

Notes on Zephaniah

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book comes from the name of its writer.

"Zephaniah" means "Yahweh hides [or has hidden]," "Yahweh's watchman," or "Yahweh treasured." The uncertainty arises over the etymology of the prophet's name, which scholars dispute. I prefer "Yahweh hides."

Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah (1:1), evidently King Hezekiah of Judah.¹ If he was indeed a descendant of the king, this would make him the writing prophet with the most royal blood in his veins, except for David and Solomon. Apart from the names of his immediate forefathers we know nothing more about him for sure, though it seems fairly certain where he lived. His references to Judah and Jerusalem (1:10-11) seem to indicate that he lived in Jerusalem, which would fit a king's descendant.

UNITY

Criticism of the unity of Zephaniah has not had great influence. Zephaniah's prediction of Nineveh's fall (2:15; 612 B.C.) 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 influenced some 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.²

DATE

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.; 1:1). Scholars debate just when during his reign Zephaniah wrote, before or after his reforms,

¹This is not at all certain, but I believe it is likely. Only two other Hezekiahs appear on the pages of the Old Testament, and they both lived in the post-exilic period. The Chronicler mentioned one of these (1 Chron. 3:23), and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah mentioned the other (Ezra 2:16; Neh. 7:21).

²For further discussion of the book's unity, see Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 290-92.

which began in 622 B.C.³ Zephaniah made no explicit reference to Josiah's reforms, and the evidence is really insufficient to settle the debate.

Zephaniah's reference to the future destruction of Nineveh (2:13) definitely fixed his writing before that event in 612 B.C. So the prophet ministered between 640 and 612 B.C. His contemporaries were Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah, though Jeremiah's ministry continued beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

References to Jerusalem in 1:10-11 seem to indicate that Zephaniah knew Jerusalem well. Since he ministered to the Southern Kingdom, it is likely that he lived in Judah and probably in Jerusalem.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

The fact that Yahweh's word came to Zephaniah during Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.) means that he could not have ministered to the Northern Kingdom because it fell in 722 B.C. Thus Zephaniah's audience consisted of the people of Judah, the surviving southern kingdom. Specifically, he ministered primarily 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).

The political situation in Judah during Josiah's reign was fairly peaceful. Following Assyria's capture of Samaria in 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire began to decline. With its decline, Nabopolassar, the first of the Neo-Babylonian kings (626-605 B.C.), began to push Babylonia forward. Assyria declined and Babylonia advanced until Babylonia, with the Medes and Scythians, destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C. and a few years later replaced Assyria as the dominant power in the ancient Near East. This happened in 605 B.C. when the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians and Egyptians at Carchemish. Judah benefited during this transitional period in Near Eastern politics. Josiah was able to get rid of some Assyrian religious practices, and he extended Judah's territory north into the tribal territory of Naphtali.⁴

Josiah's evil predecessors, Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) and Amon (642-640 B.C.), had encouraged the people of Judah to depart from the Lord for over 50 years, so wickedness had become ingrained in them. In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (622 B.C.) Hilkiyah

³There are good men on both sides. For example, *ibid.*, p. 276, cited several arguments to support a date before Josiah's reforms. He also listed J. A. Bewer, C. H. Bullock, P. C. Craigie, F. C. Eiselen, O. Eissfeld, H. Freeman, H. Hailey, R. K. Harrison, H. Hummel, A. S. Kapelrud, T. Laetsch, G. A. Larue, E. B. Pusey, T. H. Robinson, G. A. Smith, J. M. P. Smith, and C. von Orelli as other scholars who held this view. Other advocates are H. A. Hanke, "Zephaniah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 883; David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, p. 91; and Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 320. John D. Hannah, "Zephaniah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1523, listed points in favor of a date of writing after the reforms began. Patterson noted that A. R. Fausset, C. L. Feinberg, C. F. Keil, V. Reid, and L. Walker also held this view.

⁴See 2 Kings 21—23 and 2 Chron. 34—35 for the biblical record of Josiah's reign.

the priest discovered the Law of Moses in the temple, and when Josiah read it he instituted major reforms throughout Judah. Josiah's reforms were good because they were official. He eliminated much of the display of idolatry in the land and revived the celebration of the Passover, among other things.⁵ But unfortunately his reforms did not change the hearts of most of the people, as Jeremiah revealed in his earlier prophecies. So the people to whom Zephaniah ministered had a long history of formal religion without much real commitment to Yahweh.

God sent a prophetic word to Zephaniah because the Judeans of his day still needed to get right with Him in their hearts. The prophet announced that God was going to send judgment on Judah for her wickedness. He also assured the godly few in the nation, the remnant, that the Lord would preserve them and remain true to His promises concerning ultimate worldwide blessing for Israel in the future. Perhaps 1:7 summarizes what the book is all about better than any other single verse: "Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the LORD is near."

"In a sense, the history of the times has nothing to say about Zephaniah's message. Throughout the book there is a sense of distance from historical events. . . . Zephaniah is rooted in the flow of history . . . , but his concern is only with the goal—the eschaton—the day when calamitous human efforts to run the world will coincide in an awesome climax with the Lord's purposes of judgment and hope."⁶

". . . Zephaniah's purpose was to announce coming judgment on Judah in the Day of the Lord. However, he said that judgment would extend to all the nations of the earth, indicating that the Day of the Lord would also bring deliverance for Israel and the Gentiles."⁷

LITERARY FORM

"Zephaniah's style is chiefly characterized by a unity and harmony of composition plus energy of style. Rapid and effective alternations of threats and promises also characterize his style."⁸

"Zephaniah can hardly be considered great as a poet. He does not rank with Isaiah, nor even with Hosea in this particular. . . . He had an imperative message to deliver and proceeded in the most direct and forceful way to discharge his responsibility. What he lacked in grace and charm, he in some measure atoned for by the vigour and clarity of his speech. He realised [*sic*] the approaching terror so keenly that he was able to present it vividly and convincingly to his hearers. No prophet has made the picture of the day of Yahweh more real."⁹

⁵See 2 Kings 22:4-25 for the complete list of his extensive reforms.

⁶J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets*, p. 899.

⁷Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 809.

⁸Larry Lee Walker, "Zephaniah," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 540.

⁹J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Zephaniah and Nahum*, p. 176.

"Literary genres used include judgment oracles (1:2-3, 4-6, 8-9, etc.), calls for response (1:7; 2:1-3; 3:8)—including a call to praise and a psalm of praise (3:14-17)—as well as salvation oracles (3:9-13, 18-20)."¹⁰

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The Book of Zephaniah has been called "a compendium of the oracles of the prophets."¹¹ This is true for two reasons. 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; 1:7 and Isa. 34:6; 2:14 and Isa. 13:21; 34:11; 2:15 and Isa. 47:8).

Zephaniah contains more references to "the day of the LORD" than any other Old Testament book. This phrase sometimes refers to the past, sometimes to the near future, sometimes to the distant future, and sometimes to the far distant, eschatological future. The phrase always refers to some period of time in which God is working in the world in a recognizable way. It usually refers to a time of blasting, but sometimes it refers to a time of blessing.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 has been called "emergent apocalyptic."¹² This pericope contains material that would one day become prominent in Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹³

Theologically, Zephaniah stressed the sovereign justice of Yahweh (1:2-3, 7, 14-18; 3:8) and His willingness to receive the repentant (2:1-2). He also emphasized the wickedness of man (1:3-6, 17; 3:1, 4). The theme of Yahweh's relationship to Jerusalem is prominent in Zephaniah as well (1:4-13; 3:1-7, 11-17).

Structurally, the book is a carefully crafted collection of oracles that compose one coherent message.¹⁴

OUTLINE

- I. Heading 1:1
- II. The day of Yahweh's judgment 1:2—3:8
 - A. Judgment on the world 1:2-3
 - B. Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
 - 1. The cause for Judah's judgment 1:4-6
 - 2. The course of Judah's judgment 1:7-13
 - 3. The imminence and horrors of Judah's judgment 1:14-18
 - 4. A call to repentance 2:1-3

¹⁰Baker, p. 87.

¹¹Walker, p. 539.

¹²Duane L. Christensen, "Zephaniah 2:4-15: A Theological Basis for Josiah's Program of Political Expansion," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984):682.

¹³For further discussion, see Patterson, pp. 285-88.

¹⁴See Motyer, p. 902, for a diagram of the chiasms, as he saw them.

- C. Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
 - 1. Judgment coming on Philistia 2:4-7
 - 2. Judgment coming on Moab and Ammon 2:8-11
 - 3. Judgment coming on Ethiopia 2:12
 - 4. Judgment coming on Assyria 2:13-15
 - D. Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
 - E. Judgment on all nations 3:8
- III. The day of Yahweh's blessing 3:9-20
- A. The purification of the nations 3:9
 - B. The transformation of Israel 3:10-20
 - 1. Israel's purification 3:10-13
 - 2. Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17
 - 3. Israel's regathering 3:18-20

Exposition

I. HEADING 1:1

What follows is the word that Yahweh gave to Zephaniah during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.). This "word" includes all that the Lord told the prophet that He also led him to record for posterity (cf. Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic. 1:1). This was a divine revelation that God gave through one of His servants the prophets.

Zephaniah recorded his genealogy, the longest genealogy of a writing prophet in any prophetic book. It goes back four generations to Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather, Hezekiah. As noted in the "Writer" section of the Introduction above, it is impossible to prove or to disprove that this Hezekiah was the king of Judah by that name. Chronologically he could have been since people married quite young during Israel's monarchy. I think this Hezekiah probably was the king since the name was not common and since it would make sense to trace the prophet's lineage back so far if Hezekiah was an important person (cf. Zech. 1:1).¹⁵ Normally the writing prophets who recorded their ancestors named only their fathers (cf. Jon. 1:1; Joel 1:1). We have no complete genealogy of King Hezekiah's descendants in the Old Testament.

II. THE DAY OF YAHWEH'S JUDGMENT 1:2—3:8

Zephaniah's prophecies are all about "the day of the LORD." He revealed two things about this "day." First, it would involve judgment (1:2—3:8) and, second, it would eventuate in blessing (3:9-20). The judgment portion is the larger of the two sections of revelation. This judgment followed by blessing motif is common throughout the Prophets. Zephaniah revealed that judgment would come from Yahweh on the whole earth, Judah, Israel's neighbors, Jerusalem, and all nations. The arrangement of this judgment section of the book is chiasmic.

- A Judgment on the world 1:2-3
- B Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
- C Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
- B' Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
- A' Judgment on the all nations 3:8

A. THE JUDGMENT ON THE WORLD 1:2-3

Zephaniah presented three graphic pictures of the day of the LORD.¹⁶ The first is that of a devastating universal flood.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 898; Smith, pp. 182-83; G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Commonly Called the Minor*, p. 46; Baker, p. 91.

¹⁶Warren W. Wiersbe, "Zephaniah," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, pp. 426-27.

1:2 Yahweh revealed that He would completely remove everything from the face of the earth (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12). This is one of the most explicit announcements of the total devastation of planet Earth in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 24:1-6, 19-23). While it may involve some hyperbole, it seems clearly to foretell a worldwide judgment.

"Its imminent reference, some think, was to the fact that the barbaric Scythians, who had left their homeland north of the Black Sea, were sweeping over western Asia and might be expected to attack Judah at any moment. The ruthless Scythians employed the scorched earth policy with fury and vengeance."¹⁷

1:3 This verse particularizes the general statement in verse 2 (cf. Gen. 1:1-2 and 3-31). The Lord will remove animal life, not that plants will survive—if animals die, plants will undoubtedly die too—but animal life was His focus of interest. This includes human beings, beasts of all types, birds, and fish, in other words, animal life on the land, in the air, and in the water. Ruins still standing from previous destructions, or perhaps false religious practices that have caused people to stumble, would perish, as would the wicked.¹⁸ The Lord repeated that He would cut off man to make that fact indisputable. This would be a reversal of Creation (cf. Gen. 1:20-26) and a judgment similar to the Flood in its scope (Gen. 6:17; 7:21-23).

Does this prophecy refer to the judgments that will come during the Tribulation (Rev. 6—18) or at the end of the Millennium (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 20:11-15)? In view of what follows in this section describing judgment, especially 3:8, the parallel passage to 1:2-3, I think it refers to the Tribulation judgments.

B. THE JUDGMENT ON JUDAH 1:4—2:3

The Lord gave more details about this worldwide judgment. It would include Judah. Zephaniah gave more particulars concerning the fate of Judah (1:4—2:3) and Jerusalem (3:1-7) than about the fate of the rest of humanity (1:2-3; 2:4-15; 3:8). He did this both in the section of the book dealing with coming judgment and in the section about blessing.¹⁹

1. The cause for Judah's judgment 1:4-6

1:4 Yahweh announced that He would stretch out His hand in judgment against Judah and the people of Jerusalem. Stretching out the hand is a figure of speech that implies a special work of punishment (cf. Exod. 6:6; Deut. 4:34; 2 Kings 17:36; Isa. 14:26-27; Jer. 27:5; 32:17; et al.). He

¹⁷Hanke, p. 884.

¹⁸The translation of this clause is difficult, and most of the linguistic experts are not dogmatic about the correct rendering. God would destroy both things, but which one is in view here is difficult to say.

¹⁹In the section on blessing he gave only one verse to the purification of the nations (3:9) but 11 to the transformation of Israel (3:10-20).

promised to cut off the remnant of Baal worshippers who remained in Judah, or perhaps the temple (cf. Deut. 12:5, 11; 1 Kings 8:29-30; Ezek. 42:13), as well as the priests of Baal and the unfaithful priests of Yahweh. He would also terminate their reputations and memory of them (cf. 2 Kings 23:5; Hos. 10:5).

This reference has suggested to some interpreters that Zephaniah wrote after Josiah began his reforms since Josiah revived the worship of Yahweh and tried unsuccessfully to eliminate idolatry (2 Chron. 34:4). However, this verse may simply mean that the Lord would judge the idolaters in Judah, "Baal" being a figure (synecdoche) for all idolatry.

"Wherever excitement in religion becomes an end in itself and wherever the cult of 'what helps' replaces joy in 'what's true,' Baal is worshiped."²⁰

1:5 The Lord would also judge those who worshipped the sun, moon, stars, and planets, which the idolatrous Israelites did on their flat housetops (cf. Deut. 4:19; 2 Kings 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; Jer. 19:13). He would also punish the Judeans who worshipped both Yahweh and the pagan gods of the nations (cf. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer. 32:35). "Milcom," (Molech, the god of Ammon; 1 Kings 11:33), probably represents all foreign gods. Swearing to and by a deity meant pronouncing an oath that called on that god to punish the oath-taker if he or she failed to do what he or she promised. Swearing by another god involved acknowledging its authority, which God forbade in Israel.

1:6 Judgment would come, too, on all God's people who had apostatized, namely, departed from loving and following Yahweh, and had stopped praying to Him. They might not have participated in pagan idolatry, but if their love had grown cold, they were still guilty (cf. Rev. 2:1-7). The Lord commanded His people to love Him wholeheartedly (cf. Deut. 6:5). They may have forgotten Him, but He had not forgotten them.

"Sometimes it is the apathetic and indifferent who are more responsible for a nation's moral collapse than those who are actively engaged in evil, or those who have failed in the responsibilities of leadership."²¹

In this pericope the prophet identified three types of idolatry: "the overtly pagan, the syncretistic, and the religiously indifferent."²² Practitioners of all three would draw punishment from Yahweh.

²⁰Motyer, p. 912.

²¹Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:114.

²²Hannah, p. 1526.

How does this promise to judge the Israelites harmonize with the earlier prophecy that God would destroy the whole earth (vv. 2-3)? This is an example of a prophet's foreshortened view of the future in which he could not see the difference in time between some events that he predicted (cf. Isa. 61:1-3; Dan. 11:35-36; et al.). God judged Israel when the Babylonians overran Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. He will also judge the Israelites in the Tribulation (cf. Jer. 30:7; Rev. 6—18; et al.). Zephaniah described God's judgment of the people of Judah without specifying exactly when He would judge them. Most of what Zephaniah prophesied in this pericope found fulfillment, at least initially, in 586 B.C.

2. The course of Judah's judgment 1:7-13

Zephaniah's second picture of the day of the LORD is that of a great sacrifice.

1:7 In view of the inevitability of coming judgment for idolatry, it was appropriate for the Judeans to be quiet before sovereign Yahweh (cf. Hab. 2:20).

"This is a call to the people of Judah to cease every manner of opposition to God's word and will, to bow down in submissive obedience, in unconditional surrender, in loving service, to their Covenant God."²³

This is Zephaniah's first reference to the day of the Lord, to which he referred 24 times in this book.²⁴

References to the day of the LORD as a time of judgment	References to the day of the LORD as a time of blessing
The day of the LORD 1:7, 14 (2)	That day 3:11, 16
The day of the LORD's sacrifice 1:8	That time 3:19, 20
That day 1:9, 10, 15	The time 3:20
That time 1:12	
A day of the LORD's wrath 1:18	
The day 2:2; 3:8	
The day of the LORD's anger 2:2, 3	
A day 1:15 (5), 16	

The day of the Lord was a time when God works, in contrast to man's day in which he works.

²³T. Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 358.

²⁴For a brief excursus on the day of the Lord, see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 417-18.

"As employed by the prophets, the Day of the Lord is that time when for His glory and in accordance with His purposes God intervenes in human affairs in judgment against sin or for the deliverance of His own."²⁵

Here the prophet announced that the Lord's day was near; He was about to intervene in human history (e.g., the Flood). The Lord had prepared a sacrifice, namely, Judah (cf. Isa. 34:6; Jer. 46:10), and He had set apart "guests" to eat it, namely, the Babylonians (cf. Jer. 10:25; Hab. 1:6).²⁶

- 1:8 When the Lord slew Judah like a sacrifice, He would punish the king's sons and those who wore foreign clothing. The king's sons, the future rulers of the nation, bore special responsibility for conditions in the land. Josiah's sons did indeed suffer Yahweh's punishment. Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt (2 Kings 23:36). Jehoiakim was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and died in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1-6). Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16). The last son of Josiah to rule over Judah, Zedekiah, was blinded and also taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:18—25:7). Wearing foreign garments evidently expressed love and support for non-Israelite values and so incurred God's wrath (cf. Num. 15:38; Deut. 22:11-12).
- 1:9 The Lord would also punish those who leaped over the thresholds of their neighbors in their zeal to plunder them and who filled the temple with gifts taken through violence and deceit. Another view of leaping over the threshold is that this expression describes a superstition that anyone who walked on a building's threshold would have bad luck (cf. 1 Sam. 5:5). In this case the temple in view might be the temple of Baal. "Their lord" is literally "Their Baal" (cf. v. 4).
- 1:10 When the Lord brought judgment on Judah, there would be crying out from various parts of Jerusalem representing the total destruction of the city. The Fish Gate was the gate through which the fishermen normally entered the city with their catches. It was a gate that pierced Jerusalem's north wall close to the fish market (cf. 2 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 3:3; 12:39). It was probably through this gate that Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem since he invaded it from the north. The Second (or New) Quarter was a district of Jerusalem northwest of the temple area (cf. 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22; Neh. 11:9). The hills may refer to the hills on which Jerusalem stood or the hills surrounding the city or both. In any case, the Babylonian army doubtless caused loud crashing on all the hills in and around Jerusalem as the soldiers destroyed the whole city and its environs.

²⁵Patterson, p. 310.

²⁶Another view is that the invited guests were the Judeans who, ironically, would also serve as the sacrifice. Baker, p. 95.

- 1:11 Zephaniah called the inhabitants of the Mortar, the market or business district of Jerusalem, to wail because judgment was coming.²⁷ The Canaanites who did business there would fall silent because business would cease. Those who weighed silver as they conducted commercial transactions would also perish from the city.
- 1:12 The Lord would search among the residents of Jerusalem carefully then, as one searches by using a lamp (cf. Luke 15:8). He would punish the people whose love for Him had stagnated, like wine left undisturbed too long (cf. Rev. 3:15-16), and who concluded indifferently that He was complacent and would not act (cf. Isa. 32:9; Ezek. 30:9; Amos 6:1).
- 1:13 The treasures of the Jerusalemites and all the Judeans would become plunder for the enemy, and their houses would become vacant if not destroyed. They would build houses but not be able to live in them because the Babylonian invasion would come quickly. They would plant vineyards but not be able to drink their wine for the same reason (cf. Lev. 26:32-33; Deut. 28:30, 39; Amos 5:11; Mic. 6:15).

"Rather than condemning the use of alcohol, as the passage could be understood (NEB), Zephaniah condemns apathy."²⁸

3. The imminence and horrors of Judah's judgment 1:14-18

Zephaniah's third picture of the day of the LORD is that of a great battle.

- 1:14 Zephaniah reported that this great day of the Lord was near, very near, and coming very quickly. His hearers needed to realize that it would be a day in which Yahweh would act (cf. v. 12). When it came, warriors would cry out bitterly because that day would involve fierce fighting. The first deportation of Judeans to Babylon came in 605 B.C. not many years from whenever Zephaniah must have first announced this message.
- 1:15-16 The prophet wanted to impress the danger his complacent hearers faced even more strongly. He described the effects of the day of the Lord on people by using five synonymous word pairs. It would be a day marked by emotional distress and anguish as well as physical destruction and devastation. The prophet described the terror as darkness and gloom, and clouds and blackness. Trumpet blast and battle cry picture the tumult of that day. The fortified cities of Judah would face invasion, and the high corner towers of their walls would come under siege.

²⁷This section of Jerusalem may have received the name "mortar" (bowl) because it lay in the somewhat geographically depressed Tyropoeon Valley.

²⁸Baker, p. 98.

1:17 The Lord would distress His people so severely that they would grope around as though they were blind. He would do this because they had sinned against Him (cf. Deut. 28:28-29). Their precious blood would lie all over the ground like common dust, and their dead flesh would lie in the streets like putrid, decaying dung.

"Humans may categorize their sins into the serious, the mediocre, and the insignificant. To Zephaniah (see James 2:10-11) the mere fact of sin excited and merited the whole weight of divine rage. The simple statement 'they have sinned' is sufficient."²⁹

1:18 The Judeans would not be able to buy themselves out of their trouble when the Lord poured forth His wrath (cf. Ezek. 7:19). He would devour the whole earth with the fire of His jealous rage, jealousy provoked by His people's preference for various forms of idolatry (vv. 4-6). He would destroy completely and terribly all the inhabitants of the earth (cf. vv. 2-3; cf. Joel 2:1-11).

The comprehensive nature of this judgment suggests that at this point the prophet's perspective again lifted to what we now see will be the eschatological fulfillment of this prophecy. The Babylonian invasion only previewed it. Another possibility is that we should understand "all the earth" as referring only to the Promised Land. However, other descriptions of the worldwide extent of God's eventual judgment of sin and sinners in this book and others make this interpretation unattractive.

4. A call to repentance 2:1-3

This section of the book (1:4—2:3) concludes with an appeal to the Judeans to repent and so avoid the punishment destined to come on them if they did not repent.

"The prophet meant in that terrible description of approaching judgments not to drive the people to despair, but to drive them to God and to their duty—not to frighten them out of their wits, but to frighten them out of their sins."³⁰

2:1-2 Zephaniah called the shameless people of Judah to gather together, evidently in a nationwide public assembly, to repent (cf. 1:6; Joel 2:12-14). They needed to do so before the Lord's decree to punish them took effect and His burning anger overtook them. Nineveh had repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Lord relented from judging it. Perhaps He would do the same if the Judeans repented. That day was coming as swiftly as chaff blows before the wind, so they needed to act immediately.

²⁹Motyer, p. 924.

³⁰Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1168.

2:3 The prophet urged his humble hearers who had sought to be obedient to the Lord to continue to seek Him in prayerful dependence. He was appealing to the faithful remnant in particular (cf. 3:12; Isa. 11:4; Amos 8:4; Matt. 5:3). They needed to continue to pursue righteous behavior and place themselves under the Lord's sovereign authority by listening to Him and obeying Him. If they did this, the Lord might hide them when He poured out His anger on the unrepentant.³¹ Repentance was open to anyone. God did indeed protect some Judeans from destruction when the Babylonians invaded (cf. 2 Kings 24:14-16). Zephaniah's exhortation appears to have been effective.

Zephaniah called on the humble of the "earth" to seek the Lord. While the Promised Land may be in view, this is probably a worldwide invitation. All people need to seek the Lord by repenting.

The Hebrew word *satar* is the root of the word translated "hidden." *Satar* is a synonym of *saphan*, which may be part of Zephaniah's name. If it is, "Zephaniah" probably means "Yahweh hides." Thus his name could have had connection with his message of preservation for the godly remnant.

C. JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL'S NEIGHBORS 2:4-15

Since all people need to seek the Lord (v. 3), Zephaniah revealed that judgment was headed for the nations around Judah as well as for Judah. He selected nations that lived in four directions from Judah to represent all the nations. Philistia lay west of Judah, Moab and Ammon east, Ethiopia south, and Assyria north.

"He [God] would also judge nations that were near as well as nations that were far away. Those near would be plundered and possessed by Judah. Those far away would simply be destroyed by the Lord."³²

Zephaniah prophesied to the people of Judah *about* these nations rather than *to* these nations themselves, though they might have heard about Zephaniah's prophecies. His prophecies about the nations reminded the Judeans that Yahweh was sovereign over all the earth and that He was not just singling out Judah for punishment.

1. Judgment coming on Philistia 2:4-7

2:4 The prophet announced that destruction would overtake four of the five cities of the Philistine pentapolis (cf. Isa. 14:28-32; Jer. 47; Ezek. 25:15-17; Amos 1:6-8). He listed them from south to north. Gath had evidently declined already (cf. 2 Chron. 26:6; Amos 1:6-8; Zech. 9:5-7), or perhaps Zephaniah selected only four towns to preserve literary parallelism. "Gaza" and "abandoned" sound similar in Hebrew, as do "Ekron" and "uprooted." Being driven out at noon may imply an unexpected time since people normally rested during the hottest part of the day.

³¹See Wiersbe, pp. 433-35, for an excursus on "the company of the concerned."

³²Dyer, pp. 810-11.

- 2:5 Zephaniah announced woe on the Philistines because destruction was coming on them. They inhabited the Mediterranean seacoast, and they had come from Crete (cf. 1 Sam. 30:14; 2 Sam. 8:18; 20:23; 1 Chron. 18:17; Ezek. 25:16). Yahweh's powerful word was all it took to afflict them, and it would come against them. He promised to destroy them and their land, the coastal plain of Canaan, so no one would live there any longer. Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt (609-594 B.C.) initially fulfilled this prophecy (cf. Jer. 47).
- 2:6-7 The flat Philistine seacoast would become depopulated pastures, and its caves—there are many in Judah and Mt. Carmel—would serve as refuges for shepherds and folds for sheep. After this destruction, the survivors from Judah would take possession of the coastal plain and pasture their sheep there. They would also take over the houses in Ashkelon and make them their homes because Yahweh would care for this remnant and restore their fortunes (cf. 3:20; Gen. 15:18-20).

2. Judgment coming on Moab and Ammon 2:8-11

- 2:8 Probably Zephaniah linked Moab and Ammon because both nations descended from Lot (Gen. 19:30-38) as well as because both lay to Judah's east. Both nations had taunted and reviled the Israelites from their earliest history. They had repeatedly lifted themselves up as enemies of God's chosen people (cf. Num. 22; 24:17; Judg. 3:12-14; 10:7-9; 11:4-6; 1 Sam. 11:1-11; 2 Sam. 10:1-14; 2 Kings 3).
- 2:9 Because of their hostility toward the Israelites, almighty Yahweh, Israel's God, would definitely destroy these nations as He had Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Isa. 15—16; Jer. 48:1—49:22; Ezek. 25:1-14; 35; Amos 1:11—2:3). God had completely destroyed these cities that stood in the territory later occupied by Moab shortly before either of these nations came into existence (Gen. 19:23-29). Sodom and Gomorrah had become a notorious perpetual desolation, a place of salt pits where nothing but nettles grew (cf. Jer. 48:9), and that would be what Yahweh would make of Moab and Ammon. The remnant of Israelites would plunder these neighbors and take over their territory as an inheritance from their God (cf. Isa. 11:14).
- 2:10 Yahweh of armies would bring this fate on these nations because of their pride and arrogant ridicule of His people Israel (cf. Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:26, 29; Ezek. 25:5-6, 8).
- 2:11 The Lord would terrify them. He would remove the inhabitants of these nations from the face of the earth so they would not be able to offer sacrifices to their pagan gods. As a result, these gods would starve. What kind of a god needs the sacrifices of mortals to sustain it? People from all the nations, pictured as living on the coastlands of the world, would worship Yahweh (cf. Mal. 1:11). This part of the prophecy awaits future fulfillment.

3. Judgment coming on Ethiopia 2:12

Zephaniah's oracle against Ethiopia is very brief (cf. Isa. 18—20; Jer. 46; Ezek. 29—32).³³ Biblical Ethiopia occupied the territory now held by southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were the southernmost (really southwestern-most) people known to the Judeans. God promised to send His sword against this nation. His instrument of judgment proved to be Nebuchadnezzar who defeated Ethiopia shortly after overrunning all of Judah in 586 B.C. (cf. Ezek. 30:4-5, 9, 24-25). The prophet gave no reason for this overthrow, though it must be that Ethiopia shared the same disregard for Yahweh that the other nations he condemned did.

4. Judgment coming on Assyria 2:13-15

2:13 Zephaniah also prophesied the destruction of Assyria to Judah's north (really northeast) and her capital Nineveh (cf. Isa. 13:1—14:27; 21:1-10; Jer. 50—51; Nah.). Since Nineveh fell to the combined forces of Babylonia, Media, and Scythia in 612 B.C. we know that Zephaniah uttered this prophecy before that date. The Lord would make Nineveh a parched desolation (cf. Nah. 3). Until her fall Nineveh had much water surrounding and circulating through it, but in the future she would be dry (cf. Nah. 1:8; 2:6, 8).

"Nineveh is part of Scripture's early-warning system."³⁴

2:14 Beautiful Nineveh would become a dwelling place for wild animals and birds rather than populated with multitudes of sophisticated citizens. The very idea must have seemed incredible in Zephaniah's day because Nineveh was the greatest city in the ancient Near East.³⁵

2:15 In Zephaniah's day Nineveh was proud, carefree, and apparently impregnable. Its residents boasted of being citizens of the most important city in the world (cf. Isa. 10:12). Yet in the future it would become a desolate place for beasts rather than barons. Passersby would ridicule the pride of Nineveh verbally by reviling it and bodily by shaking their fists at it after its fall (cf. Nah. 3:19).

Motyer summarized five principles that Zephaniah taught in this section (2:4-15). First, the Lord is the God of all the earth. Second, the Lord plans for the spiritual needs of the world. Third, the Lord is in charge of the whole historical process. Fourth, the Lord's people are central to his world purposes. And fifth, the Lord is the fierce enemy of pride.³⁶

³³Patterson, pp. 349-50, suggested that Zephaniah may have meant Egypt rather than Ethiopia.

³⁴Motyer, p. 937.

³⁵M. R. Wilson, "Nineveh," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, p. 186.

³⁶Motyer, pp. 938-39.

D. JUDGMENT ON JERUSALEM 3:1-7

Having announced that divine judgment would come on the nations around Judah (2:4-15), the prophet returned to the subject of Yahweh's judgment on the Chosen People (cf. 1:4—2:3), but this time he focused more particularly on Jerusalem. Though he did not mention Jerusalem by name, it is clearly in view.

"Like Isaiah and Micah, he is a prophet of the city, open-eyed to its faults; unlike them, his focus is almost wholly civic and religious. But he draws the fundamental dividing line in the same place: whatever the basis on which the world is judged, the people of God are judged for turning from revealed truth (Amos 2:4) and for neglecting proffered spiritual privileges (Isa. 65:2).

"Like Amos, Zephaniah uses the rhetorical device of condemning surrounding nations, but all the while—unannounced to his hearers—bringing their own condemnation ever closer."³⁷

- 3:1 Zephaniah pronounced another "woe" (cf. 2:5) this time on Jerusalem, which he described as rebellious, defiled, and tyrannical. Rebels are those who refuse to submit to God's will. The defiled are those polluted by sinful practices. Tyrants disregard the rights of others, particularly those whom they can take advantage of.
- 3:2 There were four evidences that the people of Jerusalem had been rebellious against Yahweh (v. 1). They had been unresponsive to the prophets whom God had sent them. They were unteachable and refused to accept any correction. They did not trust in Yahweh, and they did not draw near to God in repentance and prayer (cf. 1:6).
- 3:3 Evidence that they were oppressing the weak (v. 1) was the greedy behavior of Jerusalem's civil rulers and judges. Like vicious lions and wolves they gobbled up all the possessions of vulnerable people that they could as fast as they could (cf. 1:8; Ezek. 3:9-10; Mic. 1:1-3, 9-10).
- 3:4 Jerusalem's religious leaders, the (false) prophets and priests, provided examples of the city's defiled condition (v. 1). The prophets were reckless in the way they announced their own advice as divine revelation and treacherous in deceiving the people into thinking that their words were authoritative. The priests did not observe the laws of holiness that God had prescribed for worship, and they twisted the meaning of the Mosaic Law to suit their purposes (cf. 1:4-5).
- 3:5 In contrast to these crooked leaders, Yahweh was straight, and He was still in Jerusalem. He would do no injustice, as the civil and religious leaders

³⁷Ibid., p. 941.

did. He performed justice every day as faithfully as the rising of the sun. Yet the unjust leaders of Jerusalem knew no shame for the wickedness that they consistently practiced.

- 3:6 The Lord reminded the Jerusalemites that He had already destroyed other nations. This probably refers to the nations around Judah that He had already allowed to fall to the Assyrians. He compared such a fallen nation to a city with strong corner towers that now lay in ruin because of the enemy's destruction. The streets of this representative "city" also lay deserted. The real cities of these already defeated nations were in ruins without any inhabitants. Samaria was one such city, and the numerous towns of the former Northern Kingdom were others.
- 3:7 The Lord expected the people of Jerusalem to learn from the fate of the Northern Kingdom and other fallen nations. They should respect Him, since He was behind the destruction, and obey His word. They should have done this so He would not similarly judge them, as He had threatened to do. But they were more eager to pursue sinful self-indulgence and to become thoroughly corrupt in their deeds.

E. JUDGMENT ON ALL NATIONS 3:8

The people of Jerusalem needed to wait a little longer. The Lord would soon rise up as a devouring animal to consume His prey. He had determined to gather nations and kingdoms that were wicked, including Judah, and pour His burning indignation and wrath on them. Yahweh's fiery zeal would devour all nations because the world would again become thoroughly corrupt (as in the days of Noah, cf. Gen. 6:5-7; Zeph. 1:2-3).³⁸

The world is still waiting for the Lord to pour out His wrath on all nations. He has not done so yet because He is patient and is giving people time to repent (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). Yet that day will surely come (2 Pet. 3:10). In view of its coming, Christians need to be holy in conduct and godly in character looking for and hastening that day (by our prayers and preaching, 2 Pet. 3:11). The great outpouring of divine wrath on the earth predicted here will take place during the Tribulation, before our Lord returns to set up His kingdom (cf. 2:2; Zech. 14:2; Rev. 16:14, 16).

Zephaniah's final reference to the destruction of nations all over the world (v. 8) brings the section of his prophecy that deals with judgment (1:2—3:8) full circle.

- A Judgment on the world 1:2-3
- B Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
- C Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
- B' Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
- A' Judgment on all nations 3:8

³⁸According to Charles L. Feinberg, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, p. 66, this is the only verse in the Old Testament that contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

III. THE DAY OF YAHWEH'S BLESSING 3:9-20

Having finished the revelation dealing with God's judgment of the world in a coming day (1:2—3:8), Zephaniah now announced that He would bring great blessing to all humankind after that judgment (3:9-20). As in the section of the book on judgment, he revealed God's plans for the Gentile nations briefly first and then spoke extensively about His plans for Israel.

"Why did the prophets consistently close their books with messages of hope? For at least three reasons. To begin with, hope is a great motivation for obedience, and the prophets wanted to encourage God's people to submit to God's will and do what He commanded. God's covenant blessings come to His people only when they obey His covenant conditions.

"A second reason is the prophets' emphasis on the faithfulness of God. The Lord will keep His promises and one day establish the kingdom; and since God is faithful to keep His promises, we ought to be faithful obeying His Word. . . .

"Finally, the closing message of hope was an encouragement to the faithful remnant in the land, who were true to God and suffered because of their devotion to Him. It's difficult to belong to that 'company of the committed' who stand true to the Lord and His Word no matter what others may do or say. Knowing that God would one day defeat their enemies and reign in righteousness would encourage the believers [*sic*] remnant to persist in their faithful walk with the Lord."³⁹

A. THE PURIFICATION OF THE NATIONS 3:9

"Then" signals a major change in time as well as in the focus of Zephaniah's prophecy. It is a hinge word that serves as a transition from judgment in the Tribulation to blessing in the Millennium. Then, after these judgments (1:2—3:8), the Lord promised to give the peoples of the world lips that would speak truth and grace rather than lies and defiled speech (cf. Isa. 6:5-7).

"Lip does not stand for language, but is mentioned as the organ of speech, by which a man expresses the thoughts of his heart, so that purity of the lips involves or presupposes the purification of the heart."⁴⁰

Yahweh would affect this change in all the people of the world so they would worship Him (cf. Gen. 4:26) and serve Him as one united family of nations.⁴¹ This indicates that everyone living on the earth at the beginning of the Millennium will be a believer in Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

³⁹Wiersbe, p. 429.

⁴⁰C. F. Keil, "Zephaniah," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:156. Cf. Isa. 6:5-7.

⁴¹This has been seen as a reversal of Babel (Gen. 11:1, 6-7, 9). Craigie, 2:128.

B. THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISRAEL 3:10-20

Zephaniah had received from the Lord much more revelation about what He would do for Israel following the period of worldwide punishment. This section is also chiasmic in its thought structure.

- A Israel's purification 3:10-13
- B Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17
- A' Israel's regathering 3:18-20

1. Israel's purification 3:10-13

- 3:10 The descendants of the Lord's dispersed ones, the Jews, would bring him offerings of worship from the farthest corners of the earth. The rivers of Ethiopia, probably the Nile and its tributaries, were at the edge of the known world in the prophet's day (cf. 2:12). The implication is that the Jews will come to Jerusalem, the city the Lord chose as the place where He would dwell among His people (cf. Deut. 30:1-10; Isa. 66:18, 20).
- 3:11 In that day, the day of blessing to follow the day of judgment, Zephaniah's hearers, the Jews, would not feel any more shame for all their previous rebellion against the Lord. They would not because He would remove all the pride from their hearts (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38; Matt. 25:1-13). They would never again lift up themselves in haughtiness against Yahweh on His holy mountain Jerusalem (Ps. 2:6; Dan. 9:16; Joel 2:1; Obad. 16; et al.). A feeling of shame comes from an awareness of guilt, but they would not be guilty any longer because they would be humble rather than proud.
- 3:12 The Israelites of that day will be humble and lowly in heart (cf. 2:3), and they will seek the Lord as their refuge rather than turning from Him to idols and self-exaltation. Seeking the Lord is an indication of humility whereas forsaking Him, even by not praying, demonstrates a spirit of independence from God (cf. 1:6).
- 3:13 In contrast to their conduct since the Exodus, the Jews would do nothing wrong, tell no lies, and practice no deceit (cf. 3:1-4). They will resemble a flock of sheep at peace grazing and lying down with nothing to disturb them (cf. Ps. 23; Mic. 4:4).

"When the Creator is worshipped and served as he ought to be, paradise is regained."⁴²

2. Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17

Zephaniah arranged this psalm of joy over salvation as another chiasm.

⁴²Baker, p. 117.

- "A Zion singing (3:14a)
 B Israel's shouts (3:14b)
 C Jerusalem's joy (3:14c)
 D Yahweh's deliverance (3:15a, b)
 E Presence of Yahweh the king (3:15c)
 F No more fear (3:15d)
 G Jerusalem's future message (3:16a)
 F' No more fear (3:16b, c)
 E' Presence of Yahweh the God (3:17a)
 D' The mighty deliverer (3:17b)
 C' God's joy (3:17c)
 B' Yahweh's silence (3:17d)
 A' Yahweh's singing (3:17e)"⁴³

3:14 In view of these wonderful prospects, Zephaniah called the people of Jerusalem and all the Israelites to shout for joy with all their hearts.

"Although the command is aimed at the future Jerusalem, no doubt the message would not be lost on the godly worshipers of Zephaniah's own day."⁴⁴

The phrase "daughter of" is a way of referring to the citizens of Zion (Jerusalem) as the children of the city. Children born in any city are the children of that city in a metaphorical sense as well as the children of their physical parents in a literal sense.⁴⁵

3:15 The reason for rejoicing is that Yahweh will have removed His judgment and Israel's enemies from her (cf. vv. 8, 19). Yahweh, Israel's true and omnipotent king, will be in the midst of His people (in the person of Messiah, Jesus Christ, during the Millennium; v. 17; cf. Isa. 9:7; 44:6; Zech. 14:9). Consequently they will fear disaster no more (v. 13).

3:16-17 "The battle cry on the day of judgment (1:14) will be replaced by the poignant hush of the reuniting of two lovers."⁴⁶

In that day of blessing the people of Jerusalem will have plenty of reasons not to fear. One reason is that Yahweh their God will be in their midst (v. 15). He will be a victorious warrior having defeated all His enemies and all opposition worldwide (1:2-3; 3:8). Like a bridegroom He will take joy

⁴³Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁴Patterson, p. 377.

⁴⁵Elsewhere, "daughters of Jerusalem" sometimes refers to the villages surrounding Jerusalem, those little communities that Jerusalem spawned.

⁴⁶Baker, p. 119.

in His people Israel, and they will rest quietly in the security of His love for them as His bride. Yahweh will even shout with joy over His beloved Israel!

"Most often the Lord's love is expressed by the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is the love that issues in commitment, the 'ever-unfailing' fidelity of love, love that lives in the will as much as in the heart. Here, however, the word is *'ahaba*, the passionate love of Jacob for Rachel (Gen. 29:20) and of Michal for David (1 Sam. 18:28), the fond love of Jacob for Joseph (Gen. 37:3), Uzziah's devotion to gardening (2 Chron. 26:10), Jonathan's deep friendship with David (1 Sam. 18:3), the devotee's delight in the Lord's law (Ps. 119:97). This too is the Lord's love for his people (Hos. 3:1), a love that delights him (Zeph. 3:17c), makes him contemplate his beloved with wordless adoration (v. 17d), a love that cannot be contained but bursts into elated singing (v. 17e)."⁴⁷

"We can find hope in times of difficulty if we focus on God's power, God's deliverance, and God's love. He is our King (3:15), our Savior (3:16-17a), and our Beloved (3:17b)."⁴⁸

3. Israel's regathering 3:18-20

3:18 In the past, Jews who lived far from Jerusalem were very sad because they could not travel to Jerusalem to observe Israel's annual feasts. They suffered a certain criticism from their fellow Jews for living far away from Jerusalem. But in this time of blessing (the Millennium) the Lord will enable them to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts.⁴⁹

"Why would the Lord restore religious practices that have now been fulfilled? Possibly as a means of teaching Israel the meaning of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ."⁵⁰

3:19-20 Having dealt with the Jews' oppressors (cf. vv. 8-15; 2:4-15; Gen. 12:3), the Lord will deliver even the weak and dispersed of His people and give them a worldwide reputation for goodness (cf. Deut. 26:19). He will regather them in their land and give them a good reputation when He restores their fortunes (cf. v. 15; Gen. 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 17:7-8; 2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3-4; Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 7:27).

⁴⁷Motyer, p. 958.

⁴⁸Dyer, p. 812.

⁴⁹The feasts of Israel during the Millennium will be somewhat different from those that the Old Covenant specified, but there will be annual feasts in Jerusalem in the Millennium (cf. Ezek. 45:9—46:24).

⁵⁰Wiersbe, p. 432.

Zephaniah concluded his book by affirming that such was Yahweh's declaration. He would indeed restore His people.

"The whole message of Zephaniah is finally united in one grand *inclusio*, in that it begins and ends with Yahweh, Israel's just but caring covenant God, whose word (1:1) is spoken (3:20)."⁵¹

Eight times in verses 18-20, in the NASB, the Lord said, "I will," "I am going to," or "When I." The future restoration and blessing of Israel in the world will be something that Yahweh Himself will accomplish "in that day" (i.e., the day of the LORD). No one but He could ever accomplish it, and no one but He would.

⁵¹Baker, p. 88. An *inclusio* is a repetition of key elements, either words or motifs, at the beginning and end of a literary unit.

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