



## An Introduction to the Book of Zephaniah

### Author and Title

While the originator of the words of this book ultimately was Israel's God, i.e. 'the Lord', the prophetic intermediary who delivered them to Judah was Zephaniah, after whom the book is named. Little is known about him apart from his name and pedigree. That the prophet was named Zephaniah, which means 'Yahweh has hidden or protected', could indicate his parents' piety, as they trusted in God during the godless reign of Manasseh. Indeed, the genealogy in 1:1 may indicate that Zephaniah was a descendant of Hezekiah, the pious ruler of Judah before two wicked kings assumed the throne.

### Date

The prophecy takes place during the reign of Josiah (640-609BC), a significant Judæan king (2 Kings 21:26-23:20 and 2 Chronicles 33:25-35:27). The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been exiled in 722BC, so Israel (2:9 and 3:13-15) does not refer to it. Rather, these references speak of the remainder of the nation of Israel: little Judah and its capital, Jerusalem.

Josiah was a reforming king, trying to re-establish acceptable worship practices that had fallen out of use since the time of his great-grandfather Hezekiah (2 Kings 21:1-26). Some suggest that the prophecy comes from the beginning of Josiah's reign, since the people are still engaging in condemned pagan practices (1:8-9). This is not compelling evidence, however, since even after a religious reform, not all lives are changed. This is clear from the other prophets preaching during this same time, e.g. Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, indicating that no matter how clear the call to repentance, there were always those who refused to respond and who need to hear the prophetic word afresh.

## Theme

The theme of Zephaniah, one preached more consistently by him than by any other prophet, is the 'day of the Lord'. This approaching day shows two faces: one of judgement against those who sin against God, and one of blessing for those who follow him. God will show himself just in both punishment and praise.

## Purpose

In spite of having seen the destruction and exile of her sister Israel a generation or two previously, Judah refuses to turn back as a nation to her covenant obligations toward God. The reign of pious Josiah provides an ideal opportunity to make this move and God, through Zephaniah, wants to clarify the decision that lies before Judah, and indeed before all the other nations, along with the consequences of that decision. God is calling for Judah's punishment because she has already shown herself sinful. If she should repent and abandon her evil, perhaps God will forgive.

The book is set against the background of numerous nations, many of which opposed God through opposition to his people Israel. The Philistines (2:4-7) had been vying against Israel for the same land since the time of the conquest (e.g. Exodus 13:17 and Joshua 13:2), while Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), distant relatives of the Israelites (Genesis 19:36-38), had opposed Israel's passage through their land before the conquest (Numbers Chapters 22-24). 'Cush' (2:12) possibly refers to the Egyptian 25<sup>th</sup> (Ethiopian) Dynasty, refer to Isaiah Chapter 18, while Assyria (2:13-15) is the foreign power controlling Judah at the time of the prophecy. Surprisingly, the last among the nations being warned is represented by Jerusalem, the capital of another of God's enemies, Judah (3:1-7). This places the message of God's displeasure right in the face of those who claimed to be his own people.

## Key Themes

1. God will judge the whole earth, Judah and her pagan neighbours alike.
2. God, as covenant keeper, will bless his people when they return to their covenant relationship with him.
3. God wants to extend blessing and grace to all peoples and nations.
4. Judgement and blessing occur both in the near future for the prophet and his audience and also in the more distant future.
5. There is no such thing as a second-generation child of God. Every generation must own God's covenant, not relying on the faith of a previous generation.

## History of Salvation Summary

God visits judgement on his own people to purge the faithless from their number. At the same time, he preserves the faithful and will use them to bring knowledge

of God to all peoples. On the great day of judgement, God will purge the faithless from all mankind and bring the faithful into their full inheritance.

### The Near East at the Time of Zephaniah (circa 620BC)

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, when Egypt, Judah and Babylonia, with the help of the Medes, were regaining their autonomy and eroding the power of Assyria. Shortly after this time the Babylonians would replace the Assyrians as the dominant power in the Near East.



Regional Map

### Literary Features

The Book of Zephaniah is a typical work of prophecy, but with distinctive features woven into the tapestry. The primary genre within this prophetic book is the oracle of judgement, with an oracle of salvation coming at the expected place at the end. Zephaniah, almost uniquely among the so-called ‘minor prophets’, looks like a ‘major prophet’ in miniature: it has oracles of judgement (1:1-18), oracles against foreign nations (2:4-15), and oracles of hope (3:8-20), with 2:1-3 and 3:1-7, modulating from foreign to domestic interest, much as Amos does from Amos 2:4 onwards, functioning as transitional oracles which make pointed application to Jerusalem.

The literary intentions of the book are as follows: to picture God's judgement of sin by means of the motif of a coming day of the Lord; to use the resources of poetry to paint vivid word-pictures of the coming judgement; to evoke fear of the coming judgement with a view to awakening repentance; to embody the possibility of God's blessing in the form of a concluding oracle of restored favour with God; and to identify with the people and show concern for the poor while indicting those with position and wealth, both encapsulated in 3:11-13.

### Outline

- a. Heading (1:1)
- b. The Coming Judgement on Judah (1:2-13)
- c. The Great Day of the Lord (1:14-18)
- d. Judgement on Israel's Enemies (2:1-15)
  - i. Repentance is still possible (2:1-3)
  - ii. Philistines (2:4-7)
  - iii. Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)
  - iv. Cush (2:12)
  - v. Assyria (2:13-15)
- e. The Wickedness of Jerusalem (3:1-7)
- f. Punishment and Conversion of the Nations (3:8-13)
- g. A Song of Joy (3:14-20)