



Zephaniah - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Zephaniah introduces his role and pedigree as a prophet of God and indicates the time period for his prophecy. In the prophecy God first directs his attention against all living beings (vv.2-3), then more specifically against his own people, Judah, represented by their capital, Jerusalem (vv.4-6).

After an announcement of the Day of the Lord (v.7), practitioners of specific evil deeds are warned about the consequences of their deeds (vv.8-9). A litany of punishments is then levelled against Jerusalem and its inhabitants (vv.10-16) and against all humanity (vv.17-18).

a. Zephaniah 1:1 - Heading

This verse introduces the genre, ultimate author, prophetic intermediary, and time period of the prophecy. The first verse of the prophecy of Zephaniah sets it apart from most other prophets, in that he reveals both his time and his roots. Zephaniah was an unusual prophet, in that he was of royal lineage, descending from the godly King Hezekiah. The name Zephaniah means 'Yahweh Hides' or 'Yahweh Has Hidden.' Zephaniah was almost certainly born during the long, wicked reign of Manasseh, whose reign began 55 years before the start of Josiah's reign. Zephaniah was probably hidden for his own protection.

¹ The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah.

Zephaniah 1:1

The word of the Lord opens other prophecies as well, e.g. Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1 and Micah 1:1. Lord is the personal name of Israel's God, Yahweh or Jehovah. Refer to the comment made on Exodus 3:15.

Cushi, a proper name as in: <<*Then all the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah son of Shelemiah son of Cushi to say to Baruch, 'Bring the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come.'* So Baruch son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and came to them>> (Jeremiah 36:14), is also an ethnic designation for Cushite or Ethiopian. This could explain the inclusion of the genealogy indicating that Zephaniah is in fact an Israelite.

Hezekiah is regarded as the early, reforming fourteenth king of Judah, whose life and deeds are recorded in 2 Kings 18:1-20:21 and 2 Chronicles 29:1-32:33.

Josiah was a godly, young king who brought great revival and reform to Judah but Josiah reigned for ten years before he led his great revival. Zephaniah was likely written in the years before the revival, and God used this prophecy to bring about and further that revival. Since Zephaniah predicts the destruction of Nineveh, which happened in 612 BC, it is known that his prophecy belongs to the first part of the reign of King Josiah. Josiah, the pious Judæan king, re-established the worship of *Yahweh* (2 Kings 22:1-23:30, 2 Chronicles 34:1-35:27 and Jeremiah 1:2).

Amon was an evil king of Judah like his apostate father Manasseh and the details of his reign are recorded in 2 Kings 21:19-26 and 2 Chronicles 33:21-25.

b. Zephaniah 1:2-13 - The Coming Judgement on Judah

The Lord says he will utterly consume everything from the face of the land. Judgement is promised to idolaters. The Day of the Lord is at hand; in the Day of the Lord's sacrifice, he will punish the princes and the king's children, those who wear foreign apparel, and those who practise violence and deceit. The merchants will be cut down, as will the complacent.

² I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth, says the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:2

To sweep away is to completely remove or destroy something: <<*Saul said to the Kenites, 'Go! Leave! Withdraw from among the Amalekites, or I will destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.'* So the Kenites withdrew from the Amalekites>> (1 Samuel 15:6), and: <<*For thus says the Lord: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the Lord, my steadfast love and mercy>> (Jeremiah 16:5). Who and what will be swept away is specified in vv.4-6; namely, 'the remnant of Baal' and the 'idolatrous priests' in Jerusalem (v.4); all who practice idolatrous worship, <<*those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens>> or who <<*swear by Milcom>> (v.5); and all 'those who have turned back from following the Lord' (v.6). In his holiness and his righteous judgement,***

God zealously destroys evil, sweeping away the lives of all who do not seek the Lord (v.6).

- ³ I will sweep away humans and animals;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will make the wicked stumble.
I will cut off humanity
from the face of the earth, says the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:3

The listing of humans and animals, the birds, and the fish highlights the totality of destruction through terms that occur in the creation account (Genesis 1:20-28). God, the creator of everything, will destroy everything due to the sin of humanity, creation's representative and steward.

- ⁴ I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests;

Zephaniah 1:4

Judah alone remained to serve as God's new humanity since her northern neighbour Israel was exiled to Assyria in 722 BC. Yet the presence of a righteous king such as Josiah (v.1) was not enough to avert God's judgement from Judah when other officials (v.8 and 3:3-5), and the people (vv.9-12) were persisting in evil.

Jerusalem, Judah's capital, represented the entire nation.

Baal, which literally means lord or master, is the title commonly designating the Canaanite storm god, Hadad, whom Israel was prone to worship: <<*That night the Lord said to him, 'Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole that is beside it'*>> (Judges 6:25), <<*And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria*>> (1 Kings 16:31-32). It could also refer to an Assyrian god, Bel.

The term idolatrous priests is used only of pagan priests: <<*He deposed the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem; those also who made offerings to Baal, to the sun, the moon, the constellations, and all the host of the heavens*>> (2 Kings 23:5), and: <<*The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-aven. Its people shall mourn for it, and its idolatrous priests shall wail over it, over its glory that has departed from it*>> (Hosea 10:5).

- ⁵ those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens;
those who bow down and swear to the Lord,
but also swear by Milcom;

Zephaniah 1:5

The host of the heavens refers to the astral deities worshipped by both Assyrians and Canaanites: <<*And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven*>> (Deuteronomy 4:19), <<*And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Topheth – all the houses upon whose roofs offerings have been made to the whole host of heaven, and libations have been poured out to other gods*>> (Jeremiah 19:13).

Milcom is the god of the pagan Ammonites: <<*For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites*>> (1 Kings 11:5). The law strictly prohibited mixing worship of God and a pagan deity: <<*you shall have no other gods before me*>> (Exodus 20:3).

- ⁶ those who have turned back from following the Lord,
who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him.

Zephaniah 1:6

The people turned back, becoming apostate and leaving their first faith: <<*For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart*>> (Isaiah 59:12-13).

7 Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

Zephaniah 1:7

The people are commanded to be silent, a sign of respect or fear: <<*And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, 'Is anyone else with you?' the answer will come, 'No.'* Then the relative shall say, *'Hush! We must not mention the name of the Lord'*>> (Amos 6:10), and: <<*'The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,' says the Lord God; 'the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!'*>> (Amos 8:3).

The day of the Lord is the coming day in which God will judge his enemies, as confirmed by Joel 1:8-3:8, and bless his followers (Zephaniah 3:9-20).

The sacrifice will be prepared by God himself, not dedicated to him as is customary. The guests will be consecrated. This either means:

1. That they are to eat a holy meal: <<*He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.'* And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice>> (1 Samuel 16:5).
2. Possibly that they are themselves the sacrifice, in judgement of their sins.

8 And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice
I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who dress themselves in foreign attire.

Zephaniah 1:8

The officials and the king's sons are the civil leadership punished for the nation's sin. Those engaged in syncretism during worship, i.e. combining service of God with things taken from other religions: <<*He said to the keeper of the wardrobe, 'Bring out the vestments for all the worshippers of Baal.'* So he brought out the vestments for them>> (2 Kings 10:22), and: <<*Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god*>> (Malachi 2:11), or in daily life: <<*Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work*>> (Nehemiah 13:30) appear to have worn some

undefined foreign attire, which may include the priests administering in garments other than those prescribed in the Law of Moses.

- ⁹ On that day I will punish
all who leap over the threshold,
who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud.

Zephaniah 1:9

When one leaps over the threshold, it is a pagan routine, possibly a Philistine practice: <<*But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day*>> (1 Samuel 5:4-5).

Violence and fraud are evil acts in opposition to the healing and truth that come from truly worshipping God: <<*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence*>> (Genesis 6:11). Fraud, Hebrew *Mirmah*, can also be translated deceit, as in: <<*They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth*>> (Isaiah 53:9), and: <<*Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 9:6).

- ¹⁰ On that day, says the Lord,
a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter,
a loud crash from the hills.

Zephaniah 1:10

The Fish Gate was probably the main northern city gate: <<*Afterwards he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, reaching the entrance at the Fish Gate; he carried it around Ophel, and raised it to a very great height. He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah*>> (2 Chronicles 33:14), while the Second Quarter was a newer city section north of the temple: <<*So the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her*>> (2 Kings 22:14).

Jerusalem is surrounded by hills, but this could be a specific area, probably to the north, known to Zephaniah's hearers.

- 11 The inhabitants of the Mortar wail,
for all the traders have perished;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.

Zephaniah 1:11

The location of the Mortar is uncertain, but it was possibly a mortar-shaped, or hollow, quarry: <<*So God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came from it. When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore it was named En-hakkore, which is at Lehi to this day*>> (Judges 15:19).

The traders is literally Canaanites: <<*A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress*>> (Hosea 12:7), who later became the Phoenicians, and were important merchants and traders.

- 12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
'The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.'

Zephaniah 1:12

I will search Jerusalem with lamps. No one will be able to hide against the judgement of God. It is coming, and even if God must get out the torches to search the dark recesses, he will find them

The complacent are those who are resting on their dregs like undisturbed wine that collects useless sediment. These lethargic people will not rouse themselves enough to save themselves. Since God has not yet judged their sin, perhaps they assume he never will, not realising that judgement can come any day: <<*Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned and*>>

murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!>> (James 5:1-9), and: <<First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!''>> (2 Peter 3:3-4).

The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm is an expectation of the apathetic Judæans. Not denying the existence of God, they deny rather his ongoing activity in either blessing or punishing. This negates a core element of biblical theology: God is constantly active in history.

¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

Zephaniah 1:13

Wealth, houses, vineyards belong to the rich and powerful; those who can afford their own dwellings and lands will lose everything and do not seem to care. For more on the covenant curses for disobedience refer to Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

They shall not inhabit them implies that, because of their sin, God will not allow them to enjoy the rewards of their work.

c. Zephaniah 1:14-18 - The Great Day of the Lord

The Day of the Lord will be characterised by darkness, gloominess, cloud, trumpet and alarm. The Lord will make a righteous judgement on the nation of Judah for their apostasy and sinful nature. Eventually, his judgement will fall on the whole sinful world.

¹⁴ The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

Zephaniah 1:14

God's day is near and hastening fast. The importance of quickly responding to God is highlighted through emphasising the impending judgement (v.7).

The warrior cries aloud as the valiant hero lifts his battle cry on God's day: <<*The Lord goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes*>> (Isaiah 42:13), and: <<*The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing*>> (Zephaniah 3:17).

- 15 That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

Zephaniah 1:15

The description as a day of wrath highlights the judgemental nature of the day. It is described by a catalogue of frightening terms, many of which accompany theophanies, i.e. appearances of God, in other contexts, for example: <<*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder*>> (Exodus 19:16-19), where God will act against his own people as if they were his enemy.

- 16 a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

Zephaniah 1:16

The fortified cities speaks of even the most secure of Judah's strongholds; even they will prove vulnerable to Almighty God.

17 I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the Lord,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

Zephaniah 1:17

I will bring such distress upon people. God wants to make it plain and certain that he will judge a rebellious Judah. If they do not repent, there will be no holding back from the completion of his judgement.

Instead of walking in God's guidance, Judah shall walk like the blind, staggering from her spiritual blindness: <<*The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind*>> (Deuteronomy 28:28), where blindness is a punishment for unfaithfulness.

Blood, like dust, like dung, renders the valuable worthless. Although blood carries life itself: <<*For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement*>> (Leviticus 17:11), it will lose all its value like these two insignificant items: <<*therefore, I will bring evil upon the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free, in Israel and will consume the house of Jeroboam, just as one burns up dung until it is all gone*>> (1 Kings 14:10), and: <<*Tyre has built itself a rampart, and heaped up silver like dust, and gold like the dirt of the streets*>> (Zechariah 9:3).

18 Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the Lord's wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Zephaniah 1:18

Neither their silver nor their gold means that material valued by humans (v.11 and v.13), which was often formed into idols: <<*On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship*>> (Isaiah 2:20), and: <<*Then you*

will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, 'Away with you!'>> (Isaiah 30:22), will not be able to withstand God, whether in its natural or idolatrous form.

God's passion means that he cherishes his position as unique in the affections of his people to such an extent that he makes it the foundation of his covenant with them: <<*you shall have no other gods before me*>> (Deuteronomy 5:7).

A terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. Sin and its impact is global; therefore, God's judgement must fall on the whole world and not just on the sinful nation of Judah. Judah would face its initial judgement within a generation when they would be taken off into captivity. The world still awaits its final day of judgement: <<*At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt*>> (Daniel 12:1-2), and: <<*For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil*>> (2 Corinthians 5:10).