

ZEPHANIAH

*Habakkuk stood high and looked far;
Zephaniah stooped low with the candle of searching and looked closely.¹*

THE BIG PICTURE – ZEPHANIAH – “The LORD HIDES”

- **Historical Narrative** – What are some of the significant contributions of the Book of Zephaniah? I believe we are given a clue by the placement of this book among the Old Testament Minor Prophets. In terms of simple chronology, the Book of Habakkuk is the last Minor Prophet before Judah goes into exile, at the hands of the Babylonians. But in terms of its placement in the Old Testament, it is the Book of Zephaniah which is the last of the Minor Prophets before the exile. Zephaniah therefore serves as the final written word of the pre-exilic Minor Prophets. Do some accuse Zephaniah of not being very original and of merely repeating what others before him have said? That seems to have been a good part of his job. By his repetitions, Zephaniah emphasizes the important themes and messages of the prophets who ministered before him. Because Zephaniah’s ministry overlapped that of Jeremiah, he served as a second witness, whose testimony confirmed the words of Jeremiah.²
- **Redemption** – How much more this truth should be a comfort for New Testament Christians. In one sense our “Day of Judgment” came 2,000 years ago, when our Lord Jesus Christ bore our judgment on the cross of Calvary. We need not dread God’s coming judgment, and we anxiously await the full measure of God’s promised blessings. Much that was future for the saints of old is now history for us. We can look back upon the cross of Calvary, while they could only look forward.³
- **Christ** – The book Zephaniah contains no direct Messianic prophecies, but the prophet’s focus on “the day of the Lord” as the time of judgment and blessing connects his message with the work of Christ. The New Testament on one occasion identifies the day of the Lord with the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Ac. 2:20). Normally, however, in the New Testament the day of the Lord refers to Christ’s glorious return (1 Co. 1:8; 5:5; 2 Co. 1:14; 1 Th. 5:2; 2 Th. 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Pe. 3:10), and describes that day as the time when Jesus will destroy all his enemies and bestow incredible blessings on his faithful followers. These connections between Zephaniah’s message and New Testament teaching point into two directions. **First**, Zephaniah predicted that the destruction inflicted by the Babylonians would reach far and wide. Not only were the wicked in Judah to be judged, but the evil nations of the world would also receive God’s judgment. **Second**, Zephaniah predicted that the destruction by the Babylonians would not thwart the promises of God. God would purify a people for himself from among the nations and

the exiled Jews, and he would bring then in joyous celebration to the wonders of a renewed Jerusalem. This prophetic vision is fulfilled in Jesus. In Christ Gentiles are united with believing Jews into one body (Eph. 2:11-16). When Christ returns redeemed men and women from every nation will bow before him in joyous praise (Rev. 7:9-10) in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-3).⁴

- Kingdom – The book assumes a communal context; the guilty, the less guilty, and the innocent are not differentiated in the destruction that is announced and to be experienced. A gracious future, if it is to exist at all, is on the other side of the destruction of the community and is God's act of transforming the community into a faithful community. To read in concert with the book (that is, to be addressed by the book), contemporary readers need to step outside of an individualistic understanding of guilt, innocence, and grace, recognizing themselves as part of a larger social matrix in which the acts of each affect all.⁵
- The New Testament Witness – Jesus alludes to Zephaniah twice in reference to the Second Coming (Matt 13:41 and Zeph. 1:3; Matt. 24:29 and Zeph. 1:15). Similarly, Paul also refers to the Day of the Lord (Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:8) and Zephaniah's theme of universality is also found in Paul's writings (Gal. 3:8-9, 14, 26-29).⁶

INTRODUCTION

The warning of immediate and inevitable judgment standing as a sword poised to strike was used to draw the people away from their rebellion against God and back into His loving arms.

I. WHEN WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

A. His historical context

After the time of Josiah's revival in 622, but before the destruction of Nineveh in 612 --which Zephaniah indicated was still in existence then (Zeph. 2:13) as the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

Most scholars prefer a date before Josiah's reform in 621 BC, because Zephaniah spends the book denouncing such syncretistic practices as Baal worship and child sacrifice, which had become more widespread in Israel since Manasseh's reign. By denouncing such practices, Zephaniah could have been a contributing influence in bringing about reform. However, some scholars have noted that the text mentions "the remnant of Baal", in 1:4, which suggests that the reforms had already come, but failed, in that a remnant of Baal worship still persisted.⁷

Zephaniah appears to be a descendant of the great king Hezekiah. It is possible that he was instructed by the same men who had instructed Josiah in his youth and Zephaniah may have had a significant role as a catalyst in Josiah's reforms. Zephaniah sounds a trumpet of alarm by raising his voice to shock the complacent citizens of Judah.⁸

B. His global context

663 The Fall Of Thebes • 612 Nineveh Destroyed • Kings of Israel: Destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrians • Kings of Judah: Josiah • Prophets who were Contemporary with Zephaniah (Judah): Jeremiah (Judah), Nahum (Judah), Habakkuk? (Judah) • 641 BC: Josiah becomes king of Judah. • 640 BC: Decisive victory of Assyria over Elamite Empire; Assurbanipal captures its last king Khumma-Khaldash III, annexes Elam, and lays waste the country. • 632 BC: Cylon, Athenian noble, seizes the Acropolis in a failed attempt to become king. • 632 BC: In the Battle of Chengpu, the Chinese kingdom of Jin and her allies defeat the kingdom of Chu and her allies. • 631 BC: Founding of Cyrene, a Greek colony in Libya (North Africa) (approximate date). • 631 BC: Sadyates becomes king of Lydia. • 627 BC: Death of Assurbanipal, king of Assyria; he is succeeded by Assur-etel-ilani (approximate date). • 626 BC: Nabopolassar revolts against Assyria, founds the Neo-Babylonian Empire. • 625 BC: Medes and Babylonians assert their independence from Assyria and attack Nineveh (approximate date). • 623 BC: Sin-shar-ishkun succeeds his brother Assur-etel-ilani as king of Assyria (approximate date). • c.622 BC: Text of Deuteronomy found in the Temple in Jerusalem. • 619 BC: Alyattes becomes king of Lydia. • 619 BC: Death of King Xiang of Zhou, King of the Zhou Dynasty of China.

C. His contemporaries

"Nahum and Zephaniah were probably contemporary for much of their time of service."⁹

"Zephaniah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, exercised his ministry during the reign of Josiah (640-608 BC)."¹⁰

There may have been some overlap with Jeremiah since he began to prophecy in 627 B.C. Zephaniah would have been the first prophet to Judah in the 60 years since Isaiah (Nahum was about Assyria).¹¹

ZEPHANIAH	HABAKKUK	LAMENTATIONS (written by Jeremiah)
Decades before the fall of Jerusalem (c. 630)	Just before the fall of Jerusalem (c. 607)	Just after the fall of Jerusalem (586)
God will judge	God: When will You judge?	God has judged
Preview of trouble	Promise of trouble	Presence of trouble
Declaration	Dialogue	Dirge
Day of the Lord	Dominion of the Lord	Destruction of the Lord
God is in your midst (see 3:15, 17)	God is your strength (see 3:19)	God is your portion (see 3:24)

Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 280.

II. WHO WROTE THE BOOK?

Zephaniah's name means "the Lord hides." "Contrary to the usual practice among the prophets, the author traces his ancestry four generations back (1:1) to indicate his royal lineage."¹² He was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah and, therefore, of royal blood. However, Archer, *A Survey of OT Intro*, 354 refutes this because of chronological considerations.¹³

"This is **the only time** in the prophetic books that an author traces his genealogy. He mentions a Hezekiah. Why would he go back and stop at Hezekiah if this is not the king Hezekiah? (One of the godly kings.) Therefore, Zephaniah was probably in the royal family and lived in Jerusalem."¹⁴

The prophet Zephaniah was evidently a person of considerable social standing in Judah and was probably related to the royal line.¹⁵

"The prophet was born during the ruthless reign of Manasseh (692-638 BC)."¹⁶

Wood, on the other hand shows how Zephaniah was of royal descent. "The length of time since King Hezekiah lived also fits this identification. If this is correct, Zephaniah was a descendant of the royal line."¹⁷

"Contrary to the usual custom, the title of the book contains the lineage of the prophet, which is carried back to an ancestor of the fourth generation named Hezekiah. On this basis Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, king of Judah. While the individual spoken of as Hezekiah was not actually described as 'king,' there seems little doubt that he was in fact intended to be understood by the reader, [or the author] would scarcely have troubled to furnish the ancestry of the prophet."¹⁸

"The intent of the author was to announce to Judah God's approaching judgment. A Scythian incursion into Canaan may have provided the immediate occasion. This fierce, horse-mounted people originated in what is now southern Russia, but by the seventh century b.c. they had migrated across the Caucasus and settled in and along the northern territories of the Assyrian empire. Alternately the enemies and allies of Assyria, they seem to have thrust south along the Mediterranean sometime in the 620s, destroying Ashkelon and Ashdod and halting at the Egyptian border only because of a payoff by Pharaoh Psamtik (Psammetichus). Ultimately, however, the destruction prophesied by Zephaniah came at the hands of the Babylonians after they had overpowered Assyria and brought that ancient power to its end."¹⁹

Zephaniah's main theme is the coming of the day of the Lord (see notes on Isa 2:11,17,20; Joel 1:15; 2:2; Am 5:18; 8:9), when God will severely punish the nations, including apostate Judah. Zephaniah portrays the stark horror of that ordeal with the same graphic imagery found elsewhere in the prophets. But he also makes it clear that God will yet be merciful toward his people; like many other prophets, he ends his pronouncements of doom on the positive note of Judah's restoration by Yahweh, "King of Israel" (3:15; see note there).

III. TO WHOM DID THE PROPHET PREACH?

The prophet may have been a resident of Jerusalem because of his word 'from this place (v. 4) and his familiarity with the city (vv. 10, 11). His ministry was during the reign of King Josiah (640-609BC).

IV. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK?

"The theme of his message is that Jehovah is still firmly in control of all His world despite any contrary appearances."²⁰

Because of Judah's disobedience to the Law of God, "The book serves as a bridge between the eighth century prophets of judgment such as Hosea and Amos, and the prophets after the exile, such as Haggai and Zechariah, who proclaimed a coming salvation of God."²¹

"The purpose of the work, which commenced on a note of gloom, was to warn the southern kingdom of approaching devastation."²²

"The book is composed as a dramatic dialogue between Yahweh and someone else, possibly the prophet."²³

"Zephaniah pinpoints the cause of God's judgment by proclaiming the moral degeneration of the people. He makes clear, however, that the door of mercy is open for those who will sincerely repent."²⁴

"'The day of the LORD' is an expression used more frequently in this prophecy than in any other Old Testament book. Thus the theme of the book is the impending judgment of God on Judah for its disobedience."²⁵

The Day of the Lord is a major theme in Zephaniah occurring 23 times in this short book (as well as in Obadiah, Joel, and Ezekiel). It describes a time when Yahweh will come to His people and necessarily destroy evil as a means to delivering them. While Zephaniah and Joel obviously had "local" aspects in view of this coming Day of Yahweh's presence among them (with the judgment of Assyria and Babylon), those judgments/deliverances only mirrored, or foreshadowed, the ultimate deliverance (and thus necessary judgment) which would come in the eschaton.²⁶

"Though judgment was sure, God's promise to protect His people and fulfill His promises was steadfast and everlasting."²⁷

The purpose of Zephaniah is threefold. First, the prophet wrote to warn of God's judgment (the Day of the Lord) on Judah and the surrounding nations. Second, Zephaniah's warning served an exhortation to return to God. Third, Zephaniah sought to encourage the people of Judah by pointing to a period of future blessing and restoration.²⁸

V. SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Zephaniah preached during the religious reforms of King Josiah. His ministry was probably early in the reign of Josiah and thus fought against the conditions brought about by the evil reigns of Manasseh (692-638) and Amon (638-637).

"Under Josiah administration of the Law and worship of the Lord had been revived briefly, but the people still practiced idolatrous customs in secret. Perception of this hypocrisy stirred the young prophet in action.

VI. AN OUTLINE FOR ZEPHANIAH

The book begins with the wild poetry we have come to expect from the prophets.²⁹

"The day of the LORD" is an expression used more frequently in this prophecy than in any other OT book. Thus the theme of the book is the impending judgment of God on Judah for its disobedience. The book's theme is capsulated in Zephaniah 1:7a: 'Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.'

"The book of Zephaniah sets forth first a theme of warning and then of promise. The warning pertains to the coming day of the Lord. The theme of promise is presented in the last two-thirds of chapter 3 and concerns the future day of millennial blessing that Israel will experience."³⁰

"The thought of the book is centered upon one central theme -- the coming of the day of the Lord."³¹

A. God's wrath on Judah (Chap 1)

God deals in Judgment with the land. Notice the "I will" statements.

- 1:2 "I will utterly consume"
- 1:3 "I will consume"
- 1:3 "I will cut off"
- 1:4 "I will also stretch out mine hand"
- 1:4 "I will cut off"
- 1:8 "I will punish"
- 1:12 "I will search ... and punish"
- 1:17 "I will bring distress"
- 2:5 "I will even destroy thee"

1. The Objects of Judgment

a. The idolaters (vv. 4-7)

1b. Baal (v. 4)

"Lord / Possessor," the chief male deity of Phoenicians and Canaanites.

2b. Chemarim (v. 4 [idolatrous])

3c. The host of heaven (v. 5 [Astrology])

4d. Malcham (v. 5 [Molech, offering up baby/human sacrifices])

b. The princes (v8)

"Clothed with strange apparel"

c. The oppressors (v. 9)

"Fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit"

d. The merchants (vv. 10-11)

5. The indifferent (vv. 12, 13)

"Settled on their lees"

"The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil"

2. The Description of Judgment

a. The nearness (vv. 7, 14a)

b. The horror (vv. 14b-18)

"THE DAY OF THE LORD"

1:7, 14	It is near / imminent
1:7	It is a day of feasting
1:8, 9	It is a day of reckoning
1:14-18	It is a day of judgment

See also 'in that day' 1:10; 2:2, 3; 3:8, 11, 16

WHAT TIME IS IT?

3. The Deterrent to Judgment
 - a. Repent (2:1, 2)
 - b. Seek God (2:3)
- B. God's woe on the nations (Chap 2)
 1. On Philistia (vv. 4-7)
 2. On Moab and Ammon (vv. 8-11)
 3. On Ethiopia (v. 12)
 4. On Assyria (vv. 13-15)

"The Assyrian capital of Nineveh is to become a howling wilderness occupied only by wild beasts (2:17). Along with all this dire warning, there is an appeal for repentance, addressed primarily to the remnant, rather than to the nation as a whole (2:3)."³²

C. God's will for the remnant (Chap 3)

Verses 1-9 appear to summarize the situation. It seems transitional in nature; moving us from the people's sins, to their judgment (Tribulation), then into blessing (Millennial).

"There seems to be a very definite millennial overtone to the promise of the ultimate blessedness of Israel in 3:13."³³

This is descriptive of the Millennium which is simply a forerunner of the eternal state. It deals primarily with Israel and her position during this period of time. However, regardless of the recipients, this will be the condition of the times. This is for Israel, the church's position, if possible, is even more glorious.

1. The Restoration of the nations (vv. 9, 10)

Remember the "I will" statements of chapters 1 & 2? Now notice the "I will" statements of chapter 3.

- 3:11 "I will take away out of the midst"
- 3:12 "I will also leave in the midst"
- 3:18 "I will gather them that are sorrowful"
- 3:19 "I will undo all that afflict thee"

3:19 "I will save her that halteth"
 3:19 "I will get them praise and fame"
 3:20 "I will make you a name"

a. A pure language (3:9 [cf. Isaiah 6:5-7])

Enoch in Gen. 4:26 had an acceptable worship and David in Psalm 116:13, 17 had the 'pure language' for worship. Yet, the day will come when all humanity will have in their mouth the language of worship.

"The future age will be one of universal faith, and all nations, even those beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, shall serve Jehovah with one consent and shall speak the same language of faith (3:9, 10)."³⁴

b. A popular gathering (3:10)

Humanity at large will gather for the purpose of offering. Why is there an offering in the Millennium? Two reasons: (1) to remember the slain lamb who takes away the sins of the world, and (2) it is thanksgiving oriented.

c. A purged conscience (3:11)

David pleaded that he would not be ashamed (Pss. 25:2, 20; 31:17; 37:19; 119:6, 46, 116). Isaiah speaks of the day when Israel shall not be ashamed (Isa. 45:17; 49:23; 50:7; 54:4). Paul quotes this with reference to the Gospel and its resultant condition (Rom. 9:33; 10:11).

d. A protected people (3:13)

There will no longer be the threat from their perennial enemies (i.e. Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Philistines, etc.).

e. A praising people (3:14-17) Why?

1a. The Lord hath taken away thy judgments (v. 15)

2b. He hath cast out thy enemies (v. 15)

3c. He is in the midst of thee (vv. 15, 17; Isa. 12:6; Zec. 2:10, 11)

1aa. God will not be with the stiff-necked (Exod. 3:3)

- 2bb. God, in the midst, is HOLY (Isa. 12:6; Hos. 11:9)
 - 3cc. Thou shalt not see evil anymore (v. 15)
 - 4dd. He will take great delight in you (NIV v. 17)
 - 5ee. He will quiet you with His love (NIV v. 17)
 - 6ff. He will rejoice over you with singing (NIV v. 17)
2. The Restoration of Israel (vv. 11-20)
- a. The redemption of the nation (vv. 11-13)
 - b. The joy of the nation (v. 14)
 - c. The ruler of the nation (vv. 15-17)
 - d. The reward of the nation (vv. 18-20)
 - 1a. I will gather them that are sorrowful (v. 18)
 - 2b. I will save her that halteth (v. 19)
 - 3c. I will gather her that was driven out (v. 19)
 - 4d. I will turn back your captivity before your eyes (v. 20)

VII. KEY DOCTRINAL IDEAS IN ZEPHANIAH

- A. What Is The Difference Between The Eternal State And The Millennium?
- a. New heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1)
 - b. Sin and its effects will be completely removed (Rev. 21:4, 8, 27; 22:13)
 - c. No celestial lights (Rev. 21:23; 22:5)
 - d. All humanity worships Him (Rev. 21:24)
 - e. No night (Rev. 21:25)
 - f. No seas (Rev. 21:2), but there will be a river (Rev. 22:1) and a fountain (Rev. 21:6).

g. Fruit trees will grow (Rev. 22:2)

There will be work or employment in heaven, but without the toilsome nature of work that was brought about by the curse in the garden.

B. The great and terrible day of the LORD

The major contribution of Zephaniah is its contribution to the doctrine of the Day of the Lord, a concept which occurs over twenty times in the book. The frequency of this expression is the highest of any Old Testament prophet.³⁵

One of the most prominent features that we learn from Zephaniah concerning the Day of the Lord is that God will intervene in human affairs. Another aspect of the Day of the Lord is the demonstration of Yahweh's unrivaled superiority. (cf. 1:2, 18) In chapter 2 the four nations represent the four points of the compass and point to God's superiority over all the nations of the world. Also cf. 2:11. If Yahweh is going to starve all the other God's then he must be superior to them. Chapter 3:8, 15. Yahweh has no equals. He will share his throne with no one.³⁶

C. The inevitable consequences of sin

APPLICATION

- Where are you in the midst of all this? Are you right with God or do you face His hand of judgment?
- If you stand apart from His Son, then nothing awaits you but fiery judgment.
- Today is the day of repentance and today He longs to embrace you in His arms.

¹ <http://www.thebookwurm.com/ref-zeph.htm>

² <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-zephaniah>

³ <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-zephaniah>

⁴ <http://www.npchurch.org/adulted/studies/prophets/zephaniah.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=54>

⁶ <http://www.centerpointbibleinstitute.com/classnotes/Zephaniah%20%20Handout%20Savelle%202006.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.theology.edu/biblesurvey/zephania.htm>

⁸ Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 940.

⁹ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 320.

¹⁰ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook on Zephaniah* (Moody, 1967), 428.

¹¹ <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-zephaniah>

¹² *The Criswell Study Bible on Zephaniah.*

¹³ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 354.

¹⁴ <http://bible.org/seriespage/zephaniah>

¹⁵ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/zephaniah/>

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- ¹⁶ “Zephaniah,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Everett F. Harrison, Charles F. Pfeiffer (Editor), 883.
- ¹⁷ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 321.
- ¹⁸ Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 939.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible/zephaniah/>
- ²⁰ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 354.
- ²¹ John D. W. Watts, “Zephaniah, The Book of,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michale D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 832.
- ²² Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 942.
- ²³ John D. W. Watts, “Zephaniah, The Book of,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michale D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 828.
- ²⁴ “Zephaniah,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Everett F. Harrison, Charles F. Pfeiffer (Editor), 883.
- ²⁵ John D. Hannah, “Zephaniah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty – Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1524.
- ²⁶ <http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-zephaniah>
- ²⁷ John D. Hannah, “Zephaniah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty – Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1524.
- ²⁸ <http://www.centerpointbibleinstitute.com/classnotes/Zephaniah%20%20Handout%20Savelle%202006.pdf>
- ²⁹ <http://www.intervarsity.org/followingchrist/features/feature.php?id=561>
- ³⁰ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 322.
- ³¹ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 232.
- ³² Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 355.
- ³³ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 355.
- ³⁴ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 355.
- ³⁵ <http://www.centerpointbibleinstitute.com/classnotes/Zephaniah%20%20Handout%20Savelle%202006.pdf>
- ³⁶ <http://bible.org/seriespage/zephaniah>