

THE MINOR PROPHETS

Zephaniah

by Al Maxey

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

The name *Zephaniah* (Hebrew -- *Tsephan-yah*) means "Yahweh hides" or "Yahweh has hidden." "Zephaniah was evidently born during the latter part of King Manasseh's reign (695 - 642 BC). His name may mean that he was 'hidden' from Manasseh's atrocities" (*Expanded Open Bible*). See II Kings 21:1-18 and II Chronicles 33:1-20 for the nature of this king's reign.

"Only Zephaniah among the prophetic books exhibits a lengthy genealogical note about the author" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*). "His genealogy is much longer than the usual prophetic pedigree and traces four generations" (*New Layman's Bible Commentary*). Zeph. 1:1 identifies him as the great-great-grandson of a man named Hezekiah -- many scholars feel this was the good King Hezekiah (715 - 686 BC), thus making this prophet of royal blood. Others, however, insist this is not possible due to a lack of time from the days of King Hezekiah to the birth of Zephaniah. His reference to Jerusalem as "this place" (Zeph. 1:4) seems to indicate that Jerusalem was his home. "His acquaintance with the conditions of the city (Zeph. 3:1f) further confirms this point" (Homer Hailey).

"His stern denunciations of the sins of the people and his impassioned cries for repentance have given him the name 'puritan'" (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*). "Taking a hint from Zeph. 1:12, artists of the Middle Ages regularly represented Zephaniah as the man with the lamp, searching Jerusalem for sinners to bring them to punishment" (Jack P. Lewis).

Aside from these few facts and assumptions, nothing is known of this prophet.

DATE

Zeph. 1:1 dates this prophecy in the days of King Josiah (640 - 609 BC). It may be inferred from the low moral and religious state of Judah at the time this was written that this prophecy came *before* the great religious reform of 621 BC (II Kings 22-23; II Chronicles 34-35).

Also, Zeph. 2:13 makes it clear that the fall of Ninevah (which occurred in 612 BC) was an event still in the future. "It would be safe to suggest 630 to 625 BC as the probable date of his work. If 626 BC is accepted, then the ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah began in the same year" (Homer Hailey).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the reigns of Manasseh (695 - 642 BC) and Amon (642 - 640 BC) the southern kingdom of Judah sank to astounding moral and spiritual depths. These two kings remained loyal vassals to Assyria, and sought to undo all the good that King Hezekiah had accomplished. However, in the year 640 BC --- at the age of only 24 --- King Amon was assassinated by his servants (II Kings 21:23; II Chron. 33:24), and his 8 year old son, Josiah, was made king (II Kings 21:24 - 22:2; II Chron. 33:25 - 34:2). Josiah was the last good king to reign over Judah. When he died in 609 BC --- at the age of only 39 --- Judah would have only 23 years left before her destruction and Babylonian Captivity (586 BC).

At the age of 16 Josiah began "to seek the God of his father David" (II Chron. 34:3). At the age of 20 he began to "purge Judah and Jerusalem" of all that was unholy and wicked (II Chron. 34:3f). His reforms

were the most extensive of any that were attempted by any king who ever reigned over Judah.

Several years later (621 BC) Hilkiyah the priest discovered the lost book of the Law of Moses ("The Bible had been left on the shelf for so long, and ignored, that no one could even remember where it was --- or even cared!"). When Josiah realized what this was, and its importance, he assembled all the people of his land, from the greatest to the least, and read the Book of the Covenant to them (II Chron. 34:29-30). The temple was then cleansed and a Passover was celebrated --- the likes of which had not been seen in some time (II Chron. 35). Josiah also gained independence from the Assyrians and began to retake some of the land which had been seized by them from the northern kingdom of Israel.

Undoubtedly, the prophecy and work of Zephaniah had an influence upon Josiah, and may well have had a lot to do with the institution of reforms --- and if indeed Josiah and Zephaniah were related (both being descended from King Hezekiah), this prophet probably had a great deal of access and influence upon the young king.

Zephaniah also predicts a coming *Day of the Lord*. Even though reforms were instituted, nevertheless in short time (following the death of Josiah) the people would revert to their old, evil ways. Therefore, Zephaniah warns of impending doom from a nation even now upon the horizon. This nation was Babylon! "Zephaniah's Day of the Lord plays an important role in the forming of the concept of the final judgment day" (Jack P. Lewis). "Zephaniah uses this expression more than any other prophet" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*). Zeph. 3:9-20 "speaks of another side of the day of the Lord: It will be a day of blessing after the judgment is complete. A righteous remnant will survive and all who call upon Him, Jew or Gentile, will be blessed" (*Expanded Open Bible*). Jesus alluded to Zephaniah on two occasions --- Matthew 13:41 (Zeph. 1:3) and Matthew 24:29 (Zeph. 1:15). Both of these passages are associated with the second coming of Christ.

"Pharaoh Necho of Egypt determined to help Assyria fight off the Babylonians at Haran, and so marched north with his army (609 BC). Josiah attempted to stop him at Megiddo by throwing his forces in the path of Pharaoh Necho. He did succeed in preventing the Egyptian army from reaching Haran, but he was killed in the battle. For four years Egypt dominated Judah, but in 605 BC Pharaoh Necho was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar (King of the Babylonians) at Carchemish. Here is enacted one of the ironies of history. Judah, led by Josiah, had attempted to aid the Babylonians by fighting against Egypt at Megiddo. The kingdom that gave its king in the struggle to aid Babylonia was now a vassal of the nation it had attempted to help. Later Judah was to be destroyed by Babylon" (Homer Hailey).

THE DAY OF THE LORD

The major message of this book is *The Day of the Lord* --- a day of judgment. It is viewed as a day of terror as imminent as one which will fall upon all creation as a judgment for sin. It is a grim picture of destruction, but out of it will come a remnant. "It is a day of deliverance for the faithful" (Hailey), as well as destruction for the *unfaithful*.

George Adam Smith, in *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (Vol. 2, p. 48), has well summarized the spirit of this prophecy --- "No hotter book lies in all the Old Testament. Neither dew nor grass nor tree nor any blossom lives in it, but it is everywhere fire, smoke and darkness, drifting chaff, ruins, nettles, saltpits, and owls and raven looking from the windows of desolate palaces."



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