

Zephaniah - Introduction & Background

Title

The work's title comes from the book's central character and presumed author (1:1). The Hebrew title of the book is *Tsephan-yah*, which means "Yahweh hides" or "Yahweh protects" or "Jehovah has hidden (him)." This title is appropriate considering the book's emphasis on God's promise to hide the repentant remnant from judgment (2:3). This name also may have come from the fact that Zephaniah, who was born during Manasseh's diabolical reign, had to be hidden in order to be spared from this bloody king's reach. Because of Zephaniah's connection to the royal line (1:1), perhaps Manasseh sought to kill Zephaniah in an attempt to preempt the eventual fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. The LXX entitles the book *Sophonias* and the Latin Vulgate adopted this same title. The English title is derived from this same rendering.

Authorship

Zephaniah as the writer of the book is identified in the work's opening verse. Constable responds to attacks on the book's unity. "Zephaniah's prediction of Nineveh's fall (2:15; 612 BC) led critics who do not believe that the prophets could predict the future to date the book after that event. Differences in language and style led critics to divide the book up and identify its various parts with diverse sources. Yet the unity of the message and flow of the entire book, plus ancient belief in its unity, have convinced most conservative scholars to regard Zephaniah as the product of one writer." Furthermore, the argument that Zephaniah could not have predicted the fall of Nineveh reveals the critic's anti-supernatural bias against predictive prophecy.

As far as Zephaniah's biography is concerned, he was born during Manasseh's reign.

Apparently, his name was a popular one since it is shared by three other OT figures (1 Chr 6:36; Jer 1:21; Zech 6:10). Interestingly, Zephaniah traces his lineage (1:1) back four generations to King Hezekiah of Judah (729–686 BC). On the basis of the time sequence, some object to this identification. However, these arguments have been answered.

Others object to this identification on the grounds that the verse does not say "Hezekiah of Judah." However, it is possible to understand the phrase "king of Judah" appearing at the end of the first verse to refer to both Josiah and Hezekiah. Furthermore, there is really no need to specifically identify Hezekiah as the king of Judah since he was already known to have filled this role in the life of Judah. The actual King Hezekiah must be in view in the book's first verse or else what would be the point of Zephaniah tracing his ancestry backward four generations to a person whose name merely happened to be Hezekiah. Perhaps Zephaniah traced his lineage back to Hezekiah in order to find a common link with

Josiah's reforms that took place in Zephaniah's day thus enabling the prophet to distinguish these two good kings with the wicked reigns of Manasseh and Amon. If the conclusion that Zephaniah is related to Hezekiah is correct, then more pieces of biographical information can be known of this prophet. First, Zephaniah enjoyed social privilege as a result of his royal lineage. Such privilege would grant him unfettered access to the king's court. Second, Zephaniah was a resident of Jerusalem (1:4,9-10; 3:1-7). Third, Zephaniah was a citizen of the southern kingdom of Judah. Other than these few biographical details, nothing more is known of Zephaniah.

Date

The book's opening verse (1:1) limits the time of the work's composition to the reign of Josiah (640–609 BC). Furthermore, the book must have been written prior to 612 BC since it predicts Nineveh's destruction (2:13) and 612 BC is the date of the city's fall. Moreover, the book was likely written before 627 BC since it portrays a strong Assyria (2:13-15).

Assyrian power began to wane with Ashurbanipal's death in 627 BC.

In addition, the book must have been written before 628 BC. The book's description of Jerusalem's sins (1:3-13; 3:1-7) indicates that it was written prior to Josiah's reforms.

These reforms began during the twelfth year of Josiah's reign (2 Chr 34:3-7) in 628 BC.

While Zephaniah's ministry transpired before Josiah's reforms, it likely paved the way for these reforms.

Some contend that the book was written after the inauguration of Josiah's reforms. It is argued that the prophet allegedly makes numerous references to the Law (1:3 in Deut 28:30,39; 1:15 in Deut 4:11; 1:17 in Deut 28:29; 2:2 in Deut 28:15-62) that was rediscovered by Hilkiah in the temple (2 Chr 34:8–35:19). It is also argued that the Baal cult was merely a remnant at the time of writing (1:4). However, these arguments are merely anecdotal since Zephaniah, as a prophet of God, had an awareness of the Mosaic Law, as did all OT prophets.

Furthermore, it is improbable that there would have been any remnant of Baal left had the book been written during or after Josiah's reforms. These reforms would have eliminated the Baal cult altogether.

However, it is difficult to date the book before 630 BC. "Assuming that Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah (715-688 BC) and assuming that he did not begin his prophetic ministry until he was at least twenty years old, then the earliest date for his ministry would be about 630-620 BC. Thus the prophecy should probably be dated sometime between 630 and 612 BC, in the latter part of King Josiah's reign." In sum, assigning a date of 630 BC for the composition of the book seems appropriate.

Audience

Several reasons make it apparent that the Book of Zephaniah is addressed to the southern kingdom of Judah. First, Zephaniah was related to Hezekiah (1:1), who was a Judean king.

Second, Zephaniah's familiarity with Jerusalem (1:4,9-10; 3:1-7) indicates that he was a resident of the southern kingdom. Third, if 630 BC is the proper date of the book, then it must have been written to the southern kingdom since the northern kingdom had already been scattered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. "Thus Zephaniah's audience consisted of the people of Judah, the surviving southern kingdom. Specifically, he ministered to the upper echelons of society rather than to the average Israelites, as evidenced by his references to the princes, judges, prophets, and priests (1:8-9; 3:3-4)."

Place of Writing

Zephaniah's connection to the royal line (1:1) makes Jerusalem the likely place of the book's composition. This conclusion is buttressed through the prophet's reference to Jerusalem as "this place" (1:4) and his familiarity with the city's features (1:9-10; 3:1-7).

Structure

The book of Zephaniah yields four basic parts. First, the book contains three oracles of judgment (1:1—2:3; 2:4-15; 3:1-7). Second, the book concludes with a promise of restoration (3:8-20). "Many have recognized the similarity of structure in Zephaniah with that found in other prophetic books. Broadly speaking, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Septuagint of Jeremiah, and Zephaniah all (1) begin with a set of oracles pertaining to the immediate historical situation of Judah, then (2) turn to oracles against foreign nations, and (3) end with oracles of future eschatological blessing."

Historical Background

Internationally, the Book of Zephaniah was written during the transitional time period in between the waning Assyrian empire and the burgeoning Babylonian threat. The Assyrian empire began to deteriorate with the death of Ashurbanipal (627 BC) and the defeat of the Assyrian capital Nineveh (612 BC). Babylon continued to enjoy victories over the Assyrian remnant at Haran (609 BC) and Carchemish (605 BC). No longer a vassal of Assyria, Judah experienced momentary national independence until the death of Josiah at Megiddo in 609 BC. Josiah was killed when he led an army to Megiddo to oppose Egypt's military support of Assyria, who sought to oppose the advancing Babylonian army. Judah then became a vassal of Egypt (2 Kings 23:33-35) from 609 to 605 BC and then a vassal of Babylon (2 Kings 24:1) following Nebuchadnezzar's incursion into the land of Israel in 605 BC.

Internally, the spiritual gains introduced by Hezekiah's reforms were quickly erased through the evil reigns of Manasseh and Amon. In fact, so wicked were these kings that Josiah's reforms were "too little too late" to remove impending covenant judgment. Following Josiah's death, Judah quickly returned to gross covenant rebellion (2 Kings 23:37; Ezek 8:1-8). Thus, both Josiah's reforms and Zephaniah's prophetic ministry could only postpone the coming judgment without removing it. This reality helps explain why Zephaniah focuses so heavily on the Day of the Lord motif. Consequently, many have described Zephaniah as an "eleventh hour" prophet. Nahum (664–654 BC), Habakkuk

(609–605 BC), and Jeremiah (627–580 BC) were all either contemporaries or near contemporaries of Zephaniah (630 BC).

Message

The Day of the Lord (1:7) will introduce God's wrath in both the near (586 BC) and distant future upon Judah and Jerusalem for covenant rebellion and upon the sinful Gentile nations. This coming judgment will be accompanied by ultimate deliverance and redemption for a repentant Jewish remnant and for the Gentiles.

Purposes

The Book of Zephaniah was written in order to accomplish several purposes. First, the book was written in order to announce impending judgment upon Judah. Second, the book was written to call Judah to repentance so judgment could be postponed. Third, the book was written to outline the restoration that both Judah (3:11-20) and the Gentile nations (3:9-10) would enjoy in the distant future so that they both could experience hope in the midst of the coming judgment.

Theological Themes

Numerous theological themes recur throughout the Book of Zephaniah. First, the book emphasizes God's holiness (3:5) leading to His moral demands upon both Jew and Gentile. Second, the book emphasizes God's judgment upon Judah for her covenant infidelity. Third, the book emphasizes God's coming judgment upon the surrounding Gentile nations (2:4-15) and the world (1:2-3) for their prideful sin. Fourth, the book emphasizes God's restoration of Judah (3:11-20). Fifth, the book emphasizes God's restorative purposes for both the Gentile nations (2:11; 3:9-10) and the world. Sixth, the book focuses upon the Day of the Lord motif. If one holds to a pre-exilic date for the writing of Joel (835–830 BC), then Zephaniah gives more development to the Day of the Lord concept than what was previously unfolded in the Book of Joel. For example, the Day of the Lord will come upon all creation (1:2-3), is imminent (1:14), represents terrifying judgment upon sin (1:15,17), will engulf all the nations of the earth (1:2-3; 2:14-15; 3:8), will preserve or hide a Jewish and Gentile remnant (3:9-13), will usher in blessing (3:14-20), and is inadvertible.

Christ in Zephaniah

The clearest direct messianic prophecy in Zephaniah is found in 3:15-17, which promises a coming righteous king who will rule in lieu of Judah's idolatrous priests (1:4). Furthermore, Christ is featured in the book since only He can bring to pass the millennial restoration that the book predicts (3:9-20). In addition, Christ on two occasions referred to Zephaniah in the context of His return (1:3 in Matt 13:41; 1:15 in Matt 24:29).

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Zephaniah boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the phrase the Day of the Lord is mentioned 23x in the span of just three chapters. Thus, this phrase is

used more in the Book of Zephaniah than in any other OT book. Second, unlike other OT prophets who only trace their genealogy to their father when they offer a genealogy (Is 1:1; Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1), Zephaniah traces his genealogy over four generations (1:1).

Third, Zephaniah is the only OT prophet of royal lineage (1:1). Fourth, the book includes four movements from the general to the specific. These movements include the transition from global judgment (1:1-3) to judgment upon Judah (1:4—2:3), from judgment upon the surrounding Gentile nations (2:4-15) to judgment upon Jerusalem (3:1-7), and from restoration of the Gentile nations (3:8-10) to restoration of Israel (3:11-20). Fifth, Zephaniah's royal lineage gave him greater access to Josiah's court and more familiarity with current national issues than many other OT prophets.

Sixth, Zephaniah frequently makes use of word plays. For example, the cities named Gaza and Ekron resemble the verbs that Zephaniah uses to predict future destruction upon these cities (2:4). Seventh, the book contains one of the clearest, most vivid prophecies of millennial restoration (3:9-20) found anywhere else in the OT. Eighth, Constable observes that the Book of Zephaniah has been called "a compendium of the oracles of the prophets...First, Zephaniah's general message is similar to that of most of the other writing prophets. Second, he used the same terms as several of the other prophets (Cf. 1:7 and Hab 2:20; 1:7 and Joel 1:15 and Is 34:6; 2:14 and Is 13:21; 34:11; 2:15 and Is 47:8)."

Outline

I. The coming day of divine wrath for Judah and Jerusalem (Zeph 1:1—2:3)

(1) Introduction (1:1)

(A) Author (1:1a)

(B) Date (1:1b)

(2) Universal judgment (1:2-3)

(A) Announcement of universal judgment (1:2)

(B) Objects of universal judgment (1:3)

(3) Judgment upon Judah (Zeph 1:4—2:3)

(A) Objects of judgment (1:4-9)

(a) Judah and Jerusalem (1:4a)

(b) Baal worshipers (1:4b)

(c) Idolatrous priests (1:4c)

(d) Astral worshipers (1:5a)

(e) Molech worshipers (1:5a)

(f) Apostates (1:6)

(g) Interlude: announcement of the coming day of the Lord (1:7)

(h) Faithless leaders (1:8)

(i) Threshold jumpers (1:9)

- (B) Horrors of the judgment (1:10-18)
 - (a) The wailing people (1:10-11)
 - (b) The fierce revenge of God (1:12-13)
 - (c) Nature of the judgment (1:14-18)
 - (i) Imminence (1:14)
 - (ii) Intensity (1:15-17)
 - (iii) Unstoppable (1:18a)
 - (iv) Universality (1:18b)
- (C) Invitation for Judah to repent so judgment can be averted (2:1-3)

II. Coming day of divine wrath upon Judah's surrounding neighbors (Zeph 2:4-15)

- (1) Philistia to the West (2:4-7)
 - (A) Objects of judgment (2:4-5a)
 - (B) Finality of the judgment (2:5b)
 - (C) Restorative effects of the judgment (2:6-7)
- (2) Moab and Ammon to the East (2:8-11)
 - (A) Cause of judgment: arrogant taunting (2:8,10)
 - (B) Finality of the judgment (2:9a)
 - (C) Results of the judgment (2:9b,11)
 - (a) Territory to be possessed by Israel (2:9b)
 - (b) Moabites and Ammonites to worship God (2:11)
- (3) Cush or Ethiopia to the South (2:12)
- (4) Assyria to the North (2:13-15)
 - (A) Reality of the judgment (2:13)
 - (B) Finality of the judgment (2:14,15b)
 - (C) Cause of the judgment: pride (2:15a)

III. Woe oracle upon Jerusalem (Zeph 3:1-7)

- (1) Jerusalem's unrighteousness (3:1-4)
 - (A) City's sins (3:1-2)
 - (B) Citizen's sins (3:3-4)
 - (a) Princes (3:3a)
 - (b) Judges (3:3b)
 - (c) Prophets (3:4a)
 - (d) Priests (3:4b)
- (2) God's contrasting righteousness (3:5-7)
 - (A) God's righteousness described (3:5)
 - (B) God's righteousness demands that He judge Jerusalem (3:6-7)

IV. Salvation in the day of the Lord for the righteous remnant (3:8-20)

- (1) Judgment upon all the nations (3:8)

- (2) Future blessings upon the Gentiles(3:9-10)
 - (A) Purification for service (3:9)
 - (B) Regathering for worship (3:10)
 - (3) Future blessings for Israel (3:11-20)
 - (A) Removal of sin (3:11-13)
 - (B) Rejoicing (3:14-17)
 - (a) First round (3:14-15)
 - (i) Reality of rejoicing (3:14)
 - (ii) Reasons for rejoicing (3:15)
 - (a) God's removal of judgment (3:15a)
 - (b) God's presence (3:15b)
 - (b) Second round (3:16-17)
 - (i) Reality of rejoicing (3:16)
 - (ii) Reasons for rejoicing (3:17)
 - (a) God's power (3:17a)
 - (b) God's joy over Israel (3:17b)
 - (C) Restoration of Israel's fortunes (3:18-20)
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Introduction

Zephaniah means "Whom the Lord hides (or protects)." He was born during the latter part of the reign of Manasseh (686-642 BC); Cf. 2 Kings 21:16. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Dating Authentication

Zephaniah's prophecy was given after Josiah's revival, for these reasons:

- (1) Cutting off the remnant of Baal worship implied that a religious awakening was in progress (Zeph 1:4)
- (2) Jeremiah, who prophesied long after 622 BC (as well as before), described Judah's religious and moral condition much as did Zephaniah (Cf. Jer 8:2; 19:13 with Zeph 1:5; Cf. Jer 5:2,7 with Zeph 1:5b; and Cf. Jer 8:8-9 with Zeph 3:4)
- (3) The fact that the king's sons wore foreign apparel suggests that they were old enough to make their own choices (Zeph 1:8)
- (4) Zephaniah's frequent quotations of the Law suggest that he was using the sources discovered by Hilkiah (Cf. v13 with Deut 28:30,39; Cf. Zeph 1:15 with Deut 4:11; Cf. Zeph 1:17 with Deut 28:29; Cf. Zeph 2:2 with Deut 28:15-62)
- (5) Zephaniah's message of impending judgment would be appropriate for those who spurned the religious revival under Josiah. Thus his prophecy was given sometime after

the time of Josiah's revival in 622 BC, but before the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC—which Zephaniah indicated was still in existence then as the capital of the Assyrian Empire (Zeph 2:13).

Historical Setting

Politically, Judah was benefiting from a power vacuum among the superpowers of the day, so much so that King Josiah extended his influence militarily as far north as Naphtali.

At that time Assyria—which had carried off the 10 Northern tribes in 722 BC, under Sargon II—was rapidly suffering eclipse. When Sin-shar-ishkun (623-612 BC), Ashurbanipal's son, was reigning over Assyria, the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to emerge under Nabopolassar in 626. Also the Medes, under Cyaxares II in 625, pulled out from under Assyrian authority.

The collapse of the Assyrian Empire was delayed as the Egyptians under Psamtik I (664-609 BC) allied with them, but a coalition of Medes and Babylonians destroyed Assyria's capital city, Nineveh, in 612 BC. Before Josiah's reign, Manasseh (695-642 BC) and Manasseh's son Amon (642-640 BC) had introduced wicked practices into Judah. So Josiah was encouraged to remove Assyrian religious practices from Judah. As a result Judah prospered politically.

Manasseh built altars to Baal and worshiped the sun, moon, and stars. He built altars to these stellar objects and placed them in the temple courts (2 Kings 21:4-5) and he made a carved Asherah pole (an image of the goddess Asherah) and placed it in the temple (2 Kings 21:7). Child sacrifice and astrology prospered (2 Kings 21:6; 23:10-11). King Amon, who may have been named after an Egyptian deity, continued his father's policies until his assassination (2 Kings 21:19-26; 2 Chr 33:21-25).

Josiah succeeded Amon in 640 BC at the age of 8. In 632 BC, at age 16, Josiah began to seek after the God of his forefather David. In 628, Josiah started a reform movement in which much of the idolatry was purged from Jerusalem and Judah. About that time Jeremiah (627 BC) commenced his ministry and Judah moved toward independence from Assyria with a potential revival of the idea of an undivided kingdom like that of David and Solomon.

Then in the 18th year of Josiah's reign (622 BC) a copy of the Law was discovered by Hilkiah the high priest (2 Kings 22:3-8). This accentuated the religious renewal, including a new enthusiasm for celebrating the Passover (2 Kings 23:1-25; 2 Chr 35:3ff).

Unfortunately the promising reform movement was superficial for it did not deeply affect the politico-religious life of the nation. Worship of Yahweh was re-established, but idolatry was not entirely removed. This may also explain why the Priests had removed the Ark of the Covenant and sought protection under Pharaoh Necho (Cf. 2 Chr 35ff).

Both Zephaniah and Jeremiah prophesied to a politically prospering people of coming judgment because Josiah's reform movement still went unheeded. Baal was again being worshiped (Cf. Jer 19:5; 32:35). This may be why the Ark spent several centuries on Elephantine Island in Egypt before being moved to Tana Kirkos Island on Lake Tana, Ethiopia. (Note: Pharaoh Necho was Ethiopian.)

Day of the Lord

- The phrase "The Day of the Lord" occurs 7x in this book
- Judgment would begin with God's people, Israel (Is 2:5—3:26; Ezek 13:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1,11; Zeph 1:7,14; Zech 14:1)
- It would begin with a battle cry as the Lord summoned His enemies to prepare for battle (Is 13:3-5; Ezek 30:2-3; Joel 1:15)
- It would be a day of darkness (Ezek 30:3) and fire (Zeph 1:18; Mal 4:1) and of cataclysmic events (Is 34:4), when the earth would tremble (Joel 2:1-11).

"The Day of the Lord" sometimes involves the judgment of God's people, including the Northern Kingdom (at the hands of the Assyrians; cf. Amos 5:18,20); and Judah (at the hands of the Babylonians; Cf. Lam 1:12; 2:1,21-22; Ezek 7:19; 13:5; Zeph 2:2-3). Sometimes this judgment appears in the context of a more universal judgment on all nations (Cf. Is 2:12; Zeph 1:18).

These examples of the Lord's intervention in history prefigure that final time period when He will annihilate His enemies on a more universal scale and restore Israel (for a thorough development of this relationship between history and eschatology, see Isaiah 13-27).

The Day of the Lord, however, as other Scriptures show, will include other events:

- (1) Before Israel's enemies will be destroyed, they will plunder and devastate Israel (Zech 14:1-2)
- This will be a time of anguish for Israel (Zeph 1:7-18; Cf. Dan. 12:1)
- Jesus called this time period (the Great Tribulation) a time of "great distress" for the nation (Matt 24:21)

(2) After the Lord will destroy His enemies (at Messiah's return) the day of the Lord will include a time of blessing for Israel, known as the Millennium - cf. Obadiah 15 with Obadiah 21

(3) Then, after the Millennium the day of the Lord will also include the destruction of the present heavens and earth and the creation of new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10,12-13)

Therefore, "the Day of the Lord" will be a lengthy time period including both judgment and blessing. It will begin soon after the Rapture and will include the seven-year Tribulation, the return of the Messiah, the Millennium, and the making of the new heavens and new earth.

Obviously this contradicts the view of some that at the end of the Great Tribulation the Rapture will occur and the day of the Lord will then begin.

In the Day of the Lord, Babylon (Is 13:1,6,9), Egypt (Jer 46:10-11), Edom (Obadiah 1,15), and other nations (Joel 2:31; 3:14; Obadiah 14) would be laid waste as God intervened to punish sin that had come to a climax.

The Day of the Lord will begin with the Tribulation period, "The time of Jacob's Trouble":
- In OT: Jer 30:7; Is 24:20-21; 26:20-21; 34:1-3; Joel 1:15; 2:2; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:14-18
- In NT: Rev 6:16-17; 11:18; 14:19; 15:1,7; 16:5-7; 19:1-2 and, it would include the entire Millennium

It was spoken of as a "day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12); a "day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:9); and, a "day of wrath" (Rev 6:17).

There are 1,845 references to Christ's rule on the earth in the OT. A total of 17 OT books give prominence to the event. Of 216 chapters in the NT, there are 318 references to the Second Coming. It is mentioned in 23 of the 27 books (excepting three that are single-chapter letters to private individuals, and Galatians)

For every prophecy relating to His first coming, there are eight relating to His Second Coming. Still, most people assume that the future is but a linear extrapolation of the present; life will just go on. But the Bible says otherwise.

One of the problems in many of the OT prophecies is the juxtaposition of the immediate and far horizons (e.g., Dan 11, before and after v36, et al).

A warning of impending judgment

- The Judgment Announced (v2-6)
- The Judgment Defined (v7-13)
- The Judgment Described (v14-18)