

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Zephaniah

There is a compelling simplicity about Zephaniah's message: he has only one topic, and he never digresses from it. His book opens with a vision of world disaster, embracing both the outside world (1:2-3) and the professing people of God (1:4-6). He identifies this disaster as "the day of the LORD" (1:7-18) and calls for preparation (2:1-3). His next concern is to show this day in action, shattering the nations (2:4-15) but merited equally by Jerusalem (3:1-5). Unexpectedly—as if forcing itself into the prophet's consciousness—the day also has a spark of hope (2:6-7, 9d, 11), and the remainder of the prophecy (2:8-3:20) is concerned with how this comes about. Zephaniah has handed down this message of doom and hope in a shapely, stylish form. It is a coherent, compelling eschatological vision.

J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 897.

I. Introduction

Zephaniah stands out for a variety of reasons as unique among OT prophets, not the least of which is the sustained treatment of his central and unifying theme: the day of Yahweh. In fact, the prophet uses this phrase more than any other prophet. Like Joel before him, Zephaniah's concern is the spiritual condition of his people and the impending danger that threatens to undo them for their religious apostasy. The prophet's message sounds a warning call to all professing believers who claim to be God's people.

A. *Date & Authorship*

There's uncertainty about what Zephaniah's name actually means. One explanation suggests that it is a combination of the Hebrew verb *saphan* ("to hide/shelter") and *Yah*(weh), meaning "Yahweh hides/shelters." A second is that the same combines the verb *saphah* ("to watch") with *Yah*(weh), meaning "Watchman for Yahweh." In either case, the name reflects his parents religious and spiritual piety and hope in Yahweh, and drives to the heart of Zephaniah's message of hope in the midst of Yahweh's day of judgment.

What is not uncertain is the general timeframe of Zephaniah's life and message. He stands out in providing four generations of genealogical history—most prophets gave only their

father's name, if any name at all. More interesting than that, the final name given is that of "Hezekiah," and it is commonly accepted (though not certain) that the name refers to none other than the famed King Hezekiah of Judah. If this identification is accurate, then this would make Zephaniah of royal descent.

Most likely, he was born and raised during the reigns of Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) and Amon (642-640 B.C.), and began his prophetic ministry sometime during the reign of King Josiah, as he indicates in the superscription to his message (1:1). Scholars have questioned whether his book predates or postdates the beginnings of Josiah's spiritual and religious reformations in Judah, which began around 627 B.C. A case could be made for either option.

On the one hand, the mention of "the remnant of Baal" (1:4) could suggest a time after Josiah began his reforms, indicating a decline but not yet eradication of Baalism, and his words to "those who are complacent" (1:12) seem to portray a segment of the population who may have been disappointed with Josiah's reforms. All this supports the contention that Zephaniah preached his message(s) sometime after the reforms began.

On the other hand, his condemnation of Canaanite worship (1:4-5), references to foreign dress (1:8), the presence of false prophets and priests (3:4), and widespread injustice and violence among the civic leaders (3:2-3) have led some to the conclusion that Zephaniah prophesied sometime prior to Josiah's reforms and may have, in fact, influenced Josiah to initiate them. However, as much as Josiah's reforms were lauded in Kings (22:1-23:25), it may be that they were more superficial than is commonly assumed and that much idolatry remained.

In summary, the matter is rather inconclusive. However, no matter the earliest date of the book, the fact that he predicts the fall of Nineveh clearly dates the book before the city's destruction in 612 B.C. Liberal attempts to date the book later or to date the messages of hope to a later exilic writer are extremely subjective and lack foundation.

B. *Historical Background*

Zephaniah grew up under the reigns of two of Judah's most wicked kings. Both Manasseh and Amon were responsible for facilitating apostasy and idolatry. Both sustained their loyalty to Assyria throughout their reigns, and its pagan influences on Judah are clearly reflected in the first portion of Zephaniah's message (2 Kgs 21:2-9, 19-22). Yet when Josiah ascended the throne, he began to exert independence from Assyria. Assurbanipal died around Josiah's 8th year, and subsequent policy changes and rising difficulties in the empire provided Josiah the opportunity to initiate his spiritual and religious reforms.

When Zephaniah began his ministry, Judah was plagued with Assyrian and Canaanite religious practices. He mentions the worship of astral deities, Canaanite practices, pagan cultic priests and prostitutes, as well as shrines and high places. Josiah proceeded to rid Judah of these evil practices, centralizing worship in Jerusalem, and calling the people back to covenant faithfulness. Yet coupled with these religious elements, Judah was also plagued with social issues. Injustice was prevalent in the land (3:1, 3, 7), and the rich lived in luxury at the expense of the poor (1:8-9). If Zephaniah's message post-dates these reforms, then it seems clear that they were not completely effective.

II. Major Themes

Zephaniah's message focuses on several factors. His message is clearly intended for Judah, but he keeps a keen eye especially on Jerusalem. The idolatry and social apathy of the nation was central in his thoughts (1:4-13; 3:1-7). His message to the nation is a warning to the people of the impending judgment that was coming, a judgment that had been demonstrated a century earlier when Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. Within Zephaniah's message, two major themes emerge: judgment and hope. It is the seeming incongruence of these two themes that led some liberal scholars to question the authenticity of Zephaniah's messages of hope. However, the two are inextricably linked together by the prophet in one overarching concept: the day of Yahweh.

Though Zephaniah is not the only prophet to discuss the day of Yahweh at length, he uses the expression more than any other prophet. It is the central organizing principle of his message,¹ and he portrays the day as having two sides—judgment and blessing.

On the judgment side, he describes the day with some of the most graphic language of any prophet (1:14-16):

Near is the great day of Yahweh,
Near and coming very quickly;
Listen, the day of Yahweh!
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.
A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,
A day of trumpet and battle cry
Against the fortified cities
And the high corner towers.

The reason for the coming judgment is delineated explicitly: Judah had sinned against Yahweh (1:17). They had sustained their pagan practices (1:4-9), were led by corrupt leadership (3:3-4), and were spiritually and socially complacent (1:12). Thus, God's people were in imminent danger of undergoing God's wrathful judgment. Like Amos before him, he was undoubtedly overturning the popular notion that the day of Yahweh promised blessing for the covenant people and that God's wrath was reserved specifically for the nations. Their confidence was in their covenant status. Instead, Zephaniah reveals that "the true basis for blessing or judgment was a nation's relationship to God himself, rather than to Israel."²

Yet Zephaniah offers Judah a glimmer of hope—an escape from divine wrath that will come if the nation repents (2:1-3):

¹ Mark F. Rooker, "Zephaniah," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 473-4.

² David W. Baker, "Theology of Zephaniah," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:1310.

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather,
O nation without shame,
Before the decree takes effect—
The day passes like the chaff—
Before the burning anger of Yahweh comes upon you,
Before the day of Yahweh's anger comes upon you.
Seek Yahweh,
All you humble of the earth
Who have carried out his ordinances;
Seek righteousness, seek humility.
Perhaps you will be hidden
In the day of Yahweh's anger.

There is desperation in the prophet's words. He promises shelter for those who seek after God. But he warns not to delay. Judgment is coming, and it will overtake the world. All the nations will come under divine wrath. The prophet identifies numerous foreign nations—Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (2:4), the Cherethites and the Philistines (2:5), Moab and Ammon (2:8), as well as Cush [Ethiopia] and Assyria (2:12-13)—all are guilty for their arrogance and pride, particularly expressed in their taunting and persecution of Israel (2:10).

Yet there is another side to the day of Yahweh, and it is not a divine afterthought. The day may bring judgment for those opposed to Yahweh, but the prophet offers hope for the faithful remnant. For them, the day of Yahweh is a vindication, where God intervenes on the earth and redeems and glorifies his godly ones (3:8-11):

"Therefore wait for me," declares Yahweh,
"For the day when I rise up as a witness.
Indeed, my decision is to gather nations,
To assemble kingdoms,
To pour out on them my indignation,
All my burning anger;
For all the earth will be devoured
By the fire of my zeal.
For then I will give to the peoples purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of Yahweh,
To serve him shoulder to shoulder.
From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
My worshipers, my dispersed ones,
Will bring my offerings.
In that day you will feel no shame
Because of all your deeds
By which you have rebelled against me;
For then I will remove from your midst
Your proud, exulting ones,
And you will never again be haughty
On my holy mountain.

The final portion of Zephaniah's message proclaims hope for a glorified future for the remnant of Judah. They will "take refuge in the name of Yahweh" (3:12), and so they will be saved and purified so that "Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies" (3:13). Thus, the prophet exhorts them to "shout for joy" and "rejoice and exult with all [their] heart" because "Yahweh has taken away his judgments against [them]" (3:15). He will fight for them and "deal with all [their] oppressors" and "turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth" (3:19).

Thus, Zephaniah presents the day of Yahweh as a day of divine intervention, when God punishes all of mankind for rebellion. Yet he also promises hope of blessing for those who repent and hold fast to him. They comprise the remnant, and he will sustain them through the judgment. As Motyer states, "The divine justice that must be expressed in wrath is exactly balanced by divine love, which works renewal and brings restoration for the Lord's people and for the whole world."³

This day is ultimately eschatological in nature. In one sense, Zephaniah and the prophets saw in certain historical events such as the fall of Samaria, Jerusalem, and Babylon anticipations of the day of Yahweh. Yet in no way did these events fulfill all that Zephaniah promised would come from that day:

In each case . . . neither in prospect or in retrospect was the day of the Lord fully realized. The prophets simply had in mind that these were events of such a dire nature that they exemplified a reality that would be fully demonstrated when the day finally came. But it is this ultimate day that preoccupies Zephaniah. His thinking is insistently universal (1:17a, 18b; 2:11; 3:6, 8b, 9, 20). He seems uninterested in identifying specific historical events. . . . Zephaniah, whether under historical or theological prompting, has left us a tract on the day of the Lord—the climax alike of history, sin, and the purposes of God.⁴

III. Purpose

Any attempt to summarize the purpose of Zephaniah must keep both the judgment and blessing aspects of the day of Yahweh in focus. Contrary to most superficial synopses of the book, his message is not one of doom and gloom. He gives a clear way of escape to his readers/listeners. What's more, his focus on the eschatological day of Yahweh brings the entire world into focus. Though Judah appears in the crosshairs, the prophet wants them to know that Yahweh's day will encompass all the nations and will affect all of creation. With that said, the following may serve as a summarizing purpose for the book:

Yahweh's control of all nations will be proved in the day of Yahweh.

³ Alec J. Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edwin McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 904.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 918.

IV. Literary Style & Structure

As noted earlier, Zephaniah's message is graphic and intense. He employs images of war, of theophany, and judgment to capture the horrors of the day of Yahweh. But he also uses other literary devices, not the least of which is repetition. Some of his repeated motifs include:

- the day of Yahweh (1:7, 14)
- the day of Yahweh's wrath (1:15, 18)
- the day of distress, oppression, darkness (1:14-17)
- the day of sacrifice (1:7-8)
- the day on which Yahweh raises himself up (3:8)
- that day (1:9, 15; cf. 1:8, 10; 3:11, 16)
- in the midst/among/within Jerusalem (3:3, 5, 11-12, 15, 17)
- seek Yahweh (1:6; 2:3)
- accept instruction (3:2, 7)
- worship (1:5; 2:11; cf. 3:9-10)
- fear (3:7, 15-16)
- visit (1:8-9, 12; 3:7)
- stretch out the hand (1:4; 2:13)
- gather (1:2; 3:8, 19-20)
- remnant (2:7, 9; 3:12-13)
- restore fortunes (2:7; 3:20)
- the city (2:15; 3:1)
- the arrogant (2:15; 3:11)
- *mispat* [right/just] (2:3; 3:5, 8, 15)

As for the structure of the book, several commentators have offered outlines to consider. Rooker and Motyer divide the book into three major sections:

1. Superscription (1:1)
2. Prophecy against Judah (1:2-2:3)
3. Prophecy against Foreign Nations (2:4-3:7)
 - A. Against Philistia (2:4-7)
 - B. Against Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)
 - C. Against Ethiopia (2:12)
 - D. Against Assyria (2:13-15)
 - E. Against Jerusalem and Judah (3:1-7)
4. Prophecy of Salvation (3:8-20)

Essex offers a two-fold division of the book:

ZEPHANIAH

Introduction	The Coming "Day of Yahweh"		The Coming Judgment and Blessing of the Oppressed City	
Prophet Date 1:1	Upon Judah 1:2	Upon the Nations Philistia Moab/Ammon Ethiopia Assyria 2:4	The Judgment 3:1	The Blessing 3:8