

JOEL, OBADIAH, AND NAHUM

These three books from the minor (short) prophetic writings give us three perspectives on God's judgment (against enemies and the unfaithful), God's promise to restore the faithful, and to establish peace (shalom) in the whole world. In the prophets, the event of God's judgment and establishing the better future under the rule of God is usually called "*the day of the Lord.*"

Obadiah, at 28 verses, is the shortest book in the Old Testament. His name means "servant of God." The Bible has no other information about him.

To read Obadiah is to step into the middle of the troubled relationship between the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. (Their story is told in Genesis 25:19-34, 27, 28, and 33.) The kingdom of Edom claimed Esau as their ancestor. The Israelites descended from Jacob (whom God renamed Israel). Although the brothers made up with each other, the relationship between the neighboring kingdoms had a love-hate quality. During the exodus from Egypt, the Edomites forbade the Israelites to pass through their land. Obadiah proclaims that God's judgment will come upon Edom because they did not help – in fact caused additional pain – when Jerusalem was invaded and the people carried off. Obadiah may be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. or perhaps an earlier invasion by other enemies.

Nahum, whose name means "consolation" or "comfort," announces the destruction of Nineveh. All we know about him is that he is from El-kosh, probably a town in Judea. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. God had used the Assyrians to carry out his judgment against faithless Israel, but now Nahum proclaims that God will destroy the feared and ruthless city. This word of the Lord came to Nahum between 663 B.C. when Thebes, a great city in Egypt, was captured, and 612 B.C. when Nineveh was overthrown by the Medes and Chaldeans. The city was so totally obliterated that the location was unknown until 2500 years later.

Joel ("the Lord is God"), also a prophet with no personal information, gives us "the day of the Lord" from a believer's perspective. A terrible locust infestation has made Joel – and hopefully everyone else – aware that God's judgment can come on his people as well. The call to repent and fast in chapter 2 is the Old Testament lesson for Ash Wednesday. His good news about "the day of the Lord" includes the restored Jerusalem, which is the center of all human worship, but he goes further. It is Joel 2:28 that the apostle Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost: *I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*

The Day of the Lord

Today we speak about end times and the second coming of Jesus. When the Old Testament prophets were bringing God's word to his people, "the day of the Lord" was the common phrase. Sometime in the future, God would intervene dramatically and establish a just, peaceful and holy society. That day would be a dramatic vindication of the faithful. God's wrath would be poured out in judgment on the enemies who mistreated them and on the unfaithful within Israel and Judah.

The earliest prophet to speak about "the day of the Lord" is Amos. Biblical scholars do not know when "the day of the Lord" became a widespread expectation, but almost all of the prophets speak about the hopeful and fearsome future that God intends. Jonah is a notable exception.

In the New Testament, the "day of the Lord" is always about Jesus. John the Baptist proclaims, "prepare the way of the Lord." Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is at hand." "On that day" is always a clue in the gospels: Jesus is doing something special. After Jesus' ascension, "the day of the Lord" and "the return of Jesus" are both used by Paul and other letter writers of the New Testament.

Ash Wednesday Reading – Joel 2:1, 15-16

¹Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.