

ZEPHANIAH

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THE MAN

Little is known about Zephaniah except what we read in his book of prophecy. His name means "Jehovah hides," or "Jehovah has hidden." His birth would be about 648 B.C., would be during the reign of Manasseh. This reign proved to be wicked and bloody (2 Kings 21:16). In worship to Molech, children were forced to pass through the fire (2 Kings 23:10). Some have concluded that his name might be an indication that he had been hidden from the danger presented by the wicked king, and credit given to Jehovah. He traces his ancestry back to Hezekiah, king of Judah. Hezekiah had what is considered a righteous reign. Thus the king who reigned in the days of Isaiah and Micah was the great-great-grandfather of Zephaniah. This makes Zephaniah the only prophet to be of royal blood. (He is the only prophet to trace his genealogy.) We have no information whatsoever about the occupation of the prophet. His reference to Jerusalem as "this place" (1:4) indicates that it was his home.

TIME OF THE PROPHECY

Josiah reigned from about 640 to 609 B.C., and it was during his reign that Zephaniah prophesied (1:1). Biblical historians place the actual writing of the prophecy between 636 and 623 B.C. Jeremiah and Zephaniah seem to have been prophesying in the same time period. Nahum and Habakkuk also prophesied during the reign of Josiah.

BACKGROUND

Hezekiah was succeeded by his son Manasseh, a boy, twelve years of age. It is doubtful that Judah ever had a more wicked ruler than Manasseh. He tried to undo all of the good which his father accomplished. He rebuilt the high places for idol worship, built altars to Baal and Ashtoreth, and altars to the heavenly bodies. He practiced human sacrifice, witchcraft, and dealt with familiar spirits. To this he added the shedding of innocent blood in Jerusalem

2 Kings 21:1-9 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hephzibah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel. For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger. And he set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house, of which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever: Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers; only if they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them. But they hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel.

During his reign, the heathens gained control of the government. Later in life, Manasseh tried to correct his mistakes, but with little success (2 Chronicles 33:10-20). Amon, who succeeded Manasseh, was just like his father. His reign was also characterized by great wickedness in Judah (2 Chronicles 33:21-25).

Josiah, who came to the throne at the age of eight, was the last good king to reign over Judah. At the age of sixteen, he began to seek after the Lord, the God of his fathers. And at the age of twenty, he started to purge Judah. His reforms were among the most bold every attempted by any king who reigned over the southern kingdom. Altars and images were destroyed, bones of priests who had offered sacrifices to false gods were gathered and burned.

In the process of cleansing the temple, a copy of the law was found and read before the young king. Being alarmed by what he heard, he sent to the prophetess, Huldah, for a word from God concerning what he had learned. Why he sent to Huldah instead of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum or Habakkuk is unknown. The cleansing of the temple was followed by passover observance which surpassed in enthusiasm any known for many years. (2 Kings 22,23; 2 Chronicles 34,35).

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

War loomed to the north of Judah. During the time of Isaiah and Micah, Assyria had been able to maintain supremacy over the world. It seems that Josiah had been loyal to the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, who died in about 633 B.C., and who was the last great king of the empire. After his death, the empire began to crumble.

In 625 B.C., Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, declared independence for Chaldea from Assyria. Thus establishing the independent kingdom of Babylon. This led to war between Babylon and Nineveh. In 614 B.C. the Medes captured Ashur, the chief city of Assyria. Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar and general of his army, led an attack against Nineveh. With the help of the Medes, he was able to destroy the city completely in 612 B.C. This is an important date.

The remnant of the Assyrian army went west where it became entrenched near Haran. Nebuchadnezzar regrouped his forces and followed them to Haran, where he attacked and destroyed what was left of the Assyrians in 609 B.C. This left the Chaldean nation the undisputed master of the East!

Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt decided to help Assyria at Haran by marching north with his army (609 B.C.). Josiah tried to stop him at Megiddo by throwing his forces in the path of Necho. He succeeded in keeping the Egyptian army from reaching Haran, but died in the battle. For four years, Egypt dominated Judah, but in 605 B.C. Necho was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar. He pursued them as far south as Judah, whose people he took under his own wing. Here is one of the ironies of history. Judah, led by Josiah, attempted to help Chaldea by stopping Egypt at Megiddo. The kingdom of Judah gave its king to help the kingdom which later subdued it! Later, Judah was destroyed by Babylon. Learning of the death of his father, Nebuchadnezzar made a quick return to Babylon to claim the throne. As he returned to Babylon, he carried hostages with him. Among them were Daniel and his three friends, all chief characters in the book of Daniel. It seems that it is altogether possible that it was the rise of the Babylonian empire and their westward threat that gave occasion for Zephaniah's prophecy.

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL CONDITIONS

In spite of Josiah's reforms and his own good life, the people appear to have continued to be corrupt in their personal and religious lives. Social injustice and moral corruption seem to have been widespread. Luxurious living and extravagance are seen on every hand. The baalim were still worshipped, and what worship was offered to Jehovah God was not much more than idolatry. Truly, the time was ripe for judgment.

THEME

Like Joel before him, Zephaniah emphasizes the "day of the Lord." The purpose was to bring terror to the hearts of the wicked so they might repent. He speaks of the nearness of "the day," and that it would be a day of darkness and terror.

Zeph 1:7 Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD is at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests.

Zeph 1:14-16 The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.

While the prophet does not specify at whose hand this punishment would come, he assures them that it will come. At the same time, there is a message of hope for the future with the coming of Messiah. While he does not mention the Messiah Himself, he says much about the things which the Lord will accomplish in the last days.

LESSONS OF NOTE

Zeph 1:2-3 I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the Lord. I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked: and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the Lord.

Compare Gen 1:20-27 The destruction is in the exact reverse order of creation (Zeph-Man → Beast → Fowls → Fish: Genesis - Fish → Fowls → Beast → Man

The people had stopped trusting God for their safety and started relying on foreign alliances: v. 8 *And it shall come to pass in the day of the Lord's sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel.*

The people had come to enjoy violence and deceit: v. 9 *In the same day also will I punish all those that leap on the threshold, which fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit.*

They had become dishonest in their business practices: v. 11 *Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off.*

They had become a nation obsessed with material wealth: v. 13 *Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses, but not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof.*

The complacent people in Jerusalem claimed that God would do neither good nor harm. They simply did not expect the Lord to do anything. *Zeph. 1:12 And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.—THIS IS DEISM*

The prophet warns the people that they would not be able to buy their way out of judgment. *Zeph 1:18 Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land.*

They mixed their worship of God with worship of Malcham (a fire-god): v 5. *And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham;*

(Note that worship of Malcham, a.k.a Milcom or Moloch including “passing children through the fire—sacrificing children to appease the fire-god)—see above regarding previous rule of Manasseh.

While Josiah was leading some reforms, they still were far away from worshipping God properly at the time of this writing. They elevated Malcham to the same level as Jehovah in their worship.

What can we learn from this over 2600 years later? While we may not name false gods in our worship, we must be careful that we do elevate our other worldly exploits to the level of our devotion to God through his son Jesus Christ. God does not want to share our devotion with anyone or anything. For example, when our materialism take precedence over our devotion to God, we have done exactly what our Lord warned us against in *Matthew 6:24* *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.* Families suffer, our local churches suffer, and our communities suffer when our love is divided.

THE REMEDY--REPENTANCE

Zeph 2:1-3 Gather yourselves together, yea, gather together, O nation not desired; Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger come upon you. Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD's anger.

For those who repent there is hope that the Lord will protect them from judgment. He speaks of the enemies of God's people, and they will be destroyed.

This soon to come historic day of the Lord judgment against the surrounding nations include the Philistines, (Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron) to the west (2:4-7), Moab and Ammon to the east (2:8-11), Ethiopia to the south (2:12), and Assyria (Nineveh) to the north (2:13-15).

BRINGING IT BACK HOME—WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO GOD'S PEOPLE?

Zeph 3:1 Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city!

This is speaking of Jerusalem. God will destroy Jerusalem's enemies, but He will, also, punish Jerusalem for the evil within her. They are polluted with false gods and idols. They have rebelled against their God, and committed spiritual adultery. They thought themselves to be above others, and they oppressed those around them, because of their arrogance. They thought they would never be destroyed, because of their relationship with God.

Zephaniah 3:2 She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God.

This speaks of rebellion toward God. God had sent judges, teachers, and prophets to warn them, and they still did not live the faithful life. God loved them dearly. He wanted to bless them. He sent prophet after prophet, warning them of the consequences of unfaithfulness. It seemed the more prophets He sent to warn them, the further they wandered away from God. They did not repent of their sins. He drew nigh to her, but she did not draw nigh to God. She put her trust in the heathen nations around her, and not in God.

Zephaniah 3:3 Her princes within her [are] roaring lions; her judges [are] evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow.

Being a prince of the people, carries with it a great responsibility to take care of the people. It seems, the princes did not want any responsibility for the people. They just wanted to rule, and take what they could from the people. The judges were greedy and ferocious. They, too, took more than they needed, and left the people ravaged.

Zephaniah 3:4 Her prophets [are] light [and] treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

This is a terrible state of affairs, when the spiritual leaders have gone bad. Matthew 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." The very leaders, who were to uphold the law, have destroyed it. They not only forgot to teach the law, but they polluted the sanctuary with false gods.

They are the blind leading the blind. Matthew 15:14 "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."

Zephaniah 3:5 The just LORD [is] in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame.

God dwelt in the midst of His people. The LORD was the only holy One upon the earth. His law was perfect. The people's inability to keep the law was where the problem came from. They had walked away from the Light of God, and made a habit of sinning. They know no shame, because they have committed so many sins their consciences have become dull. God still shines His Light where the people are caught up in sin, but He will not always remain there. He left the temple in Jerusalem, before the destruction by Babylon.

Zephaniah 3:6 I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by: their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant.

The nations, here, are, probably, speaking of the nations around them, but it is true of Israel, as well. God sent His judgments to cause them to repent, and turn back to God. Israel had trusted in their military strength to save them from the enemy. They had even made agreements with worldly countries to help them in their wars. The truth is their strength lay in God's protection of them. When they stopped trusting in God, their strength was gone.

Zephaniah 3:7 I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, [and] corrupted all their doings.

God used examples of other countries He had judged, to show Israel and Judah that they must repent. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Zephaniah 3:8 Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination [is] to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, [even] all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.

Zephaniah 3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.

At the tower of Babel, God punished the sinful people by changing their language, so they could not understand each other. This has always been a problem in understanding people of other nations. This is a reversal of that. God will, now, return them all to the same language so they might understand each other. This speaks of a time of total agreement of people of many nations. This will be that peace that Jesus Christ brings. People of all nations will be converted to the Lord.

Zephaniah 3:10 From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suplicants, [even] the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.

Zephaniah 3:11 In that day shalt thou not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain.

The idea that Israel was better than everyone else because they alone had the law of God will be removed in the coming of the Messiah who will bring salvation to both Hebrews and Non-Hebrews. *Matthew 3:9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to [our] father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.*

Romans 3:27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

Zephaniah 3:12 I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.

This is a prophecy of the coming followers of Jesus Christ. A small, humble remnant. They have to give up all their conceit and arrogance to come to Christ. The power to live the Christian life lies in the ability to trust in the name of Jesus.

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Luke 6:20 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

Philippians 2:10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Zephaniah 3:13 The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.

The remnant of Israel, throughout the Bible, is the group who have never bowed their knee to Baal. This just means they have never worshipped false gods. They have always remained faithful to God.

These are those people who are holy, because He is holy. They are not interested in sin. They are interested in pleasing God. They have all the good habits of Christ, because Christ lives in them. These are speaking of those who have trusted Christ as Lord.

I John 3:9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.

The joy of the daughters of Jerusalem, is the fact that they have been restored. I do not believe the restoration of Jerusalem is a great cataclysmic event (as some do) however, I believe the restoration of God's people has taken place, and is taking place in the church. Further, I believe that we are the spiritual Israel that has taken the place of Israel in the Old Testament. I believe that the head of the Church is Christ and he is the King of Kings, taking over the Davidic throne.

Zephaniah 3:15 The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more.

Hebrews 8:12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

They are forgiven and restored.

Revelation 12:10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

Zephaniah 3:16-17 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Zephaniah 3:18-19 I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden. Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.

This speaks of restoring the reputation of God's people in all the world. However, this is not a re-gathering of the Hebrews in Jerusalem, rather, this is a re-structuring of God's people under the leadership of his only begotten Son.

Zephaniah 3:20 At that time will I bring you [again], even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the LORD.

God will gather His people from all over the world, and bring them to Jerusalem. In other words, there are people from all over the world who believe at the preaching of the Gospel and become Christians.

The prophecy spells doom for Judah, who have fallen from their first love and their belief in the coming Messiah. This prophecy speaks not only of their eventual destruction, but the reconstituting of Israel beginning with the preaching of John the Baptist and ending with the destruction of the entire earth on the final day.