



Zephaniah - Chapter Two

Summary of Chapter Two

The first three verses are a brief reminder of Judah's duty to return to the Lord or face his wrath. As in Amos' prophecy (Amos 1:3-2:3), the judgement prophecy focuses on Israel's neighbours and enemies (vv.4-15), whom Judah would have heartily joined in condemning. Only then will the people of Judah feel the focus turning on themselves once again (Zephaniah 3:1-7), being just as sinful as the nations before the same just God.

d. Zephaniah 2:1-15 - Judgement on Israel's Enemies

Refer to the chapter summary above.

d.i. Zephaniah 2:1-3 - Repentance is still possible

While sin is a universal human problem, God still shows grace if his people repent.

- 1 Gather together, gather,
O shameless nation,
- 2 before you are driven away
like the drifting chaff,
before there comes upon you
the fierce anger of the Lord,
before there comes upon you
the day of the Lord's wrath.

Zephaniah 2:1-2

O shameless nation. Israel's shameful actions demonstrate that they are not covenant followers; they have no right to be considered God's people unless they repent.

Verse 2 is difficult to interpret. When grain is winnowed, the light, outer husk, worthless for human or animal food, is allowed to blow quickly away. Something being like chaff refers here either to the quickly coming day or to the quick departure of those worthless people who abandon God.

The day of the Lord's wrath highlights the judgemental nature of God's coming: <<*Therefore wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed*>> (Zephaniah 3:8), precipitated by Judah's sin.

³ Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,
who do his commands;
seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you may be hidden
on the day of the Lord's wrath.

Zephaniah 2:3

Rather than abandoning God, as it had been doing, Judah is called to seek diligently for him, the mark of true piety: <<*'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek*>> (Psalm 27:8), <<*Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice*>> (Psalm 105:3), <<*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug*>> (Isaiah 51:1), and: <<*those who have turned back from following the Lord, who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him*>> (Zephaniah 1:6).

Addressing the humble of the land indicates that not everyone is apostate. A few rely on God rather than themselves, being <<*humble and lowly*>> (Zephaniah 3:12b); as confirmed by <<*poor in spirit*>> (Matthew 5:3a). The humble realise that they need to turn beyond themselves for help. Another translation for humble of the land is 'meek of the earth', similar to those Jesus describes in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:5, or to those whom David described: <<*But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity*>> (Psalm 37:11).

Righteousness describes the goal of correct living in relation to God and humanity: <<*How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice,*

righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers!>> (Isaiah 1:21), following his will as revealed in his commands.

Perhaps is a theologically important word, which highlights God's grace and sovereignty: <<*On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin'>>* (Exodus 32:30), and: <<*Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph>>* (Amos 5:15). God is just, and can and should punish wrongdoing; he is also loving and gracious, willing that none should perish: <<*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him>>* (John 3:17), and: <<*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance>>* (2 Peter 3:9). A sinner can only throw himself on the mercy of God, who has forgiven in the past and might do so again. The fact that God forgives the penitent: <<*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness>>* (1 John 1:9), does not mean that forgiveness should be expected lightly and cheaply, for it should always evoke wonder at God's grace.

You may be hidden indicates that humble, righteous people may be protected when God's judgement falls on the rest of the nation: <<*And on the next day the Lord did so; all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not one died>>* (Exodus 9:6), <<*Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, 'Go into the prostitute's house, and bring the woman out of it and all who belong to her, as you swore to her.'* So the young men who had been spies went in and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her – they brought all her kindred out – and set them outside the camp of Israel>> (Joshua 6:22-23), <<*Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed>>* (Isaiah 1:27-28), <<*and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly; and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement>>* (2 Peter 2:5-9).

d.ii. Zephaniah 2:4-7 - Philistines

These coastal dwellers, for so long enemies of God's people lying to their north and east, will be taken over by Israel.

- 4 For Gaza shall be deserted,
and Ashkelon shall become a desolation;
Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon,
and Ekron shall be uprooted.

Zephaniah 2:4

Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron are four of the five Philistine city-states lying on the Mediterranean Sea coast and coastal plain, here presented in south-to-north order. These bustling opponents of Israel will soon be gone.



Map of Philistia

5 Ah, inhabitants of the sea coast,
you nation of the Cherethites!
The word of the Lord is against you,
O Canaan, land of the Philistines;
and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.

Zephaniah 2:5

The sea coast indicates the location of the Philistines, from which the name Palestine is derived. They lived to the southwest of Judah, and are also called Cherethite: <<*We had made a raid on the Negeb of the Cherethites and on that which belongs to Judah and on the Negeb of Caleb; and we burned Ziklag down*>> (1 Samuel 30:14), and: <<*All his officials passed by him; and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath, passed on before the king*>> (2 Samuel 15:18), showing historical links with Crete.

An unusual title for them is Canaan, which more regularly refers to the natives of the territory before the arrival of Israel and the Philistines: <<*Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan*>> (Genesis 12:5a), but could indicate the traders from the area: <<*The inhabitants of the Mortar wail, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off*>> (Zephaniah 1:11).

6 And you, O sea coast, shall be pastures,
meadows for shepherds
and folds for flocks.

7 The sea coast shall become the possession
of the remnant of the house of Judah,
on which they shall pasture,
and in the houses of Ashkelon
they shall lie down at evening.
For the Lord their God will be mindful of them
and restore their fortunes.

Zephaniah 2:6-7

Remnant is a theologically significant term, showing two sides of God's relationship with his people. His judgement against sin will be so severe that only a few survivors will remain: <<*Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten – two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, says the Lord God of Israel*>> (Isaiah 17:6), and: <<*For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord – the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid*>> (Zephaniah 3:12-13). All hope is not lost, however, since the destruction is not complete; at least a few refugees will remain, continuing the existence of God's people.

God will be mindful of Judah, taking note of their need and responding to it: <<*My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the Lord of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like his proud warhorse*>> (Zechariah 10:3). This involves not only thought but also action, since he will restore the bounty of which they have been deprived: <<*At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord*>> (Zephaniah 3:20). The mention of pastures and shepherds predicts that, after the Philistine cities have been destroyed, the area will be repopulated by God's people, who will live in peace.

d.iii. Zephaniah 2:8-11 - Moab and Ammon

Judah's eastern neighbours, cousins yet enemies, face punishment.

⁸ I have heard the taunts of Moab
and the revilings of the Ammonites,
how they have taunted my people
and made boasts against their territory.

Zephaniah 2:8

Taunts and revilings are verbal attacks using insults against the people of God: <<*Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary, I delivered Jacob to utter destruction, and Israel to reviling*>> (Isaiah 43:28), and: <<*I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it*>> (Zephaniah 3:18b). These are launched by two of Israel's long time enemies to the east, Moab and the Ammonites. They descended from Lot through his incestuous relationship with his daughters (Genesis 19:30-38). Having frequently opposed Israel, as in

Numbers Chapters 22-24, 1 Samuel 11:1-11 and 2 Kings 1:1, they were a desirable target for Josiah's geographical expansion because of their location just east of the Dead Sea.

⁹ Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts,
the God of Israel,
Moab shall become like Sodom
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,
a land possessed by nettles and salt-pits,
and a waste for ever.
The remnant of my people shall plunder them,
and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.

Zephaniah 2:9

As I live strengthens an oath that God makes, in swearing by his own existence: <<*Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, says the Lord, you shall put all of them on like an ornament, and like a bride you shall bind them on*>> (Isaiah 49:18). Refer also to 1 Samuel 14:39 and 14:45.

Sodom and Gomorrah were two infamous cities near the Dead Sea so completely destroyed by God for their great sins: <<*Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt*>> (Genesis 19:24-26), <<*If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah*>> (Isaiah 1:9), and: <<*Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire*>> (Jude 7), that their exact location is unknown. The peoples mentioned in vv.8-9 are probably placed together here because they are also joined in the account of the two cities in Genesis Chapter 19.

For people whose livelihood depends on agriculture, it would be devastating to be overrun by nettles or weeds: <<*I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down*>> (Proverbs 24:30-31), and arid and non-productive salt pits: <<*But Lot's wife,*

behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt>> (Genesis 19:26), another reference back to the events in Genesis Chapter 19.

The remnant of God's people will be those that return from Babylonian exile and remain faithful to him, rather than turning to the ways of the world. However, the people need to know there is nothing within their own nature to keep God's people from the worst of paganism and its appropriate judgement. This remains as true for Christians as it did for the Jews.

¹⁰ This shall be their lot in return for their pride,
because they scoffed and boasted
against the people of the Lord of hosts.

Zephaniah 2:10

In this summary of the preceding poem (vv.8-9), pride or arrogance is contrasted with the humility desired of God's people (v.3).

¹¹ The Lord will be terrible against them;
he will shrivel all the gods of the earth,
and to him shall bow down,
each in its place,
all the coasts and islands of the nations.

Zephaniah 2:11

Terrible is most often translated as awesome and describes Israel's God, who causes fear in the hearts of his opponents: <<*Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?*>> (Exodus 15:11), and: <<*He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you*>> (Exodus 34:10). He moves not only against Judah's neighbours but against all the gods of the earth.

God will shrivel them, causing them to waste away: <<*Therefore the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire*>> (Isaiah 10:16), and: <<*On that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean*>> (Isaiah 17:4). Unlike Israel's God, many of the gods of her neighbours needed nourishment, which was provided through offerings. In one Mesopotamian story about a flood, the myth of Gilgamesh, the gods are

famished because there are no people to feed them. Instead of worshipping these powerless pagan deities, foreigners will **bow down** to the God of Israel, either coming to worship in Jerusalem: <<*Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'* For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem>> (Isaiah 2:3), or else joining in the worship of the true God spreading around the world: <<*At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord>> (Zephaniah 3:9), <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>> (Philippians 2:9-11), and: <<*They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth'>> (Revelation 5:9-10).***

d.iv. Zephaniah 2:12 - Cush

Ethiopia and Egypt, farther to the southwest, will also fall.

¹² You also, O Ethiopians,
shall be killed by my sword.

Zephaniah 2:12

Ethiopians or Nubians is a translation of the Hebrew word *Cushites*, just as *Cush* is translated Ethiopia in: <<*On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea>> (Isaiah 11:11), and: <<*From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering>> (Zephaniah 3:10). However, it may refer to Egyptians here, Israel's enemy to the south. In the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, Egypt was under the control of the Ethiopian Twenty-fifth Dynasty. In 525 BC Egypt and Ethiopia were both defeated by the Persians under Cambyses, so this defeat could refer to his campaign.**

d.v. Zephaniah 2:13-15 - Assyria

The greatest threat to Israel lies farther east and north. A major world power of the time, Assyria cannot withstand God.

- 13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north,
and destroy Assyria;
and he will make Nineveh a desolation,
a dry waste like the desert.

Zephaniah 2:13

God will stretch out his hand, the body part used as an image indicating power and control: <<*He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin*>> (Genesis 16:12), and: <<*See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters; with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth*>> (Isaiah 28:2), in judgement against his people's northern enemy, Assyria.

The Assyrians, coming especially from one of their greatest cities and onetime capital, Nineveh, as confirmed by Jonah and Nahum, conquered the Near East, including Judah's sister, Israel. In 722 BC Israel's capital city, Samaria, fell to Assyria, and the leaders of Israel disappeared into exile (2 Kings Chapter 17). In 701 BC King Sennacherib turned his attention on Judah and took siege against King Hezekiah in Jerusalem, but God miraculously defeated the Assyrians and Judah remained in Hezekiah's hands (2 Kings Chapter 19).

- 14 Herds shall lie down in it,
every wild animal;
the desert-owl and the screech-owl
shall lodge on its capitals;
the owl shall hoot at the window,
the raven croak on the threshold;
for its cedar-work will be laid bare.

Zephaniah 2:14

Although the exact translation is uncertain, the two owls represent just two of the inhabitants of what used to be a major metropolis. Humans will be gone; animals and birds will take their place. The actual buildings themselves will become dilapidated, with the underlying cedar-work exposed. Cedars from Lebanon were commonly used for main building beams: <<*So he built the house, and finished it; he roofed the house with beams and planks of cedar*>> (1 Kings 6:9), <<*So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to*

the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia>> (Ezra 3:7), and: <<His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars>> (Song 5:15) because of their size and strength, which will now be of no use.

Assyria was not only famous for its cedar trees, it was actually likened to their tall and majestic status: <<Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds>> (Ezekiel 31:3).

15 Is this the exultant city
that lived secure,
that said to itself,
'I am, and there is no one else'?
What a desolation it has become,
a lair for wild animals!
Everyone who passes by it
hisses and shakes the fist.

Zephaniah 2:15

Nineveh, formerly known as an exultant city, will be deprived of its joyful abandon: <<*The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled*>> (Isaiah 24:8), as well as its safety and security. Human pride and power are useless in a time of God's judgement.

In its pride: <<*On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain*>> (Zephaniah 3:11), Nineveh arrogantly boasted 'I am, and there is no one else.' This primacy is reserved for God alone: <<*so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other*>> (Isaiah 45:6), and such pride will be punished. Anyone who sees the destruction of Nineveh hisses and shakes his fist, actions not of aggression but of horror and amazement at how the mighty have fallen: <<*And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters*>> (Jeremiah 19:8).

In 612 BC Nineveh was sacked and burned by a coalition of Babylonians, Persians, Medes, and Scythians, among others. The mighty Assyrian Empire had been in decline for many years and had suffered several civil wars but it would eventually succumb to Babylon who would take its place as the regional superpower. God had said Assyria would crumble and it did!