

# ZEPHANIAH

## WRITER

We know nothing of the life of Zephaniah other than what is stated in 1:1. We understand the nature of His ministry only by what is revealed in this book. In the introductory verse, Zephaniah traced his lineage back four generations. His great, great grandfather was King Hezekiah of Judah. He was thus of royal lineage.

The name Zephaniah means “he whom the Lord has protected,” or, “he whom the Lord hides.” He was a prophet who was contemporary with Jeremiah, and his predecessors were Nahum and Habakkuk. He was probably a resident of Jerusalem. Because he was born of a royal family, he probably associated easily with the royalty of the time.

## DATE

The book is dated from the reign of Josiah, which would be somewhere between 640 to 609 B.C. We do not know if the prophecy of Zephaniah took place during the period of Josiah’s reign before the book of the Lord was discovered in the temple during repairs, or after the discovery of the book and the great reforms of Josiah (See 2 Ch 34). The contents of the book indicate that the message was delivered prior to the discovery of the book of the law, and thus would have been delivered between 640 to 621 B.C., assuming that the book of the law was discovered in 621 B.C.

## BOOK

Zephaniah was a prophet of passion. He was such because he saw the coming day of the Lord as a harsh judgment of those who had worked against the people of God. He also considered the judgment of God as God’s means by which He would cleanse His people of idol heresy and social injustices. He focused on the imminent invasion and devastation of the land by foreign powers. He thus hopes for a remnant that would survive the coming calamity that would befall Judah (2:3). He was reassured that a remnant would survive, but it would be a humbled remnant that would give themselves to God (3:5-20).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Zephaniah’s time was a time of great moral decay among God’s people. There was stirring in the international affairs of nations, and thus God was building a nation to bring down judgment on His people in punishment for their apostasy from

Him. The Assyrian Empire that had taken the northern kingdom into captivity in 722/21 B.C. was coming to an end. The Chaldeans (Babylonians), who had been a part of the Assyrian Empire, were in the process of rebelling against Assurbanipal, the last king of Assyria. Under the leadership of Nebopolassar, king of Babylon, the Babylonians, in an alliance with the Scythians, would conquer Nineveh in 612 B.C.

Following the deaths of Manasseh and Amon, who unrighteously reigned over Judah, Josiah was a young boy of eight years old when he became king of Judah. He became a king of a nation that was largely given over to idol worship. It was a nation of people that had no copy of the law of God, and thus the people had created religious beliefs and behavior after the nations around them. The rulers were corrupt and the religious leaders led the people further away from God. Zephaniah describes the people as arrogant and rebellious. The courts were corrupt and the civil leaders oppressed the poor for their own benefit.

Josiah came to the throne in 639 B.C. He had been brought up by the godly high priest, Hilkiah. At the age of twenty, he began an initial effort to do away with idol worship throughout Judah (2 Ch 34:3-7). When he was twenty-six, he began a renovation of the temple, during which a copy of the Old Testament law was discovered (2 Ch 34:8-28). He read the warnings of what God would do if Israel departed from His word. He read that the people would be put out of the land of Palestine if they forsook God (Dt 28–30). Josiah then made a covenant with God that he would restore the people to the law of God (2 Ch 34:29-33). From the time of the discovery of the law of God in 621 B.C., he conducted a diligent campaign to rid the pagan shrines and idols from the land. He restored the Passover (2 Kg 23:1-25). His reforms were exhaustive throughout the land, but the reforms did not reach the hearts of the people. After his death, the people quickly returned to their idol worship.

When Nineveh fell in 612 B.C., a remnant of Assyrian leaders and soldiers fled to Carchemish where they made a last stand against the Babylonians. The Assyrians called on the Egyptians to align with them in the battle. On his way to help the Assyrians at Carchemish, Pharaoh-necho of Egypt passed through Palestine. Josiah foolishly thought to stop the Egyptians, and subsequently was killed in the battle (2 Kg 23:29,30). It was during these times of uncertainty that Zephaniah ministered his message to the people.

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## Warning Of Judgment

(1:1 – 3:7)

**Outline:** (1) Introduction (1:1), (2) The sins of Judah (1:2-18), (2) Judgment of the nations (2:1 – 3:7)

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

**1:1 Zephaniah:** See 1 Ch 6:36; Jr 21:1; Zc 6:10,14. Because of the meaning of his name (See “Writer” in intro.),

it has been suggested that Zephaniah was born during the wicked reign of Manasseh. No greater detail in genealogy was ever given to any prophet of God. Since this genealogy takes us back to King Hezekiah, it is assumed that Zephaniah wanted us to understand that he was of royal blood.

### THE SINS OF JUDAH

**1:2,3** The universality of the judgment that is pronounced here reminds us of God's assessment and condemnation of the world that existed during the days of Noah (Gn 6). Judgment was coming, and to the Judean resident, it would be as if the entire world was affected as in the days of Noah.

**1:4-6** Those who would be judged were the idolaters who had turned from the Lord. Idolatry is the desire of man to mold his religious beliefs and behavior according to his own lusts. Idolatry, therefore, is the manifestation of a rebellious person who seeks to follow after his own desires. **Every trace of Baal:** Since the judgment would include Judah and Jerusalem, Zephaniah revealed the effect the captivity would have on God's people. Idolatry would be eradicated from the people. When the captives returned from Babylon in 536 B.C., they would never again bring idolatry into the streets of Jerusalem. **Chemarims:** This was a reference to the priests of idolatry. **Hosts of heaven:** Reference was to the Assyrian worship of heavenly bodies (See Dt 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kg 21:3; Jb 31:26-28; Ez 8:15-18). **Swear by the Lord ... Molech:** They were spiritual adulterers.

Some translations use the word "Malcham" which was the national god of the Ammonites. However, more recent translations render the text as a reference to Molech (See 2 Kg 23:10; Jr 32:35). The judgment extended to those who had backslidden and those who were indifferent to the word of God. The extent to which the judgment was to go indicated that Israel was no longer useful for God to fulfill His work of bringing the Messiah into the world. Therefore, a national cleansing was necessary in order to rid the people of all those who were not loyal to God.

**1:7-9** *Hold your peace:* The time for complaints and discussion was over. It was a time to be silent in the presence of the judgment that God was bringing on the unrighteous. **Day of the Lord:** This was the day of judgment. It would be a day of calamity for the unrighteous, but a day of deliverance for the righteous. **Sacrifice:** The day of the Lord was a day when the invited guests were to come before the Lord with their sacrifices. **I will punish:** In the context of verse 12, those who would suffer the judgment of the day of the Lord would be the unrighteous of Jerusalem. **Princes:** Since the apostasy of the nation was led by the princes and kings, then the judgment would first come to them (See Rv 19:17-21). **Foreign garments:** The royalty dressed themselves in the fashions of the Assyrians in order to identify with their culture. Their dress, therefore, signified their betrayal to their homeland in order to be identified with pagan cultures. By their dress they revealed the idol culture

after which they wanted to be identified. **Leap on the threshold:** This was probably a reference to a violent entrance into one's house by passing through the threshold of the house without permission.

**1:10-13** The day of the Lord would mean that the merchants and international traders would be cut off. **Fish Gate:** This entrance to Jerusalem was on the north side of the city (Ne 3:3). It would be on this side of the city that the invaders, coming from the north, would first approach Jerusalem. **Second Quarter:** Or, New Town. This was probably a new addition to the city that was in the northern part of the city (See 2 Ch 33:14). **Maktesh:** This was believed to be a resort for merchants. When the invasion came from those who would bring the proxy judgment of God on Jerusalem, all who would be associated with trade in and around Jerusalem would be affected. The picture of calamity here describes the termination of a great merchant center. In the destruction of Jerusalem, the economy of Palestine would be shut down. **Search Jerusalem with candles:** No one would be hidden from the judgment of the day of the Lord. Through the invaders, God would find every person who had become indifferent to His will and who had dressed themselves in the garments of idolatry. **Stagnant in spirit:** The reference here in Hebrew was a metaphor that defined those who were slothful and indifferent. Those who should have been concerned about the low spiritual condition of the people were lax and lazy. Those who should have

been alert concerning the safety of the people had become indifferent to the threat of those who would conquer and rule over God's people. Because they believed that God was distant from their everyday lives, they became complacent in reference to God being involved with the people. They became a spiritually lazy people who carried on their lives without considering their relationship with God as His people among the nations. **Become a booty:** That for which they had worked so hard without God, would be taken from them. Through death and captivity, the Israelite population would be vacated from Jerusalem.

**1:14-18** Verses 14-18 explain the tragedy that would prevail when the day of the Lord came. It was a time of terror for those on whom God would pour His judgment through the proxy of the Babylonians. **In the land:** In the historical context, reference would be to the termination of Judah through the destruction of Jerusalem. The destruction that would be unleashed on Jerusalem would be the finality of an era. It would be the end of national independent Israel in the promised land. A remnant would eventually return to the land, but the remnant would dwell in a land that was under the control of the Medo-Persian Empire, and eventually the Greeks and Romans. Thus the devastation and finality that is pictured in these verses is a description of the termination of something that would never again be reestablished. Some translations render the last phrase "in the earth." Such a rendering is justified if the destruction of Jerusalem is under-

stood as a metaphor of the final destruction that will come at the end of time (Compare comments 2 Pt 3). Any destruction of the day of the Lord in time illustrates the destruction that will take place at the end of time.

## Chapter 2

### JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS

**2:1-3 *Undesirable nation:*** As they stood in their apostate nature, they were a nation that was of no use for the purpose for which God originally called them into existence. They were a foreign nation to God because they had forsaken Him for an existence that they had created after their own desires. Zephaniah's call in this text is that the righteous few pull themselves together in order to be identified with God. He pleads that they take notice of the calamity that was about to be poured out on them. His plea assumes that some may escape the calamity with their lives. When the end came to Judah and Jerusalem, the prophets encouraged those who would live to turn themselves over to the Babylonians and captivity. Those who did would survive the calamity of the destruction of Jerusalem. Because of Zephaniah's plea, we thus assume that there was still a righteous remnant among the apostates. The apostates were responsible for leading the nation to both civil and moral ruin. Though the righteous remnant would survive, they would have to suffer the calamity of the termination of Judah and Jerusalem.

**2:4-7** The Philistines dwelt in the major coastal trade route between the

continent of Africa and the nations to the north of Palestine. They were always a people under threat, and thus in the final days of national Israel, they would suffer from the calamity. First conquered by the Assyrians, they would eventually succumb to the Babylonians when they invaded and subjected the land of Palestine. ***Cherethites:*** This would be a reference to the Philistines who migrated from the island of Crete around 1,200 B.C. and settled on the coastal area of southern Palestine. The use of the name "Canaan" in this context may refer to the greedy traders of the Philistines. The land of the Philistines would be depopulated to the point that the land would become a place only for shepherds and flocks. All commerce would cease. ***The remnant:*** God would visit the righteous remnant in order to protect them from the calamity that He would allow to come upon the unrighteous. Though the unrighteous would be economically devastated, God would restore the fortunes of the righteous remnant. When the repentant remnant returned from captivity in 536 B.C., this is what transpired. God returned the remnant in order that they dwell in the land of their heritage.

**2:8-11** See Am 1:13-15; 2:1-3. The nations of both Moab and Ammon were unfriendly to the Israelites. They continually taunted the Israelites, particularly when Israel was under the oppression of other nations. When weak militarily, the Moabites and Ammonites seized the land of Reuben and Gad. Their punishment for such actions against Israel would be that they would be terminated as nations.

They would suffer utter destruction, never to be restored in history as nations.

**Starve all the gods:** Their gods would vanish away because the nations would cease to exist. Nations prided themselves in their national gods. But when the people ceased to be a nation, the patriotic gods they had created after their own imagination ceased to exist.

**2:12 Ethiopians:** Ethiopia was the land of Cush which was south of Egypt. Reference here would possibly include the land of Egypt since the Ethiopian dynasties often extended their rule over the Egyptians.

**2:13-15** See comments Nh. At the time of Zephaniah's ministry, the Assyrian Empire was coming to an end. Once the Assyrians had taken the northern kingdom into captivity in 722/21 B.C., they were a continual threat to Judah. However, the heavily fortified city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Though Nineveh felt secure behind her fortifications, she succumbed to the ruthless army of the Babylonians and Scythians. The city was destroyed to the point of never being rebuilt again. **Desert owl:** Some have rendered the Hebrew word "vulture" or "jackdaw." **Bittern:** Other translations rendered this word "hedgehog" or "porcupine."

### Chapter 3

**3:1-7** Zephaniah turns to a description of the morally degraded society of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a morally rotten city because of the wicked leadership of the rulers and religious leaders. **She**

**does not obey:** The inhabitants of Jerusalem had long forgotten the voice of instruction, and thus they were a rebellious people in that they created their own social standards, which standards led to the oppression of the poor. **Roaring lions:** The leaders were as beasts looking for financial prey. They feasted off the poor. The civil leaders maintained their existence at the expense of the poor. They thus could not be trusted since they had their own selves at heart. **Her prophets:** The religious leaders maintained their existence by conforming to the desires of the civil leaders. They could not be trusted for what they spoke. Instead of being spiritual leaders who would lead people to the law of God, they were self-centered religionists who maintained their positions at the expense of the people. **Violence to the law:** The religious leaders made no distinction between the holy and defiled, and thus rejected the judgments of the law (See comments Mk 7:1-9). They rejected the law of God in order to maintain their own religiosity that was created after their own desires. **He will not do injustice:** God was working in their presence in order to bring justice to an apostate generation. The calamity of judgment that He was bringing on them was just, for they had sinned against His purpose for their very existence. Since they had forsaken the law of God, then it would be just for God to bring judgment upon them for their sin (See comments Hs 4:6). **Every morning:** God's laws of nature come to light every morning. The natural world obeys the laws of nature with-

out fail. But Jerusalem failed to be obedient to her creator. The moral laws of God that were to be obeyed without fail were forgotten in the society of Jerusalem. ***Surely you will fear Me:*** God had worked throughout the history of Israel to keep His people directed by His will. He worked among the nations in order to discipline them to obey. He even brought the Assyrians to the walls of Jerusalem during the reign of King Sennacherib, and threatened the inhabitants of Jerusalem with destruction. But they would not obey. All efforts to stimulate repentance had failed, and thus it was time for termination through captivity.

### Promise Of Restoration (3:8-20)

**Outline:** (1) Judgment to cleanse (3:8-13), (2) Hope for the righteous remnant (3:14-20)

### JUDGMENT TO CLEANSE

**3:8-13** Zephaniah called on the people of God to be patient. God would eventually execute judgment on those nations that brought suffering on them. It would be a day for the outpouring of the indignation of God on the nations who tormented His people (See Is 66:6; Jr 25:31-33; Ez 38,39; Jl 3:11-16). ***Purified language:*** The speech of God's people would be cleansed of all idol terminology and references to idol worship (Compare Is 6:5-7). Once the people were cleansed of their idolatrous ways, they could come to the Lord with a pure heart. ***Serve Him with one accord:*** Once their hearts were cleansed, then they

could come before the Lord as one people. They would stand together as one people in their belief in the one true and living God. ***Beyond ... Ethiopia:*** Ethiopia would be a distant land from which exiles would return to Jerusalem. Zephaniah seems to be looking beyond the judgment of Jerusalem and its destruction, to the time of the return of the exiles after their release in 536 B.C. (See comments Er and Ne). ***A humble and lowly people:*** The returnees from the Babylonian captivity would certainly be a humbled people, no longer arrogant in their own devices. The arrogant ones will have been removed from their midst when they returned to the land of their possession. However, those who would partake of the new covenant would be a people who had humbled themselves at the cross of Christ in obedience to the gospel (See 1 Pt 5:5-7). Reference here would be to the age of the Messiah when the people would be cleansed of their sins by their obedience to the gospel (See comments At 2:38; 1 Co 1:2; 1 Jn 1:9).

### HOPE FOR THE RIGHTEOUS REMNANT

**3:14-20** Zephaniah gives hope to those who were headed for calamity in the destruction of Jerusalem. However, the hope he gives to those who would eventually return to the land, would be hope of an era beyond their repossession of the land. He takes the minds of the people to the Messianic era wherein they would forever be protected from the evils of the nations that would afflict them. God would dwell among them, and thus

be their continual deliverer. ***Taken away your judgments:*** The judgments that were pronounced upon the unrighteous of Judah would not be pronounced against God's people in the future. God's people would be a people whose sins were forgiven as they walked in the light of God's will (Is 40:2; 1 Jn 1:9). ***Cast out your enemy:*** The enemy of the people was sin. And thus, when they are restored to a new covenant relationship with God, God would not remember their sins (See comments Jr 31:31-34). ***Do not let your hands be weak:*** Because God would be in their midst, they could be strong in heart. God would rejoice over

those who gave themselves to Him. Those who grieved over their inability to be in the assembly of God would be restored to the land because of their repentance. Those in the Messianic kingdom who mourned over their sins, would come into the kingdom of Jesus (See comments Mt 5:1-16). ***I will bring you:*** This last note of hope infers their restoration from the captivity of the nations, but also their deliverance from the bondage of sin in the Messianic era. They would once again take delight in the fact that they were the people of God (See comments Rm 1:16).