

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Read the Bible in a Year Challenge
Week 50

Monday	Habakkuk 3	Psalm 129	Mark 7
Tuesday	Zephaniah 1	Psalm 130	Mark 8
Wednesday	Zephaniah 2	Psalm 131	Mark 9
Thursday	Zephaniah 3	Psalm 132	Mark 10
Friday	Haggai 1-2	Psalm 133	Mark 11
Saturday	Zechariah 1-2	Psalm 134	Mark 12

Sunday: *Enjoy the lessons from Scripture as they are read aloud in Sunday worship. The Bible study summary for each Sunday of the year is found as a separate document on the parish website, under “Adult Education, Bible Study”.*

The readings from Habakkuk:

1. See the study summary for week 49 for an introduction to Habakkuk.
2. The third chapter in Habakkuk reads as a canticle (a prophetic song).
 - a. Following the title being given, in which the song is designated as a prayer (3.1), the prophet states a theme of fear and salvation (3.2).
 - b. Vv. 3-15 describe a theophany, an apparition of God in which first Creation reacts to God’s coming (3.3-7) and then God engages in battle with the forces of chaos (3.8-15).
 - i. The battle is described using ancient Near Eastern mythic elements, as a battle between a storm god and the sea.
 1. A storm god is a motif of power and sovereignty. The sea is a classic symbol of chaos.
 - a. To the audience of Habakkuk, these elements in story-telling were so well known as to not require elaboration.
 - ii. God’s triumph in battle over chaos mirrors his triumph on behalf of His people in the realm of history.
 - c. The book ends with the prophet returning to a description of his own fear of God at God’s appearing.
 - i. Nature reflects the prophet’s fear. The land’s fertility collapses (3.17) in parallel to the prophet’s panic at the advent of God.
 1. And yet the canticle (and book) ends with hope, on a note of salvation.
 - a. God is to be trusted even in the face of the upheavals of history.
 - i. The oracle found at 2.4 (“the righteous shall live by his faith”) is confirmed.

The readings from Zephaniah:

1. Zephaniah prophesied during Josiah’s reign (640-609 B.C.) Uniquely for a prophet, his own genealogy is provided for four generations.

- a. While the prophet condemns the unfaithful, he does not condemn the king. This reflects the fact that Josiah attempted to restore the cult following the apostasy of Manasseh.
2. Zephaniah addresses a particular geopolitical reality. For almost a century Judah had been a vassal to Assyria. However, following the death of Ashurbanipal in 627, Assyrian power eroded, partly due to internal collapse and partly due to pressure from Egypt.
 - a. In this situation, Babylonian power began to rise, and Assyrian and Egyptian power was further threatened.
 - i. The prophet sees the fate of all nations as lying in the hand of God. The dominant theme in Zephaniah is the Day of the LORD (*cf.* Amos 5.18), when God will devastate the old vassals of Israel (Philistia, Moab, and Ammon, all now rebellious) and the foundering world power, Assyria.
 - ii. The LORD will ravage, as well, His own people (1.9) for false worship.
 1. However, destruction is reserved for the rebellious. The ravages attendant on God's judgment will purify the people. A righteous remnant will be found, a smaller group that will please God.
 - b. Zephaniah's message is expanded by a later editor who seeks to ensure that readers understand Zephaniah's prophecies to be fulfilled in Nebuchadnezzar's devastation of Judah, and to reassure a dispirited people by magnifying restoration (2.7; 3.9-20).
 - i. Zephaniah is a good example of how prophesy may be addressed to a particular time and place, rather than stated as a perennial religious truth.
 1. The interpretation of such prophesy makes it perennial, either explicitly (as in the editing of Zephaniah) or implicitly (in applying the prophet's words to another time and place).

The readings from Haggai:

1. Haggai prophesied in Jerusalem about 520 B.C., *i.e.*, during the reign of the Persian emperor, Darius I (reigned 521-486).
 - a. Darius renewed the policies of Cyrus II (538-530), which had been suspended by Cambyses II (529-522). Under these policies the loyalty of the empire's subject peoples was to be consolidated by allowing them to return to their homelands, and by granting a degree of home rule and of religious freedom.
 - i. Not many Judeans had returned to Jerusalem under Cyrus, but large numbers returned during Cambyses's campaign against Egypt in 525.
 - ii. Haggai's oracles were delivered, therefore, to a people with an ethnically Judean governor (Zerubbabel) and priestly leader (Joshua).
 - b. The Persian-Egyptian War brought disruption to Judah, both socially and economically, as Persian armies passed through. Imperial disruption was magnified by internal struggles for power, as Darius succeeded Cambyses and consolidated his rule.
 - i. Disruption would have been great among the Judean exiles who remained in Babylon, and Haggai's oracles may be addressed to them as well.
 - ii. Because of societal disruption, the people of Judah were more concerned with their own selfish interests, and worked less for the advancement of their religious and societal institutions. It is in light of this self-focus that the prophet spoke, speaking as a cultic prophet for the establishment and magnification of the cult of the Temple.
 1. Haggai calls for increased devotion to the cult, for the rebuilding of the Temple.

2. The importance of the Temple to Haggai is not as a place of worship, but as the place of the LORD's presence on earth.
 - a. Haggai functions, therefore, in a role like a court prophet (like Nathan in 2 Sam. 7), with Zerubbabel being God's elect.
 - i. The future, therefore, is the future of Judah restored under a Davidic ruler, with God dwelling in His earthly Temple.

The readings from Zechariah:

1. Zechariah was active as early as 520 (1.1), and active for at least two decades (Neh. 12.16). He wrote in an historical situation similar to that in which Haggai wrote. Unlike Haggai, however, Zechariah addresses a situation that is more universal. The prophet was active in the project to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 5.1), but his concern is less for the here-and-now as for what is transcendental.
 - a. The book reads as two distinct collections of oracles, chs. 1-8 and 9-14.
 - i. Chs. 1-8 are written in light of the reality that Zerubbabel has played out his part. The prophet is concerned with what the lasting meaning of the rebuilding of the Temple shall be.
 1. Zechariah is unique in appealing to earlier prophets. His message is one in which the prophetic word that has come before is compared to the situation of the people whom he addresses.
 - a. The Judeans are to turn/return (repent) in light of the prophetic word, and to live as those in whose midst God dwells.
 - b. When the people purify themselves and rebuild God's dwelling, God will return to their immediate presence.
 2. Each one of the visions in 1-8 relates to how the people observe the covenant with God. *E.g.*, the flying scroll (5.1-4) will itself ferret out those guilty of injustice, for the scroll is God's word.
 - ii. In chs. 1-2 a prologue is followed by three oracles:
 - i. The colored horses and the horsemen (1.7-17) involves a peaceful scene in which messengers announce God's peace.
 1. The date given at 1.7 is 16 February 519 B.C.
 2. The seventy years referred to at v. 8 are a rounding of the time from the return from exile (587). Despite peace, God is concerned with the misfortune of Judah, and has wrath against the nations.
 - ii. The four horns and the carvers (1.18-21, numbered as 2.1-4 in some translations) extend the oracle which has concluded. God will discomfit those who oppress Judah, despite the peace they enjoy.
 1. Each horn represents an oppressing power.
 - iii. Ch. 2 closes with a third vision, that of a surveyor. This represents the first stage of rebuilding that follows the removal of the oppressors.

The psalms: N.B. *In The Bible Challenge the Psalter is read twice (once in each half year). We may all be led into new insights, particularly in focusing on praying each psalm (preferably aloud). See the summary for week 1 for a general introduction.*

1. See the study summaries for weeks 23 and 24.

The Gospel according to St. Mark:

1. *See* the study summaries for weeks 6 and 7 for a discussion of the readings from Mark.