

Zephaniah

During Judah's hectic political and religious history, reform would come from time to time. Zephaniah's forceful prophecy may have been a factor in the reform which occurred during Josiah's reign - a "revival" which produced outward change but could not remove the inward heart of corruption which characterized the leadership of the nation. Zephaniah hammers home his message repeatedly that the day of the Lord, Judgment Day, is coming when the malignancy of sin will be dealt with. Israel and her Gentile neighbors will soon experience the crushing hand of God's wrath. But after the chastening process is complete, blessing will come in the person of Messiah, who will be the cause for praise and singing.

INTRODUCTION

The bulk of Zephaniah (1:1-3:8) describes the coming Day of Judgment upon Judah and the nations. Yahweh is holy and must vindicate His righteousness by calling all the nations of the world into account before Him. The sovereign God will judge not only His own people but also the whole world. No one is beyond His authority and dominion. The day of the Lord will have universal impact. That day came for Judah and all the nations (2:4-15), but there is a future aspect when all the earth will be judged. Chapter 3, verses 9-20, speak 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. God will regather and restore His people, and there will be worldwide rejoicing.

Tsephan-yah means "Yahweh Hides" or "Yahweh Has Hidden." Zephaniah was evidently born during the latter part of the reign of King Manasseh. His name may mean that he was "hidden" from Manasseh's atrocities.

AUTHOR

The first verse is very unusual in that Zephaniah traces his lineage back four generations to Hezekiah. This is probably Hezekiah the king of Judah. If Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of the godly king Hezekiah, he was the only prophet of royal descent. This may have given the prophet freer access to the court of King Josiah in whose reign he ministered. Because Zephaniah used the phrase "this place" (1:4) to refer to Jerusalem and was quite familiar with its features (cf. 1:9-10; 3:1-7), he was probably an inhabitant of Judah's royal city.

DATE & SETTING

Zephaniah states his prophecy were "in the days of Josiah son of Amos, king of Judah" (1:1). Josiah reigned from 640 to 609 b.c. and chapter 2, verse 13, indicates that the destruction of Nineveh (612 b.c.) was still a future event.

It is likely that Zephaniah's ministry played a significant role in preparing Judah for the revivals that took place in the reign of the nation's last righteous king, Josiah. Josiah became king of Judah at the age of eight, and by the age of sixteen his heart had already begun to turn toward God. His first reform took place in the twelfth year of his reign (628 b.c.; 2 Chr. 34:3-7) when he tore down all the altars of Baal, destroyed the foreign incense altars, burned the bones of the false prophets on their altars, and broke the carved and molten images in pieces. Six years later (622 b.c.), Josiah's second reform was kindled when Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law in the temple (see 2 Chr. 34:8-35:19). Thus, Zephaniah's prophecy can be dated more precisely as occurring between 630 and 625 b.c.