

# Books of The Bible

## Survey of Zephaniah - Renewed Meditations

### Introduction

There can be little doubt that the minor prophets are some of the hardest books to understand and read. The difficulty lies in part to the fact that we often ignore the Israeli political environment in which some prophets lived. For instance, some will tell when they prophesied, i.e. Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1; Micah. 1:1, while others tell only what the Lord told them to proclaim and to whom, i.e. Jonah. A second reason is it takes time and effort to learn the lessons of why the books are written and why God brings judgment on His people and other nations. Paul, under inspiration, wrote that the happenings of Israel in the Old Testament for our learning and warning (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). Since "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16), that includes the minor prophets. Therefore, what is:

### The spiritual political environment in which Zephaniah was raised and prophesied

#### 1) The political situation:

- a) God has been pleased to give the four ancestors of Zephaniah (Zeph. 1:1). Possibly one reason is for us to seriously consider the spiritual environment in which Zephaniah was raised and prophesied.
- b) While we cannot be absolute, it appears that Hezekiah the King was his great great grandfather, therefore, he was of the royal family. There are four generations between Hezekiah the king and Zephaniah but we never read in the book of Chronicles or Kings the other sons mentioned in Zephaniah 1:1.
- c) Zephaniah prophesied in the reign of Josiah who began his reign at eight years of age and reigned for thirty-one years (2 Kgs. 22:1).
- d) His father was Amon (2 Kgs. 21:24) who began to reign at twenty-two years of age and reigned for two years (2 Kgs. 21:19).
- e) Amon was the son of Manasseh who reigned for fifty-five years (2 Kgs. 21:1).

#### 2) The spiritual conditions:

- a) Hezekiah had been a wicked king but repented and did according to the will of God. However, his son Manasseh followed his father's steps and was a very evil king committing great evils before the Lord. It is recorded that he:
  - i) Rebuilt the high places Hezekiah had destroyed and built an altar to Baal, made an Asherah and worshipped and served the hosts of heaven (2 Kgs. 21:3). He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord (2 Kgs. 21:5). He caused his son to go through the fire, used divination and had familiar spirits and soothsayers (2 Kgs. 21:6). Added to this, God summed up his wickedness by twice repeating that he did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed (2 Kgs. 21:2, 9), shed innocent blood and made Judah to sin (2 Kgs. 21:16).
  - ii) After him came Amon his son who was also exceedingly wicked. Of him the Lord left on record that he did evil (2 Kgs. 21:20), walked in all the ways of his father, served the idols of his father and worshipped them (2 Kgs. 21:21) and forsook the LORD God of his fathers (2 Kgs. 21:22).
  - iii) Amon's son Josiah was a child when he began to reign and sought to restore the worship of God. Politically the child was made king when the nation was in crisis. Josiah had lived under the two very wicked kings, Manasseh and Amon. Now being a child of eight (8) years he had the rulership of the nation. What way would things go? Would he be evil like his father and grandfather or good like his great great grandfather? Would it be a rule of evil or good, idolatry or the worship of the true God?
  - iv) Jeremiah and Zephaniah were two male prophets during the reign of Josiah and Huldah (2 Chron. 34:22). Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth (13) year of Josiah. -Josiah was approximately twenty-one (21) years of age. Evidently the people were not responding to the pleadings of God (Jer. 2:1-2:37).

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- v) I am not aware of the Lord communicating with any prophet to the nation of Judah during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. It is always frightening when God is silent and if we are right, it means that for at least fifty-seven years not a warning or encouragement came from God. Sad to say, such was the persistence of evil in Judah during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon that the judgment of God was now not a distant happening, but was imminent.

### Note on the Day of the Lord

The “Day of the Lord” is a major theme in Zephaniah and also in the minor prophets. To what does it refer to? Is it only prophetically in the future of today in 2020, or does the expression have a double fulfilment, one which was imminent at that time and also a final fulfilment in a time yet to come? It is often overlooked that some Old Testament prophecies have an immediate and future deeper fulfilment. The “Day of the Lord” is one of those prophecies. In the immediate context it indicated a judgment from God when God had tolerated the rebellion of his people sufficiently and consequently poured out His wrath on them. Yet it is clear that the immediate prophecy was not fully fulfilled and awaits a future day when it will find its full fulfilment.

### Zephaniah the man

Concerning Zephaniah, we know very little about his personal life. We are not told at what point in the reign of Josiah he prophesied but since there are only four generations between Zephaniah and Hezekiah, it would seem he prophesied shortly after the reigns of Manasseh and Amon since the people were still rebelling against the Lord. They were not easy times in which to stand for God.

### Clarification of gods and places

Throughout the Old Testament there are a number of ancient pagan gods which the children of Israel worshipped. Those associated with Israel at the time of Zephaniah were:

- a) **Baal**: From the first reference to Baal (Num. 22:41) it is evident it was a pagan god. Every reference to it afterwards endorses this truth (Jud. 2:13; Jud. 6:25; 1 Kgs. 18:22, etc). The servants sent by Balaam brought the “rewards of divination” who brought Balaam to the high places of Baal, indicating most prominent cathedrals and shrines of heathenism.
- b) **Chemarim**: (Zeph. 1:4). While it is not known the exact meaning of the word, yet its association with the priest of Baal (Zeph. 1:4) and similarity to 2 Kgs. 23:5 and Hosea 10:5, it is connected to the priests who practise idolatry. It is often associated with a word which means “to be black” from the possibility the priests wore black clothing.

### Description of God and His Names

Names:

- a) LORD (ch. 1:1)
- b) Lord GOD (ch. 1:7)
- c) Day of the LORD (ch. 1:7)
- d) LORD of Hosts (ch. 2:9)
- e) God of Israel (ch. 2:9)
- f) God (ch. 2:7)
- g) LORD thy God (ch. 3:17)
- h) Just Lord (ch. 3:5)
- i) King of Israel (ch. 3:15)

### Key words and phrases

Zephaniah used the word “Day” in a number of clauses by Zephaniah. He spoke of:

- a) The day of the LORD (ch. 1:7; 14; 2:2). That is Jehovah, a name which indicates morality.

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- b) The day of the LORD's sacrifice (ch. 1:8)
- c) In that day (ch. 1:9, 10)
- d) Great day of the LORD (ch. 1:14)
- e) 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" (ch. 1:15)
- f) The day of the LORD's wrath (ch. 1:18)
- g) The day of the LORD's anger (ch. 2:3)

#### The intensity of the wrath of God:

There is no way we can possibly comprehend the righteous judgments of God. The Holy Spirit seeks to use expressions which a human being can know when faced with an incredulous arrogant disobedient individual. It is spoken of in terms that by their very meditation cause the heart to tremble. These are not idle threats but because of God's holiness and perfections in which He cannot tolerate anything contrary to His nature, conveys the rightening manifestations of the divine attitude which result in actions so terrible to grasp. This attitude of:

- a) "The day of the LORD's sacrifice" (ch. 1:8)
- b) "The day of the LORD's wrath" (ch. 1:18)
- c) "Fierce anger of the LORD" (ch. 2:2); The fierce, "burning anger" as when ones face is red-with fury or nostrils flaming.
- d) "The day of the LORD's anger" (ch. 2:3)

#### The present conditions of Judah and Jerusalem

Jeremiah signified by illustration and proclamation to the people of Judah and Jerusalem the wickedness of their sins, with Isaiah and Zephaniah it was a state of moral rottenness. For this we are not concerned about the wickedness of Manasseh and Amon but the adherence of the people to the evil of their kings. What were the sins of the people?

- a) Jeremiah was told by God to take an earthen vessel and before the elders of Tophet brake it signifying God's breaking of Judah because of their sins (Jer. 19:10), which were:
  - i) They burned incense to other gods who neither their fathers nor the kings of Judah knew (Jer. 19:4)
  - ii) They filled the place with the blood of innocents (Jer. 19:4)
  - iii) They built the high places (the chief places) for the acknowledgment of Baal (Jer. 19:5)
  - iv) They burned their sons with fire as burnt offerings to Baal (Jer. 19:5)
  - v) They harkened not to God nor did what He commanded, were vicious (Zeph. 3:1-3)

#### Goal of Zephaniah

It is irrelevant which book of the Word of God one studies. It is my understanding that the student must not only have an outline of the book and its structure, but also determine what is the goal of the book? For instance, if one was to study the gospel of John it would be readily seen it is divided into several distinct sections. There is the public ministry of the Lord followed by His private ministry to His own, then His Passion, but that does not tell me the goal of the book, the reason it was written. I am told the reason (Jn. 20:21-22) and that is quite different from the structure. So with Zephaniah. So two matters are to be considered, "What is the developing structure of Zephaniah?" and "What is the goal of the book?"

- a) The goal of the book is to manifest the greatness of God and His superiority over all other gods:
  - i) Wrongs done by God's people or toward God's people will result in judgment by God. The solemnity is increased because He is the all seeing God and nothing escapes His searching (ch. 1:12). God is not ignorant to the doings of His people. Compare the words of the Lord to the churches (Rev. 2:2; 9, 13, 19, 3:1, 8, 15). When at the Judgment seat, He will search the motives, etc. (2 Cor. 4:5); how we considered the saints (Rom. 14:7-13); what we did to build up the saints (1 Cor. 3:12-15). At the Judgment of the nations He will judge attitudes toward His people (Matt. 25:32-46) and at the Great White Throne He will judge according to works (Rev. 20:11-15).

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- ii) He is all powerful and no nation can stand against Him (Rev. 19:17-21).
- iii) He is sovereign over all creation (ch. 1:3). His determination is final. Observe the “I will” references (ch. 1:2, 3, 4, 8, 12, 17; 2:5; 3:11, 12, 18, 19, 20).
- iv) He is sovereign over all nations (ch. 1:4, 2:4, 5, 7, 8, 12).
- v) He knew the attitude of the rebellious leaders such as Pashur (Jer. 20:1); denying His warnings of judgment (ch. 1:12-13); the rejection of Jeremiah’s illustrations of the clay in the potter’s hand, (Jer. 18:2-16) and their rejection toward God’s servant.

### A structure of Zephaniah

- 1) The messenger (ch. 1:1)
  - a) His ancestry. He is the only prophet who’s ancestry is given to four (4) generations.
- 2) The message:
  - a) Judgment on Judah for practising the God given corrupted religion (ch. 1:2-2:3)
    - i) Denunciation (ch. 1:4-9)
      - (1) Symbolized by a flood (ch. 1:2-6)
      - (2) Symbolized by a sacrifice (ch. 1:7-8)
      - (3) Symbolized by fire (ch. 1:18; 3:8)
  - b) Judgment on the nations in practising the God rejecting religion and their attitude to Judah (ch. 2:4-15).
    - i) Nations to the West, Philistines (ch. 2:4-7)
    - ii) Nations to the East, Moab and Ammon (ch. 2:8-11)
    - iii) Nations to the South, Egypt and Ethiopia (ch. 2:13-15)
  - c) Summary:
    - i) The cause for God’s judgment on Judah for practising the God rejecting religion, demanding God’s justice executed (ch. 3:1-4)
      - 1. National Stubbornness (ch. 3:2-7) seen by:
        - (a) Rebellions (ch. 3:1-4)
          - (1) God’s plea for their repentance (ch. 3:5-7)
    - ii) God’s divine mercy is extended (ch. 3:9-20)
      - 1. International Godliness (ch. 3:9)
      - 2. National delightfulness (ch. 3:10-20)

### Practical Lessons

What an affect the leaders of Judah had on their subjects. It was always much easier to let things slip, to slide downward into compromising, and then accommodation to bring things back to the right ways of the Lord.

Two truths are obvious:

- a) The responsibility of leaders to keep the truths God has given without compromise and without addition.
- b) The saints will follow their leaders to whom they are to be subject (Heb. 13:17), and the saints as a whole will not rise higher than their leaders.

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**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.  
John 16:13**

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