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THEODICY AND HOPE IN THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

EDITED BY
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Chapter 1

THEODICY AND HOPE IN THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

Grace Ko

Introduction

Searching for meaning in the face of anomalies, especially during calamity and when good deeds are not rewarded and bad deeds are not punished, inevitably gives rise to the question of theodicy.¹ James L. Crenshaw suggests that there are three answers given to the apparent injustice of God in the ancient Near East: (1) human beings are innately evil, therefore they deserve what they get; (2) the gods are unjust, by allowing the innocent to suffer, they are not upholding justice; and (3) human knowledge is limited, since the gods are hidden.² All these responses may be found in some forms in Israelite attempts to grapple with the problem of theodicy.

In the first part of this chapter, I will examine the prophetic struggle to deal with the issue of theodicy in the Book of the Twelve. In order to

1. Theodicy is a term first coined by Gottfried von Leibniz (1646–1716). The word “theodicy” is derived from two Greek words meaning “God’s righteousness.” For a definition of theodicy, see R. L. Sturch, “Theodicy,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. J. Atkinson, D. F. Field, A. Holmes, and O. O’Donovan (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 954–5. For a discussion of God’s justice, see J. L. Crenshaw, “Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel,” *ZAW* 82 (1970): 380–95 (380–2).

2. J. L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion*, BZAW 124 (New York: de Gruyter, 1971), 38. See also S. E. Balentine’s helpful summary of perspectives on theodicy in the Hebrew Bible in *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine–Human Dialogue*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 190.

do that, I will investigate the prophetic disputation with the *vox populi*³ as expressed in most of the prophetic sayings in the Twelve, and the prophetic attempts to justify divine judgment. I will also discuss the relationship between prophecy and covenant to understand why the prophets' view is so fundamentally different from the view of the people. Then I will look into some of the prophetic complaints to see if any of the prophets share the same sentiment and inquisitive spirit as the populace. Since divine judgment is never the last word in the prophetic literature, the second part of this essay will focus on the salvation sayings that raise hope amidst atrocity in the Book of the Twelve, especially during the time when the national security is threatened and catastrophe brought on by the foreign invasion is at hand. I will pay special attention to the attributes of divine mercy and compassion (stated in Exod. 34:6-7) as hope for Israel.

Prophetic Disputation with Vox Populi in the Twelve

When facing calamity, the most popular sentiment displayed by the people is to blame God and to accuse him of injustice. Most of the classical prophets engage in justifying God by disputing with the *vox populi* which questions God's justice.⁴ In the Book of the Twelve, Hosea accuses the Israelites of harassing the prophets, God's spokespersons, and treating them like fools and madmen (Hos. 9:7).⁵ He uses his own personal experience as a betrayed husband by his adulterous wife, Gomer, to indict Israel of harlotry by forsaking God and attributing God's gifts to her lovers, the idols (1:5-13).⁶ Israel's idolatry (13:2, 4) breaks the first three commandments of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2-5a), which then leads to many social and political crimes among them. False swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, bloodshed and violence break out in the society (Hos. 4:2),⁷ which are direct transgressions of divine covenant and

3. For a detailed discussion on *vox populi*, see Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict*, 21-36.

4. *Ibid.*, 30-1.

5. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

6. Hans Walter Wolff explains that the simile of Yahweh as husband is, first, "to clarify the indictment against Israel" and, secondly, "to elucidate the fact that Yahweh is the exclusive bestower of all gifts." See "Guilt and Salvation: A Study of the Prophecy of Hosea," trans. Lloyd Gaston, *Int* 15 (1961): 274-85 (278).

7. In this verse alone, Israel has broken five of the Ten Commandments, which are: nos. 3, 9, 6, 8, and 7 (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:1-21). M. Daniel Carroll R. mentions that if the verb פָּרַץ, "break out," is counted as another violation, then the

law (8:1). On the political front, the people prefer to make alliance with foreign powers than turn to the Lord (5:13; 7:8-11; 8:9). Domestically, they change kings and dynasties through deception and violence, but never bother to seek God's counsel (7:3-7; 8:4a). Hence, according to Hosea, it is Israel's pervasive sins that cause God to terminate his covenant with them. This termination of covenant is symbolized by the naming of two of Hosea's children Lo-Ruhamah (לֹא רַחֲמָה), which means "not-pitied" (1:6), and Lo-Ammi (לֹא עַמִּי), meaning "not my people" (1:9). Both names indicate God's relationship with Israel. The former one focuses on God's attribute as merciful, illustrating a broken relationship between God and Israel, and that God will no longer have mercy on his people.⁸ As a consequence, the latter name is a reversal of Exod. 6:7: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."⁹

Amos also indicts Israel of her religious and social sins. Sins include oppression of the righteous and the poor, profaning the Lord's name by sexual impurity, taking garments and keeping them as pledge from the poor and drinking wine beside the altar, making the Nazirites drink wine and commanding the prophets not to prophesy (Amos 2:6-12). He declares that in spite of many catastrophes, such as famine, drought, flooding, disease, locust, plague, war, fire, which he attributes to Yahweh, Israel still refuses to turn back to God: "Yet you did not return to me" (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). This blatant disregard of divine warnings, which Crenshaw calls "wasted opportunity," then leads to the "doxologies of judgment" in Amos 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6.¹⁰ These doxologies, which explicitly mention Yahweh's name, function as judgments in order to exonerate God's punishment on Israel as just and righteous;¹¹ and to give a universal aspect

number of sins adds up to seven, i.e., Israel commits "perfect sin." See his "Hosea," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary 8: Daniel–Malachi*, ed. T. Longman III and D. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 244.

8. The word "compassionate" (רַחֲמָה) may allude to Exod. 34:6.

9. John T. Willis, "'I am your God' and 'You are my People' in Hosea and Jeremiah," *ResQ* 36 (1994): 292–8, gives five metaphorical backgrounds for these terms: (1) Israel borrowed them from other ancient Near Eastern nations describing their relationship with their gods; (2) covenantal terms based on Hittite suzerainty treaties; (3) the shepherd–sheep relationship; (4) the father–child relationship; and (5) the husband–wife relationship.

10. J. L. Crenshaw, "Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve," in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Paul L. Redditt and Aaron Schart, BZAW 325 (New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 175–91 (190).

11. Amos also debunks Israel's spurious belief that Yahweh would deliver them because of their covenant with him, by telling them that God would punish them precisely because of their privileged position of being God's people (Amos 3:2).

to his justice.¹² Moreover, the rejection of Amos by Amaziah seals the fate of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Amos 7:10-17).¹³

Micah accuses the people of stopping the prophets from preaching so as to avoid bringing disgrace upon the people (Mic. 2:6). He then engages in arguing with them, “Should it be said, O house of Jacob: ‘Is the spirit of the Lord impatient? Are these his doings?’ Do not my words do good to one who walks uprightly?” (Mic. 2:7). This shows that the people are so callous that they simply do not want to hear the prophetic message. Later Micah, representing Yahweh, launches a “covenant lawsuit” (רִיב) against the people (6:1-16).¹⁴ The structure of the lawsuit has five constituent parts:¹⁵ (1) an introduction describing the scene of judgment, which usually involves summoning the heaven and earth, and other natural elements such as hills and mountains, as witnesses to hear Yahweh’s accusation against Israel for breaking his covenant (Mic. 6:1-2); (2) an accusation by the plaintiff stating Yahweh’s case against his people (Mic. 6:3, 10-12); (3) a refutation of the defendant’s possible arguments (Mic. 6:6-8); (4) a pronouncement of guilt (Mic. 6:16a); and (5) a sentence or warning (Mic. 6:13-15, 16b). Micah disputes their claim that Yahweh is interested in many sacrifices, even human sacrifice (Mic 6:6-7), but rather what God required of them is simply “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

The dispute over God’s justice continues even in the post-exilic period when Malachi argues with the people: “You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, ‘How have we wearied him?’ By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them,’ or by

12. J. L. Crenshaw, “Theodicy and Prophetic Literature,” in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. A. Raato and J. C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 236–55 (252–3).

13. Hetty Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition: An Examination of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, CBET 26 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 237–8, explains that the rejections of the prophetic words by the kings in both Amos’ and Jeremiah’s days render the prophetic intercessions ineffective and the divine judgment irreversible.

14. For a detailed discussion on the use and the meaning of the word רִיב in the Old Testament, see J. Limburg, “The Root רִיב and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 291–304.

15. For a detailed discussion on the form of the prophetic covenant lawsuits and their possible origins, see H. B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” *JBL* 78 (1959): 285–95. See also L. C. Allen’s discussion on Mic. 6:1-8 as a covenant lawsuit in his commentary, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 363–4; and M. O’Rourke Boyle’s discussion on Amos 3:1–4:13 in “The Covenant Lawsuit of the Prophet Amos: III 1–IV 13,” *VT* 21 (1971): 338–62.

asking, “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal. 2:17). The prophet’s quotations of the people’s complaints not only show that the people doubt divine justice because of the prosperity of the wicked, they also use them as an excuse to deal treacherously with each other.¹⁶ Malachi responds to the people’s charge of divine injustice by announcing that the Lord is sending his messenger to prepare his way and that he will come suddenly to purify his temple by refining the Levites and judging the evildoers, namely, the sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, and those who defraud the laborers as well as the oppressors of the weak (3:1-5). The disputation intensifies as the prophet accuses the people of robbing God by withholding tithes and offerings. The people justify their rejection to serve the Lord by saying: “It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of Hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape” (Mal. 3:14-15). The people’s complaint reveals an underlying problem: their disappointment over the unfulfilled promises when the expected prosperity of the restored Jerusalem never materialized. It also shows that they view religious piety as a means to obtain material blessings from the Lord. But when the expected blessings do not materialize, they refuse to serve the Lord. Also, they implicitly accuse God of not carrying out justice and letting the evildoers get away with murder, as it were. Recognizing that there may be some honest doubters among the people and that the prosperity of the wicked may be too damaging to their continued trust in the Lord, Malachi reminds them that the Lord is the ultimate Judge who knows the conduct of all people. He encourages them to remain loyal to the Lord regardless of the situation, for their righteous deeds will not be in vain, because a “scroll of remembrance” is written before the Lord and that the righteous and the wicked will have two very different destinies in the Day of Judgment (3:16-21 [3:16–4:3 Eng.]).¹⁷

16. E. Ray Clendenen divides the book of Malachi into three main sections corresponding to the three main themes of the book: 1:2–2:9; 2:10–3:6; and 3:7–4:6. Such division links the people’s complaint about divine justice to their unfaithful acts in 2:10–16, and their question on theodicy can be taken to mean that they are justifying their own treacherous acts, since God either delights in the evildoers or he does not care to mete out justice. See his essay, “C. J. H. Wright’s ‘Ethical Triangle’ and the Threefold Structure of Malachi,” in *Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society 2003* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 10.

17. Some scholars view this as an attempt to avoid the question of failed prophecy by mentioning such a scroll so as to push the matter to a future eschaton whereby divine justice will finally take place. See the discussion in Crenshaw, “Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve,” 185–6. Nogalski, however, argues that the “book of remembrance” is not the same as the “book of life,” which records the name of the righteous

Prophecy and Covenant

The people's rejection of the prophetic messages is due to their delusion that their covenant with Yahweh would guarantee them Yahweh's protection regardless of their morality. They consider the prophetic warnings as the prophets' way of trying to impose unnecessary laws on them.¹⁸ However, Clements mentions that from the earliest stage, Israel's covenant with Yahweh has consisted of a foundation of law expressed in decalogue form to establish a standard of conduct among the people.¹⁹ Thus the prophets are not the inventors of the law, but rather they aim to remind Israel of her covenantal obligation as a people of Yahweh. Clements also comments that the prophets are not teachers of a new doctrine of God or of a new morality. Rather they are God's messengers reminding the people of their covenantal tradition which is not "devoid of theological insights and moral value."²⁰

Crenshaw opines that the prophetic emphasis on a covenantal and "holy war" tradition, together with the ancient Near Eastern worldview of a moral world governed by the retribution principle, may have given rise to the question of theodicy; and that the principle of grace fits poorly into such a worldview.²¹ However, the covenant between Yahweh and Israel entails reciprocal responsibilities between both parties.²² Yahweh elects Israel to be his people by delivering them from servitude and by granting them his covenant. Israel, as people of Yahweh, must live out the ethical demands imposed on them as expressed in the covenant law. The purpose of the law is to ensure the continuance of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people. Thus the law is a gift of grace for it gives

whom the Lord will remember in the judgment day. It is, rather, a book which reminds the God-fearers of God's grace, patience, and justice so that they will be able to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, and to live accordingly. See J. D. Nogalski, "Recurring Themes in the Book of the Twelve: Creating Points of Contact for a Theological Reading," *Int* 61 (2007): 134–45.

18. A modern example is the dismissal of human deeds affecting global warming by some, thinking that it is fabricated by scientists to promote the conservation agenda.

19. R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant*, SBT 43 (London: SCM, 1965), 23. In "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law," *BA* 17 (May 1954): 26–46 (28), G. E. Mendenhall stated the belief that the Decalogue was the foundation of the Sinai covenant, from which laws and stipulations were derived.

20. See Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant*, 16.

21. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict*, 36.

22. Clements (*Prophecy and Covenant*, 69) comments that "the existence of a covenant implied of necessity the existence of a series of obligations into which the covenant members were contracted."

Israel a moral and ethical standard to regulate her life as the people of Yahweh, and to protect the covenant from annulment.²³ Israel's obedience to the law is not a precondition of the covenant, but is an expression of her loyalty to Yahweh.²⁴ Israel has no right to accuse Yahweh of injustice when she is the one who breaks the covenant and, as a result, experiences the covenantal curses.²⁵

Prophetic Complaint against Yahweh

The populace's complaint about God's justice is usually dismissed as due to their lack of the knowledge of the Lord or due to their rebellious nature. However, when the protest comes from God's own called ones—the prophets—then the issue of theodicy becomes too acrid to ignore. When we examine the prophetic complaints against Yahweh, we will find that they share the inquisitive sentiment of the populace and raise the same questions concerning God's justice. In the Book of the Twelve, two prophets, Jonah and Habakkuk, stand out to challenge God's actions and raise the theodic cry²⁶ against Yahweh.²⁷

Jonah challenges divine compassion toward the Assyrians, the notorious enemy of Israel, who commit atrocities against other ancient Near Eastern countries and inflict great pain on Israel.²⁸ Jonah does not question

23. *Ibid.*, 77.

24. *Ibid.*, 74.

25. Clements states that it was not Yahweh, but Israel, who broke the covenant by disobeying the law, and that this caused Yahweh to terminate the covenant. See his discussion in *ibid.*, 76.

26. "Theodic crisis" is a term coined by Brueggemann, by which he means that there is a theodic settlement within a community, which teaches that moral behavior is rewarded and evil behavior is punished. But when the lived reality does not accord well with this settlement, then a theodic cry arises to challenge it. See W. Brueggemann, "Some Aspects of Theodicy in Old Testament Faith," *PRSt* 26 (Fall 1999): 253–68 (257).

27. E. Ray Clendenen opines that, according to 2 Kgs 17:13, all prophetic writings have a hortatory function "to 'warn Israel and Judah' to 'turn from [their] evil ways and keep [Yahweh's] commandments and statutes.'" In Jonah and Habakkuk, they serve their hortatory function "by inviting the ideal reader to assume the identity of the prophet himself." See the discussion in his article, "Textlinguistics and Prophecy in the Book of the Twelve," *JETS* 46 (2003): 385–99 (398).

28. Assyrians are well known for their cruelty towards their enemies. For a concise summary of ancient documents and pictorial depictions of their brutality, see Erika Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *BAR* 17, no. 1 (1991): 52–61.

God's compassion *per se*, for he knows full well God's compassionate nature. This is reflected in his prayer to God, "O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2). Jonah knows from Israel's experience that God is willing to pardon people and relent from sending judgment when they repent from their sins.²⁹ That is why he runs away to Tarshish in an attempt to flee from the Lord, so as to avoid his mission to Nineveh (1:1-3). Jonah's action shows that he does not want Nineveh to repent, for he questions the justness of proffering divine mercy to such an evil nation as Assyria,³⁰ under whose hand Israel has suffered tremendous loss.³¹ To Jonah, God's compassion toward Assyria, a nation whose wickedness has come to God's attention (1:2), indicates divine caprice and injustice.³² Thus, theodicy is a central issue in Jonah.³³

In response to Jonah's resentment, God twice questions Jonah's right to be angry: "Is it right for you to be angry?" (4:4, 9).³⁴ He uses the growing up and withering of a vine as an object lesson to teach Jonah that he has no right to question God's justice and sovereignty; "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (4:10-11). God's argument is twofold.³⁵ First, since the vine does not belong to Jonah, its growth is

29. Fretheim explains that Israel's very life depends on God's repentance of sending calamity, so it is not the changeableness of God that bothers Jonah. See Terrence E. Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 227-37 (228).

30. *Ibid.*, 227.

31. During the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BCE), Assyria's power was declining under the reigns of several weak kings and Israel was able to enjoy a period of peace and prosperity. But historically Assyrian aggression had caused great grievances to Israel and other ancient Near Eastern nations. So Jonah's hostility towards Assyria is understandable. Eventually in 722 BCE, Assyria conquered and ended the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

32. Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 234.

33. *Ibid.*, 229.

34. Fretheim insightfully mentions that while the divine questions in Jon. 4:4 and 4:9 are set in parallel, their content is quite different: 4:4 concerns God's deliverance of Nineveh, and 4:9 concerns divine destruction of the vine. See *ibid.*, 233.

35. For a detailed discussion, see *ibid.*, 234-5.

purely a gift from God. Therefore, Jonah has no right to be angry when it is taken away by God. Secondly, the plant is only short-lived and insignificant (“came into being in a night and perished in a night”), yet Jonah is concerned about its existence; how, then, can he blame God for being concerned about the well-being of the city of Nineveh when so many lives are at stake? Moreover, Jonah’s story also reveals that Yahweh, as a universal sovereign, cares for the other nations just as much as he cares for Israel. Since Israel has experienced divine saving acts despite their continuous rebellious acts, they do not have the right to raise questions of divine justice with regard to Nineveh.³⁶

Habakkuk is unique among the Twelve in his message. While most of the other prophets engage in warning Israelites against breaking the covenant with Yahweh, and prophesying foreign invasion as the just divine judgment, Habakkuk accuses God of his aloofness and even obliviousness to rampant wickedness (Hab. 1:1-4). When God reveals that he is using the Babylonians as his tool of judgment (Hab. 1:5-11), Habakkuk further challenges God’s justice for his appointment of brutal Babylon as a judgment on Judah (Hab. 1:12-17). According to Habakkuk, this is incongruous with Yahweh’s nature, and a gross miscarriage of divine justice, since Judah is a more righteous nation than Babylon (Hab. 1:13). To him, God, as a righteous judge, is supposed to calculate degrees of righteousness and favor the less unrighteous. But, in reality, this is not the case; hence he challenges theodicy on behalf of the people by complaining against God. The questions raised by Habakkuk indeed give voice to the honest doubters who earnestly seek to reconcile the hard reality of life with belief in a benevolent God. This open challenge against divine justice reflects the popular sentiment and would certainly attract attention and gain approval from his audience. It is this bold challenge against God, on behalf of the people, that makes Habakkuk unique among his peers. I will address his resolution on the issue of theodicy in the second half of this study.

Hope in the Book of the Twelve

Although the classical prophets usually warn the Israelites of the certainty of divine judgment, the message of doom will never be their last word.³⁷ In the midst of doom and destruction, the prophets always look beyond the

36. *Ibid.*, 230.

37. Clendenen (“Textlinguistics and Prophecy,” 388) sees the judgment oracles as one of the elements of the prophetic hortatory discourse, which serves to deter Israel and Judah from disobeying Yahweh and to motivate their repentance.

judgment and pronounce a future salvation plan for Israel.³⁸ This message of hope in the Book of the Twelve is not missed in Jewish interpretation of the prophetic message, but is affirmed in Sir. 49:10: “May the bones of the twelve prophets revive from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope.”³⁹

This “confident hope,” which concerns Israel’s salvation, is made possible by the divine attributes as proclaimed in Exod. 34:6-7:

The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate (רחום) and gracious (חנון), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (חסד) and faithfulness (אמת). Keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. Yet he by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the children’s children to the third and fourth generations.⁴⁰

Raymond C. Van Leeuwen argues convincingly that the final redactor of Hosea–Micah uses this passage “as a base text in developing an overarching theodicy vis-à-vis the incidents of 722 and 586 B.C.”⁴¹ In addition to that purpose, I suggest that this passage, which describes divine attributes, is also the basis of Israel’s hope. We shall now examine how this passage helps to arouse hope in the Book of the Twelve.

Hosea

While in Hosea there is no direct reference to Exod. 34:6-7, the hope of salvation is seen in the re-naming of Hosea’s children in Hos. 2:1-3 [1:10–2:1 Eng.] and 2:24-25 [22-23 Eng.], where Lo-Ammi (לא עמי), “not my people,” is changed to Ammi (עמי), “my people,” and Lo-Ruhamah (לא רחמה), “not-pitied,” is renamed Ruhamah (רחמה), “pitied.” And the indictment and judgment of Israel in Jezreel (1:4-5) will become a day when

38. Most of the prophetic books end with a positive hope for the future of Israel as a whole. In most cases these words of hope likely come from the prophets themselves, but it is possible that these could be from later editors as well.

39. R. E. Clements, “Patterns in the Prophetic Canon,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in the Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 42–55 (44). He explains that it is the “canonical form of prophecy that brings together the various sayings and messages of individual prophets and coordinates them into a unified ‘message.’ Likewise, it is this canonical form and structure which make prophecy as a whole a message of coming salvation.”

40. Translation here is mine.

41. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Scribal Wisdom and Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, ed. Leo G. Perdue et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 31–49.

God will answer and sow (זרעאל)⁴² the land by bringing back the people and granting them bountiful agricultural products (2:22-23). The reason for this reversal is due to divine compassion for Israel, which accords well with Yahweh's compassionate attribute as described in Exod. 34:6-7a.

God's love and compassion for Israel come through most vividly in Hos. 11:1-11.⁴³ Here Yahweh is portrayed as a pained father dealing with his rebellious son, Israel, who goes on his wayward way by committing idolatry, despite divine loving care and guidance. Israel's apostasy leads to judgment. Yet this hurts Yahweh so much to see Israel in distress that he cries out, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within me, my compassions are kindled" (v. 8).⁴⁴ The divine pathos is shown in this soliloquy as he deliberates over what to do. Then he resolves to withdraw his wrath (v. 9), which may allude to Yahweh's slowness of anger in Exod. 34:6. Indeed, divine mercy always prevails over his justice when there is a tension between them.⁴⁵

Joel

After a severe locust plague that ruins all the crops in Judah, Joel tells the people that the plague is a divine warning of an upcoming devastating judgment and urges the Judeans to repent and return to God.⁴⁶ Joel's

42. A play on Jezreel's name, which mean "God sows."

43. I see a chiasmus in this passage as follows:

- A. God calls and delivers Israel out of Egypt (v. 1)
- B. Israel refuses to follow Yahweh and her apostasy (v. 2)
- C. God's loving care for Israel but Israel does not know (v. 3)
- D. God's merciful guidance and providence for Israel (v. 4)
- E. Israel's refusal to return to Yahweh leads to exile to Assyria (v. 5)
- F. The consequence of rebellion (v. 6)
- E' Israel's forsaking God leads to heavy burden (v. 7)
- D' Divine deliberation and compassion for Israel (v. 8)
- C' God's resolution to recede his anger against Israel (v. 9)
- B' God roars and Israel follows (v. 10)
- A' God lets Israel return and settles them in their homes (v. 11)

44. J. Gerald Janzen quotes Mays in calling this form of questioning an "intense impassioned self-questioning by Yahweh," which is in full view. See Janzen, "Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11," *Semeia* 24 (1982): 7-44 (10).

45. So, Crenshaw when he says, "the belief in justice stands in tension with mercy, and when the two come into conflict mercy will prevail" ("Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve," 189).

46. Richard D. Patterson, "Joel," in Longman and Garland (eds), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:307-46 (313).

advice is based on Yahweh's attributes and he quotes Exod. 34:6: "Render your hearts and not your garments, and return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and relents from [sending] calamity" (Joel 2:13). Although he does not take God's mercy for granted,⁴⁷ his firm belief in God's attributes leads him to trust that repentance is the only way to move God to have compassion (חַסָּד) on his people (2:14, 17).⁴⁸ Joel's ministry seems to be successful and he ends the book with a glorious hope of Zion becoming the permanent residence of Yahweh (4:17, 21 [3:17, 21 Eng.]).⁴⁹

Amos

Amos is usually regarded as a "preacher of judgment and doom,"⁵⁰ since his messages are mostly on divine judgment of human sins, particularly the sins of Israel. These judgments are Yahweh's warnings to stimulate Israel's repentance to return to him.⁵¹ Amidst all the doom sayings, there are at least two incidents whereby Amos pleads to Yahweh, appealing to his compassionate nature and his love for Israel: "O Lord God, please forgive/stop! How can Jacob stand? For he is so small!" (Amos 7:2, 5). Amos' success in changing Yahweh's heart in these two instances shows that Yahweh is open to the prophetic intercession for the salvation of Israel. Although Amos' message is mainly "doom and gloom," the book ends with the hope of Israel's future restoration (Amos 9:11-15).⁵² This restoration is made possible due to divine compassion for Israel and his faithfulness to his covenant.

Obadiah

Obadiah accuses Edom of collaborating with the Chaldeans during the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Edom's lack of familial

47. This is confirmed by Joel's use of "who knows?" in 2:14, which allows divine sovereignty to take place (cf. Jon. 3:9)

48. Patterson, "Joel," 330.

49. Nogalski, "Recurring Themes in the Book of the Twelve," 132, comments that by changing the recipient of divine wrath to the nations in Joel 4:21 (3:21 Eng.), both Joel 2:13 and 4:21 (3:21 Eng.) then complete the hope and judgment parts of Exod 34:6-7. Moreover, judgment on Israel's enemies signifies hope and salvation for Israel.

50. Walter Brueggemann, "Amos' Intercessory Formula," *IT* 19 (1969): 385-99 (385).

51. Crenshaw, "Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve," 190.

52. The descriptions in Amos 9:11—the fallen booth of David, breached wall and ruins—presuppose a time after the fall of Judah in 586 BCE.

loyalty and treachery against Judah are the main reasons for divine punishment (vv. 10-16).⁵³ While Edom will face destruction, Israel as a whole on the other hand, will be restored (vv. 17-21).⁵⁴ Their distinct destiny is due to divine attributes. God shows his justice by meting out judgment when Edom fails to carry out the familial loyalty (חסד) and faithfulness (אמת);⁵⁵ and he demonstrates divine compassion (רחום) on Israel because of his covenant with them.

Jonah

God's sovereignty and his compassion on all nations are demonstrated most clearly in Jon. 4:10-11. Jonah obviously understands God's nature, for he quotes Exod. 34:6 in his complaint against God (4:2). What bothers him is the issue of theodicy that God would extend forgiveness to such a brutal nation as Assyria.⁵⁶ However, what he fails to see is that God's provisional pardon on Assyria is also an implicit call for Israel's repentance. If God would pardon even a brutal nation like Assyria, how much more would he do for Israel if she would only return to him?

Micah

Hope in Micah can be seen from its repetitive pattern of alternating arrangement of judgment and salvation. I follow Leslie C. Allen and see an intentional chiasmic structure in the whole book by repeating the catchwords.⁵⁷

53. In this section Judah is called "your brother Jacob" (יעקב אחיך), emphasizing their ancestral familial relationship, for Esau and Jacob are twin brothers.

54. The mention of "Mount Zion" in v. 17 and "house of Joseph" in v. 18 indicate that the whole Israel is in view.

55. Historically Edom was hostile to Israel since the days when Israel first came out of Egypt. They refused to let Israel pass through their territory (Num. 20:14-21; cf. Deut. 2:4-8; Judg. 11:17-18). Edom was among Israel's enemies to plunder and oppress them (1 Sam. 14:47). The subjugation of Edom by David in 2 Sam. 8:13-14 is seen as part of the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to grant Israel peace and security (2 Sam. 7:10). In prophetic literature, Edom is singled out to represent those who oppose God's people, due to its relationship with Israel.

56. Stephen Derek Cook, in his unpublished dissertation "'Who Knows?' Reading the Book of Jonah as a Satirical Challenge to Theodicy of the Exile" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2019), 315, argues that the main concern of Jonah's story is not about theodicy, but that God's mercy is unpredictable and unknowable. But his argument contradicts Jonah's complaint in 4:2, for he knows full well of God's mercy and his proclivity to forgive when people repent.

57. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 260.

- I. Judgment against Samaria and Jerusalem, 1:2–2:11 (שמעו)
 - Promise of deliverance, 2:12-13
- II. A. Judgment against Israel's leader, 3:1-12 (שמעו)
 - Hope for Zion's future, 4:1-5 (והיה)
 - B. Remnant's hope: restoration of ruler, 4:6-8 (אתה, שארית)
 - C. Present dire situation in Zion with hope of deliverance, 4:9-10 (עתה)
 - Present siege by nations but eventual victory, 4:11-13 (עתה)
 - Present helpless judges and the future ideal king, 4:14–5:5 (5:1-6 Eng.) (עתה)
 - B'. The future role of Israel's remnants, 5:6-8 (5:7-9 Eng.) (שארית)
 - A'. God's future purge, 5:9-13 (10-14 Eng.) (והיה)
 - Hope of deliverance in the future, 5:14 (5:15 Eng.)
- III. God's indictment against Israel, 6:1–7:6 (שמעו)
 - A prophetic liturgy: hopes and prayers, 7:7-20

The structure of the book and the presence of catchwords give enough evidence that the book does contain an internal coherence.⁵⁸ It is my opinion that the intentional arrangement of a woe–weal pattern in the book is to demonstrate that human sins can never thwart the divine sovereign plan. This theme is further supported by specific mention of those who “plan” (חשב) iniquity and God’s “planning” (חשב) of disaster in 2:1, 3. Moreover, God also recalls how he thwarted the “plot” (יעץ) of Balak against Israel in 6:5. This certainty and permanence of God’s sovereign plan, which always involves the redemption of the remnants, becomes the source of hope and comfort for God’s people throughout history. Furthermore, Micah’s paraphrasing of Exod. 15:11 and Exod. 34:6-7 in 7:18-19 celebrates God’s faithfulness (אמת) to Jacob and his steadfast love (חסד) to Abraham and his descendants (7:20). Hence Israel’s future depends on divine attributes as well as his plan.

Nahum

While both Jonah and Micah emphasize Yahweh’s compassion (רחם) and maintain that divine mercy is the basis for Nineveh’s provisional deliverance and Israel’s hope for future restoration, Nah. 1:2-3 paraphrases Exod. 34:6-7 to accentuate divine justice by prophesying Yahweh’s punishment on Nineveh, who destroys Israel. Not only does Nahum mention hope for Judah in Nah. 1:12-15 and Israel in 2:2, the prophetic pronouncement of the destruction of Assyria in the book, particularly the

58. Willis, “Structure of Micah,” 193, affirms that the structure of Micah can be demonstrated to be coherent. Although some scholars doubt the authenticity of some parts of the book, the chiasmic structure is likely from the hand of the prophet.

dirge for the Assyrian king in 3:18-19 also avenges the Northern Kingdom of Israel's suffering and also serves as an answer to the theodicy question raised by Jonah.⁵⁹ Moreover, most would agree that oracles against the nations, who are the enemies of Israel, are meant to be oracles of salvation for Israel as a whole.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk speaks of the inevitability of the Babylonian invasion but at the same time assures the people of Yahweh's justice and the eventual destruction of Babylon. To Habakkuk, the divine revelation in Hab. 2:4b that "the righteous by his faithfulness will live" (וצדיק באמונתו יהיה) is a real comfort and inspiration.⁶⁰ After God's revelation, he then understands that Yahweh's justice will prevail and that the righteous should persevere through extremely distressing situation. The prophetic pronouncement of the five woe oracles against the Babylonians (2:6-19), together with the theophanic hymn celebrating Yahweh's power over his enemy (3:3-15), give him strength to endure the imminent atrocity. Between the woe oracles and the theophany, we hear the prophet pleading to God, "O Lord, I have heard of your report... In the midst of years revive it, in the midst of years make it known. In turmoil, remember compassion (רחם)" (3:2).⁶¹ Thus, it is Yahweh's compassion that he appeals to and it is God's "remembering" and presence that give him hope. Then Habakkuk professes his resolution to trust and rejoice in the Lord even when he is deprived of all of life's necessities (3:16-19).

Zephaniah

Zephaniah explains that the universal disregard for Yahweh and his law leads to the coming of the "Day of the Lord" (יום יהוה). According to Zephaniah, in this awesome day, God will bring universal judgment

59. Paul L. Redditt, "The Production and Reading of the Book of the Twelve," in Nogalski and Sweeney (eds), *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, 15, makes a citation error of Mic. 7:18-19 instead of Nah. 3:18-19.

60. There is an ambiguity as to whose faithfulness the writer has in mind in the divine response, "But the righteous (וצדיק) in his faithfulness (באמונתו) shall live" (2:4b). There have been three proposals: (1) God's faithfulness, which is supported by I.XX; (2) the trustworthiness of the vision—see J. Gerald Janzen, "Habakkuk 2:2-4 in the Light of Recent Philological Advances," *HTR* 73 (1980): 59-62; and (3) the faithfulness of the righteous person since he is the closest antecedent. I opt for the third meaning for this addresses Habakkuk's existential concern for the survival of the righteous during adversity.

61. Translation here is mine.

not just on humanity but on all earth's creatures also—all animals, birds, and fish (1:2-3). This will be a reversal of the creation account in Gen. 1:20-27.⁶² Despite all these dreadful pronouncements, Zephaniah also offers safety and shelter to those righteous ones who humbly seek Yahweh (2:3).⁶³ The book ends with the message of a future restoration of Jerusalem with the coming of worshippers from all nations and the return of God's people (3:9-20). Israel's hope for restoration is based on God's deep love (אהבה) for them (3:17).⁶⁴

Haggai

Haggai seeks to rally the postexilic community to complete the building of the Second Temple, which they have started since their return from Babylon some sixteen years ago.⁶⁵ He points out that their abandonment of the temple building project is the reason for their meager agricultural harvest and economic failure. He admonishes them to set their priorities straight and work on building God's temple first. Haggai further encourages them by God's promise of his presence and his blessing, as

62. The order of living things listed here is in reverse order of the creation account in Gen. 1. For a detailed discussion on the relationship between Zeph. 1:2-3 and the creation account in Gen. 1-2, see Michael De Roche, "Zephaniah 1:2-3: The 'Sweeping' of Creation," *VT* 30 (1980): 104-9.

63. So, Larry L. Walker, "Zephaniah," in Longman and Garland (eds), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:655.

64. Here the mention of Zion and Israel together in 3:14 indicates that the restoration is for Israel as a whole.

65. Some scholars opine that the Jews did not return right after Cyrus' decree in 538 BCE, but sometime during the later days of Cambyses' reign (530-522 BCE). If that was the case, then the Jews had only returned three to five years beforehand. This view is proposed by Mark Leuchter and George Athas in an unpublished conference paper, "Is Cambyses Among the Persians?" However, most scholars take Ezra 1: 5:13-16 as describing a situation in the early period of Cyrus' reign and conclude that the returnees started to build the Temple foundation right way but abandoned it later due to the hostility from the neighboring people. See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 221. John Bright stated that "eighteen years after the work on the Temple had begun, it had not progressed beyond the foundation..."; see *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 367. Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 31, opines that Zerubbabel led the return to Jerusalem in 537 BCE. Although we cannot be sure of Zerubbabel's return date, there is a consensus that the first return under Sheshbazzar occurred shortly after Cyrus' decree in 538 BCE, and that they started building the Temple foundation right away but left unfinished.

well as giving them hope for a glorious future (2:5-9). Haggai's message is well received by the people, and that brings out God's promise of restoration and blessing (2:19b-23).

Zechariah

Zechariah is called "the prophet of hope and encouragement in troublous time."⁶⁶ The reason is that Zechariah prophesies the bright future that awaits Jerusalem. All this is made possible because Yahweh is "jealous for Zion with great jealousy (קנאה)" and "jealous for her with great wrath" (8:2). Here the word jealous is the same word that the Lord used to describe himself as "a jealous God" (אל קנא) in Exod. 20:5; 34:14. The reason for God's jealousy is because of his love for Israel, a love that demands exclusive loyalty.⁶⁷ It is precisely because of this love that Yahweh determines to return and make Jerusalem his permanent resident and calls it a "City of Truth" (עיר־אמת) (8:3).⁶⁸ He also promises the coming of a righteous and peaceful Messiah (9:9-10), and at the end, Yahweh himself is going to be king over the whole earth (14:9), and Jerusalem will be the center for all nations to come and worship God (14:20-21).

Malachi

Malachi tries to combat the disenchantment of the postexilic community. Their disappointment comes from the difficult life in Palestine: scanty harvests (cf. Hag. 1:6, 10), a failed economy, hostile neighbors (cf. Neh. 4:1-3, 7-8), and internal division between the poor and the rich (cf. Neh. 5:1-5). The reality facing the postexilic community is not even remotely close to the rosy and glorious future prophesized by the previous prophets. This leads to a general spiritual malaise in the society, which is revealed by the six disputations between Malachi and the populace (Mal. 1:2-5; 1:6-2:9; 2:10-16; 2:17-3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13-21 [4:3 Eng.]). Despite this gloomy portrayal of the postexilic community, Malachi still gives them hope by focusing on the certainty of the coming of the Messiah, who will punish the wicked and have compassion (חמל) on those who serve the Lord (3:17-18). Thus, God's justice and compassion give the disillusioned people hope to carry on.

66. Kenneth L. Barker quotes Theodore Laetsch in his commentary, "Zechariah," in Longman and Garland (eds), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:730.

67. This love is similar to the love between husband and wife, which demands exclusivity.

68. This name recalls Isaiah's words that the Lord is going to restore Jerusalem so that it will be called "the city of righteousness, the faithful city (קריה נאמנה)" (Isa. 1:26).

Conclusion

Israel's covenant with Yahweh entails reciprocal responsibilities between both parties. On the one hand, Yahweh as the suzerain sovereign promises to protect Israel and to ensure the well-being of his people. On the other hand, Israel, as God's people, should observe and keep God's covenantal law that is imposed on them. Israel violates the covenantal law by committing idolatry, social, political, and cultic crimes. Thus, they incur the covenantal curses as stated in Deut. 28:15-68. The adversity that befalls them leads the people to question God's justice. The prophets as God's spokesmen justify divine action by accusing the Israelites of breaking the covenantal law. Two prophets among the Twelve, Jonah and Habakkuk, stand on the side of the people and raise the issue of theodicy on behalf of them. Their encounters and discussions with Yahweh provide us with a better understanding of divine attributes and will.

Even though God metes out his judgment against the Israelites and gives them over to their enemies, Yahweh's compassion and mercy still remain with them. The intense self-questioning in Hos. 11:8 shows divine pathos most vividly. It is the divine attributes of compassion (רחום), steadfast love (חסד), faithfulness (אמת), and indeed his justice and righteousness as expressed in Exod. 34:6-7, that drive him to offer the Israelites future hope of salvation and restoration. And it is this confident hope that empowers and enables God's suffering righteous ones in all generations to sing the song of victory with Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree does not blossom
 And no fruit is on the vines,
 [Though] the produce of the olive fails
 And the fields yields no food,
 Though the flock is cut off from the fold
 And there is no herd in the stalls,
 Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.
 God, the Lord is my strength,
 He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
 And makes me tread upon my heights. (Hab. 3:17-19)