

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 50

Minor Prophets – Part Four

OBADIAH, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH

I. BACKGROUND

Why are these three books examined together?

These three books are grouped together because of the probable dates of authorship. We know rather definitely that Habakkuk and Zephaniah were written around the same time (late 600's B.C.). Obadiah could have been written at an earlier date; however, it most likely was written around the same time.

What was happening to the Jews at this time?

Zephaniah 1:1 specifies that the prophecies were given “during the reign of Josiah,” which would have been 640–609 B.C. Habakkuk 1:6 references its time as one where the Lord is “raising up the Babylonians...who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places that are not their own.” This reference causes scholars to think the writing occurred around the Battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.).¹ Obadiah's composition is determined from an interpretation of the references in verses 11–14 about Jerusalem. Those verses relate “foreigners” entering the gates and casting “lots for Jerusalem.” This was a day of “disaster” when the “day of the Lord” was near. Some see these verses as references to the Philistines' and Arabs' invasion of Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoram (853–841 B.C.) described in 2 Kings 8:20-22 and 2 Chronicles 21:8-20. More likely, the reference is to the Babylonian attacks and victories over Jerusalem in 605–586 B.C.

Within this 50-year time span, the Biblical narratives, as well as the historical archives of Assyria and Babylon, set forth the events well. Israel (the “Northern Kingdom”) has already been destroyed. Judah (the “Southern Kingdom”) is on its last legs. Judah has just finished with the reigns of Manasseh and Amon, two pagan kings who led the people ever further from Yahweh. After their reigns, the young pre-teen, King Josiah,

¹ Reference the class notes for Jeremiah for more details on Carchemish. This was the final battle where Babylon vanquished the Assyrian empire, inflicting great casualties also on the Egyptians that had come to Assyria's aid after the fall of Nineveh.

began to reign. Josiah sought Yahweh and tried to move the people back to their covenant with God. Josiah met with limited success as the people rediscovered the Law of Moses and sought to re-establish the Passover. Time showed that any mass conversion of the people was brief at best. After the death of Josiah, the remaining kings of Judah up to the time of the captivity were evil in the eyes of the Lord and led the people in evil.

The big international issues of the day involved the interplay of the fading world power, Assyria, the role of the world power, Egypt, and the arising world power of Babylon. Which side Judah should take, if any at all, was the pressing issue for the king and his court. Contemporary prophets on these issues included Jeremiah, who told the kings that Babylon was destined to be victorious.

Who were these people?

Zephaniah was a great, great grandson of King Hezekiah (1:1). As such, he would have had considerable social standing. The prophecies of Zephaniah show a great familiarity with the court of Judah and the current political issues. Also, Zephaniah was probably cognizant of Amos's and Isaiah's (contemporaries of Hezekiah, the great, great, grandfather king) prophecies of 100-plus years earlier. We know this fact because Zephaniah reflects some of the writings of those prophets in his own materials.

The little we know about Habakkuk comes from reading between the lines of his book. Aside from the fact that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, we know that his faith was deeply rooted in the religious traditions of the Hebrew faith. That is apparent from the information he includes as he writes.

We know next to nothing about Obadiah. His name is fairly common with about a dozen others having the same name in the Old Testament alone (*See* 1 Kings 18:3-16; 1 Chron. 3:2; 7:3; 8:38; 9:16; 12:9; 27:19; 2 Chron. 17:7; 34:12; Ezra 8:9; Neh. 10:5; 12:25). Obadiah's name is a composite of the Hebrew for servant (evad) and the abbreviation for Yahweh (yah). We understand his name to mean "servant of the Lord."

II. THEMES

A. *Zephaniah*

Zephaniah joined the chorus of other prophets who cried about the coming judgment of God upon Judah. The "day of the Lord" was

noted as coming as a day of punishment for the nations, including Judah. The imagery denotes the horrors of what should be expected. Yet, like the other true prophets both before and after him, Zephaniah reiterates and emphasizes that God will restore his people and bring rejoicing back.

While noted earlier to be a prophet during the reign of King Josiah, it is important to note that a good bit of Zephaniah's writings concern the ongoing Baal worship in the land. This worship was outlawed around the mid-point of Josiah's reign, leading to the conclusion that a good bit of Zephaniah's prophecies were earlier than the reform of 621 B.C.

Judah is confronted with not only the pagan worship of Baal, but also the sins of ignoring God ("those who turn back from the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him" 1:7). Those turning from God were wealthy people who were "complacent" before God thinking "the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad" (1:12-13). To these people, the judgment of God is coming as a day of wrath, distress and anguish – trouble. Gloom and ruin are around the corner (1:15). For folks to be sheltered from this coming onslaught, they were admonished to "seek the Lord" in "humility," to "do what he commands," to "seek righteousness [and] humility" in hopes of being "sheltered" on the day of God's judgment (2:3).

Zephaniah goes into some detail when recounting the sins of the governmental and religious leaders. They are "roaring lions" and "evening wolves" (3:3). They do not "trust in Yahweh, do not draw near to God," but instead are "arrogant" and "treacherous men" who "profane the sanctuary" and "do violence to the law" (3:2, 4).

While Zephaniah is clear and blunt in his foretelling of the judgment, he is equally clear that the judgment will not last forever. The judgment will be followed by a time of restoration, when the "lips" of the people will be "purified" so that "all of them may call on the name of Yahweh" (3:9). God will leave the "meek and humble, who trust in the name of Yahweh" (3:12). Those people who stay in the coming kingdom will "speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths" (3:13). God has sworn to "rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered" (3:19). History has seen this promise fulfilled both in the Israel by blood (the Jewish nation) and the Israel by faith (the church).

B. *Habakkuk*

Habakkuk is a bit different from the other prophet books. It almost harkens back to parts of Job in the sense that it contains a dialogue between the prophet and God as opposed to the oracles against Judah. Habakkuk spends two chapters arguing with God over God's actions. In the final chapter, Habakkuk brings a confession of faith to God who is a bit beyond our ability to always understand.

In this sense, Habakkuk was teaching Judah at the time (and us readers throughout history) that there are legitimate questions to be posed to God, and there are also answers, even if not totally satisfactory to our reasoning, that are sufficient to allow us to settle in a position of faith.

Habakkuk's major complaint to God was the "violence" and "injustice" he saw (1:2-3). Habakkuk viewed it as the "wicked" hemming in "the righteous" (1:4). God answers this complaint with what might seem an even greater injustice! God says to watch because God is going to raise "up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people" who are "feared and dreaded" (1:5-11).

To this response, Habakkuk raises a cry of "unfair(!)," arguing that God's eyes are "too pure to look on evil" (1:12). Habakkuk does not see how God could raise up an evil, pagan nation to judge Judah. God responds that Babylon is not the end all! In fact, wicked Babylon is also bound for destruction. God's people are called to wait patiently for the certain fall of Babylon as well. The "righteous," Habakkuk is told, "will live by his faith" (2:3-4). This is right in recognition that "the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silent before him" (2:20).

Habakkuk is moved to respond to Yahweh with a prayer of praise and confident expectation. Habakkuk states, "Yahweh, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds," which Habakkuk then recounts. God's awesome works caused Habakkuk's "heart" to "pound." His "lips quivered" and "legs trembled" (3:16); yet, Habakkuk waited patiently as the Lord instructed. Habakkuk found Yahweh as his "strength," noting God made "his feet like the feet of a deer" enabling Habakkuk "to go on the heights" (3:16-19).

C. *Obadiah*

Obadiah is a short one-chapter book. In fact, Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. The theme of Obadiah is the coming destruction of Edom. Edom was often a thorn in the side of Judah. The Edomites were ultimately relatives of the Jews. Whereas the Jews descended from Abraham and Isaac through Jacob, the Edomites were descendants of Abraham and Isaac through the older twin Esau. Esau was the older brother who sold his birthright to Jacob for hot food. In their subsequent history, Edom would take advantage of Judah whenever the opportunity presented itself. These actions were the cause for the pronounced judgment in Obadiah. “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever” (10).

Edom’s sin was found rooted in the “pride of your [the “Edomites”] heart” (3). The Lord notes that he will personally see that Edom is brought down from its arrogant heights.

An interesting play on words occurs in Obadiah regarding this sin of pride. The Hebrew word is *zadon*. It comes from the verb meaning “to boil up; to seethe.” The same letters are used for food that is boiled. The idea is that food or water that boils up or foams over is like the person too big for his own britches (or pot!) who self-exalts – in other words, one with pride.

Now, the pun. This same “pride”/“boil over” root occurs three times in the Genesis account of Esau (Edom) selling his birthright to Jacob. It seems the nation that got its start selling its birthright for something that boils over became the nation to be destroyed because its character boiled over in pride.

The destruction of Edom is to be complete compared to the destruction of Judah, which is to be limited in time and followed by a return from exile. Accordingly, verse 18 notes that the “house of Jacob will be a fire,” while “the house of Esau will be a stubble. There will be no survivors from the house of Esau” (18).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Arrogance has no place before God.
2. Opt for humility instead.
3. God is not to be ignored.
4. Wait. God is the ultimate justice.
5. Hold to Jesus because God is the ultimate justice.