

Zephaniah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zephaniah chapter 2. Gather together, yes gather, O shameless nation, before the decree takes effect, before the day passes away like chaff, before there comes upon you the burning anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the anger of the Lord. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord. For Gaza shall be deserted, and Ashkelon shall become a desolation.

Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to you inhabitants of the seacoast, you nation of the Cherethites. The word of the Lord is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines, and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left. And you, O seacoast, shall be pastures, with meadows for shepherds and flocks for flocks. The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall graze, and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the Lord their God will be mindful of them, and restore their fortunes. I have heard the taunts of Moab, and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people, and made boasts against their territory. Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste for ever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them. This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts.

The Lord will be awesome against them, for he will famish all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations. You also, O Cushites, shall be slain by my sword, and he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert. Herds shall lie down in her midst, all kinds of beasts, even the owl and the hedgehog shall lodge in her capitals, a voice shall hoot in the window. Devastation will be on the threshold, for her cedar work will be laid bare. This is the exultant city that lives securely, that said in her heart, I am, and there is no one else. What a desolation she has become, a lair for wild beasts. Everyone who passes by her hisses, and shakes his fist. In Zephaniah chapter 1, the prophet announced the coming of the dread day of the Lord, an imminent disaster that would sweep away everything from the face of the earth.

While chapter 1 particularly focuses upon the impact of this event in Jerusalem, in chapter 2, the impact of the day of the Lord beyond Judah, the fact that it will be a more general judgment of the nations of the region, is made more apparent. Having declared the rapidly approaching destruction, in chapter 2 verses 1 to 3, the prophet exhorts the people to prepare for the Lord's advent, to batten down the hatches as it were, before the storm of divine wrath hits them.

The imagery of the opening verse of the chapter is variously understood. Commentators commonly understand it to be referring to some act of gathering, but doing so using atypical terminology, rather than relating to a generic act of gathering. A specific sort of gathering might be in view here.

[3 : 26] Jim Roberts is one of several commentators who argue that the terms used here present the gathering of the people under the image of the gathering of worthless stubble. As such stubble, the people cannot presume upon the Lord's concern for their preservation. Evildoers are elsewhere compared to chaff, who are removed by the Lord's judgment, most famously in Psalm 1 verses 4 to 6.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. The people of the land are marked for removal in the imminent judgment, and so they must prepare themselves for the Lord's advent with some urgency.

They are like stubble, chaff, and straw, and the wrath of the Lord is approaching like a consuming fire. Their only hope lies in seeking the Lord and walking righteously before him. Perhaps he will have some mercy upon them. In the next chapter we are told of those who will be left standing after the judgment, in verses 12 and 13. 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. However, as in the Passover in Egypt, the righteous are also under threat, unless they heed the Lord's warnings and take action in preparation. As with Jesus' teaching concerning the poor in the Gospels, we should beware of over-spiritualising the language here.

While there is an appropriate posture of spiritual humility and poverty, such a posture is more easily cultivated and more readily found among those who are lacking in social standing and wealth. The judgment that we have read about so far is focused upon the wealthy and the powerful of the land, and anyone wanting to escape it would be much more likely to do so among the poor and humble.

[5 : 23] Wrens observes that the focus on those in the land might also present those to be spared the disaster as principally being those of the countryside, in contrast to the urban elites.

We might think here, for instance, about the way that the poorest of the land were left after the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem, under the short-lived rule of Gedaliah, enjoying peace and arguably improved circumstances for a period of time. We might see in this a temporary initial fulfilment of the Lord's promise. In verse 4, the prominent cities of the Philistines are mentioned, ordered in a way that moves towards Jerusalem. The devastation about to fall will fall upon all of the lands. The Hebrew of the text also plays upon the sounds of words like Gaza and Ekron, in a manner similar to Micah's word plays using place names in Micah chapter 1 verses 10 to 15.

The use of descriptions of judgment in a manner that recalls the names of the places to be judged is a literary means of implying the fittingness of the judgments about to fall. The surprising thing here, however, is that Zephaniah does not pun as extensively as he could have done. Wrens references an intriguing theory of Lawrence Zalkman that seeks to explain this. Wrens writes, Zalkman sees a reason for the specific lexical choices that do not fully exploit the potential for puns in a desire to portray an elaborate sequence of double entendres in which the cities of the Philistines are personified as women and consigned to four of the most bitter fates a woman can endure, abandonment, spinsterhood, divorce and barrenness. With modification this may well be plausible. Gaza will be like a betrothed or married woman abandoned by her man, Ashkelon will be like a desolate wife following desertion by her husband, Ashdod will be driven out like a divorced woman, and Ekron will be like a barren woman. What then might happen to the daughter of Zion is the unspoken question that motivates the call to seek Yahweh. How we regard the place of verse 4 within the division of the chapter is a question worth considering. Its introduction suggests the reference back to material that preceded it. The cities aren't directly addressed as well.

Perhaps the point is to describe the judgment about to fall upon the whole land as it approaches Jerusalem. Verse 5 begins a statement of woe and presumably a new section. However the fact that verse 4 also speaks about the judgment of the Lord falling upon nations beyond Judah might associate it with the material that follows. It would seem to function then as a sort of hinge verse connecting the two sections. Verses 5 to 15 speak of judgment about to fall on a number of nations. Upon the Philistines in verses 5 to 7, continuing the judgment spoken of in verse 4, Moab and Ammon in verses 8 to 11, and Cush and Assyria in verses 12 to 15. Interestingly there are no oracles against Edom or Egypt. The Philistines inhabited the Mediterranean coast to Judah's west. Cherethites were formerly mentioned in scripture as being represented among David's fighting men, along with the Gittites and the Pelethites. The Pelethites possibly being another name for the Philistines. It is likely that the

[8 : 33] Cherethites were a people associated with the Philistines. Given their coastal location, Philistia and its cities were of strategic significance and the Philistines were often vassals of or loyal to Egypt. The Philistines are here associated with the land of Canaan. Canaan of course evokes the memories of the first conquest of the land, the division of the land, and as a name is also associated with merchants. The great cities of the Philistines would be devastated. The description of verse 6 suggests that there would be ruins, wilderness places in which shepherds could keep their flocks. Throughout this chapter we see old urban ways of life collapsing and herdsmen and farmers

coming up in their place.

There will be a remnant of Judah that remains, and they will use the land of the Philistines as pasture land. Next in line are Moab and Ammon, two nations towards the east of Judah. Historically these nations descended from Lot, so it seems appropriate that there is a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah here.

Lot had been delivered from Sodom, and yet the nations descending from him would suffer the fate of the cities of the plain. The Moabites and the Ammonites had boasted against the people of the Lord, and in consequence they would be possessed as a people by the remnant of the house of Judah.

This would also serve as a judgment against false gods. The Cushites that are mentioned in verse 12 might be surprising. The Cushites were far away from Judah to the south of Egypt, and did not seem to pose any threat to the land, and had minimal involvement with it. It is possible that this looks back in time to an event also mentioned in the book of Nahum, to the overthrow of Thebes by the Assyrians in 663 BC. What had seemingly been a demonstration of the power of the Assyrians was really a demonstration of the power of the Lord, and that power that Assyria claimed for itself would now be proved to be nothing when the Lord's hand turned against them. As foretold by the prophet Nahum, the Lord's judgment would come upon Assyria. Nineveh, once a place of great buildings, and a place of great canals and waterworks, would be made like a dry waste. The destruction of Nineveh would occur in 612 BC at the hands of a Medo-Babylonian army. Where there had once been a great city, there would be ruins, occupied by the beasts of the desert. A city and people marked out by their pride and their cruelty and brutality would be subject to the derision of people that it had once dominated.

A question to consider, how many examples can you see in this chapter of the Lord bringing low the proud and raising up the humble?

