

Notes on Zephaniah

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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book comes from the name of its writer. "Zephaniah" means "Yahweh Hides [or Has Hidden]," "Hidden in Yahweh," "Yahweh's Watchman," or "Yahweh Treasured." The uncertainty arises over the etymology of the prophet's name, which scholars dispute. I prefer "Hidden by Yahweh."¹

Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah (1:1), evidently King Hezekiah of Judah. This is not at all certain, but I believe it is likely. Only two other Hezekiahs appear on the pages of the Old Testament, and they both lived in the postexilic period. The Chronicler mentioned one of these (1 Chron. 3:23), and the writers of Ezra and Nehemiah mentioned the other (Ezra 2:16; Neh. 7:21).

If Zephaniah was indeed a descendant of the king, this would make him the writing prophet with the most royal blood in his veins, except for David and Solomon. Apart from the names of his immediate forefathers, we know nothing more about him for sure, though it seems fairly certain where he lived. His references to Judah and Jerusalem (1:10-11) seem to indicate that he lived in Jerusalem, which would fit a king's descendant.²

UNITY

Criticism of the unity of Zephaniah has not had great influence. Zephaniah's prediction of Nineveh's fall (2:15; 612 B.C.) led critics—who do not believe that the prophets could predict the future—to date the book after that event. Differences in language and style influenced some critics to divide the book up and identify its various parts with diverse sources. Yet the unity of the message and flow of the entire book, plus ancient belief in its unity, have convinced most conservative scholars to regard Zephaniah as the product of one writer.³

¹Cf. Ronald B. Allen, *A Shelter in the Fury*, p. 20.

²See Vern S. Poythress, "Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning: Gains and Losses from Focusing on the Human Author, Illustrated by Zephaniah 1:2-3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57:3 (September 2014):481-99.

³For further discussion of the book's unity, see Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 290-92.

DATE

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.; 1:1). Scholars debate just when during his reign Zephaniah wrote, before⁴ or after⁵ Josiah's reforms, which began about 622 B.C. There is support for both views.⁶ Zephaniah made no explicit reference to Josiah's reforms, and the evidence is really insufficient to settle the debate.⁷ However, Zephaniah alluded to Deuteronomy often. He may have done so because the discovery of the Law, which triggered Josiah's reforms, had made the people more aware of it than they had been before its discovery.

Zephaniah's reference to the future destruction of Nineveh (2:13) definitely fixed his writing before that event in 612 B.C. So the prophet ministered between 640 and 612 B.C. His contemporaries were Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah, though Jeremiah's ministry continued beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 586 B.C.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

References to Jerusalem in 1:10-11 seem to indicate that Zephaniah knew Jerusalem well. Since he ministered to the Southern Kingdom, it is likely that he lived in Judah and probably in Jerusalem.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

The fact that Yahweh's word came to Zephaniah during Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.), means that he could not have ministered to the Northern Kingdom, because it fell in 722 B.C. Thus, Zephaniah's audience consisted of the people of Judah: the surviving Southern Kingdom. He apparently ministered primarily to the upper echelons of society rather than to the average Israelites, as evidenced by his references to the princes, judges, prophets, and priests (1:8-9; 3:3-4).

The political situation in Judah during Josiah's reign was fairly peaceful. Following Assyria's capture of Samaria in 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire began to decline. With its decline, Nabopolassar, the first of the Neo-Babylonian kings (626-605 B.C.), began to lead Babylonia forward. Assyria declined, and Babylonia advanced until Babylonia, assisted by the Medes and Scythians, destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C., and a few years later replaced Assyria as the dominant power in the ancient Near East. This happened in 605 B.C. when the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians and Egyptians at Carchemish. Judah benefited during this transitional period in Near Eastern politics. Josiah was able to get rid of some Assyrian religious practices, and he extended Judah's territory north into the tribal territory of Naphtali. Unfortunately, Josiah died prematurely in 609 B.C. (cf. 2 Chron. 35:20-27).

⁴E.g., *ibid.*, p. 276; E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:226; H. A. Hanke, "Zephaniah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 883; David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, p. 91; Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 320; Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 839; George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, p. 132; et al.

⁵E.g., John D. Hannah, "Zephaniah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1523; et al.

⁶See Patterson, pp. 275-6, and Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, pp. 121-23, for other scholars who held each of these views.

⁷Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 472.

Josiah's evil predecessors, Manasseh (695-642 B.C.) and Amon (642-640 B.C.), had encouraged the people of Judah to depart from the Lord for over 50 years, so wickedness had become ingrained in them. In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (622 B.C.), Hilkiah the priest discovered the Law of Moses in the temple, and after Josiah read it, he instituted major reforms throughout Judah.

Josiah's reforms were good because they were official. He eliminated much of the display of idolatry in the land, and revived the celebration of the Passover, among other things. See 2 Kings 22:4-25 and 2 Chronicles 34:3—35:19 for the lists of Josiah's extensive reforms. But unfortunately his reforms did not change the hearts of most of the people, as Jeremiah revealed in his earlier prophecies. So the people to whom Zephaniah ministered had a long history of formal religion without much real commitment to Yahweh.

God sent a prophetic word to Zephaniah because the Judeans of his day still needed to get right with Him in their hearts. The prophet announced that God was going to send judgment on Judah for her wickedness.

"The little prophecy of Zephaniah presents the dark side of the love of God. He is a God of love, but He is also a God of judgment. Zephaniah opens with the rumblings of judgment, and you will not find judgment enunciated [*sic* enunciated] in any more harsh manner than it is in this book."⁸

Zephaniah also assured the godly few in the nation, the remnant, that the Lord would preserve them and remain true to His promises concerning ultimate worldwide blessing for Israel in the future. Perhaps 1:7 summarizes what the book is all about better than any other single verse: "Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the LORD is near."

"In a sense, the history of the times has nothing to say about Zephaniah's message. Throughout the book there is a sense of distance from historical events. . . . Zephaniah is rooted in the flow of history . . . , but his concern is only with the goal—the eschaton—the day when calamitous human efforts to run the world will coincide in an awesome climax with the Lord's purposes of judgment and hope."⁹

". . . Zephaniah's purpose was to announce coming judgment on Judah in the Day of the Lord. However, he said that judgment would extend to all the nations of the earth, indicating that the Day of the Lord would also bring deliverance for Israel and the Gentiles."¹⁰

"His theme, accordingly, is little less than 'the consummation of the world's history.'"¹¹

⁸J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:862.

⁹J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah," in *The Minor Prophets*, p. 899.

¹⁰Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 809.

¹¹Robinson, p. 133.

LITERARY FORM

"Zephaniah's style is chiefly characterized by a unity and harmony of composition plus energy of style. Rapid and effective alternations of threats and promises also characterize his style."¹²

"All of Zephaniah is poetry with the exception of 1:1 and 2:10-11."¹³

"The form of Habakkuk's prophecy was (as we might say) more subjective; that of Zephaniah, more objective."¹⁴

"Zephaniah can hardly be considered great as a poet. He does not rank with Isaiah, nor even with Hosea in this particular. . . . He had an imperative message to deliver and proceeded in the most direct and forceful way to discharge his responsibility. What he lacked in grace and charm, he in some measure atoned for by the vigour and clarity of his speech. He realised the approaching terror so keenly that he was able to present it vividly and convincingly to his hearers. No prophet has made the picture of the day of Yahweh more real."¹⁵

"Literary genres used include judgment oracles (1:2-3, 4-6, 8-9, etc.), calls for response (1:7; 2:1-3; 3:8)—including a call to praise and a psalm of praise (3:14-17)—as well as salvation oracles (3:9-13, 18-20)."¹⁶

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The Book of Zephaniah has been called "a compendium of the oracles of the prophets."¹⁷ This is true for two reasons. First, Zephaniah's general message is similar to that of most of the other writing prophets. Second, he used the same terms as several of the other prophets (cf. 1:7 and Hab. 2:20; 1:7 and Joel 1:15; 1:7 and Isa. 34:6; 2:14 and Isa. 13:21; 34:11; 2:15 and Isa. 47:8). These parallels may indicate that Zephaniah was alluding to these, and other, former writing prophets.¹⁸

"Zephaniah reintroduced the message of Joel and Obadiah; however, for him the day of the Lord was both a day of world-wide judgment and a day when Judah would be punished."¹⁹

"Obadiah, Joel, Amos, and Isaiah had all spoken of this day, but Zephaniah alone emphasized more strenuously than them all the

¹²Larry Lee Walker, "Zephaniah," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 540.

¹³Smith, p. 127.

¹⁴Pusey, 2:225.

¹⁵J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Zephaniah and Nahum*, p. 176.

¹⁶Baker, p. 87.

¹⁷Walker, p. 539.

¹⁸See Pusey, 2:230-32.

¹⁹Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, pp. 220-21.

universality of its judgment while also surprisingly predicting the conversion of the nations as one of its fruits."²⁰

Zephaniah contains more references to "the day of the LORD" than any other Old Testament book. This phrase sometimes refers to the past, sometimes to the near future, sometimes to the distant future, and sometimes to the far distant, eschatological future. The phrase always refers to some period of time in which God is working in the world in a recognizable way. It usually refers to a time of blasting, but sometimes it refers to a time of blessing.

"The 'Day of Yahweh' may be seen as that theme which unifies the entirety of the book of Zephaniah."²¹

Zephaniah 1:14-18 has been called "emergent apocalyptic."²² This pericope contains material that would one day become prominent in Jewish apocalyptic literature.²³

Theologically, Zephaniah stressed the sovereign justice of Yahweh (1:2-3, 7, 14-18; 3:8) and His willingness to receive the repentant (2:3). He also emphasized the wickedness of man (1:3-6, 17; 3:1, 4). The theme of Yahweh's relationship to Jerusalem is prominent in Zephaniah as well (1:4-13; 3:1-7, 11-17).

"The instrument of God [in Judah's chastening] having been named by Habakkuk [i.e., Babylon], Zephaniah does not even allude to him. Rather he brings before Judah the other side, the agency of God Himself. God would not have them forget Himself in His instruments. Hence all is attributed to God."²⁴

Structurally, the book is a carefully crafted collection of oracles that compose one coherent message.²⁵

"The Book of Zephaniah does not contain two or three prophetic addresses, but the quintessence of the oral proclamations of the prophet condensed into one lengthened prophecy . . ."²⁶

"Zephaniah's prophecy has a more general character, embracing both judgment and salvation in their totality, so as to form one complete picture."²⁷

²⁰Ibid., p. 223.

²¹O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, p. 257.

²²Duane L. Christensen, "Zephaniah 2:4-15: A Theological Basis for Josiah's Program of Political Expansion," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984):682.

²³For further discussion, see Patterson, pp. 285-88.

²⁴Pusey, 2:226-27.

²⁵See Motyer, p. 902, for a diagram of the chiasms, as he saw them.

²⁶C. F. Keil, "Zephaniah," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:121.

²⁷Ibid., 2:122.

OUTLINE

- I. Heading 1:1
- II. The day of Yahweh's judgment 1:2—3:8
 - A. Judgment on the world 1:2-3
 - B. Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
 - 1. The cause for Judah's judgment 1:4-6
 - 2. The course of Judah's judgment 1:7-13
 - 3. The imminence and horrors of Judah's judgment 1:14-18
 - 4. A call to repentance 2:1-3
 - C. Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
 - 1. Judgment coming on Philistia 2:4-7
 - 2. Judgment coming on Moab and Ammon 2:8-11
 - 3. Judgment coming on Ethiopia 2:12
 - 4. Judgment coming on Assyria 2:13-15
 - D. Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
 - E. Judgment on all nations 3:8
- III. The day of Yahweh's blessing 3:9-20
 - A. The purification of the nations 3:9
 - B. The transformation of Israel 3:10-20
 - 1. Israel's purification 3:10-13
 - 2. Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17
 - 3. Israel's regathering 3:18-20

MESSAGE

The key to the Book of Zephaniah is the phrase "the day of the Lord." This phrase appears in most of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. As the prophets used the phrase, "the day of the Lord" can be a past day, a day in the relatively near future, or a day in the far distant (eschatological) future. It is any day in which God is obviously at work in human affairs.

Wherever we find the phrase "the day of the Lord," it always suggests a contrast with the "day" of man. The day of man is any day when *man* appears to be in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's patience. The day of the Lord is any day when *God* is clearly in control of human affairs. It is a day of God's judgment and or blessing. The phrase "the day of the Lord" is by no means unique to Zephaniah, but it is the key to the message of this book. Zephaniah used it more frequently than any other prophet. It was his burden, and he explained the meaning of this phrase more than any other prophet.

Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (1:1). It is rather remarkable that the prophet did not refer to Josiah's reforms, which were his great spiritual contribution to the history of Judah. Perhaps the reason for the lack of mention is that Josiah's reforms were a result of his personal dedication to Yahweh, rather than the result of a revival of spiritual life among the Judahites generally. Huldah's prophecy reflects this difference (cf. 2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28). Zephaniah took no note of Josiah's good heart, but addressed the spiritual need of the Judahites. The contrast between this king and his subjects is striking.

The "day of the Lord" that Zephaniah predicted was an eschatological day in which God would judge the people of Judah and Jerusalem. This judgment will take place during the first part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Tribulation. Zephaniah also predicted restoration following judgment (ch. 3). This refers to the second part of the eschatological day of the Lord, the period we refer to as the Millennium.

But Zephaniah also had in mind an eschatological day of the Lord even after the Millennium. This seems clear from the extent of devastation he described, as well as the picture of restoration he painted. That "day of the Lord" will be the judgment of the Lord at the end of the Millennium, including the destruction of the present earth and heavens, which will be followed by the creation of *new heavens* and a *new earth*.

Other revelation helps us see that there are, in fact, two periods of future judgment followed by restoration, not just one, which we might conclude if all we had was Zephaniah's prophecy (cf. 2 Pet. 3; Rev.).

The timeless value of the Book of Zephaniah is its unveiling of the day of the Lord. The book does not reveal exactly when that day will come. The only chronological reference in the book is in the first verse, which locates Zephaniah's ministry in history. The book pictures God judging in the undefined future. This is not judgment through armies of invading soldiers, or through any human instrumentality. It is direct judgment from God Himself.

There are three things that this book reveals about this coming day of the Lord: its content, its extent, and its intent.

The content of the day of the Lord is clear from 1:2-3. God will visit earth with direct and positive retribution, not in the general administrative sense of bringing people to account eventually, but in the narrower sense of executing vengeance on humanity in cataclysmic judgment (1:14-16). This judgment will fall in spite of human unbelief (1:12). When people will be disregarding God, He will break into human history dynamically, supernaturally, to judge. Peter's description of the day of the Lord is remarkably similar (2 Pet. 3:1-10). People today are saying what these two prophets said they would say so long ago. They are saying that God will never intervene in judgment this way. The great statement of the Book of Zephaniah is that God will indeed do this in a day yet future.

What will be the extent of this judgment? Zephaniah reveals that it will be discriminating. His people Israel will be the special target of this judgment, though all humanity will also

suffer (1:12). As we can see from this verse, the last stages of sin are *complacency* and *indifference*.

It is an interesting fact of history that complacency and indifference have frequently preceded the destruction of great empires of the past. Assyria fell to Babylonia because she was complacent and indifferent (cf. Nahum). Remember the fall of the Babylonian Empire that we read of in Daniel 5. The Roman Empire fell to the Visigoths from the north because it had become complacent and indifferent. And earlier, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and later the Southern Kingdom of Judah, fell to Assyria and Babylonia respectively for the same reasons.

The *spirit* that produces these conditions (complacency and indifference) is disregard for God and His Word (3:1-2). The result of such a spirit is that the leaders of the people forsake their proper servant role and turn to abusing the people to fatten themselves (3:3-4).

Reading Zephaniah is somewhat like watching a science fiction movie about a nuclear disaster, that leaves nothing but a sterile, uninhabited, windswept landscape with no life, no flowers, no fruit, and no beauty. What produces this horrible condition? The reason is the vast number of people who are complacent and indifferent, who disregard and ignore God. They do not obey God's voice, receive His correction, trust in Him, or draw near to Him. They are materialized, self-centered, living in luxury, and oblivious to their danger. So God steps in and turns their complacency into chaos, disorganizes their orderly lives, and purges them in their indifference. All that is left is a wind-swept desert (cf. the Flood).

What is the intent of this terrible activity? It is the creation of a new order, with God Himself enthroned among His creatures (3:17). Chapter 3 of this prophecy is such a different picture of the future, from what we have in chapters 1 and 2, that some commentators have said that a different person must have written it. Chapter 3 describes songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, and solidarity instead of scattering. That is the intent of this judgment. Marvelous restoration will follow devastating judgment.

The living message of this book is twofold. We can rejoice in the assurance of this coming judgment followed by restoration, and we have a responsibility in view of this coming judgment followed by restoration.

It is our privilege to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" that will be manifested at the end of God's judgment (cf. Rom. 5:2b). Even though the day of the Lord will involve the destruction of all things that destroy, it will also begin a new era of singing, service, and solidarity. That era will be the millennial reign of Christ first, and then the Eternal State.

It is also our responsibility to live holy and godly lives as we anticipate the coming of "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell" (2 Pet. 3:11-13). We need to be diligent to be found at peace with God, "spotless and blameless" in our lives (2 Pet. 3:14). We need to be on guard that we do not fall away from our own faithfulness

because of the prevalent "error of unprincipled people" (i.e., complacency and indifference; 2 Pet. 3:17). And we need to continue to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Rejoicing and responsible living: these characteristics need to distinguish the lives of people who anticipate the day of the Lord.

We could state the message of the book as follows: God will intervene in history, catastrophically, to judge humanity's complacency and indifference, and to restore His people to the conditions of blessing that He originally intended for them to enjoy.²⁸

²⁸Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:289-301.

Exposition

I. HEADING 1:1

What follows is "the word" that Yahweh gave "to Zephaniah" during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.). This "word" includes all that the Lord told the prophet that He also led him to record for posterity (cf. Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic. 1:1). This was a divine revelation that God gave through one of His servants the prophets.

Zephaniah recorded his genealogy, the longest genealogy of a writing prophet in any prophetic book. It goes back four generations to Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather, or possibly more distant relative, Hezekiah. As noted in the "Writer" section of the Introduction above, it is impossible to prove or to disprove that this Hezekiah was the king of Judah with that name. Chronologically, he could have been, since people married quite young during Israel's monarchy.

I think *this* Hezekiah probably was *the king*, since the name was not common, and since it would make sense to trace the prophet's lineage back this far only if Hezekiah was an important person (cf. Zech. 1:1).²⁹ Normally the writing prophets who recorded their ancestors named only their fathers (cf. Jon. 1:1; Joel 1:1). We have no complete genealogy of King Hezekiah's descendants in the Old Testament.

II. THE DAY OF YAHWEH'S JUDGMENT 1:2—3:8

Zephaniah's prophecies are all about "the day of the LORD." He revealed two things about this "day." First, it would involve judgment (1:2—3:8), and second, it would eventuate in blessing (3:9-20). The judgment portion is the larger of the two sections of revelation. This "judgment followed by blessing" motif is common throughout the Prophets. Zephaniah revealed that judgment would come from Yahweh on the whole earth, Judah, Israel's neighbors, Jerusalem, and all nations. The arrangement of this judgment section of the book is chiasmic.

- A Judgment on the world 1:2-3
- B Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
- C Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
- B' Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
- A' Judgment on the all nations 3:8

A. THE JUDGMENT ON THE WORLD 1:2-3

Zephaniah presented three graphic pictures of the day of the LORD.³⁰ The first is that of a devastating universal flood.

²⁹See *ibid.*, p. 898; J. M. P. Smith, pp. 182-83; George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Commonly Called the Minor*, 2:47; and Baker, p. 91.

³⁰Warren W. Wiersbe, "Zephaniah," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, pp. 426-27.

"These words not only introduce the particular judgment that would be pronounced upon Judah (v. 4), but they also speak of the final judgment that will usher in the kingdom of God on earth (see Rev. 19)."³¹

- 1:2 Yahweh revealed that He would "completely remove" everything "from the face of the earth" (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12). This is one of the most explicit announcements of the total devastation of planet Earth in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 24:1-6, 19-23). While it may involve some hyperbole, it clearly seems to foretell a worldwide judgment.

"Its imminent reference, some think, was to the fact that the barbaric Scythians, who had left their homeland north of the Black Sea, were sweeping over western Asia and might be expected to attack Judah at any moment. The ruthless Scythians employed the scorched earth policy with fury and vengeance."³²

"As a computer screen might cause all words to disappear at a keyed command, so the creation is about to vanish from the screen of God's presence."³³

- 1:3 This verse particularizes the general statement in verse 2 (cf. Gen. 1:1-2 and 3-31). The Lord will remove animal life, not that plants will survive—if animals die, plants will undoubtedly die too—but animal life was His focus of interest. "Man and beast" includes human beings, beasts of all types, birds, and fish, in other words, animal life on the land, in the air, and in the water.

"Ruins" still standing from previous destructions, or perhaps from false religious practices that have caused people to stumble, would perish, as would the wicked. The Lord repeated that He would "cut off man" to make that fact indisputable. This would be a reversal of Creation (cf. Gen. 1:20-26). The order in which things are listed for destruction is exactly the reverse from which they appear in the Creation narrative.³⁴ Zephaniah pictured a judgment similar to the Flood in its scope (Gen. 6:17; 7:21-23).

"Zephaniah begins with words of such stunning judgment we reel before them. He walks up, swings his fist in the solar plexus, then hits again before we've caught our breath. It's the Rambo approach to prophecy."³⁵

³¹*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1526.

³²Hanke, p. 884.

³³Allen, p. 40.

³⁴See M. DeRoche, "Zephaniah 1:2, 3: The 'Sweeping' of Creation," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1979):106.

³⁵Allen, p. 35.

Does this prophecy refer to the judgments that will come during the Tribulation (Rev. 6—18) or at the end of the Millennium (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 20:11-15)? In view of what follows in this section describing judgment, especially 3:8, the parallel passage to 1:2-3, I think it refers to the Tribulation judgments.

B. THE JUDGMENT ON JUDAH 1:4—2:3

Zephaniah gave more particulars concerning the fate of Judah (1:4—2:3) and Jerusalem (3:1-7) than about the fate of the rest of humanity (1:2-3; 2:4-15; 3:8). He did this, both in the section of the book dealing with coming judgment, and in the section about blessing. In the section on blessing, he gave only one verse about the purification of the nations (3:9), but 11 about the transformation of Israel (3:10-20).

1. The cause for Judah's judgment 1:4-6

1:4 Yahweh announced that He would "stretch out" His "hand against Judah" and the people "of Jerusalem"—in judgment.

"Zephaniah's methodology of spiraling from an outer rim to an inner core in depicting the object of God's judgment compares closely to the technique of Amos (cf. Amos 1:6—2:16)."³⁶

"Stretching out the hand" is a figure of speech that implies a special work of punishment (cf. Exod. 6:6; Deut. 4:34; 2 Kings 17:36; Isa. 14:26-27; Jer. 27:5; 32:17; et al.). He promised to "cut off the remnant of Baal" worshippers who remained in Judah, or perhaps the temple (cf. Deut. 12:5, 11; 1 Kings 8:29-30; Ezek. 42:13), as well as the priests of Baal and the unfaithful priests of Yahweh. He would also terminate their reputations and the memory of them (cf. 2 Kings 23:5; Hos. 10:5).

This reference has suggested to some interpreters that Zephaniah wrote *after* Josiah began his reforms, since Josiah revived the worship of Yahweh and tried—unsuccessfully—to eliminate idolatry (2 Chron. 34:4). Other interpreters use this verse to argue for a time of writing *before* Josiah began his reforms.³⁷ However, this verse may simply mean that the Lord would judge the idolaters in Judah, "Baal" being a figure (synecdoche) for all idolatry.

"Wherever excitement in religion becomes an end in itself and wherever the cult of 'what helps' replaces joy in 'what's true,' Baal is worshiped."³⁸

³⁶Robertson, p. 260.

³⁷E.g., Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 370.

³⁸Motyer, p. 912.

1:5 The Lord would also judge those who worshipped "the host of heaven"—the sun, moon, stars, and planets—which the idolatrous Israelites did on their flat "housetops" (cf. Deut. 4:19; 2 Kings 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; Jer. 19:13). This superstition persists today among believers in horoscopes. He would also punish the Judeans who worshipped both Yahweh and the pagan gods of the nations (cf. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer. 32:35).

"Milcom" (Molech, the god of Ammon; 1 Kings 11:33) probably represents all foreign gods. Syncretism also exists today whenever someone worships the true God but at the same time chooses something over Him. Swearing to and by a deity meant pronouncing an oath that called on that god to punish the oath-taker if he or she failed to do what he or she promised. Swearing by another god involved acknowledging its authority, which God prohibited in Israel.

"A great many people think that if a building has a steeple on it, a bell in that steeple, an organ, a big center aisle for weddings, a pulpit down front, and a choir loft, these make it a church. My friend, it may be one of the worst spots in town! It may be worse than any barroom, any gambling establishment, or any brothel in town. This is the thing that is so deceptive. The thing that undermined the nation of Judah is that they *pretended* that they were serving the living and true God, but they were giving themselves over to Molech idolatry."³⁹

1:6 Judgment would come, too, on all God's people who had apostatized, namely, departed from loving and following Yahweh, and had stopped praying to Him. They might not have participated in pagan idolatry, but if their love had grown cold, they were still guilty (cf. Rev. 2:1-7). The Lord commanded His people to love Him wholeheartedly (cf. Deut. 6:5). They may have forgotten Him, but He had not forgotten them.

"There were some who had at first heeded Josiah's call to repentance, and who had sought for a time to obey the voice of the Lord; but, putting their hand to the plow, they looked back and relapsed into their old idolatrous ways. There were others who had never known, nor cared to know, the mind of God. All must perish in the common destruction that was coming."⁴⁰

"Sometimes it is the apathetic and indifferent who are more responsible for a nation's moral collapse than those who are actively engaged in evil, or those who have failed in the responsibilities of leadership."⁴¹

³⁹McGee, 3:866.

⁴⁰Harry A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, p. 304.

⁴¹Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:114.

In this pericope, the prophet identified three types of idolatry: "the overtly pagan, the syncretistic, and the religiously indifferent."⁴² Practitioners of all three would draw punishment from Yahweh.

How does this promise to judge the Israelites harmonize with the earlier prophecy that God would destroy the whole earth (vv. 2-3)? This is an example of a prophet's foreshortened view of the future, in which he could not see the difference in time between some events that he predicted (cf. Isa. 61:1-3; Dan. 11:35-36; et al.). God judged Israel when the Babylonians overran Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. He will also judge the Israelites in the Tribulation (cf. Jer. 30:7; Rev. 6—18; et al.). Zephaniah described God's judgment of the people of Judah without specifying exactly when He would judge them. Most of what Zephaniah prophesied in this pericope found fulfillment, at least initially, in 586 B.C.

2. The course of Judah's judgment 1:7-13

Zephaniah's second picture of the day of the LORD is that of a great sacrifice.

1:7 In view of the inevitability and imminence of coming judgment for idolatry, it was appropriate for the Judeans to "be silent" or quiet before sovereign Yahweh (cf. Hab. 2:20).

"This is a call to the people of Judah to cease every manner of opposition to God's word and will, to bow down in submissive obedience, in unconditional surrender, in loving service, to their Covenant God."⁴³

This is Zephaniah's first reference to "the day of the LORD," to which he referred 24 times in this book.⁴⁴

References to the day of the LORD as a time of judgment	References to the day of the LORD as a time of blessing
The day of the LORD 1:7, 14 (2)	That day 3:11, 16
The day of the LORD's sacrifice 1:8	That time 3:19, 20
That day 1:9, 10, 15	The time 3:20
That time 1:12	
A day of the LORD's wrath 1:18	
The day 2:2; 3:8	
The day of the LORD's anger 2:2, 3	
A day 1:15 (5), 16	

⁴²Hannah, p. 1526.

⁴³T. Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 358.

⁴⁴For a brief excursus on the day of the Lord, see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 417-18.

"The day of the LORD" was a time when God works, in contrast to *man's day*, in which he works.

"As employed by the prophets, the Day of the Lord is that time when for His glory and in accordance with His purposes God intervenes in human affairs in judgment against sin or for the deliverance of His own."⁴⁵

Many amillennialists believe that the *cosmic judgments* of the Day of the Lord will take place at Christ's Second Coming.⁴⁶ Premillennialists typically believe that they will occur at various times in the future: the Tribulation, the Second Coming, and the destruction of the present heavens and earth at the end of Christ's millennial reign on earth.

Here the prophet announced that the Lord's day was "near"; He was about to intervene in human history (e.g., the Flood). The Lord had prepared "a sacrifice," namely, Judah (cf. Isa. 34:6; Jer. 46:10), and He had set apart "guests" to eat it, namely, the Babylonians (cf. Jer. 10:25; Hab. 1:6). Another view is that the invited guests were the Judeans who, ironically, would also serve as the sacrifice.⁴⁷

1:8 When the Lord slaughtered Judah like a sacrifice, He would "punish . . . the king's sons," and those who wore foreign clothing. The king's sons, the future rulers of the nation, bore special responsibility for conditions in the land. Josiah's sons did indeed suffer Yahweh's punishment. Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt (2 Kings 23:34). Jehoiakim was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and died in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1-6). Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16). The last son of Josiah to rule over Judah, Zedekiah, was blinded and also taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:18—25:7).

Wearing "foreign garments" evidently was a custom that expressed love and support for non-Israelite values, and so incurred God's wrath (cf. Num. 15:38; Deut. 22:11-12).⁴⁸ This reference to foreign garments may also imply that those who wore them were greedily practicing extortion against their neighbors and, possibly, participating in religious rites associated with exotic clothing.⁴⁹ The Israelites' garments were to be distinctive, including tassels on the corners with a blue cord in the tassels (Num. 15:38).

1:9 The Lord would also punish those who leaped over the thresholds of their neighbors in their zeal to plunder them, and who filled the temple with

⁴⁵Patterson, p. 310. Cf. Allen, p. 66.

⁴⁶E.g., Robertson, p. 273.

⁴⁷Baker, p. 95.

⁴⁸Keil, 2:131.

⁴⁹*The Nelson . . .*, p. 1527; Robertson, p. 278.

gifts taken through "violence and deceit."⁵⁰ Another view of "leaping over the threshold" is that this expression describes a superstition that anyone who walked on a building's threshold would have bad luck (cf. 1 Sam. 5:5).⁵¹

Still another view is that this expression describes people who claimed their neighbors' houses as their own.⁵² A fourth view is that the phrase "who avoid stepping on the threshold" (NIV) implies that the Judahites were worshiping pagan deities in the temple courts, which had been established for the worship of Yahweh.⁵³

In this passage, the temple in view might be the temple of Baal. "Their lord" is literally "Their Baal" (cf. v. 4).

1:10 When the Lord brought judgment on Judah, there would be crying out from various parts of Jerusalem—representing the total destruction of the city. The "Fish Gate" was the gate through which the fishermen normally entered the city with their catches. It was a gate that pierced Jerusalem's north wall close to the fish market (cf. 2 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 3:3; 12:39). It was probably through this gate that Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem, since he invaded it from the north. The modern name of this gate is the Damascus Gate.⁵⁴

The "Second (or New) Quarter" was a district of Jerusalem northwest of the temple area (cf. 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22). "The hills" may refer to the hills on which Jerusalem stood, or the hills surrounding the city, or both. In any case, the Babylonian army doubtless caused loud crashing on all the hills, in and around Jerusalem, as the soldiers destroyed the whole city and its environs.

1:11 Zephaniah called on the "inhabitants of the Mortar," the market or business district of Jerusalem, to "wail," because judgment was coming. This section of Jerusalem may have received the name "mortar" (bowl) because it lay in the somewhat geographically depressed Tyropoeon Valley. Another view is that the "mortar" refers to the entire city of Jerusalem, since it was surrounded by higher hills.⁵⁵

The Canaanites ("people of Canaan" or "merchant people") who did business there would fall silent because business would cease. Or perhaps it was the Judeans, who were behaving like Canaanites, that were on Zephaniah's mind.⁵⁶ Those who weighed silver—i.e., who conducted commercial transactions—would also perish from the city.

⁵⁰Keil, 2:132; Charles Lee Feinberg, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, p. 48.

⁵¹*The Nelson . . .*, p. 1527.

⁵²Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1167.

⁵³Allen, p. 54.

⁵⁴McGee, 3:867.

⁵⁵Robertson, p. 279.

⁵⁶Keil, 2:133.

"Commerce is the Baal of the hour. In the accumulation of great wealth, conscience and Christianity are pressed to the wall. Gold is king and god. For gold men will sacrifice every principle, human and divine. Covetousness is the ruling passion of the age. All else must go down before it."⁵⁷

1:12 The Lord would carefully search among the residents of Jerusalem then, as one searches by using a lamp (cf. Luke 15:8). He would punish the people whose love for Him had stagnated, like wine left undisturbed too long (cf. Rev. 3:15-16), and who concluded indifferently that He was complacent and would not act (cf. Isa. 32:9; Ezek. 30:9; Amos 6:1). *Their* complacency led them to believe that *He* was similarly complacent.

1:13 The treasures of the Jerusalemites, and all the Judeans, would "become plunder" for the enemy, and "their houses" would become vacant if not destroyed. They would "build houses"—but "not" be able to live in them—because the Babylonian invasion would come quickly. They would "plant vineyards"—but "not" be able to "drink their wine"—for the same reason (cf. Lev. 26:32-33; Deut. 28:30, 39; Amos 5:11; Mic. 6:15).

"Rather than condemning the use of alcohol, as the passage could be understood (NEB), Zephaniah condemns apathy."⁵⁸

3. The imminence and horrors of Judah's judgment 1:14-18

Zephaniah's third picture of the day of the LORD is that of a great battle.

1:14 Zephaniah reported that this "great day of the LORD" was "near," very near, and "coming very quickly." His hearers needed to realize that it would be a day in which Yahweh would act (cf. v. 12). When it came, warriors would cry out bitterly because that day would involve fierce fighting. The first deportation of Judeans to Babylon came in 605 B.C., not many years from whenever Zephaniah must have first announced this message.

1:15-16 The prophet wanted to emphasize, even more strongly, the danger his complacent hearers faced. He described the effects of "the day of wrath" on people by using five synonymous word pairs. It would be a day marked by emotional "distress" and anguish ("trouble"), as well as physical "destruction" and devastation ("desolation"; cf. Deut. 28:53, 55, 57). The prophet described the terror as "darkness and gloom," and "clouds and" blackness ("thick darkness"; Deut. 4:11). "Trumpet" blast "and battle cry"

⁵⁷Ironside, p. 305.

⁵⁸Baker, p. 98.

picture the tumult of that day. The "fortified cities" of Judah would face invasion, and the "high corner towers" of their walls would come under siege.

1:17 The Lord would "distress" His people so severely that they would grope around as though they were "blind." He would do this because they had sinned against Him (cf. Deut. 28:28-29). Their precious "blood" would lie all over the ground like common "dust," and their dead "flesh" would lie in the streets like putrid, decaying "dung."

"Humans may categorize their sins into the serious, the mediocre, and the insignificant. To Zephaniah (see James 2:10-11) the mere fact of sin excited and merited the whole weight of divine rage. The simple statement 'they have sinned' is sufficient."⁵⁹

1:18 The Judeans would not be able to buy themselves out of their trouble when the Lord poured forth His "wrath" (cf. Ezek. 7:19). He would devour the whole earth with "the fire" of His jealous rage, "jealousy" provoked by His people's preference for various forms of idolatry (vv. 4-6; cf. Deut. 32:21-22). He would destroy completely, and terribly, "all the inhabitants of the earth" (cf. vv. 2-3; cf. Joel 2:1-11).

"It has been quite interesting that this nation in which I live has spent billions of dollars throughout the world trying to *buy* friends, trying to win friends and influence people. But we are hated throughout the world today—we are not loved. You cannot buy love; you cannot win people over with silver and gold. But in this country we still believe that money solves all the ills of this life, that money is the answer to all the problems."⁶⁰

The comprehensive nature of this judgment suggests that, at this point, the prophet's perspective again lifted to—what we can now see—will be the eschatological fulfillment of this prophecy. The Babylonian invasion only previewed it. Another possibility is that we should understand "all the earth" as referring only to the Promised Land. However, other descriptions of the worldwide extent of God's eventual judgment of sin and sinners, in this book and others, make this interpretation unattractive.

4. A call to repentance 2:1-3

This section of the book (1:4—2:3) concludes with an appeal to the Judeans to repent, and so avoid the punishment destined to come on them if they did not repent.

⁵⁹Motyer, p. 924.

⁶⁰McGee, 3:869.

"The prophet meant in that terrible description of approaching judgments not to drive the people to despair, but to drive them to God and to their duty—not to frighten them out of their wits, but to frighten them out of their sins."⁶¹

2:1-2 Zephaniah called for the shameless people of Judah to "gather . . . together," evidently in a nationwide public assembly, to repent (cf. 1:6; Joel 2:12-14). They needed to do so before the Lord's decree to punish them took effect, and His "burning anger" overtook them. Nineveh had repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Lord relented from judging it. Perhaps He would do the same if the Judeans repented. That day was coming as swiftly as chaff blows before the wind, so they needed to act immediately.

2:3 The prophet urged his "humble" hearers, who had sought to be obedient to the Lord, to continue to seek Him in prayerful dependence. He was appealing to the faithful remnant in particular (cf. 3:12; Isa. 11:4; Amos 8:4; Matt. 5:3). They needed to continue to pursue righteous behavior, and to place themselves under the Lord's sovereign authority, by listening to Him and obeying Him. If they did this, the Lord might "hide" them when He poured out His "anger" on the unrepentant.⁶²

"This is a beacon of hope for the committed, not an escape clause for the half-hearted."⁶³

Here Zephaniah made a play on words (*paronomasia*) with his own name: "Hidden by Yahweh." The Hebrew word *satar* is the root of the word translated "hidden." *Satar* is a synonym of *saphan*, which may be part of Zephaniah's name. If it is, "Zephaniah" probably means "Hidden by Yahweh." Thus his name could have had connection with his message of preservation for the godly remnant.

Repentance was open to anyone. God did indeed protect some Judeans from destruction when the Babylonians invaded (cf. 2 Kings 24:14-16). Zephaniah's exhortation appears to have been effective.

Zephaniah called on the "humble of the earth" to seek the Lord. While the Promised Land may be in view, this is probably a worldwide invitation. All people need to seek the Lord by repenting.

⁶¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1168.

⁶²See Wiersbe, pp. 433-35, for an excursus on "the company of the concerned."

⁶³Allen, p. 98.

C. JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL'S NEIGHBORS 2:4-15

Since all people need to seek the Lord (v. 3), Zephaniah revealed that judgment was headed for the nations around Judah as well as for Judah. He selected nations that lived in four directions from Judah to represent all the nations. Philistia lay west of Judah, Moab and Ammon east, Ethiopia south, and Assyria north.

"He [God] would also judge nations that were near as well as nations that were far away. Those near would be plundered and possessed by Judah. Those far away would simply be destroyed by the Lord."⁶⁴

Zephaniah prophesied to the people of Judah *about* these nations rather than *to* these nations themselves, though they might have heard about Zephaniah's prophecies. His prophecies about the nations reminded the Judeans that Yahweh was sovereign over all the earth, and that He was not just singling out Judah for punishment.

1. Judgment coming on Philistia 2:4-7

2:4 The prophet announced that destruction would overtake four of the five cities of the Philistine *pentapolis* (cf. Isa. 14:28-32; Jer. 47; Ezek. 25:15-17; Amos 1:6-8). He listed them from south to north. Gath had evidently declined already (cf. 2 Chron. 26:6; Amos 1:6-8; Zech. 9:5-7), or perhaps Zephaniah selected only four towns to preserve literary parallelism.⁶⁵ A better option follows:

"Uzziah and Hezekiah had kept Gath in subjection. 2 Kings 18:8 and 2 Chronicles 26:6."⁶⁶

"Gaza" and "abandoned" sound similar in Hebrew, as do "Ekron" and "uprooted." Being "driven out at noon" may imply *an unexpected time*, since people normally rested during the hottest part of the day.

2:5 Zephaniah announced "woe" on the "Philistines" ("Emigrants") because destruction was coming on them. They inhabited the Mediterranean "seacoast," and they had come from Crete (cf. 1 Sam. 30:14; 2 Sam. 8:18; 20:23; 1 Chron. 18:17; Ezek. 25:16). Yahweh's powerful word was all it took to afflict them, and it would come against them. He promised to "destroy" them and their land, the coastal plain of Canaan, so no one would live there any longer. Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt (609-594 B.C.) initially fulfilled this prophecy (cf. Jer. 47).

2:6-7 The flat Philistine "seacoast" would become depopulated "pastures," and its "caves"—there are many in Judah and Mt. Carmel—would serve as refuges "for shepherds and folds for flocks" of sheep. After this

⁶⁴Dyer, pp. 810-11.

⁶⁵Keil, 2:140.

⁶⁶Feinberg, p. 55.

destruction, the survivors from Judah would take possession of the coastal plain and pasture their sheep there. They would also take over the "houses" in "Ashkelon" and make them their homes, because Yahweh would "care for" this remnant "and restore their fortune" (cf. 3:20; Gen. 15:18-20).

"This prophecy is a picture of a scene that can be demonstrated any day of the year, although it may change tomorrow. However, I do not consider what we see there today as a fulfillment of prophecy, because I believe that Israel will be driven from that land again before their final return under God."⁶⁷

2. Judgment coming on Moab and Ammon 2:8-11

2:8 Probably Zephaniah linked "Moab" and "Ammon" because both nations descended from Lot (Gen. 19:30-38), as well as because both lay to Judah's east. Both nations had "taunted" and reviled the Israelites from their earliest history. They had repeatedly lifted themselves up as enemies of God's chosen people (cf. Num. 22; 24:17; Judg. 3:12-14; 10:7-9; 11:4-6; 1 Sam. 11:1-11; 2 Sam. 10:1-14; 2 Kings 3).

2:9 The LORD swore by Himself: "As I live!"

"Life specially belongs to God, since He Alone is Underived Life."⁶⁸

Because of their hostility toward the Israelites, Almighty Yahweh, Israel's God, would definitely destroy these nations as He had "Sodom" and "Gomorrah" (cf. Isa. 15—16; Jer. 48:1—49:22; Ezek. 25:1-14; 35; Amos 1:11—2:3). God had completely destroyed these cities—that stood in the territory later occupied by Moab—shortly before either of these nations came into existence (Gen. 19:23-29).

Sodom and Gomorrah had become a notorious "perpetual desolation," a place of "salt pits" where nothing but "nettles" grew (cf. Jer. 48:9), and that would be what Yahweh would make of Moab and Ammon. The "remnant of" Israelites would "plunder" these neighbors and take over their territory as an inheritance from their God (cf. Isa. 11:14).

2:10 Yahweh of armies would bring this fate on these nations because of "their pride" and "arrogant" ridicule of His people Israel (cf. Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:26, 29; Ezek. 25:5-6, 8).

⁶⁷McGee, 3:872.

⁶⁸Pusey, 2:270.

"The curse resting upon these lands will not be entirely removed till the completion of the kingdom of God on earth. This view is proved to be correct by the contents of ver. 11, with which the prophet passes to the announcement of the judgment upon the nations of the south and north."⁶⁹

2:11 The Lord would terrify them. He would remove the inhabitants of these nations from the face of the earth so they would not be able to offer sacrifices to their pagan gods. As a result, these "gods" would "starve." What kind of a god needs the sacrifices of mortals to sustain it? People from "all" the "nations," pictured as living on "the coastlands" of the world, would worship Yahweh (cf. Mal. 1:11).

"That the final fulfillment of these predictions is yet future to our day can be seen from the connection of verses 8 to 10 with verse 11."⁷⁰

"After this statement of the aim of the judgments of God, Zephaniah mentions two other powerful heathen nations as examples, to prove that the whole of the heathen world will succumb to the judgment."⁷¹

3. Judgment coming on Ethiopia 2:12

Zephaniah's oracle against Ethiopia is very brief (cf. Isa. 18—20; Jer. 46; Ezek. 29—32). Patterson suggested that Zephaniah may have meant Egypt rather than Ethiopia.⁷² Biblical Ethiopia occupied the territory now held by southern Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and northern Ethiopia. The "Ethiopians" were the southernmost (really southwestern-most) people known to the Judeans. God promised to send His "sword" against this nation. His instrument of judgment proved to be Nebuchadnezzar, who defeated Ethiopia shortly after overrunning all of Judah in 586 B.C. (cf. Ezek. 30:4-5, 9, 24-25). The prophet gave no reason for this overthrow, though it must be that Ethiopia shared the same disregard for Yahweh that the other nations He condemned held.

4. Judgment coming on Assyria 2:13-15

2:13 Zephaniah also prophesied the destruction of "Assyria" to Judah's north (really northeast), and her capital "Nineveh" (cf. Isa. 14:24-27; Nah.). Since Nineveh fell to the combined forces of Babylonia, Media, and Scythia in 612 B.C., Zephaniah must have uttered this prophecy before that date. The Lord would make Nineveh a "parched . . . desolation" (cf. Nah. 3). Until her fall, Nineveh had much water surrounding and circulating through it, but in the future she would be dry (cf. Nah. 1:8; 2:6, 8).

⁶⁹Keil, 2:144.

⁷⁰Feinberg, pp. 56-57.

⁷¹Keil, 2:146.

⁷²Patterson, pp. 349-50.

"Nineveh is part of Scripture's early-warning system."⁷³

2:14 Beautiful Nineveh would become a dwelling place for wild animals ("beasts") and "birds," rather than populated with multitudes of sophisticated citizens. The very idea must have seemed incredible in Zephaniah's day because Nineveh was the greatest city in the ancient Near East.⁷⁴

"The entire imagery depicts a reversal of creation's order. Humanity originally had been given the responsibility for exercising dominion over the whole of creation. But now the creation seizes power from the greatest of human empires and transforms it into a bestial wilderness. Organized chaos has supplanted civilization."⁷⁵

2:15 In Zephaniah's day, Nineveh was proud, carefree, and apparently impregnable. Its residents boasted of being citizens of the most important city in the world (cf. Isa. 10:12). Yet in the future, it would become a desolate "resting place for beasts" rather than barons. Passersby would ridicule the pride of Nineveh verbally, by reviling it, and bodily, by shaking their fists at it after its fall (cf. Nah. 3:19).

Motyer summarized five principles that Zephaniah taught in this section (2:4-15). First, the Lord is the God of all the earth. Second, the Lord plans for the spiritual needs of the world. Third, the Lord is in charge of the whole historical process. Fourth, the Lord's people are central to His world purposes. And fifth, the Lord is the fierce enemy of pride.⁷⁶

D. JUDGMENT ON JERUSALEM 3:1-7

Having announced that divine judgment would come on the nations around Judah (2:4-15), the prophet returned to the subject of Yahweh's judgment on the Chosen People (cf. 1:4—2:3), but this time he focused more particularly on Jerusalem. Though he did not mention Jerusalem by name, it is clearly in view.

"Like Isaiah and Micah, he is a prophet of the city, open-eyed to its faults; unlike them, his focus is almost wholly civic and religious. But he draws the fundamental dividing line in the same place: whatever the basis on which the world is judged, the people of God are judged for turning from revealed truth (Amos 2:4) and for neglecting proffered spiritual privileges (Isa. 65:2).

⁷³Motyer, p. 937.

⁷⁴M. R. Wilson, "Nineveh," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, p. 186.

⁷⁵Robertson, p. 312.

⁷⁶Motyer, pp. 938-39.

"Like Amos, Zephaniah uses the rhetorical device of condemning surrounding nations, but all the while—unannounced to his hearers—bringing their own condemnation ever closer."⁷⁷

- 3:1 Zephaniah pronounced another "woe" (cf. 2:5), this time on Jerusalem, which he described as "rebellious," "defiled," and "tyrannical." Rebels are those who refuse to submit to God's will. The defiled are those polluted by sinful practices. Tyrants disregard the rights of others, particularly those whom they can take advantage of.

"Jerusalem's sin is threefold, actively rebelling against God; then, inwardly defiled by sin; then cruel to man. So then, toward God in herself, toward man, she is wholly turned to evil, not in passing acts, but in her abiding state, 1) rebellious, 2) defiled, 3) oppressive."⁷⁸

- 3:2 There were four evidences that the people of Jerusalem had been rebellious against Yahweh (v. 1). They had been unresponsive to the prophets whom God had sent them. They were unteachable and refused to accept any correction. They "did not trust in" Yahweh, and "they did not draw near to . . . God" in repentance and prayer (cf. 1:6).

"Here Yahweh is a father with a broken heart. The love of his life, his own daughter, has spurned him thoroughly."⁷⁹

"Our practical relation to God is summed up in the four words, 'Mistrust self; trust God.' Man reverses this and when 'self-trust' has of course failed him, then he 'mistrusts God.'"⁸⁰

- 3:3 Evidence that they were oppressing the weak (v. 1): the greedy behavior of Jerusalem's civil rulers ("princes") and "judges." Like vicious "lions" and "wolves," they gobbled up all the possessions of vulnerable people that they could—as fast as they could (cf. 1:8; Ezek. 3:9-10; Mic. 2:1-3, 9-10).

- 3:4 Jerusalem's religious leaders, the (false) "prophets" and "priests," provided examples of the city's defiled condition (v. 1). The prophets were "reckless" in the way they announced their own advice as divine revelation, and "treacherous" in deceiving the people into thinking that their words were authoritative. The priests did not observe the laws of holiness that God had prescribed for worship, and they twisted the meaning of the Mosaic Law to suit their purposes (cf. 1:4-5).

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 941.

⁷⁸Pusey, 2:278.

⁷⁹Allen, p. 109.

⁸⁰Pusey, 2:278.

- 3:5 In contrast to these crooked leaders, Yahweh was straight, and He was still in Jerusalem. He would "do no injustice," as the civil and religious leaders did. He performed "justice" every day, as faithfully as the rising of the sun (cf. Deut. 32:4). Yet the "unjust" leaders of Jerusalem knew "no shame" in the wickedness that they consistently practiced.
- 3:6 The Lord reminded the Jerusalemites that He had already destroyed other "nations." This probably refers to the nations around Judah that He had already allowed to fall to the Assyrians. He compared such a fallen nation to a city with strong "corner towers" that now lay in ruin because of the enemy's destruction. The "streets" of this representative "city" also lay deserted. The real "cities" of these already defeated nations were in ruins, without any inhabitants. Samaria was one such city, and the numerous towns of the former Northern Kingdom were others.
- 3:7 The Lord expected the people of Jerusalem to learn from the fate of the Northern Kingdom and other fallen nations. They should respect Him, since He was behind the destruction, and obey His word. They should have done this so He would not similarly judge them, as He had threatened to do. But they were more eager to pursue sinful self-indulgence, and to become thoroughly "corrupt" in "their deeds."

"Great is the enticement of sin and great is the penalty it incurs, but man rushes headlong into it, nevertheless."⁸¹

E. JUDGMENT ON ALL NATIONS 3:8

The people of Jerusalem needed to "wait" a little longer. The Lord would soon "rise up" as a devouring animal to consume His prey. He had determined to "gather nations" and "kingdoms" that were wicked, including Judah, and "pour" His "burning anger," "indignation," and wrath on them. Yahweh's fiery "zeal" will devour "all" nations, because the world will again become thoroughly corrupt (as in the days of Noah, cf. Gen. 6:5-7; Zeph. 1:2-3). According to Charles Feinberg, this is the only verse in the Old Testament that contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁸²

"The Book of Zephaniah is like a Florida hurricane, a Texas tornado, a Mississippi River flood, a Minnesota snowstorm, and a California earthquake all rolled into one."⁸³

The world is still waiting for the Lord to pour out His wrath on all nations. He has not done so yet because He is patient and is giving people time to repent (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). Yet that day will surely come (2 Pet. 3:10). In view of its coming, Christians need to be holy in conduct and godly in character, looking for and hastening that day (by our prayers and

⁸¹Feinberg, p. 65.

⁸²Ibid., p. 66.

⁸³McGee, 3:877.

preaching, 2 Pet. 3:11). The great outpouring of divine wrath on the earth predicted here will take place during the Tribulation, before our Lord returns to set up His kingdom (cf. 2:2; Zech. 14:2; Rev. 16:14, 16).

Zephaniah's final reference to the destruction of nations all over the world (v. 8) brings the section of his prophecy that deals with judgment (1:2—3:8) full circle.

- A Judgment on the world 1:2-3
- B Judgment on Judah 1:4—2:3
- C Judgment on Israel's neighbors 2:4-15
- B' Judgment on Jerusalem 3:1-7
- A' Judgment on all nations 3:8

III. THE DAY OF YAHWEH'S BLESSING 3:9-20

Having finished the revelation dealing with God's judgment of the world in a coming day (1:2—3:8), Zephaniah now announced that He would bring great blessing to all humankind after that judgment (3:9-20). As in the section of the book on judgment, he first briefly revealed God's plans for the Gentile nations, and then spoke extensively about His plans for Israel.

"In what follows, the aim and fruit of the judgment are given; and this forms an introduction to the announcement of salvation."⁸⁴

"Why did the prophets consistently close their books with messages of hope? For at least three reasons. To begin with, hope is a great motivation for obedience, and the prophets wanted to encourage God's people to submit to God's will and do what He commanded. God's covenant blessings come to His people only when they obey His covenant conditions.

"A second reason is the prophets' emphasis on the faithfulness of God. The Lord will keep His promises and one day establish the kingdom; and since God is faithful to keep His promises, we ought to be faithful obeying His Word. . . .

"Finally, the closing message of hope was an encouragement to the faithful remnant in the land, who were true to God and suffered because of their devotion to Him. It's difficult to belong to that 'company of the committed' who stand true to the Lord and His Word no matter what others may do or say. Knowing that God would one day defeat their enemies and reign in righteousness would encourage the believers remnant to persist in their faithful walk with the Lord."⁸⁵

⁸⁴Keil, 2:155.

⁸⁵Wiersbe, p. 429.

A. THE PURIFICATION OF THE NATIONS 3:9

"Then" signals a major change in time, as well as in the focus of Zephaniah's prophecy. It is a hinge word that serves as a transition from judgment in the Tribulation to blessing in the Millennium. Then, after these judgments (1:2—3:8), the Lord promised to give the peoples of the world "purified lips" that would speak truth and grace, rather than lies and defiled speech (cf. Isa. 6:5-7).

"Lip does not stand for language, but is mentioned as the organ of speech, by which a man expresses the thoughts of his heart, so that purity of the lips involves or presupposes the purification of the heart."⁸⁶

Yahweh will effect this change in all the people of the world, so that they will worship Him (cf. Gen. 4:26) and serve Him as one united family of nations. This event has been seen as a reversal of Babel (Gen. 11:1, 6-7, 9).⁸⁷ This revelation indicates that everyone living on the earth at the beginning of the Millennium will be a believer in Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

B. THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISRAEL 3:10-20

Zephaniah had received from the Lord much more revelation about what He would do for Israel following the period of worldwide punishment. This section is also chiasmic in its thought structure.

- A Israel's purification 3:10-13
- B Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17
- A' Israel's regathering 3:18-20

1. Israel's purification 3:10-13

3:10 The descendants of the Lord's "dispersed ones," the Jews, will bring Him offerings of worship from the farthest corners of the earth. "The rivers of Ethiopia," probably the Nile and its tributaries (the Atbara, the Astasobas, the Blue Nile, and the White Nile⁸⁸), were at the edge of the known world in the prophet's day (cf. 2:12). The implication is that the Jews will come to Jerusalem, the city the Lord chose as the place where He would dwell among His people (cf. Deut. 30:1-10; Isa. 66:18, 20).

"We prefer with others to understand the words 'my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed' as the object of the verb and not the subject. In other words, the Lord's people dispersed in Ethiopia will be brought by the Gentiles to their homeland as an offering to the Lord."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Keil, 2:156. Cf. Isa. 6:5-7.

⁸⁷Craigie, 2:128; Allen, p. 114.

⁸⁸Feinberg, p. 67.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 68.

"The meaning is therefore the following: The most remote of the heathen nations will prove that they are worshippers of Jehovah, by bringing to Him the scattered members of His nation, or by converting them to the living God."⁹⁰

3:11 "In *that day*," the day of blessing to follow the day of judgment, Zephaniah's hearers, the Jews, will not feel any more "shame" for all their previous rebellion against the Lord. This is because He will remove all the pride from their hearts (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38; Matt. 25:1-13). They "will never again" lift up themselves in haughtiness against Yahweh on His "holy mountain" Jerusalem (Ps. 2:6; Dan. 9:16; Joel 2:1; Obad. 16; et al.). A feeling of shame comes from an awareness of guilt, but they will not feel guilty any longer, because they will be humble rather than proud.

"The congregation, being restored to favour, will be cleansed and sanctified by the Lord from every sinful thing."⁹¹

3:12 The Israelites of that day will be "humble and lowly" in heart (cf. 2:3), and they will seek the Lord as their "refuge," rather than turning from Him to idols and self-exaltation. Seeking the Lord is an indication of humility, whereas forsaking Him, even by not praying, demonstrates a spirit of independence from God (cf. 1:6). Again, "Hidden by Yahweh," Zephaniah's name, comes into view. God would hide His people—He would be their hiding place, and they would "take refuge" in Him.

"God's desire is not to vaporize mankind, but to make man fit to live in his presence."⁹²

3:13 In contrast to their conduct since the Exodus, the Jews "will do no wrong," "tell no lies," and practice no deceit (cf. 3:1-4). They will resemble a flock of sheep at peace, grazing and lying down with nothing to disturb them (cf. Ps. 23; Mic. 4:4).

"When the Creator is worshipped and served as he ought to be, paradise is regained."⁹³

2. Israel's and Yahweh's rejoicing 3:14-17

"One of the most awesome descriptions of the wrath of God in judgment found anywhere in Scripture appears in the opening verses of Zephaniah. The totality of the cosmos shall be consumed in his burning anger. The very order of creation shall be overturned.

⁹⁰Keil, 2:157.

⁹¹Ibid., 2:158.

⁹²Allen, p. 112.

⁹³Baker, p. 117.

"One of the most moving descriptions of the love of God for his people found anywhere in Scripture appears in the closing verses of Zephaniah. God and his people attain heights in the ecstasy of love that are hard to comprehend."⁹⁴

"After the promises of the taking away of sin, here follow promises of the taking away of trouble; for when the cause is removed the effect will cease."⁹⁵

Zephaniah arranged this psalm of joy over salvation as another chiasm.

"A Zion singing (3:14a)
 B Israel's shouts (3:14b)
 C Jerusalem's joy (3:14c)
 D Yahweh's deliverance (3:15a, b)
 E Presence of Yahweh the king (3:15c)
 F No more fear (3:15d)
 G Jerusalem's future message (3:16a)
 F' No more fear (3:16b, c)
 E' Presence of Yahweh the God (3:17a)
 D' The mighty deliverer (3:17b)
 C' God's joy (3:17c)
 B' Yahweh's silence (3:17d)
 A' Yahweh's singing (3:17e)"⁹⁶

3:14 In view of these wonderful prospects, Zephaniah called for the people of Jerusalem, and all the Israelites, to "shout for joy with all" their hearts.

"Although the command is aimed at the future Jerusalem, no doubt the message would not be lost on the godly worshipers of Zephaniah's own day."⁹⁷

The phrase "daughter of" is a way of referring to the citizens of Zion (Jerusalem) as the children of the city. Children born in any city are the children of that city, in a metaphorical sense, as well as the children of their physical parents in a literal sense. Elsewhere, "daughters of Jerusalem" sometimes refers to the villages surrounding Jerusalem, those little communities that Jerusalem spawned. Here, however, Zephaniah probably meant that Jerusalem *was* Yahweh's daughter, not that Jerusalem *had* a daughter.⁹⁸

⁹⁴Robertson, p. 334.

⁹⁵Henry, p. 1170.

⁹⁶Baker, p. 87.

⁹⁷Patterson, p. 377.

⁹⁸Allen, p. 117.

3:15 The reason for rejoicing is that Yahweh will have removed His "judgments" and Israel's "enemies" from her presence and life (cf. vv. 8, 19). Yahweh, Israel's true and omnipotent King, will be in the "midst" of His people (in the person of Messiah, Jesus Christ, during the Millennium; v. 17; cf. Isa. 9:7; 44:6; Zech. 14:9). Consequently, they "will fear disaster no more" (v. 13).

3:16-17 "The battle cry on the day of judgment (1:14) will be replaced by the poignant hush of the reuniting of two lovers."⁹⁹

"In that day" of blessing, the people of "Jerusalem" will have plenty of reasons not to fear. One reason is that Yahweh their God will be in their midst (v. 15). He will be "a victorious Warrior," having defeated all His enemies and all opposition worldwide (1:2-3; 3:8). Like a bridegroom, He will take "joy" in His people Israel, and they will rest quietly "in" the security of "His love" for them as His bride (cf. Deut. 28:63; 30:9). Yahweh will even shout with joy over His beloved Israel!

"Now the prophet moves into the 'holy of holies' by a rapturous description of the love of God for his people. This verse [v. 17] is the John 3:16 of the OT."¹⁰⁰

"This must be one of the most astounding texts in all the word of God."¹⁰¹

"Most often the Lord's love is expressed by the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is the love that issues in commitment, the 'ever-unfailing' fidelity of love, love that lives in the will as much as in the heart. Here, however, the word is *'ahaba*, the passionate love of Jacob for Rachel (Gen. 29:20) and of Michal for David (1 Sam. 18:28), the fond love of Jacob for Joseph (Gen. 37:3), Uzziah's devotion to gardening (2 Chron. 26:10), Jonathan's deep friendship with David (1 Sam. 18:3), the devotee's delight in the Lord's law (Ps. 119:97). This too is the Lord's love for his people (Hos. 3:1), a love that delights him (Zeph. 3:17c), makes him contemplate his beloved with wordless adoration (v. 17d), a love that cannot be contained but bursts into elated singing (v. 17e)."¹⁰²

⁹⁹Baker, p. 119.

¹⁰⁰Robertson, p. 339.

¹⁰¹Allen, pp. 120-21.

¹⁰²Motyer, p. 958.

"We can find hope in times of difficulty if we focus on God's power, God's deliverance, and God's love. He is our King (3:15), our Savior (3:16-17a), and our Beloved (3:17b)."¹⁰³

3. Israel's regathering 3:18-20

3:18 In the past, Jews who lived far from Jerusalem were very sad because they could not travel to Jerusalem to observe Israel's annual "feasts." They suffered a certain criticism from their fellow Jews for living far away from Jerusalem. But in this time of blessing (the Millennium), the Lord will enable them to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. The feasts of Israel during the Millennium will be somewhat different from those that the Old Covenant specified, but there will be annual feasts in Jerusalem in the Millennium (cf. Ezek. 45:9—46:24).

"Why would the Lord restore religious practices that have now been fulfilled? Possibly as a means of teaching Israel the meaning of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁴

3:19-20 Having dealt with the Jews' "oppressors" (cf. vv. 8-15; 2:4-15; Gen. 12:3), the Lord will deliver even the weak ("lame") and dispersed ("outcasts") of His people, and give them a worldwide reputation for goodness (cf. Deut. 26:19). He will regather them in their land and give them a good reputation when He restores their fortunes (cf. v. 15; Gen. 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 17:7-8; Deut. 26:19; 2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3-4; Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 7:27).

"Suffering does not have to be the continued experience of God's people even when the judgment they suffer here on earth is deserved."¹⁰⁵

Zephaniah concluded his book by affirming that such was Yahweh's declaration. He would indeed "restore" His people.

"The whole message of Zephaniah is finally united in one grand inclusio, in that it begins and ends with Yahweh, Israel's just but caring covenant God, whose word (1:1) is spoken (3:20)."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Dyer, p. 812.

¹⁰⁴Wiersbe, p. 432.

¹⁰⁵Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Writing Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁶Baker, p. 88.

An *inclusio* is a repetition of key elements, either words or motifs, at the beginning and end of a literary unit.

Eight times in verses 18-20, in the NASB, the Lord said, "I will," "I am going to," or "When I." The future restoration and blessing of Israel in the world will be something that Yahweh Himself will accomplish "in that day" (i.e., the day of the LORD). No one but He *could* ever accomplish it, and no one but He *would* and *will*!

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