

Notes on
Zephaniah
2002 Edition
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 sure 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 led 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, 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.

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 Ezra and Nehemiah mentioned the other (Ezra 2:16; Neh. 7:21).

²For further discussion, see Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 290-92.

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. John

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.

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 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 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.

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.

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

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."

". . . 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."⁶

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."⁷

"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 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."⁸

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The Book of Zephaniah has been called "a compendium of the oracles of the prophets."⁹ 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 it also sometimes refers to blessing.

⁶Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 809.

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

⁸J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Zephaniah and Nahum*, p. 176.

⁹Walker, p. 539.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 has been called "emergent apocalyptic."¹⁰ This pericope contains material that would one day become prominent in Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹¹

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).

MESSAGE¹²

The key to the Book of Zephaniah is the phrase "the day of the Lord." This phrase appears in most of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. As we saw in Joel, "the day of the Lord" can be a past day, a day in the relatively near future, or a day in the far distant, eschatological future. It is any day in which God is dynamically at work in human affairs.

Wherever we find the phrase "the day of the Lord," it always suggests a contrast with the day of man. The day of man is any day when man appears to be in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's patience. The day of the Lord is any day when God is clearly in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's judgment. The phrase "the day of the Lord" is by no means unique to Zephaniah, but it is the key to the message of this book. Zephaniah used it more frequently than any other prophet. It was his burden. And he explained the meaning of this phrase more than any other prophet.

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (1:1). It is rather remarkable that the prophet did not refer to Josiah's reforms, which were his great spiritual contribution to the history of Judah. Probably the reason for the lack of mention is that Josiah's reforms were a result of his personal dedication to Yahweh rather than the result of a revival of spiritual life among the Judahites generally. Huldah's prophecy reflects this difference (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28). Zephaniah took no note of Josiah's good heart but addressed the spiritual need of the Judahites. The contrast between this king and his subjects is striking.

The day of the Lord that Zephaniah predicted was an eschatological day in which God would judge the people of Judah and Jerusalem. This judgment will take place during the first part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Tribulation. Zephaniah also predicted restoration following judgment (ch. 3). This refers to the second part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Millennium. But Zephaniah also had in mind an eschatological day of the Lord even after the Millennium. This seems clear from the extent of devastation he described and the picture of restoration he painted. That day of the Lord will be the judgment of the Lord at the end of the

¹⁰Duane L. Christensen, "Zephaniah 2:4-15: A Theological Basis for Josiah's Program of Political Expansion," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984):682.

¹¹For further discussion, see Patterson, pp. 285-88.

¹²Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:288-301.

Millennium including the destruction of the present earth and heavens, which will be followed by the creation of new heavens and a new earth. Other revelation helps us see that there are in fact two periods of future judgment followed by restoration, not just one, which we might conclude if all we had was Zephaniah's prophecy (cf. Rev.).

The permanent value of the Book of Zephaniah is its unveiling of the day of the Lord. The book does not reveal exactly when that day will come. The only chronological reference in the book is in the first verse that locates Zephaniah's ministry in history. The book pictures God judging in the undefined future. This is not judgment through armies of invading soldiers or through any human instrumentality. It is direct judgment from God Himself.

There are three things that this book reveals about this coming day of the Lord: its content, its extent, and its intent.

The content of the day of the Lord is clear from 1:2-3. God will visit earth with direct and positive retribution, not in the general administrative sense of bringing people to account eventually but in the narrower sense of executing vengeance on humanity in cataclysmic judgment (1:14-16). This judgment will fall in spite of human unbelief (1:12). When people will be disregarding God, He will break into human history dynamically, supernaturally to judge. Peter's description of the day of the Lord is remarkably similar (2 Pet. 3:1-10). People today are saying what these two prophets said they would say so long ago. They are saying that God will never intervene in judgment this way. The great statement of the Book of Zephaniah is that God will indeed do this in a day yet future.

What will be the extent of this judgment? Zephaniah reveals that it will be discriminating. His people will be the special target of this judgment, though all humanity will also suffer (1:12). As we can see from this verse, the last stages of sin are complacency and indifference. It is an interesting fact of history that complacency and indifference have frequently preceded the destruction of great empires of the past. Assyria fell to Babylonia because she was complacent and indifferent (Nahum). Remember the fall of the Babylonian Empire that we read of in Daniel 5. The Roman Empire fell to the Visigoths from the north because it had become complacent and indifferent. And earlier the Northern Kingdom of Israel and later the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to Assyria and Babylonia respectively for the same reasons. The spirit that produces these conditions is disregard for God and His Word (3:2). The result of such a spirit is that the leaders of the people forsake their proper servant role and turn to abusing the people to fatten themselves (3:3-4).

Reading Zephaniah is somewhat like watching a science fiction movie about a nuclear disaster that leaves nothing but a sterile, uninhabited, windswept landscape with no life, no flowers, no fruit, and no beauty. What produces this horrible condition? The reason is people who are complacent and indifferent, who disregard and ignore God. They do not obey God's voice, receive His correction, trust in Him, or draw near to Him. They are materialized, self-centered, living in luxury oblivious to their danger. So God steps in and

turns their complacency into chaos, disorganizes their orderly lives, and purges them in their indifference. All that is left is a wind-swept desert.

What is the intent of this terrible activity? It is the creation of a new order with God Himself enthroned among His creatures (3:17). Chapter 3 of this prophecy is such a different picture of the future from what we have in chapters 1 and 2 that some commentators have said that a different person must have written it. Chapter 3 describes songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, and solidarity instead of scattering. That is the intent of this judgment. Marvelous restoration will follow devastating judgment.

The living message of this book is twofold. We can rejoice in the assurance of this coming judgment followed by restoration, and we have a responsibility in view of this coming judgment followed by restoration.

It is our privilege to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" that will be manifested at the end of God's judgment (Rom. 5:2b). Even though the day of the Lord will involve the destruction of all things that destroy, it will also begin a new era of singing, service, and solidarity. That era will be the millennial reign of Christ first and then the eternal state.

It is also our responsibility to live holy and godly lives as we anticipate the coming of "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell" (2 Pet. 3:11-13). We need to be diligent to be found at peace with God, "spotless and blameless" in our lives (2 Pet. 3:14). We need to be on guard that we do not fall away from our own faithfulness because of the prevalent "error of unprincipled people" (i.e., complacency and indifference; 2 Pet. 3:17). And we need to continue to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Rejoicing and responsible living: these characteristics need to mark the lives of people who anticipate the day of the Lord.

We could state the message of the book as follows. God will intervene in history catastrophically to judge humanity's complacency and indifference and to restore His people to the conditions of blessing that He originally intended for them to enjoy.

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
 - 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). 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, that it would involve judgment (1:2—3:8) and, second, that it would eventuate in blessing (3:9-20). The judgment portion is the larger of the two sections. 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

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.

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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 promised to cut off the remnant of Baal worshippers who remained in Judah as well as the priests of Baal and the unfaithful priests of Yahweh. He would also terminate their reputations and memories (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.

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

¹³The translation of this clause is difficult, and most of the commentators are not dogmatic about the correct rendering. God would destroy both things, but which one is in view here is difficult to say.

¹⁴In 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).

(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.

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."¹⁵

In this pericope the prophet identified three types of idolatry: "the overtly pagan, the syncretistic, and the religiously indifferent."¹⁶ Practitioners of all three would draw punishment from Yahweh.

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 and others (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

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."¹⁷

¹⁵Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:114.

¹⁶Hannah, p. 1526.

¹⁷T. Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 358.

This is Zephaniah's first reference to the day of the Lord, to which he referred 24 times in this book.¹⁸

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) The day of the LORD's sacrifice 1:8 That day 1:9, 10, 15 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	That day 3:11, 16 That time 3:19, 20 The time 3:20

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

"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."¹⁹

Here the prophet announced that the Lord's day was near; He was about to intervene in human history. 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).

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).

¹⁸For 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.

¹⁹Patterson, p. 310.

- 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 city.
- 1:11 Zephaniah called the inhabitants of the Mortar, the market or business district of Jerusalem, to wail because judgment was coming.²⁰ 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).

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

- 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

²⁰This section of Jerusalem may have received the name "mortar" because it lay in the somewhat geographically depressed Tyropoeon Valley.

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 day of the Lord as a day marked by wrath, trouble, distress, destruction, desolation, darkness, gloom, clouds, thick darkness, military trumpet, and battle cry. The fortified cities of Judah would face invasion, and the high corner towers of their walls would come under siege.
- 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.
- 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 makes 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."²¹

- 2:1-2 Zephaniah called the shameless people of Judah to gather together, evidently in a public assembly, to repent (cf. Joel 2:12-14). They needed

²¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1168.

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.

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. 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. 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."²²

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-

²²Dyer, pp. 810-11.

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.

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 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).²³ Biblical Ethiopia occupied the territory now held by southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were the southernmost (really southwesternmost) 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 and His people 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). 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).
- 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.²⁴
- 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

²³Patterson, pp. 349-50, suggested that Zephaniah may have meant Egypt rather than Ethiopia.

²⁴M. R. Wilson, "Nineveh," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, p. 186.

pride of Nineveh verbally by reviling it and bodily by shaking their fists at it after its fall (cf. Nah. 3:19).

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.

- 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 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).²⁵

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

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.

²⁵According 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.

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."²⁶

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. 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).

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 and awareness of guilt, but they would not be guilty any longer because they would be humble rather than proud.

²⁶C. F. Keil, "Zephaniah," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:156. Cf. Isa. 6:5-7.

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).

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

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."²⁷

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.

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 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 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!

"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)."²⁸

²⁷Patterson, p. 377.

²⁸Dyer, p. 812.

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.²⁹
- 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).

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

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.

²⁹The 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).

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