Obadiah - Commentaries by William Kelly

Brief Hints on the Minor Prophets, Brief Hints on the Minor Prophets

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Introduction

Does the group of the so-called Minor Prophets differ from all the other component parts of Holy Scripture? Or is each of them characterized by its own special aim, and a peculiar contribution to the sum of divine revelation? Let us examine them, however briefly, one by one, though in time they were gathered for convenience into a single volume by the Jews.

Hosea

The drift of Hosea, though in style terse and abrupt to obscurity, is sufficiently clear in the main to any attentive believer. He announces in chapter 1 the fall of Jehu's house and of Israel's kingdom, under the symbolic children Jezreel and Loruhamah. A still more awful doom was intimated by Lo-Ammi, when the ruin of Judah should leave Jehovah without a recognizable people. Yet the chapter does not conclude without the assurance (1) that, in the place where Lo-Ammi was said, sons of the living God should be said (which Romans 9 applies to the call of the Gentile and to privileges higher than Jewish), and (2) that the two houses of the divided people shall be gathered together with one head (Messiah without doubt in a day yet to come). Is not this so? 1 Peter 2 applies the end of Hosea 2 to the Christian Jews even now. It is plain, however, that the end of both chapters contemplates as a whole what is not yet in terms fulfilled. Hosea 3 fills up the gap with a graphic sketch of the long interval during which the people abide without privilege—civil or religious—and yet without idolatry, before their blessed restoration at the end of the days. Such is the first section.

The second part is a series of expostulations, entreaties, menaces, and lamentations over the beloved but guilty people, distinguishing the sons of Israel from Judah's in danger; and testifying, not only the loss of priestly place as a whole (Hosea 4:6), but priests, people, princes—all objects of divine displeasure and judgment (Hosea 5). Hosea 6 breaks out into a touching appeal that they might repent; as Hosea 7 has to pronounce woe, because even when they howled, they cried not to Jehovah in heart. Hosea 8, therefore, is the trumpet blast of coming destruction on Israel and Judah.

Yet, in Hosea 9, what tender pleading over Ephraim, about to become a wanderer, wherein the prophet was a snare! It was no new evil, but since Gibeah: what could be but cutting off Israel's king and the Assyrian their king (Hosea 10-11)? What a contrast with Jacob, as Hosea 7 draws out. Nevertheless, He declares that He will ransom them from the power of Sheol and redeem them from death.

Accordingly, the last chapter (14) provides words of confession and of return to Jehovah from iniquities and creature help with His own blessed and blessing promises—which shall be made good as surely as He spoke them through the prophet.

Joel

Joel remarkably differs from the general sweep of Hosea, for he concentrates attention from a then famine (Joel 1) on the northern army to perish in spite of its menaces between the eastern and the western seas. After that will come not only fullness of outward blessing, but the divine Spirit poured out upon all flesh; and in Jerusalem shall be no ruin nor danger more, but deliverance in every sense (Joel 2). For, in those days, Jehovah will enter into judgment with all the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat on account of Israel. The Apostle Peter was beyond controversy justified in vindicating the effusion of the Spirit at Pentecost as of this character, and in no wise creaturely excitement (Acts 2:16). But he is far from intimating that it was the fulfillment of the prophecy; which did not contemplate the formation of the church, or the going forth of the gospel to all the creation, but the earthly glories of the Messianic kingdom for Judah and Jerusalem, as shall surely be in due season. So the Apostle Paul applies it, in Romans 10, to the salvation of Jew or Gentile now, stopping short of citing the promised deliverance in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.

Amos

Who can fail to discriminate the work assigned to the herdman or sheep-master, Amos of Tekoa? No competent person can deny the beauty and force of his style or the fresh originality with which he pronounces Jehovah's punishment on the nations which surround His people, and the surprising fact that Judah and Israel fall under it also (Amos 1-2). Indeed, Amos 3 lets them together learn that, because they were known as none else, therefore He should visit them for their iniquities. But He would do nothing without revealing it to His servants the prophets. Do professing Christians believe either of those words of His? "Hear this word" begins Amos 3, 4 & 5—all of them warnings to His guilty people, whose false worship was the mother sin of all other sins. Amos 6 is a woe on their self-security and luxury, like Gentiles who know not God. Now would the Lord Jehovah, who repented of destroying judgments at the prophet's intercession, take the measuring-line in hand and desolate the people and king (Amos 7); as in Amos 8, the end is shown coming on Israel, and the land darkened in the clear day. Amos 9 reveals the Lord standing, not on a wall, but on the altar for judgment still more overwhelming. Yet, while He declares that He will shake the house of Israel to and fro among all the nations, He says not the least grain shall fall. Nay more, He will raise up David's fallen tabernacle and build it as in days of old to the downfall of their spiteful foes; He will pour on them earthly blessing without stint; and when He plants them in those days on their land, they shall no more be plucked up. These glorious realities await repentant Israel.

Obadiah

Obadiah calls for few words, not only because it is so short, but because its distinctive aim is most unmistakable. Edom is the object before him, and the judgment which the Lord Jehovah would inflict on its jealous and rancorous hatred of His chosen people. Their pride had deceived them; their fastnesses should not screen them: Jehovah will bring them down. Their boasted wisdom is in vain, as well as their

might. Their malice was aggravated, as against “thy brother Jacob,” and “in the day of his disaster.” But in the Day of Jehovah, upon all the nations shall be deliverance on Mount Zion, and it shall be holy; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. Can anything be plainer than the specialty of our prophet? or that he looks onward to the triumphs of the last days, when saviors shall come upon Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau, but the kingdom shall be Jehovah’s in a form and fullness never yet known on the earth?

Jonah

He who does not see Jonah’s distinctive place must have singularly little teaching. Indeed, it is himself or what befell him that is the prophetical sign, though the prophetic message, short as it is, must strike us as addressed to the Gentiles in Nineveh. The history is a great and instructive type throughout; and this is no mere idea but truth taught by our Lord.

Jonah 1 tells us of Jonah charged to cry against the great city because of its wickedness. Strange to say, he, a true prophet, flees west when bidden to go east. But Jehovah sent a mighty tempest on the ship sailing to Tarshish; and Jonah slept below, while the mariners cried each to his god, and vainly struggled on. At length they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah, who, as they knew, fled from Jehovah’s presence—and he frankly bade them cast him overboard as their only safety. This reluctantly and with prayer to Jehovah they did; and the sea ceased from raging to their deeper fear, which issued in a sacrifice to Him and vows. But Jehovah prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, who was in its belly three days and nights, the sign of Christ (Matt. 12).

There he prayed as in Jonah 2 owning salvation to be of Jehovah, who commanded the fish to vomit out Jonah on the dry land. And the word of Jehovah came to him the second time, bidding him to go and preach to Nineveh what He should say. Jonah both despised the Gentiles and feared that Jehovah might repent Him of judgment if they sought His mercy; and where then would be the glory of a prophet of Israel, when his Yea became Nay? The figure of death and resurrection opens the door of grace to the lost. If Christ for the time be lost to the Jew who rejected Him, grace works to save Gentiles. Jonah does his errand now (Jonah 3); and they repent at his preaching from the king downward, the very beasts covered with sackcloth being denied food and drink that they might cry out; and God repented of what He threatened.

This even now Jonah revealed (Jonah 4) and wished to die rather than his word should fail and Nineveh abide. But here was the truth so needed by Israel as well as Jonah. Hence the gourd, that sprang up under the hand of Jehovah Elohim to shelter the narrow-hearted and self-occupied prophet, withered under the worm He prepared to this end, so that Jonah fainted under the heat, and again wished to die. Then said Jehovah, “Thou hast pity on the gourd…and I, should not I have pity on Nineveh, the great city, wherein are more than 120,000 persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” Yes, He is the God of all grace, the God not of Jews only but of Gentiles also, whose mercies as the faithful Creator are over all His works. What Jew, what Rabbi, had ever allowed such a book within the sacred canon, if God had not written it for the purpose?

Micah

Next comes a still more brilliant seer: the word of Jehovah that came to Micah the Morasthite, a contemporary of Isaiah, concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. It is composed of three chief divisions, ushered in by a call to listen, “Hear, ye peoples, all of you; hearken, O earth, and all that is therein” (Micah 1:2, JND); “And I said, Hear, I pray you, ye heads of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel” (Micah 3:1, JND); and “Hear ye now what Jehovah saith,” etc. (Micah 6:1). Can the least discerning of believers fail to apprehend its distinctive character?

It opens with the imminent fall of the northern kingdom because of its transgression, but goes on to the punishment of Judah also and Jerusalem. “Of late my people is risen up as an enemy.” “Arise ye, and depart; for this is not the resting-place, because of defilement that bringeth destruction, even a grievous destruction” (Micah 2:8, 10, JND). The people and their prophets were alike wicked and rebellious. As Micah 1 has a predictive sketch of the Assyrian foe coming against Jerusalem, so does the end of Micah 2 present Him Who will effectuate Jehovah’s purpose of deliverance and blessing for the remnant of Israel at the end.

In the next section, he appeals to the chiefs, warning them against the prophets that cause Jehovah’s people to err. If they cried, Peace, without a vision or light from God, Micah could say that he was filled with power by the Spirit of Jehovah to declare unto Jacob his transgression and unto Israel his sin. Heads, priests, prophets were only building up Zion with blood and Jerusalem with unrighteousness, while veiling iniquity under the privilege of His name. Zion and Jerusalem should come to utter desolation (Micah 3:9, 12). But this is followed in Micah 4 by the glowing picture with which Isaiah begins his chapter 2. Only Micah, instead of going on to the overwhelming judgment of the Day of Jehovah as there, predicts the going to Babylon as Isaiah does in his chapter 39. Thence he turns to the closing scenes where many nations gather against Zion, which is told to arise and thresh many peoples: judgment awaiting its sure fulfillment, when the first or former dominion shall come to her.

This gives occasion for announcing a still deeper reason for putting off blessing and the giving up His people for a season. Awful to think and say, they should smite the Judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek (Micah 5:1)! And a parenthesis reveals Him born at Bethlehem, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting. His rejection was their own rejection, till God’s counsel comes to birth; when the residue of His brethren, instead of merging in the church of God as now, shall return unto the children of Israel, and the kingdom be displayed in power and glory before all the world. And the prospect is beautifully described to the end of this part.

The third section is a most affecting call to hear Jehovah’s controversy with His people, in spite of His goodness to them from the beginning and through the wilderness into Canaan. It is not offerings but righteousness He values. In the face of iniquity, deceit, and violence, of family bonds turned to enmity all the more evil and destructive, the prophet waits on Jehovah with confidence of deliverance and vindication. And he looks through the desolation that must intervene because of Israel’s sins to the restitution of all things in the latter day, when the nations shall be ashamed of all their might, and lick the dust. “Who is a God like unto Thee, that forgiveth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger forever, because He delighteth in loving-kindness. He will turn again, He will yet again have compassion on us; He will tread under foot our iniquities: and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the seas. Thou wilt perform truth to Jacob, loving-kindness to Abraham, which Thou hast sworn unto our fathers, from the days of old” (Micah 7:18-20, JND). In denying God’s faithfulness to Israel and monopolizing the earthly promises, Babylon has shown herself, as in all else, faithless to the true place of His church—in present and future glory with Christ.

Nahum

As Micah on a small scale noticed both Babylon and the Assyrian which Isaiah presented much more fully, Nahum is occupied only with Nineveh and its chief before the world-powers were ordained. For such was the order historically, as prophetically it will be the inverse. (Compare Isaiah 13-14 with Micah 4:5) For what answers to Babylon, the imperial Beast or fourth empire revived for judgment at the consummation of the age, will meet its doom before the Assyrian comes up with the external nations for final destruction when Israel shall be owned of Jehovah; but the reign of righteousness and peace is not yet fully established. Who can deny the special place designed for Nahum as to Nineveh, any more than the peculiar task given to Obadiah as to Edom?

Nahum was a Galilean like Jonah; and if the latter was sent long before to warn the haughty Gentile—and, on repentance, to defer the judgment in divine mercy—the former was given, on its raising its head still more proudly, to pronounce Jehovah's indignant vengeance, however slow to anger; for He is as great as He is good. In vain went forth out of Nineveh one that imagined evil against Jehovah, a counselor of Belial. He will make a full end—trouble shall not rise a second time, as Sennacherib proved: his yoke broken, His people's bonds burst, out of the house of the Assyrian's god, graven and molten images cut off, and his grave prepared. The scourge finally past is followed by the enduring peace of His people (Nahum 1).

What more superb than the lifelike, graphic sketch of the dashing in pieces (Nahum 2)? But all ends, not in Jerusalem taken, but in Nineveh and its palace melting away in its own rivers which burst the gates—the converse of Babylon's later fate. The lair of the lions would be an utter ruin, instead of a terror (Nahum 3). Nineveh was no better than Thebes, or No-Amon; there is no healing of her breach.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk begins by complaining of the evil in Jehovah's people, when he is reminded of the marvelous work He wrought in using the Chaldeans in their proud self-seeking energy to chastise them. This turns his complaint against the wicked swallowing up one more righteous, and withal sacrificing to his net and burning incense to his drag (Habakkuk 1). Can any hesitate to own distinctive design here?

The prophet waits for His word, and Jehovah's answer comes so plainly that the runner may read it. The just shall live by his faith, before public deliverance is given. If God is patient, His people may well be. All the iniquity was seen and felt: retribution would come at an appointed time. The peoples labor for the fire, and the nations weary themselves in vain. For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Jehovah (not of the gospel, which appeals to faith now for heaven), as the waters cover the sea. The Babylonian capturing would be to no purpose any more than their famous building; and their intoxication of others for deceit as of themselves would end in shame, like their idolatries: Jehovah is in His holy temple above, whatever the state of His house on earth. Silence! (Habakkuk 2)

His prayer follows in Habakkuk 3, and the power that will make itself seen, heard, and felt, rises for his soul as he recalls His deliverance of old—though but partial, as He had only Israel in view, not yet Messiah and the new covenant. He anticipates the triumphant lot of Israel, as is already seen, no less than the downfall of their foes; but he ends with the faith that waits, though not a sign meanwhile appears (Habakkuk 3).

Zephaniah

Is Zephaniah one whit less distinctive? Is he not beyond mistake occupied from first to last with the Day of Jehovah on Jerusalem? But the land and the Jewish remnant are fully in view for that day. The reign of the last pious king did not hinder or defer it; for the general advance in evil revolt would be all the surer when that check vanished. Divine judgment must clear away all offenses, that righteousness by grace may flourish. Hardly any truth is more repulsive to haughty and lawless Christendom than the Lord's unexpected dealing with the living, though every one in word confesses that He is coming to judge the quick as well as the dead. Who can wonder that idolatrous Jews decried it? It is the becoming answer of our prophet to all questions. If Jehovah must judge His people, all the world must bow—no nation can escape. What Nebuchadnezzar did was but the earnest of a great and complete judgment; yet Jehovah could not but begin with His land, people, and city, as in Zephaniah 1.

In Zephaniah 2, a remnant is looked for, the meek, that they may be hidden in that day which overtakes the guilty mass. There is—indeed, and for the same reason—the doom of the Philistines, of Moab, and of Ammon. But not the neighbors only; He will famish all the gods of the earth; and Assyria with its great city Nineveh shall fall into desolation.

Zephaniah 3 returns to Jerusalem unsparingly. But, from verse 8, he shows Jehovah rising to pour His indignation upon the nations and kingdoms in all the earth. Then will He turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call on Jehovah's name and serve Him with one consent. And His dispersed shall return, suppliant and accepted, afflicted and poor, but unrighteous and deceitful no more. Assuredly, it is a day yet future, when none shall make them afraid. From verse 14, he calls on the daughter of Zion to exult, Israel to shout. Jehovah is their king and in their midst, having taken away their judgments and cast out their enemy. "He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love; he will exult over thee with singing." Praise and fame He will make in all the lands of their shame when He gathers and turns again their captivity before their eyes. It is wholly distinct from the gospel or the church.

Haggai

The three prophets that remain were after the Return, and thus differ from all before. The house of God, lowly as it might be, was a great test for their lukewarm state. Haggai was sent to awaken their zeal: not God's providence, however it might work, but Jehovah's word. Difficulties arose, and they left off to build. It was not the time, said they. "Is it time for you to dwell in your wainscoted houses, while this house lieth waste?" replies the prophet, as he points out how their efforts came to failure under His hand Who bade them, "Consider your ways." But there were those who heard Zerubbabel and Joshua, and others of opened ear; and Jehovah's messenger declared on His part, I am with you, saith Jehovah; and they came and worked for Jehovah's house (Haggai 1).

Near a month after, the word came to such as had ears to hear, abating any disappointment from comparison with the house in its former glory: Be strong, for I am with you. "For thus saith Jehovah of hosts: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry [land]; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come; and I will fill this house with glory, saith Jehovah of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith Jehovah of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, saith Jehovah of hosts; and in this place will I give peace, saith Jehovah of hosts" (Haggai 2:6-9, JND). Could any answer be more assuring or glorious? Some believed it then, we may trust, to their blessing: do men who call themselves Christians believe it now? Whatever

measure of application it had when Christ came the first time, Hebrews 12 leaves no doubt that its fulfillment awaits the second advent. It may be observed how carefully the house is viewed as one till then. Render therefore as in the Septuagint, “the latter glory of this house,” not “the glory of this latter house.” It has unity in His eyes.

The third message turns on holiness according to the law. Things ordinary are not sanctified by the touch of what is holy; though the holy becomes unclean by contact with defilement. Such the prophet declares this people and every work of theirs unclean. Yet they are told to consider from this day that, instead of smiting as before, Jehovah would bless them (Haggai 2:10-19).

On the same day came a fourth word, in which Jehovah says, “I will shake the heavens and the earth; and I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and those that ride therein; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother” (Haggai 2:21-22, JND). It is the judgment of the quick, or at least that part which relates to the nations that gather against Israel; it is after the destruction of the Beast and his vassal kings and armies whom the Lord destroys by His appearing. Zerubbabel seems taken as a shadow of great David’s greater son in the verse following. A strange critic would he be who fails to discern Haggai’s special place, and a faithless one who questions his divine inspiration.

Zechariah

No less distinctive is the work given to Zechariah, who alone approaches in his earlier visions to the apocalyptic character of Daniel among the four so-called greater prophets. But, unlike Daniel, he is occupied with Jerusalem, and launches out in his later visions to the open and magnificent scenes of universal glory under Jehovah-Messiah for all the earth. If all peoples and all the nations assemble against Jerusalem even in the Day of Jehovah, He will go forth and fight with them and smite all their adversaries; and it shall be that all that are left of all the nations which came up against her shall go up from year to year to worship the King, Jehovah of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. It is the day of His manifested supremacy in the midst of Israel, and clearly as yet to be fulfilled. What circumstances among the returned remnant gave the prophet an existing groundwork? Did the book come from God? or is it a human dream? That the writer could begin with prose, and rise to poetical style when called for later is no great marvel.

After aggrieved appeal in the preface of Zechariah 1:1-6, the youthful prophet saw (as in the rest of the chapter) the vision of the administering powers of the three empires under the symbol of red, bay, and white horses; for the first empire had passed away and the provisional return to the land had already been a fact for some 18 years. Next he saw four horns, powers which had scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem, as well as four smiths to cast out those Gentile horns. Zechariah 2 presents a man with a line to measure Jerusalem; for if Jehovah was jealous over the feeble remnant, He also looks on to the time when He would be the glory in their midst; and a song quite as lofty as any afterward follows. In Zechariah 3 is solved by grace the question of fitness for His presence, though the high priest represents also their responsibility meanwhile. But the Branch or Sprout is promised, Who will be the true Stone of Israel, when their iniquity shall pass away, and communion shall abound. The vision of order and holy power in testimony follows in Zechariah 4—in its measure of light then, but complete only when He reigns Who combines royalty and priesthood. Zechariah 5 gives two visions of judgment which must be: the flying roll against iniquity in Israel toward man and toward Jehovah; and the ephah with the woman (this is wickedness, or demoralizing idolatry) carried off to Shinar, its source, for its dwelling-place. After the vision of the four chariots in Zechariah 6, representing the external powers in divine providence, comes the word of Jehovah on the occasion of gifts from those of the captivity, to make crowns—one of which was to be set on Joshua—again looking on to the Branch Who should build the temple of Jehovah emphatically, bearing the glory, sitting and ruling upon His throne, a priest thereon, when the counsel of peace should be between Them both. What believer can mistake the special design of this?

Zechariah 7 & 8 seem transitional. Such fasts as those in the captivity would not do: Jehovah claimed righteousness and mercy, not oppression and evil-mindedness, for which He had scattered them. Returned to Zion, He would restore and bless to the full—as He will yet. Fasts will yield to feasts, and peoples come to Jerusalem as they never yet have done, whatever the application of intermediate condition then.

Then we have “the burden of the word of Jehovah” in Zechariah 9. Not only will He defend His house against surrounding foes, but Zion’s King will come in humiliation, notably and to the letter fulfilled, but going on to the day when Ephraim, as well as Jerusalem, shall behold His judgments issuing in peace to the nations and dominion everywhere. How could such a future be before the prophet without kindling the fire of hope so assured? And this is pursued through Zechariah 10.

But in Zechariah 11 comes a change to pathos and grief, as Christ’s rejection passes before his spirit, and the retributive usurpation of Antichrist. Then another “burden” is heard concerning Israel; and besieged Jerusalem becomes a burdensome stone, as never yet, “to all peoples” (Zechariah 12:3); and David’s house and Jerusalem’s inhabitants shall be objects of grace in true repentance; and a fountain to cleanse those who may look to Him whom they pierced shall be opened in that day (Zechariah 13). Then shall the very names of idols, and prophets with the unclean, pass out of the land; and Christ is again recalled, wounded in the house of His friends, albeit Jehovah’s Shepherd, the Man who is His fellow. Scattering is thence justly predicted, though not without protection for the little ones. But again we are in presence of the final crisis (Zechariah 13:8-9), which is too plain in Zechariah 14 save for obstinate unbelief. There is a final capture of Jerusalem in part when all the nations join to assail it; but Jehovah then decides all. (Compare Psa. 48; Isa. 29; Isa. 66). Subjection to Him is the glorious and blessed result.

Malachi

The brief prophecy of Malachi has its specific moral traits, exactly suited to Jehovah’s final call to the Jew in view of His messenger to prepare the way, and of the Lord suddenly coming to His temple. He denounces irreverence, corruption, fraud, and profanity in the returned, but looks for a remnant, and is sure of divine faithfulness to purpose and promise. Jehovah’s name shall be great among the nations when His kingdom comes. What is Israel now? What the priests are as in Malachi 2. All hung on Jehovah’s coming; but He will judge as well as purge (Malachi 3). Meanwhile, those that fear Him have the resource of His name and shall be His peculiar treasure; as He will discern the wicked too. For His day comes as a furnace for the wicked, but with healing for those that are His, who also shall tread down the wicked. It is for Israel in that day, not the heavenly church, though we should profit by all the word (Malachi 4). Thus He recalls the law of Moses, and promises Elijah, before that day, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and of the children to their fathers, lest His coming should bring not blessing but curse, as the first man entails.