

Zephaniah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zephaniah chapter 3. Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city. She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord. She does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions. Her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men. Her priests profane what is holy. They do violence to the law. The Lord within her is righteous. He does no injustice. Every morning he shows forth his justice. Each dawn he does not fail, but the unjust knows no shame.

I have cut off nations. Their battlements are in ruins. I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them. Their cities have been made desolate, without a man, without an inhabitant. I said, Surely you will fear me. You will accept correction. Then your dwelling would not be cut off according to all that I have appointed against you. But all the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt. Therefore wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger. For in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord, and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering. On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me. For then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord. Those who are left in Israel, they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. Sing aloud,

O daughter of Zion. Shout, O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord has taken away the judgments against you. He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear not, O Zion. Let not your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors, and I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together. For I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord. Much of Zephaniah chapter 2 was a woe oracle addressed to various nations, to Philistia, Moab, Ammon, and Assyria. Chapter 3, the final chapter of the prophecy, opens with a new woe oracle, this time addressed to Jerusalem. However, the hearer of the beginning of this woe oracle is not immediately told that the addressee is Jerusalem. We might perhaps initially think that another of the cities of the nations is being condemned. The addressee is described as rebellious and defiled, and as the oppressing city. It is only in the next few verses that it becomes clear that Jerusalem is in view. This alone serves to underline the ugly truth that Jerusalem has become like one of the pagan cities of the nations. So fully has she adopted their ways.

[4 : 01] There is a possibility of an arresting pun or wordplay raised by Thomas Renz here. The word used here for oppressors is elsewhere more commonly encountered as a noun, as dove or Jonah. This would give us city of Jonah, which in the immediate context would make us think of Nineveh, although the city being addressed is manifestly Jerusalem. Once again, this would serve to accentuate the ambiguities of the addressee, and the ways in which Jerusalem has become

indistinguishable from the oppressive, idolatrous cities of the nations. The city is condemned for its willfulness and moral corruption. The stubborn rebellion of Zion is displayed in its refusal to listen to counsel, discipline or correction, and its resistance to the Lord, whom she neither trusts nor serves. The condemnation of the city focuses upon the leaders of the people. The rulers and authorities are compared to devouring predators, who chiefly operate under the cloak of darkness.

Jerusalem's officials are similarly creatures of violence, who rather than guarding the people, prey upon the vulnerable. From the civil authorities, Zephaniah turns to the religious authorities. Prophets are supposed to be faithful messengers of the Lord, but have become untrustworthy and unreliable deceivers. Priests are supposed to be guardians of the holy and upholders of the law. However, they profane what is holy, treating the things of God with little concern, and doing violence to the law. In sharpest contrast to the injustice of the authorities, the Lord, who dwells in the midst of Jerusalem, is unwaveringly righteous and just, the light of his truth as dependable as the dawn. The shamelessness of the sinful leaders of Jerusalem is seen more fully against the foil of the Lord's righteousness and truth. The period running up to the destruction of Jerusalem was one during which the whole face of the region was dramatically transformed. From the high water mark of the power of the Neo-Syrian Empire, with the overthrow of Thebes, to the fall of Nineveh and Haran and the battle of Carchemish, the great powers of the region were dramatically changed. In all of this, the hand of the Lord had been at work, fulfilling his word, bringing great nations low and raising up new powers in their place.

Verse 6 describes the desolation and devastation left in the wake of this, the destruction of cities, their walls and their citadels, the desolation of their now empty streets, and the depopulation of places that were once full of people. Of course, this was not the first time that the Lord had done this. The pages of Israel's histories were littered with accounts of the humbling and destruction of once proud powers.

[6 : 38] Reflecting upon current events and the events of the last few decades, in addition to the accounts of their longer-term history, Israel should have recognized the hand of the Lord and humbled itself before him. Each new reversal in the region was another warning to Jerusalem that its time would also come very soon. However, rather than heed the warnings, at each warning Jerusalem had merely become more brazen in its sin, hardening its heart. In verse 8, the Lord announces that his judgment is about to come. As in places like the book of Jeremiah, the judgment is described as a universal judgment, about to fall upon all of the nations, notably including Judah. The whole earth will be consumed by it, even Babylon, when its time comes. We might expect an elaboration upon the destruction that the Lord will effect. Yet, in the verses that follow, we are surprised by a prophecy of salvation. While the nations were in rebellion against the Lord, as Judah also was, the Lord is not merely going to bring them down as he has declared. On the other side of judgment, he is going to effect transformation.

In Genesis chapter 11, the nation's speech had been confused at Babel. The people had been all of one lip and one speech, but the unity of the people was used for the hubristic project of the building of the tower and city of Babel, designed to set up their dominion against the Lords. The Lord here promises a sort of reversal of Babel, not merely in frustrating the Babelic projects of Assyria and Babylon, two nations associated with Nimrod and the original empire of Babel, but in accomplishing a true unity of the nations in the place of their false unity. The Lord is going to transform the lip of the peoples to a pure lip, one manifested in the united worship of the Lord. It is not entirely clear where the Cush of verse 10 is located, whether it is Mesopotamian or the Nubian empire. It is most likely that it is the latter though, and the arrival of worshippers from such a great distance, from the very ends of the known world, would be an indication of the extent of the worship of the Lord and the way that it would spread over all of the lands. The daughter of my dispersed ones might be a reference to the exiles of Judah. Perhaps the image is of the nations coming to Jerusalem, not now to make

Jerusalem a sacrifice, as in chapter 1, but to bring Israelites once exiled as tribute to the Lord. In that time the character of Jerusalem would be transformed. The once proud and rebellious city, humbled on account of its iniquity, would now be freed of its shame and populated no longer by the haughty, but by a humble and lowly people, a godly remnant that would seek the Lord and find security in him as their shepherd. In contrast to the current rulers of Jerusalem, they would not be corrupt or unjust, and as the Lord promises concerning the nations, their tongues would also be changed, their now truthful speech corresponding to the pure lip that the nations would be given.

After the judgment and their restoration, Jerusalem and Israel will have reason for celebration and rejoicing. The slate will have been cleaned, the sentence concluded, the enemies removed. The Lord will once again be in the midst of his people as their true and mighty king, giving them security, safety and strength, releasing them from the tyranny of fear. Not only will Jerusalem be rejoicing in the Lord, however, the Lord will be rejoicing over Jerusalem. We encounter similar imagery in Isaiah chapter 65 verses 18 and 19. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people. No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping, and the cry of distress. The meaning of the expression the ESV translates as, he will quiet you by his love, is variously understood. Some take it as the ESV translates it, as a reference to the Lord's soothing of his people. Fanny Snyman takes it to refer to the Lord's refraining from reacting in judgment to his people. Renz takes it to refer to the Lord's joy in the silent contemplation of his people, not merely in the exuberance of loud song. Verse 18 is extremely difficult to translate and to understand, leading Adele Berlin to call it unintelligible. However, as Snyman argues, in context, the general meaning seems to be fairly apparent. There will no longer be cause for sorrow at the festivals. As the Lord has saved the people and raised them up, they will no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. Indeed, as the following verses declare, for Jerusalem's former shame will be given glorious renown and praise, as their fortunes are reversed and their reputation exalted.

[11 : 24] A question to consider, how might this chapter be seen as a fulfillment of the Lord's purpose in calling Abraham?