

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

Message:

The coming Day of the LORD will bring judgment on the wicked, both Jews and Gentiles, and restoration for a righteous remnant which will include both Jews and Gentiles.

Author:

According to the superscription (1:1), the author of the book is Zephaniah. The name means “Yahweh hides.”¹ The superscription also reveals that Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, and the son of Hezekiah (the king?). This rather extensive genealogy might suggest that the prophet was the great, great, grandson of Hezekiah the King of Judah (729–686 B.C.). If this is correct then Zephaniah would be part of the royal family.² Zephaniah’s ministry is linked in the superscription to the reign of Josiah, king of Judah (640–609 B.C.). This means that Zephaniah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom, probably a resident of Jerusalem (see 1:4, 10–11).

Recipients:

It is generally acknowledged that the original recipients of Zephaniah’s messages were the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Dating:

According to the superscription (1:1), Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah King of Judah (640–609 B.C.). This date can probably be narrowed further by noting that the destruction of Nineveh is seen as future in 2:13. Since Nineveh was destroyed in 612, Zephaniah would have been written before that. Another key to dating is the institution of Josiah’s religious reforms (c. 622) which among other things addressed the issue of idolatry (cf. 2 Kgs 22–23). Some argue that since Zephaniah does not mention the reforms and since there are frequent references to idolatry in the book (cf. 1:4–6, 11–12; 3:1–4), then Zephaniah must have prophesied prior to the reforms. However, these facts can be explained in other ways and it seems best not to draw a firm conclusion either way on this point. Thus a date between 640–612 seems likely.

¹ The name, with minor spelling variations occurs about ten times in the Old Testament. These references may refer to as many as four people including a priest, the son of Maaseiah (Jer 21:1; 29:25, 29; 37:3; 52:24; 2 Kgs 25:18); a Kohathite, son of Tahath (1 Chr 6:36); a priest, father of Josiah or Hen (Zech 6:10, 14), and the prophet referred to here.

² Gleason Archer disputes this identification however, contending that there would be insufficient time between the birth of Hezekiah’s oldest son, Manasseh (c. 710 B.C.), and the birth of Josiah (c. 648 B.C.) to foster four full generations (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3d. ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 354).

Historical Setting:

The reign of Josiah had been preceded by the wicked reigns of Manasseh (696–642 B.C.) and Amon (642–640 B.C.). Like these evil kings, the people practiced immorality and idolatry. Josiah's kingship held more promise as he sought to turn the people back to the Lord. Unfortunately, Josiah's reign ended in 609 B.C. when he was wounded during an attempt to stop Pharaoh Necho II at Meggido from assisting Assyria against Babylon.

Politically, Zephaniah's ministry coincided with the decline in Assyrian dominance which began around 626 and ended in 612 B.C. It was also a period which began to see the rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire. During this time between the decline of Assyrian power and the rise of Babylonian dominance, Judah was able to experience a brief period of national independence.

Purpose:

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.

Contribution:

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.³

Zephaniah and the Other Prophets:⁴

ZEPHANIAH	HABAKKUK	LAMENTATIONS
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)

³ Larry Walker, "Zephaniah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 539.

⁴ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 280.

Zephaniah in the New Testament:

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).

Literary Issues:

Like other Old Testament prophets, Zephaniah is a book rich in literary forms and features.⁵ The variety of forms used by the prophet include “(1) positive prophetic sayings of hope (2:1–3; 3:9–13, 14–20); and (2) threats (judgment oracles), whether to individuals (3:1–7), Judah and Jerusalem (1:4–6, 7–13), or the nations of the world (1:2–4; 2:4–15). Zephaniah makes use of exhortations (1:7–13; 3:8), two instructional admonitions (2:1–3; 3:14–20, the latter of which is almost hymnic in nature), lament (1:10–11), woes (2:4–7; 3:1–7), and pronouncements (1:2–3, 4–6; 2:4–15). Two narrative discourses giving detailed information are also present (1:14–18; 3:9–13).”⁶

Likewise, Zephaniah is skilled in his use of literary features. These features include, “metaphor and simile (1:7, 11, 12; 2:1, 2, 4–7, 9; 3:3, 8, 13, 16), literary/historical allusions (1:3; 2:4, 9; 3:9–10, 18), personification (1:14; 3:14–15, 16), anthropopocia (1:4, 12–13; 3:7, 8, 15), irony (1:11; 2:12), merismus (1:12), synecdoche (1:16; 2:11, 13, 14; 3:6), enallage (3:7), hendiadys (3:7, 19), chiasmus (3:19), alliteration and paronomasia (1:2, 15, 17; 2:1, 4, 7, 12(?); 3:10(?), 20), enjambment (1:9–12; 2:2, 3, 14; 3:3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 20), and repetition and refrain (1:2, 3, 14, 15–16, 18; 2:2, 3; 3:14–15). Several key words punctuate the prophetic material: יָרֵם (*yôm*, ‘day’), 21 times; קָרֹב (*q rōb*, ‘near’), 10 times; אָסַף (*sap*, ‘gather’), אֶרֶץ (*ere*, ‘earth’), and שֵׁם (*š m*, ‘name’), 5 times each; שָׁפַט (*š pa*, ‘judge’), 4 times; פָּקַד (*p qad*, ‘punish/visit’) and קָבַץ (*q ba*, ‘gather/assemble’), 3 times each.”⁷ Some have also noted that Zephaniah appears to be dependent upon the phraseology of Deuteronomy (Zeph 1:13–18; 3:17–20).⁸

Structure:

The structure of the Book of Zephaniah includes three major sections (1:2–15; 2:1–13;

⁵ That Zephaniah stands well within the prophetic tradition is noted by Julia O’Brien who suggests that, Zephaniah reads like a “prophetic primer.” See Julia M. O’Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 88-9.

⁶ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, ed. Kenneth Barker, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 283, 285.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, ed. R. K. Harrison, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 27.

3:1–19) separated by two transitory exhortations (2:1-3; 3:8a).⁹

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Judgment Against Judah (1:2–2:3)
 - A. Judgment for All (1:2–3)
 - B. Judgment for Judah (1:4–18)
 - C. Exhortation (2:1–3)
- III. Judgment Against the Nations and Jerusalem (2:4–3:8)
 - A. Judgment of the Nations (2:4–15)
 - 1. Philistia (2:4–7)
 - 2. Moab and Ammon (2:8–11)
 - 3. Ethiopia (2:12)
 - 4. Assyria (2:13–15)
 - B. Woe Against Jerusalem (3:1–7)
 - C. Exhortation (3:8)
- IV. Future Restoration for the Remnant (3:9–20)
 - A. Salvation for the Gentiles (3:9–10)
 - B. Salvation for the Jews (3:11–20)

Chart

Superscription 1:1	DAYS OF JUDGMENT						DAYS OF JOY	
	Judgment Against Judah 1:2–2:3			Judgment Against the Nations and Jerusalem 2:4–3:8			Future Restoration for a Remnant 3:9–20	
	Judgment for all 1:2-3	Judgment for Judah 1:4-18	Exhortation 2:1-3 →	Judgment of the Nations 2:4-15	Woe Against Jerusalem 3:1-7	Exhortation 3:8 →	Salvation for the Gentiles 3:9-10	Salvation for the Jews 3:11-20
	↑ The Response of the Righteous ↓							
	RETRIBUTION						RESTORATION	

⁹ In this we follow Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 444

Expositional Outline of Zephaniah:**I. SUPERScription (1:1)****II. JUDGMENT AGAINST JUDAH (1:2–2:3)**

- A. Judgment for All (1:2–3)
- B. Judgment for Judah (1:4–18)
- C. Exhortation (2:1–3)

III. JUDGMENT AGAINST THE NATIONS AND JERUSALEM (2:4–3:8)

- A. A. Judgment of the Nations (2:4–15)
 - 1. Philistia (2:4–7)
 - 2. Moab and Ammon (2:8–11)
 - 3. Ethiopia (2:12)
 - 4. Assyria (2:13–15)
- B. Woe Against Jerusalem (3:1–7)
- C. Exhortation (3:8)

IV. FUTURE RESTORATION FOR THE REMNANT (3:9–20)

- A. Salvation for the Gentiles (3:9–10)

- B. Salvation for the Jews (3:11–20)

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF 3:11–20¹⁰
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A) Jerusalem's shame removed (v. 11a) <li style="padding-left: 2em;">B) Jerusalem purified and populated by a remnant (vv. 11b-13) <li style="padding-left: 4em;">C) Jerusalem exhorted to rejoice over the Lord's salvation (vv. 14-15) <li style="padding-left: 4em;">C) Jerusalem exhorted to trust in the Lord's protection (vv. 16-17) <li style="padding-left: 2em;">B) Jerusalem purified and populated by a remnant (vv. 18-19a) A) Jerusalem's shame reversed (vv. 19b-20)

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¹⁰ Slightly modified from Robert B. Chisholm Jr. *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 203

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