or elevated state***. Alter, p. 1337.

[40] In this theophany, the Lord is coming from the south: Both Ternan and Mount Paran (v. 3) are in the south from a Judahite perspective (cf. Deut. 33.2; Judg. 5.4).

[41] Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 86.

[42] Theodore Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion through the Lens of Divinity*, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 209-674. Much of Lewis' work focuses on Yahweh, with the first couple hundred pages focusing on the god El.

[43] Lewis, p. 283.

[44] Theodore Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion through the Lens of Divinity*, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 240 electronic version.

appropriately humble given our cultural and historical distance from Iron Age Israel, and it should also be appropriately complex, taking into account the complicated nature of our data. Agnosticism comes easily. ***We simply do not know the historical origin of the deity Yahweh***."[45]

Horns coming out of his hand: Habakkuk 3.4

וְנֹגַהּ כָּאוֹר תִּהְיֶה קַרְנַיִם מִיָּדוֹ לוֹ וְשָׁם חֶבְיוֹן עֻזּוֹ "And his brightness was as the light; he had **horns**[46] coming out of his hand: and there was the hiding of his power" (Hab. 3.4, KJV). This can also be translated as "And a brilliant light which gives off rays on every side – therein his glory is enveloped."[47]

This passage represents God's glory, קַרְנַיִם as great light projecting from a place where he has the ability to cover or envelop it at any moment. This image of God fits into the stories told of God showing his power to the Children of Israel as they came from the south and proceeded to the Promised Land. We see this in Hab. 3.15 "Thou didst walk through the sea… through the heap of great waters," and Hab. 3.8 "Are you wroth, O Lord, with *Neharim*/the rivers?"[48] These verses tie into the ancient story of Yahweh's delivering Israel from their enemies.

Deber and Resheph: Habakkuk 3.5

לְפָנָיו יֵלֶךְ דָּבֶר וְיֵצֵא רֶשֶׁף לְרַגְלָיו "Before him went Deber and Resheph went at his feet" (Hab. 3.5 my translation).

Many bible translations have a tendency to mask the polytheistic nature of Israel's commitment to Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures. Throughout the Old Testament, clues exist to demonstrate the monolatrous nature of the authors of these texts. This is due to the fact that the authors of these texts lived in an environment that acknowledged the existence of other gods and divine beings. I like to say that scripture comes in its very own cultural packaging. These prophets, priests, poets, and scribes that assembled these texts that we call "The Bible" lived in a world that acknowledged other divine beings as naturally as 21st century writers talk about things we are familiar with. Over time many of these authors, while acknowledging other divine beings, came to view Yahweh or Jehovah as the head god of a pantheon of gods, and eventually became monotheists, or believers in a one true God.[49]

These changes didn't happen instantly, and there is disagreement as to when these changes occurred. But if we read the texts of the Old Testament with an eye open to these divergent views, we will see the Bible for what it really is: an ancient document that reflected the varying views of the authors as they worked to express their experience with the divine. There are some examples of these other gods of the

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[45] Lewis, p. 282, emphasis added.

[46] קֶרֶן qeren, translated as "horn" at times, can also be word denoting strength, a flask of oil, or something projecting outward, like light. See Brown-Driver-Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon, Hendrickson, 2020, p. 901-902. In this rendering of *qeren*, the authors translated this as lightning flashes that Jehovah has coming from his presence.

[47] *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1231. Robert Alter (p. 1337) renders it "And the radiance is like light. Beams from his hand he has, and there his might is hidden."

[48] נְהָרִים *Neharim*, or "Floods" or "rivers." Neharim is another West-Semitic mythological figure (Reshef in v. 6) and so is Yam, "Sea" or "sea." *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1232.

[49] Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. With a foreword by Patrick D. Miller. 2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans; Dearborn, Mich.: Dove, 2002.

Ancient Near East that remained in the text of the Hebrew Bible, that were incorporated into the council of God, or members of the entourage of Jehovah.

Habbakuk 3 offers an interesting example of this, describing a scene in which Yahweh decides to engage in conflict with the waters of chaos.

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. (Selah.)
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand,
where his power lay hidden.
Before him went Deber,
and Resheph followed close behind.[50]

(Habakkuk 3:3-5)

What do we make of this? Deber and Resheph are gods of the Ancient Near East that are put into the retinue of God in these verses for reasons known to the author.[51] Some posit that they took these other gods and made them into characteristics of their deity Yahweh. Others saw them as angels of destruction.[52] Others saw this passage reflecting the henotheistic world in which Habakkuk lived, a place where other gods were acknowledged, only in a lesser light. In this view, Habakkuk portrays these gods in Yahweh's retinue as his subordinates.[53]

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[50] Translation taken from John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, p. 199. See also John J. McDermott, *What are they saying about the formation of Israel?* p. 24. McDermott writes: More specifically, the god Resheph accompanies Yahweh. Although English translations usually treat the word in a naturalistic way (plague), it may originally have been a reference to the same Canaanite god who is sometimes associated with Baal.

[51] For more information on Resheph, see Day: Resheph – God of War, Pestilence, and the Underworld in the Hebrew Bible.

[52] This is the position of Berlin and Brettler. See: *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1231. They explain: Pestilence, some translate "plague" or " Plague" since it is personified. The personification contributes to the mythological atmosphere of this passage. The Targum identifies "Plague" with the angel of death. Plague, some translate "Fever" (Heb "*reshef*"), a West-Semitic mythological figure.

[53] Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 2001, p. 149. See also: Maciej Münnich, *The God Resheph in the Ancient Near East*, Mohr Siebeck, 2013 p. 218. Münnich writes: We are dealing with a typical henotheistic picture in which besides the primary god there are lesser, subordinate deities. "Pestilence" is here only a personified disease while Resheph remains a deity, like the pantheons of the other West Semites. In the case of Hab. 3:5 both beings serve to stress the menacing, destructive power of Israel's God. They can be – as found in literature – described as demons. This character is perfectly visible in the ancient translations of the biblical text. Jerome translated the name of Resheph directly as *diabolus*, which explicitly shows that he saw in reseph the name of the pagan deity/demon. However, this gives a fairly surprising whole: a devil proceeds in Yahweh's retinue! We do not know how the creator of the Vulgate reconciled that picture with his faith but undoubtedly, it was a problem for the authors of the LXX, for whom the personified perception of Resheph, clearly contradictory to the final monotheistic phase of the development of the religion in ancient Israel, could not be accepted. Consequently, the Greek version omits the name of Resheph, and additionally, instead of "pestilence" (deber) it has "word" (dabar), with the result that in the translation we have:

The Jews used the gods that were in their culture to express their belief and understanding of the divine realm in a way not unlike their neighbors. They put their sacred texts together the way that they knew how, in their own cultural packaging. That is how God has allowed mankind to experience spiritual things, according to the language and culture that they understand. God speaks to man "according to his (mankind's) language" (D&C 1:24). This is how God "deals" with the children of men. Those who misunderstand this may have a tendency to complain, to say that the text is too human and not enough divine. Like Laman and Lemuel, they may "murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them" (1 Nephi 2:12).

All this being said, it is also important to note that Habakkuk 3.5 has variants. The discussion of these variants is well beyond the scope of this podcast. However, they are worthy of discussion and help serious students of the Hebrew Bible to appreciate the complexity of these ideas and their transmission.[54]

Yahweh as Storm God and Victory over the Enemies of Israel

Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck (Hab. 3.13).

Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses, through the heap of great waters (Hab. 3.15).

The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments (Hab. 3.19).[55]

Zephaniah

An Outline[56]

There are several possible ways to outline the book of Zephaniah, each pointing to a particular but partial reading that emphasizes certain aspects of the book and de-emphasizes others. These partial

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Logos strides before Yahweh. Certainly, we are not dealing here with a mistake to read the Hebrew text but with a conscious intervention to correct the text. The aim of this correction was most probably to demythologise the text, which could result in a theologically correct monotheistic version. The Greek version certainly reads differently than the Hebrew here: πρὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ πορεύσεται λόγος καὶ ἐξελεύσεται **ἐν πεδίλοις οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ** "Before his face the LOGOS will go, **with sandals on his feet**" (my translation). The Greek translators certainly changed דֶּבֶר (destruction, plague)to דָּבָר (speech, word, thing, utterance), and completely removed רֶשֶׁף resheph from the verse.

[54] For a discussion of the variants of Habakkuk 3.5, see: Obadyah, Habaqquq 3:5 in the Septuagint: Translator as Textual Critic, Accessed 11.1.22. Obadyah notes, "The Masoretic Text (MT) of Habakkuk 3 is notoriously difficult. Andersen notes that "Habakkuk 3 must surely be the more rewritten chapter in the Hebrew Bible. Almost every word has been found unacceptable, touched up, replaced, or given a more appropriate meaning." See: Francis Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 25, New York, Doubleday, 2001.

[55] The language here is close to Psalms 18:34, which is a victory psalm. It seems that the celebration of YHWH as warrior god has slid into the proclamation of a human victor who praises God for giving him strength on the battlefield. Alter, p. 1340.

[56] This outline is provided by Ehud Ben Zvi, *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1235.

readings inform each other, and all together create a meaning much richer than any of them separately. This is a common situation in prophetic books.

The following is one of these possible outlines:

1. Announcement of doom (1.2-9)
2. Description of doom (1.10-18)
3. The last chance to repent (2.1-4)
4. Against the nations and their gods (2.5-15)
5. Against the overbearing city (3.1-13)
6. Joy to Jerusalem (3.14-20)

Overview[57]

His writings relegated to the back of the Old Testament, it seems strangely appropriate that Zephaniah's name should be interpreted "The Lord has hidden."[58] Yet the first commentary on any book of the Bible written by an LDS Church leader was Oliver Cowdery's treatise on the book of Zephaniah in 1834.[59] The reason behind Elder Cowdery's fascination with this small book is clear. ***From the early years of the Restoration, modern prophets have seen in the visions of Zephaniah a vivid picture of the last days***.

Very little is known about Zephaniah the man. The only solid information about him is in the superscription that opens his book (Zeph. 1:1). He is described as "the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hizkiah," or, as this last name is more commonly rendered in English, Hezekiah (Zeph. 1:1). On the basis of this genealogy, it has been proposed that Zephaniah was a descendant of King Hezekiah of Judah (715-687 B.C.), a suggestion that remains a matter of conjecture. Noting the lack of detail regarding Zephaniah's personal background, one scholar has observed: "His own person apparently played no role; the message was the totally dominating feature."[60]

Beyond the names of Zephaniah's ancestors, the only biographical datum provided by the superscription is the statement that the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah "in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah." The reign of Josiah is typically assigned to the years 640 to 609 B.C. Internal clues in the book of Zephaniah suggest that the prophet's ministry may have taken place during the first half of Josiah's reign. Arguing from that evidence, "it seems reasonable to conclude that the prophet Zephaniah preached in Jerusalem in the years between 635 and 625 B.C."[61]

The Day of the Lord

The book of Zephaniah is a prophecy of divine judgment and redemption, expressed in powerful images. Acknowledging that Zephaniah may not rank with Isaiah or even Hosea in his skill as a poet, one scholar has explained: "He had an imperative message to deliver and proceeded in the most direct and forceful way to discharge his responsibility. What he lacked in grace and charm, he in some measure atoned for by the vigour and clarity of his speech. He realised the approaching terror so keenly that he was able to

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[57] Much of this overview comes from Rulon Eames, "The Book of Zephaniah," *Studies in Scripture*, Vol. 4: 1 Kings to Malachi, Deseret Book, (ed. Kent Jackson), 2004, emphasis added.
[58] See Maria Eszenyei Szeles, *Wrath and Mercy: Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 62.
[59] *Evening and Morning Star,* Feb. 1834, pp. 132-33; Mar. 1834, pp. 140-42; Apr. 1834, pp. 148-49.
[60] Arvid S. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah*, Oslo, Norway: Universitetsvorlaget, 1975, p. 46.
[61] Kapelrud, p. 42.

present it vividly and convincingly to his hearers. No prophet has made the picture of the day of Yahweh more real."[62]

Careful analysis of Zephaniah reveals an underlying structure that highlights the mercy and redemptive power of Jehovah. This effect is achieved through a thematic progression from scenes of total annihilation at the beginning of the book, to scenes of triumphant salvation in the closing verses. **As in the writings of other Old Testament prophets, the prophecies of doom precede those of salvation and restoration.** The contrast between Jehovah's fierce justice and his ultimate and enduring mercy is further emphasized by the direct juxtaposition of a prophecy of global judgment and an oracle of redemption in the book's final chapter (Zeph. 3:8-20).

Zephaniah's major theme was the day of the Lord, a term used in the scriptures for the time when the Lord will recompense all according to what they deserve.[63] For Zephaniah's unrepentant nation, the kingdom of Judah, the day of the Lord came when the Babylonians destroyed their cities and took their people into forced exile. These events took place within a few decades of Zephaniah's warnings. For the world as a whole there will be a similar day of reckoning, on a global scale, when wickedness will be cleansed from the earth at Christ's second coming. For the faithful it will be a great day of blessing and mercy. For the unrepentant it will be a dreadful day of judgment and sorrow. In Zephaniah's writings, the earlier day of the Lord's recompense is used as a type to foreshadow the latter-day judgment on all the earth. Although the day of the Lord will end in redemption, it must commence with judgment. The first chapter of Zephaniah presents a panorama of violent and unrelenting destruction that would be poured out upon the entire human and animal creation and particularly upon the treacherous inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. The language employed by the prophet seems deliberately evocative of the wording of the Flood narrative (Zeph. 1:2-3; cf. Gen. 6:17; 7:21-23). The result is a reversal of the Creation; the earth returns to the primordial chaotic darkness that prevailed "in the beginning" (Zeph. 1:15; cf. Gen. 1:2; Jer. 4:23-28).[64]

Ambiguity and Wordplay

The book uses wordplay and potential or actual ambiguities that channel the attention of the readers and contribute to the possibility of multiple readings. These features are typical in prophetic books because they facilitate the continuous reading and study of these texts.[65]

The opening chapter also contains the Lord's indictment against the kingdom of Judah. The catalog of trespasses includes idol and astral worship (Zeph. 1:4-5; cf. 2 Kgs. 21:1-7, 19-21), spiritual cynicism and indifference toward religious duties (Zeph. 1:6, 12), adoption of foreign fashions and superstitions (Zeph. 1:8-9), and the acquisition of wealth through "violence and deceit" (Zeph. 1:9). These odious practices provoked the Lord to declare a holy war against his own people.[66] The graphic imagery of divine warfare against Judah gives way to a picture of universal desolation as the whole earth is "devoured by the fire

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[62] John M. P. Smith, William H. Ward, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Joel*, The International Critical Commentary, New York: Scribner's, 1911, p. 176.
[63] E. A. Leslie, "Zephaniah," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., ed. G. A. Buttrick, et al., Nashville: Abingdon, 1962, 4:952.
[64] Paul R. House, *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*, Sheffield: Almond, 1988, p. 75.
[65] *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1234.
[66] Ralph L. Smith, *Micah—Malachi,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32, Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984, p. 132.

of his jealousy" (Zeph. 1:10-18). Thus the very real and imminent destruction of Judah would prefigure the universal destruction in the last days.

The book's second chapter begins on a hopeful note as the prophet pleads with Judah to seek the Lord. Still, Zephaniah cannot ensure the safety of even the penitent. One scholar has pointedly observed: "The word 'perhaps' [Zeph. 2:3; "it may be," KJV] speaks volumes. The prophet would not presume on the prerogative of Yahweh to determine who would or would not be hidden. Zephaniah, like Amos (cf. Zeph. 3:15), knew that not even righteousness nor humility could guarantee a person's safety. That was all in the hand of Yahweh."[67]

All the writing prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries, except Hosea, pronounced oracles against foreign nations. Thus, in the second chapter of Zephaniah the anger of Jehovah shifts from Judah to her traditional enemies at each of the points of the compass: Philistines to the west, Moab and Ammon on the east, Egypt on the south (the reference to Ethiopians seems to be a taunt based on Ethiopian domination of Egypt), and Assyria on the north (Zeph. 2:4-15). The same punishments that would bring destruction to Philistia, Moab, and Ammon would yield blessings of wealth and prosperity for Judah, for "the residue of my people shall spoil them, and the remnant of my people shall possess them" (Zeph. 2:5-10).

Jehovah's wrath is focused on Jerusalem once again in the final chapter (Zeph. 3:1-7). Those whom the prophet condemned were the leaders of Judahite society: the rulers (Zeph. 3:3), the false prophets, and the priests (Zeph. 3:4). It hardly seems coincidental that the prophet's denunciation of high-level wickedness and corruption in Jerusalem comes immediately after his attack on Nineveh, capital of the arrogant and tyrannical Assyrian empire (Zeph. 2:13-15). Jerusalem is no better than Nineveh. In fact, because Jerusalem was the repository of Jehovah's law, her crimes were far worse than those of pagan Nineveh. Of the once holy city of Jerusalem he said: "Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city! She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the Lord; she drew not near to her God. . . . I said, surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction . . . but they rose early and corrupted all their doings" (Zeph. 3:1-2, 7). Consequently, the wicked in Judah would be consumed just as would the transgressors from every nation. Jehovah would assemble all of them for destruction, "for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy" (Zeph. 3:8).

With the next verse (Zeph. 3:9), the prophetic tone is dramatically transformed. The ensuing promises of Jehovah to the righteous are like rays of pure sunlight piercing the smoke of the global holocaust. The linguistic and spiritual confusion of Babel will be undone as all people worship Jehovah in a pure speech (Zeph. 3:9; cf. Gen. 11:6-9; Moses 6:6; Isa. 6:5-7). The Lord will reign in the midst of his people (Zeph. 3:15, 17), sorrow will turn to rejoicing (Zeph. 3:14, 18), and the shame of Israel's long dispersion will be swallowed up in anthems of praise—from "all people of earth" (Zeph. 3:19-20). As the third chapter closes, the transition from destruction to redemption is complete. The judgments of Jehovah must come upon the wicked in every nation; yet it is his exaltation of the righteous that will be the final and enduring reality.

Latter-day Judgments and Gathering

[67] Smith, p. 132.

From the time of Joseph Smith, modern prophets have seen in the visions of Zephaniah a multilayered view of the future with great significance for Latter-day Saints. Citing Zephaniah's declaration that "the great day of the Lord is near" (Zeph. 1:14), Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared: "He is speaking of our day. We live in the last days, when the day of the Lord is near."[68] Zephaniah described the day of the Lord as a "day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Zeph. 1:15). Elder Neal A. Maxwell applied this prophecy to the wickedness and resultant misery of the latter days, observing that the "coming decades will be times of despair."[69] Zephaniah saw the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in the larger context of the ultimate and climactic judgments that must precede the Second Coming. The fall of wicked cities and nations in Zephaniah's day portended the final collapse of Satan's kingdom at the end of the world. President Joseph Fielding Smith interpreted the visions of widespread devastation as a picture of the judgments that will precede the Savior's return.[70] In harmony with this view, Elder McConkie identified Zephaniah 1:14-18 and 3:8 as warnings of latter-day judgments in the form of "premillennial wars,"[71] and President Spencer W. Kimball cited Zephaniah 1:17-18 to illustrate the severity of God's impending vengeance.[72]

Another subject of great importance in the prophecy of Zephaniah is the gathering and restoration of disgraced and scattered Israel. While Zephaniah hinted that this gathering could commence prior to the great day of the Lord with its attendant devastation (Zeph. 2:1-3), he seemed to assign a major part of that gathering to the period after the Savior's return (Zeph. 3:15-20). The Lord's presence among his gathered Saints will be the cause of much happiness: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (Zeph. 3:17).

Although Zephaniah does not rank among the best-known books of the Old Testament, its message is one of tremendous importance for latter-day Israel. In three short chapters, Zephaniah depicted not only the judgments that would come upon Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. but also the latter-day redemption of Israel and the global turbulence that will herald Jehovah's return. Impressed by the clarity and the power of his vision of the future, modern seers have used the words of Zephaniah to support and amplify their own teachings concerning the coming day of the Lord. To all who long for that day, the book of Zephaniah is a priceless treasure.

Zephaniah 1: Destruction, A Day of Wrath

The Chemarim: Zeph. 1.4

> I will stretch out My arm against Judah
> And against all who dwell in Jerusalem;
> And I will wipe out from this place
> Every vestige of Baal,
> And the name of the Chemarim along with the priests (Zeph. 1.4).

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[68] Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man*, Deseret Book, 1982, p. 497.
[69] Neal A. Maxwell, in *Conference Report*, Oct. 1982, p. 96.
[70] Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 4 vols., sel. Bruce R. McConkie, Bookcraft, 1954-56, 3:19, 47.
[71] McConkie, pp. 497-98, 543.
[72] Spencer W. Kimball, in *Conference Report*, Oct. 1975, p. 8.

Who were the Chemarim?[73] **The Chem'arim are priests:** We read that Josiah cut these priests down. We read in 2 Kings 23.5 that Josiah "put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah… that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven. It says that he put down the *kemarim*: הַכְּמָרִים… who were these priests ousted by Josiah? Could they be the very movement that Lehi and his ilk represented? I find it interesting that part of the reforms of Josiah is that he "put down the idolatrous priests" (2 Kings 23.5). The text says that he put down הַכְּמָרִים "the *chemarim*," in what can be read as "The Melchizedek Priests." At least this is one way of reading this.[74] One non-LDS scholar put it this way:

Later texts show that this ascent to heaven to learn divine knowledge had been the prerogative of the Davidic kings and high priests, and Josiah did depose some priests, described as the *kemārîm* who had kept the high places (2 Kgs 23.5), and other priests, *kohanîm* who had burned incense at high places (2 Kgs 23.9). The latter went to Jerusalem but were not allowed to serve at the altar, although they did eat the unleavened bread among their brethren. To translate *kemārîm* as 'idolatrous priests' (thus AV, RSV) is not accurate, since the distinction between *kemārîm* and *kohanîm* is not clear: there were *kemārîm* for the golden calf in Samaria (Hos.10.5) and *kemārîm* worshipped the host of heaven on the rooftops together with *kohanîm* in the time of Josiah (Zeph.1.4). The word is usually translated 'idolatrous priests', as though to distinguish them from *kohanîm*, but this cannot be the distinction: Joseph's father-in-law was a *kohen* of On, the sun god (Gen.41.50), and the Philistine god Dagon was served by *kohanîm* (1 Sam.5.5). It is possible that a *komer* had significance that later editors sought to obscure, and the indications are that this was an association with Melchizedek. The Syriac Old Testament chose *kumra'* to describe Melchizedek, not *kohēn* (Gen.14.18), which may preserve a memory of the distinction between the two types of priest in earlier times.[75]

Swearing by Malcham

"Those that swear by Malcham" (Zeph. 1.5).[76]

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[73] Berlin and Brettler write, "Hebrew: The *Kemarim*, this is a term used only of priests of heathen gods." *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1235. Margaret Barker has a different view (see below).

[74] See: Stephen Ricks and John Tvedtness, The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 6, number 2, article 15, 1997. Christian priests are referred in modern Hebrew by the term כומר komer.

[75] Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord: The Lady in the Temple*, 2012, p. 40. For more on *Chemarim*, see: McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia. They write: According to Gesenius *(Thes* Hebrews p. 693), the corresponding Syriac word signifies "a priest in general; but this, as well as other Syriac words relating to divine worship, is restricted by the Hebrews to idol-worship. As to the etymology, the singular form כֹּמֶר, *ko´mer,* is properly *blackness, sadness,* and concretely, *one* who *goes about in black, in mourning,* hence an *ascetic, a priest."*First *(Heb. Lex.* s.v.) suggests a derivation from אָמַר = כָּמַר, in the sense of *worship,* and remarks that the title *chemarim,* although proper to the peculiar priests of Baal, was also applied to other idolatrous priests. Zep 1:4, the *chemarim* are coupled with the priests, and the passage may signify, "I will destroy the *chemarim*, together with the priests of the tribe of Levi who have joined in the worship of idols." The priests who officiated in the service of the golden calves at Dan and Bethel were called *chemarim* (see the other passages referred to). Even to this day the Jews retain the word, and apply it in derision to Christian ministers, on account of their black robes.

[76] The Masoretic Text has מַלְכָּם *malkam*, "their king," but this is almost certainly a scribal substitution in order not to mention the name of the pagan deity. Alter, p. 4438, electronic version. *The Jewish Study Bible* (p. 1236) states that this is apparently identical with "Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites"; cf. 1 Kings 11.5. Some see this

The Feast

> Be silent before my Lord God,
> For the day of the Lord is approaching;
> For the Lord has prepared a sacrificial feast,
> Has bidden His guests purify themselves (Zeph. 1.7).

The last two lines in Zeph. 1.7 can be translated as "The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited." This translation communicates better the double entendre of the Hebrew here. Are the guests consecrated so they can take part in the sacrificial meal? Or, are they consecrated because they are about to be slaughtered for the meal? Are they going to be at the meal, or be the "meal"? The Hebrew is likely intentionally ambiguous.[77] I see this ambiguity use to emphasize the dual nature of the feast. In the final day we will have the “Marriage Supper of the Lamb”[78] and the “Supper of Great God.”[79] These two feasts are *not* the same!

“I will punish those that leap upon the threshold” (Zeph. 1.9).[80]

A Prophecy Against Jerusalem: Zeph. 1.10-14.

> A loud outcry from the Fish Gate,
> And howling from the Mishneh,' (“the second” KJV)
> And a sound of great anguish from the hills.
> The dwellers of the Machtesh[81] howl;
> For all the tradesmen have perished,
> All who weigh silver are wiped out.[82]
> At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps;
> And I will punish the men
> Who rest untroubled on their lees,
> Who say to themselves,
> "The Lord will do nothing, good or bad."
> Their wealth shall be plundered
> And their homes laid waste.
> They shall build houses and not dwell in them,

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as a reference to Molech, a deity to whom children were sacrificed or passed through fire (see Lev. 18.21; 20.2; 2 Kings 23.10; cf. 1 Kings 11.7). Other modern scholars maintain that מַלְכָּם (this can be seen as מֶלֶךְ *melek*, with the 3rd person masculine plural suffix added to make it say “their king) "their king" simply means just "their king" (cf. Exod. 22.27; 1 Kings 21.10; Isa. 8.21). It has also been suggested that "their king" points to the Lord, wrongly worshipped.

[77] *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1236.

[78] Revelation 19.7-8.

[79] Revelation 19.17-21.

[80] There are two main interpretations regarding this passage of scripture. According to the first, this is a reference to an imitation of the ways of idolaters in general or Philistines (1 Sam. 5.4-5) in particular. According to the second interpretation, this verse is speaking about social injustice, oppression, and thievery. The reference to their master's palace is ambiguous: It may refer to the Temple of the Lord or to the palace of the king, or to both.

[81] הַמַּכְתֵּשׁ *ha maktesh* = "the ravine." This probably would have been the valley running through Jerusalem, perhaps the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, just west of the walls of the city. Alter, p. 4438.

[82] The epithet sounds derisive and may point to sharp trading practices. Alter, p. 4438.

Plant vineyards and not drink their wine.
The great day of the Lord is approaching,
Approaching most swiftly.
Hark, the day of the Lord!
It is bitter: there a warrior shrieks! (Zeph. 1.10-14)

Here the prophet describes locations within Jerusalem: "The Mishneh" הַמִּשְׁנֶה or "Second Quarter" (Zeph. 1.10), probably refers to the Upper City of Jerusalem, the Western Hill, where the elites in Jerusalem lived. It is God in verse 12 that is searching out the city with lamps (candles KJV). The text of Zephaniah 1.13 is similar to that of Deut. 28.30, referring to the curses the Israelites were warned about in previous generations.

Repent before it is too late: Zeph. 2.1-3.

Gather together, gather, O nation without shame,[83]
Before the day the decree is born
The day flies by like chaff
Before the fierce anger
Of the Lord overtakes you,
Before the day of anger
Of the Lord overtakes you.
Seek the Lord,
All you humble of the land
Who have fulfilled His law;
Seek righteousness,
Seek humility.
Perhaps you will find shelter
On the day of the Lord's anger (Zeph. 2.1-3).

Oracles Against Other Nations: Zeph. 2.5-15.

Such oracles against the nations are typical of prophetic books, which emphasize that God is universal in His control. Zeph. 2.5 mentions "The Nation of Cherethites," meaning the people of Crete (an island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea). The Cherethites are associated with Philistines, this being their approximate place of origin.

"He will destroy Assyria; and he will make Nineveh a desolation" (Zeph. 2.13).

"The Cormorant (קָאַת) and the bittern (קִפּוֹד)" (Zeph. 2.14) can be read as "the jackdaw and owl and the screech owl."[84]

The Lord Speaks Against the Filthy and Polluted City: Zeph. 3.1-13

[83] This verbal stem (קָשַׁשׁ) of the verb is generally used for the gathering of firewood and the like. Here it might suggest that the people have fallen apart, become disparate sticks or limbs, and need to be pulled together. Alter, p. 4443.
[84] Alter, p. 4443. He explains, "the precise identification of these birds is uncertain."

Ah, sullied, polluted,
Overbearing city! (or the “dove” city! הָעִיר הַיּוֹנָה)
She has been disobedient,
Has learned no lesson;
She has not trusted in the Lord,
Has not drawn near to her God.
The officials within her
Are roaring lions;
Her judges are wolves of the steppe,
They leave no bone until morning:
Her prophets are reckless,
Faithless fellows;
Her priests profane what is holy,
They give perverse rulings.
But the Lord in her midst is righteous,
He does no wrong;
He issues judgment every morning,
As unfailing as the light.
The wrongdoer knows no shame!
I wiped out nations:
Their corner towers are desolate;
I turned their thoroughfares into ruins,
With none passing by;
Their towns lie waste without people,
Without inhabitants (Zeph. 3.1-6).[85]

A Pure Language

“For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent” (Zeph. 3.9).

The Lord will restore unto his gathered people a pure language (Zephaniah 3:9). This was interpreted by the Prophet Joseph Smith as the time of the gathering and restoration of Israel, "when he will turn to them a pure language, and the earth will be filled with sacred knowledge."[86] This language will probably be that of Adam or the language as it was before the Lord confounded the language of all the earth at the time of the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9; see also Moses 6:5-6). The return of this

[85] **The Hebrew text radiates ambiguity**. It is uncertain whether the city is Nineveh or Jerusalem. Sullied can be understood as "revered or feared"; polluted as "redeemed" (גָּאַל); and overbearing (or "oppressing") as "the dove city" (הָעִיר הַיּוֹנָה i.e., a powerless city). In this particular case the ambiguities are unequivocally resolved within the context of the text. **Zephaniah 3.2 clarifies that the city is not powerless and redeemed**, but polluted and oppressing. The descriptions of wrongdoing in the following verses show that the city is Jerusalem. This type of ambiguity shows the artistry of the book's composition and also points to the use of ambiguity as a rhetorical device to capture the readers' attention, and then lead them to a central issue: the identity and main characteristics of the city. It is the polluted, sinful, late monarchic (Josianic) Jerusalem. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1240, emphasis added.

[86] *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 93.

language will better enable the Lord's people to call upon him and serve him with one consent (Zephaniah 1:9). To serve with one consent is probably the law of common consent, the receiving of revelation from the Lord and sustaining the revelation by the voice of the people (D&C 26:2).[87]

A Message of Hope: Zephaniah 3.12-20

The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.[88] Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, **he hath cast out thine enemy**: the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. (Zeph. 3.13-15).

Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame. At that time **will I bring you again**, even in the time that **I gather you**: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth,[89] when **I turn back your captivity before your eyes**, saith the Lord. (Zeph. 3.19-20).

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[87] Monte S. Nyman, Farres H. Nyman, "Zephaniah: A Second Witness with Jeremiah," *Words of the Twelve Prophets: Messages to the Latter-Day Saints*, Deseret Book, 1990.

[88] "They shall graze and bed down." Both verbs invoke the familiar metaphor of the people as a flock to be led by a faithful shepherd, the just king. Alter, p. 4452.

[89] אֶתֵּן אֶתְכֶם לְשֵׁם וְלִתְהִלָּה בְּכֹל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ – "I will give you a name and a praise among all people of the earth" (Zeph. 3.20). I (Mike Day) see this as a temple promise. God will give the Saints both a name (think John 17 here) and "a praise" or splendor, even "the garment of praise" (מַעֲטֵה תְהִלָּה) as described by Isaiah (see Isa. 61.3). God is promising his followers that he will redeem his people.