

Zephaniah

Overview and Summary

Author:

- ⇒ The self-stated author of this book is Zephaniah. Being a very common name, there are several other Zephaniah's mentioned in the OT.
- ⇒ Zephaniah is a prophet to the southern nation of Judah.
- ⇒ Unlike his contemporary prophets (Habakkuk and Nahum), Zephaniah chooses to date himself by listing four different ancestors.
 - The identity of Zephaniah's ancestor Hezekiah has been a source of debate:
 - Some believe this to be King Hezekiah, who reigned from 729-686BC. Supporters of this conclusion say that this makes Zephaniah cousins with King Josiah, giving him unparalleled access to the Judean royal courts. This may be why Zephaniah lists Hezekiah as the last ancestor in his brief four-person lineage.
 - Others suggest that this was not King Hezekiah, but just another man with the same name. This could be possible as Hezekiah was a common name. Supporters of this view also point out that Zephaniah does not call him "King Hezekiah," but only uses the name without a title.
 - The identity of Zephaniah's father as Cushi, have led some to suggest that he was from the nation of Cush (modern Sudan). Others suggest that Zephaniah identifies himself with King Hezekiah to avoid the assumption that his father was from Cush.
- ⇒ The name Zephaniah means "to hide."
 - Some have suggested that the name Zephaniah is appropriate because the prophet is almost totally absent from his own prophecy (only mentioned in the first verse).
 - Others have suggested that since he was most likely born in the days of the evil king Manasseh, who, according to scripture, set up synchronistic worship and spilled the blood of the innocent (2 Kings 21:16), that his family might have had to hide Zephaniah from being murdered by Manasseh's evil regime.

Date:

- ⇒ Zephaniah dates himself within the reign of the Judean king Josiah, who maintained rule from 640-609BC.

⇒ There are a few clues that we can gather from the text that may help us narrow down the exact time of Zephaniah's writing to between 640-621BC.

- Clue #1: In 2:13 Yahweh announces judgment upon Assyria. In particular, Assyria will soon be destroyed. This implies that Assyria is still in power over the region. Historically, while beginning its decline in 627B with the death of Ashurbanipal (King of Assyria), Assyria ultimately fell in 612 with the destruction of Ninevah by Babylon. This means that Zephaniah had to have written before 612BC.
- Clue #2: 2 Kings 22:8-20 recounts the re-discovery of the OT Law by King Josiah. Scholars have dated this discovery to 621BC. After its discovery, Josiah read the entire Law to the people, and they re-dedicated themselves to service to the Lord. Because of the content of Zephaniah's prophecy, the re-discovery of the Law indicates that this prophecy was most likely written before 621BC.
- Clue #3: 2 Kings 23 records the reformation efforts of Josiah to undo syncretistic worship installed by his predecessors after the re-discovery of the Law. Like clue #2, it seems that Zephaniah's prophecy would be null if the nation were in a state of religious reformation, back to worship of the Lord. Therefore, it seems likely that Zephaniah wrote prior to 621BC.

⇒ Contrary to the assumptions above, some believe that the book of Zephaniah was written to those who refused to repent from their ways and turn to the Lord under the reforms of Josiah. If this is true, then it would mean that the book was written to the unrepentant Israelites under Josiah's rule before Assyria's fall, making the date of authorship sometime between 621BC and 612BC.

Context:

- ⇒ In 696, under the height of Assyrian tyranny in the region, Manasseh became king over Judah. Manasseh was an exceptionally evil king (2 Kings 21:1-9) who rebuilt the high places for pagan worship which were destroyed by his father Hezekiah. Manasseh's also offered his son as a sacrifice to pagan gods while at the same time colluding with necromancers and mediums. During the 55 years of his reign, Israel drifted further and further from Yahweh and committed evil acts before the Lord.
- ⇒ Amon reigned for two years continued the evil which had been started by his father Manasseh.
- ⇒ In 640, at the ripe old age of 8, Josiah (the son of Amon) became king over Israel. Unlike his fathers, Josiah pursued the Lord, enacting large reforms across Israel. These reforms were spurred on by the fact that Assyria had begun to wane in their regional power. Barker Kenneth suggests there are three components to Josiah's reforms: "a consistent purge of foreign cults and practices, destruction of the high

places in the territory of the former Northern Kingdom as well in the south, and centralization of public worship in Jerusalem.”

- Josiah’s reforms were honored by God and Judah experienced a time of economic, political, and religious blessing.
- In 2 Kings 22, the book of the law is found in the temple (i.e. the book of Deuteronomy). Josiah read the words of the law and committed himself, along with the rest of Israel, to follow and do the words of God.

Interpreting Zephaniah:

- ⇒ Interpreting Zephaniah requires the reader to look understand Zephaniah’s varied use of the phrase “Day of the Lord.” At some points in his prophecy, the Day of the Lord refers to a time of immediate judgment on the surrounding nations and upon Judah. At other times, the phrase Day of the Lord refers to a future time when the unbelieving nations will be judged and the remnant of Israel will be saved.
 - When we interpret Zephaniah, we must be aware of the now and not yet tension play out in the book. In other words, we must be able to look at the near prophecy to understand the far-off prophecy.
- ⇒ It is also important to have a decent understanding of the surrounding nations to understand their real and symbolic nature in their judgments.
- ⇒ Lastly, it is important to understand that while this book includes judgments for other nations, it was always intended of Judah. Being the main recipient of this prophecy, even the judgments of the foreign nations were meant to be instructive to Judah.

Structure & Content:

- ⇒ The book of Zephaniah can be structured in the following different ways:
 - Leon J. Wood, “The Prophets of Israel”:
 - The day of the Lord Prefigured (1:1-3:7)
 - Judgement on Judah and Jerusalem (1:1-2:3)
 - Judgment upon neighboring nations (2:4-15)
 - Threatened punishment on Jerusalem (3:1-7)
 - Prediction of the millennial kingdom (3:8-20)
 - Mark Hitchcock, “Bible Briefs”:
 - Judgment and Doom (1:1-3:8)
 - Judgment on all the earth (1:2-3)
 - Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (1:4-2:3)
 - Judgment on Surrounding Nations (2:4-15)
 - Judgments on Jerusalem (3:1-7)

- Judgment on all the earth (3:8)
 - Joy and Deliverance (3:9-20)
 - Richard Fuhr & Gary Yates, “The Message of the Twelve”:
 - Oracle of judgment against Judah (1:2-18)
 - A call to repentance (2:1-3)
 - Oracle of judgment against the nations (2:4-3:7)
 - A call to wait (3:8)
 - Oracle of salvation (3:9-20)
- ⇒ Chapter 1: After introducing the reader to the author and the historical setting of the prophecy, verse 2 and 3 declare the utter ruin of the earth. Taking imagery from God’s de-creation event in the flood, the Lord promises to “sweep away everything from the face of the earth.” From the onset of the prophecy the reader is heightened to the seriousness of the judgment coming upon the world. Verses 4-6 then turn the prophecy’s focus onto the nation of Judah. God promises to demolish the religious places of Judah that have forgone worshipping the Lord and have turned to Baal. Starting in verse 7 the reader is introduced to the phrase the Day of the Lord which will be used 14 times in chapter one. Of particular interest is verses 14-16. In these short three verses the Day of the Lord is referenced 9 different times. Zephaniah describes this day as a day of: anguish, distress, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, clouds, thick darkness, trumpet blast, battle cry against the fortified cities of Judah. Verse 17-18 then brings the judgment back into a universal scale, similar to verse 2 and 3. Verse 18 says, “In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”
- ⇒ Chapter 2: Continuing in it’s condemnation of Judah, verses 1-3 calls on the wayward nation to gather together and seek three things in the hope that God will relent from his judgment: seek the Lord, seek righteousness, and seek humility. Starting in verse 4 through 7 the Lord turns his attention to the seacoast towns of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron (all cities within Philistia). God promises to level the entire nation until it is nothing but pastureland, and after he does this God will give the land back to it’s rightful owner, Judah. Moving from the western nation of Philistia, God pronounces a similar judgment upon the eastern nation of Moab. God promises to judge this nation in the same way that he judged Sodom and Gomorrah. After Moab is leveled, God will give Moab back to Judah as it’s rightful owner. Of particular interest is verse 11, where God promises to famish all the foreign gods of Moab until all the people bow down in reverent worship to the Lord. Unlike the previous two nations, the next nation, the southern nation of Cush, receives a short word of judgment (one verse and five Hebrew words). Cush will be slain by the sword. The last nation to receive a judgment of condemnation is the northern nation

of Assyria. God promises to desolate Assyria until there is nothing left of the once prideful and powerful nation. Instead of being inhabited by the wealthy and powerful, it will become a wasteland only fit for wild beasts. While focusing on four unique nations, their locations (north, south, east, and west) are an important feature to be attentive to. It seems as if God is proclaiming judgment in all directions against anyone and any nation that does not worship God and live righteously.

⇒ Chapter 3: In the first seven verses of the third chapter, the judgment focus switches back to Jerusalem, the center of Judean worship and government. Verse two lists the faults of God's people this way, "She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord; she does not draw near to her God." The Lord then singles out four persons who have failed to live in accordance with His Law: the officials, the judges, the prophets, and the priest. It is no wonder the nation of Judah has gone astray since their leaders themselves are far from the Lord. Verse four then connects the prophetic circle back to 1:2-3 as the prophecy of judgment comes once again upon the entire world.

Starting in verse 9 through the end of the chapter, the book of Zephaniah takes a dramatic turn as the messaging switches from one of judgment to one of a future hope. Here the phrase Day of the Lord begins to have a different connotation.

Instead of dread and this future Day of the Lord will be one of hope and joy. In that day a remnant of God's people will return to the Land praising God. In that Day the King (Jesus) will reign with his people and God will restore the fortunes of his covenanted people.

Message:

- ⇒ The Day of the Lord is coming in the near future. The Day of the Lord will be a judgment on the sinfulness and idolatry of Judah.
- ⇒ The Day of the Lord is coming in the far future. The Day of the Lord will be a time of judgment on the nations and salvation for God's remnant people.
- ⇒ Judgment is pictured as a de-creation event, evoking imagery of the flood.
- ⇒ God is merciful to provide salvation to those who turn to the Lord.