

# Books of The Bible

## A Survey of Zephaniah

### Introduction

It is important to observe that which the Holy Spirit emphasises at the beginning of books, and in this case it is the minor prophets. In the following books:

- a) Hosea and Amos there is mention how they prophesied during the reigns of both the kings of Judah and Israel with Amos including an event - the earthquake (Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1).
- b) In Joel and Jonah there is the mention of their father's but no reference to the ruling kings (Joel 1:1; Jon. 1:1).
- c) In Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Malachi there is no mention of either kings or forefathers (Obad. 1:1; Habb. 1:10; Mal. 1:1).
- d) In Micah and Nahum there is a slight distinction. In Nahum there is no reference to the kings who ruled nor his father but only his "nationality". In Micah we are informed of his "nationality" and the kings of Judah (Mic. 1:1; Nah. 1:1).
- e) In Haggai and Zachariah reference is made to others associated with the prophet (Hagg. 1:1; Zech. 1:1).
- f) When reading Zephaniah there is reference to both his forefathers and the king of Judah, however, his genealogy goes further back to his great great grandfather (Zeph. 1:1).

### The Man

In recounting his ancestry back to King Hezekiah who led a reformation, Zephaniah was of the kingly line and had godly associations for some time.

### The Time In Which He Lived

While no reference is made to the preceding kings of Judah, there are expressions in Zephaniah which come with new clarity when the historical background is seen. Zephaniah informs of the great judgments that are going to come on Judah, a fact which begs the question, "Why"? The judgements are going to be vented on Judah due to the sins of the kings and the people, sins which are mentioned in 2 Kings 21-22.

- a) Hezekiah had been told a message from God, "Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live" (Isa. 38:1). Turning his face to the wall he pleaded with God who graciously promised him an extension of fifteen years.
  - i) In the third year of those extra years, Manasseh was born and he was a wicked king (2 Kgs. 21:2-7a; 11). God pledged his judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 21:11-12) repeating again the sins of Manasseh and the people (2 Kgs. 21:16-17).
  - ii) When Manasseh died, Amon his son reigned. He also did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kgs. 21:20-21) just like his father. Amon was murdered and his son Josiah was made king when he was only 8 years of age. Thus the early years of the child were spent under the evilness of his grandfather Manasseh and his father Amon.
  - iii) Judah and Jerusalem were corrupt and again God pledged His judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 22:16), but Josiah was told, "Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD . . . thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place" (2 Kgs. 22:18-20).
- b) It was evident the people were settling down (Zeph. 1:12), thinking that God would not punish them for the sins committed instead of seeing the delaying of the judgment was God's merciful dealings because of godly Josiah, and now warns them again of coming judgement called, "the day of the LORD" (Zeph. 1:14). The judgment would not be delayed and God was giving another warning and appeal.

### Key Words or Phrases

There are three key words and one key phrase, they are: Jealousy (2); Day of the LORD (6); In the midst (5); and Remnant (4).

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### Key Verses

It is my understanding that there are three major verses or passages in Zephaniah:

- a) The non merit to security found in valuable things of earth in the day of the LORD's judgment (ch. 1:18).
- b) The summary of the sovereign activity of God and judgment of God on the nations (ch. 3:8). It is a pronouncement of judgment on Philistia on the west (ch. 2:4-7); on Moab and Ammon on the east (ch. 2:8-11); on Ethiopia on the south (ch. 2:12); and Assyria on the north (ch. 2:13-15). Then a warning to Israel (ch. 3:1-5); and the summary (ch. 3:6, 8).
- c) The glorious future for Israel (ch. 3:9-20).

### Key Concepts

God does not take insolence, disobedience and rebellion lightly, they are dishonoring to Him and He will not let such go unpunished. There is an old saying, "The wheels of God grind slowly but surely". Delay does not mean the forgetfulness of God or that the pronounced judgments were merely empty threats.

- a) Man in his spiritual blindness sees sin as humorous and enjoyable, yet God's word still stands, "Fools make a mock at sin" (Prov. 14:9), and ultimately its judgment will be terrifying and devastating (Zeph. 1:14-18; 2:2, 4-15; Rom. 1:18-32; Rev. chs. 6-20).

God will not keep His anger forever (Psa. 103:9; Jer. 3:12) as an observation between the beginning and ending of the book shows. It begins with, "I will consume" (ch. 1:3) and ends with, "I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth" (ch. 3:20). The thought is, God has an end in view, but that will not be by the ignoring of sin. Sin must be punished. There must be smiting before smiling, retribution before restoration.

### Major Truths

Zephaniah was gripped by the gravity of the spiritual and political situation for he saw reality from God's perspective. There were those who were simply paying lip service to the restorations, "The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil" (ch. 1:12), in other words, God does not interfere with this world. The people had followed the lead of Josiah but while the spiritual activity was good in itself, by many it was only a "fad", the thing to be done, and did not reach the heart. Knowing the intensity of divine holiness and justice and the consequential fierceness of Jehovah's wrath, due to the rebellious nature of man's heart, with earnest pleadings he cries for them to be aware that the "Great day of the LORD is near, it is near and hasteneth greatly" (ch. 1:15-16). Since the Day of the LORD is not just a past happening but also a future one, and since the judgments of God in the past were horrors incomprehensible, then what will the seals, trumpets, thunders, and vials be like?

### Aspects of God

There are multiple manifestations of God in Zephaniah for He is portrayed as:

- a) The God over all the nations (ch. 2 & 3:8)
- b) God in the midst of His people (ch. 3:17)
- c) The God of love (ch. 3:17)
- d) The God of ability to fulfill His designs. Note the "I will", (ch. 1:2, 3, 4, 12, 17; ch. 3:9, 12, 18, 19, 20) and "I have" (ch. 3:6)
- e) The God of delights (ch. 3:17)
- f) The God of recompense (ch. 2:9)
- g) The God who is aware of the afflictions of His People (ch. 2:8)
- h) The God who does not ignore sin or give special privileges of rebellion to his people (ch. 3:2)
- i) The God of integrity (ch. 3:5)

Furthermore, God is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9) and will not share the love of His own with any other. He must have whole hearted devotion, for that is perfect love and that is how He loves.

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Zephaniah emphasizes the sovereignty of God in a twofold way. In judgment (ch. 1:2-4) and mercy (ch. 3:18-20).

### Date

There are several expressions in Zephaniah which indicate when the book was written.

- a) The first expression is that He prophesied, “in the days of Josiah” (ch. 1:1). This leaves a very large space of time for Josiah reigned for thirty one years. It appears to me that Zephaniah prophesied before the revival of Josiah and the pleadings of God for Judah to return to Him (ch. 2:1-3), but it was a warning which they did not fully in heart respond to.
- b) The second set of expressions are, “Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation . . . Ekron shall be rooted up” (ch. 2:4); “Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah” (ch. 2:9); “he will destroy Assyria” (ch. 2:13). With these in mind, it is evident that it was during the reign of Josiah and before the fall and destruction of Nineveh which was approximately between 515 and 625 B.C.

### Associated Prophets

From Jeremiah 1:2 it is revealed that Jeremiah and Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah. While Jeremiah gives the beginning date for the Lord speaking to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:2), this is not given for Zephaniah therefore, whether they were actual contemporaries or not we do not know for certain. Jeremiah prophesied longer than Zephaniah (Jer. 1:3) right up to the captivity and the going into Babylon, which for Israel would have been the “Day of the LORD’S” first fulfillment.

### Suggested Structure

The writing of Zephaniah is in three distinct movements where He will prophecy:

- a) **To Judah.** Observe the references to Judah (ch. 1:4). The following references are by context to Judah while not specifically mentioning it (ch. 1:7, 8, 11, 12, ch. 2:1). Note the reason for the judgment (ch. 1:17) and then an appeal to repent and encouragement (ch. 2:1-3). One had pointed out that the basic problem was a failure or unwillingness to listen to God. The mighty were too independent to listen (ch. 1:6-8); the masses were too settled in their iniquity to listen (ch. 1:7-8); the merchants were too involved to listen (ch. 1:10-11); and the majority were too indifferent to listen (ch. 1:12-13). For those conditions see Jer. 3:6, 7, 10.
- b) **The Nations.** Turning from Israel and looking west, east, south and north and then returns to Israel. First west to Philistia (ch. 2:4-7); then east to Moab and Ammon (ch. 2:8-11); then south to Ethiopia (ch. 2:12); then north to Nineveh and Assyria (ch. 2:13-15); then back to Jerusalem (ch. 3:1-8). The reason the Lord goes back to Jerusalem is they had not considered their sister as is seen in Jeremiah 6, but they had ignored the judgment of God on the nations (ch. 3:7). God will judge fully and fairly (ch. 1:2-6).
- c) **All the Nations.** In this section the Lord deals with all the peoples. In chapter 3:9 the word “people” is a plural word and ought to be “peoples”. God will bring in universal blessing. In verse 10 there will be a regathering of His people; vv. 11-13 there will be a changed attitude and behavior; vv. 14-15 a banishing of evil and in its place joyous exalting. God himself will dwell in their midst.

Another way of viewing the thought flow is by the key messages in the book. There is the message of warning of coming judgment, which is in two parts, followed by pleas for them to repent, which is followed by the promise of restoration and blessing. How great is God’s grace in deliverance. First there is regathering (ch. 3:9-10); then repentance (ch. 3:11-13); followed by rejoicing (ch. 3:14-15); finally the great Redeemer (ch. 3:16-20).

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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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