

# Zephaniah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Zephaniah chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushai, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Jeziel the son of Ammon, king of Judah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away man and beast. I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the Lord.

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him. Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire. On that day, I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud. On that day, declares the Lord, a cry will be heard from the fish gate, a whale from the second quarter, a loud crash from the hills. Whale, O inhabitants of the mortar, for all the traders are no more, all who weigh out silver are cut off. At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill. Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them. Though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed, for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. A prominent uniting theme of the book of the twelve is the day of the Lord, and this theme arguably arrives at one of its most pronounced expressions in the book of Zephaniah, the ninth prophet of the book of the twelve, after Habakkuk and prior to Haggai.

Like Hosea, Amos and Micah before it, Zephaniah is introduced to us with the king during whose reign the prophet ministered. The book of Haggai is set after the return to the land, while Habakkuk was likely written in the final decade of the 7th century BC, during the reign of Jehoiakim.

[ 3 : 19 ] If this dating of Habakkuk is correct, then the book of Zephaniah must be dated prior to its predecessor, during the reign of Jeziel. Jeziel was a godly reforming king who succeeded his wicked father Ammon upon the throne at the tender age of eight, after his father's assassination. Jeziel ruled for 31 years, from around 640 to 609 BC. His reforms, which began during his teens, were designed to bring Judah back into conformity with the law. During his lengthy reign of over 50 years, Jeziel's grandfather Manasseh had reversed the reforms of Jeziel's great-grandfather Hezekiah. Manasseh had been peculiarly wicked, leading Judah into idolatrous practices, extending the worship of Baal and Asherah and of the celestial bodies, and participating in the worship of Molech. Despite the repentance of Manasseh towards the end of his life mentioned in the book of Chronicles, the legacy of Manasseh's wickedness and the idolatry and sin that had become entrenched in Judah during his reign would prove devastating for the people, and despite the zealous reforming efforts of his grandson, would end up spelling doom for the entire nation. In Jeremiah chapter 15 verse 4, for instance, the Lord declares that the judgment to fall upon the

nation through the Babylonian captivity was because of what

Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem. 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 3 to 4 make a similar claim concerning the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians and others.

Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon. The writing then was already on the wall. While Josiah's reforming program brought Judah a temporary reprieve, it was not sufficient to arrest or to reverse the course of the nation. The nation was careening towards oblivion through its wickedness and idolatry. 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 25 to 27 speak of Josiah. Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses. Nor did any like him arise after him. Still, the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there. During Josiah's reign, Assyria was in decline, and was in freefall during his final years. The dramatic cutting back of Assyrian power freed Josiah and Judah from their thrall, and the pull that this had represented towards idolatry, as Judah had been a vassal of Assyria. This is important background for considering the reforms of Josiah's reign. In the latter years of Josiah's reign, Babylon's power was rising. They would soon come to dominate the entire region. Zephaniah speaks into the context of religious syncretism and paganism that Josiah's reforms were designed to address. In his message, we can see something of the prophetic impetus to reform that accompanied the priestly work of Hilkiah and the royal work of Josiah.

[ 6 : 43 ] Likely, Zephaniah was one of the prophets mentioned in 2 Kings chapter 23 verse 2, who accompanied King Josiah and the priests in the renewing of the covenant in the house of the Lord. Zephaniah was likely also a contemporary of Nahum, who prophesied the downfall of Nineveh.

Nahum foretold the downfall of Nineveh, and Habakkuk addressed the rise of Babylon. Zephaniah also deals with the radical political changes of this historical juncture, but within his prophecy, the desolation of the entire region and of Judah and Jerusalem is more pronounced and prominent. While likely written prior to Habakkuk, its prophetic subject matter might make its later placement in the Book of the Twelve. The superscription of the book introduces it as the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is given a surprisingly extensive genealogy, going back to his great-great-grandfather. Thomas Wrens remarks upon the speculations of some commentators that what seems to be Zephaniah's father's name, Cushai, was either a statement of Zephaniah's own Cushite origin, or a name that Zephaniah's father received on account of his, and that the more extended genealogy might be intended to highlight Zephaniah's Israelite ancestry, which might not be immediately obvious from his darker skin, that is if we take the Cush in view to be the region of southern Sudan. These are possibilities, but tenuous ones, so we shouldn't rest too much upon them one way or another. Another possibility, again highly speculative, is that Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather Hezekiah was King Hezekiah, and that the genealogy is traced back to him because of his royal significance and reforming work.

[ 8 : 30 ] Wrens suggests that the reference to the name Hezekiah could be taken as a reminder of the reforms of that earlier king, whether or not Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather was King Hezekiah.

In the verses that follow, Zephaniah announces the destruction that is about to come upon the earth. Adel Boleyn remarks upon themes of decreation at the beginning of Zephaniah, and the way that they drew upon Genesis chapters 1 to 11, both as a reversal of the creation work of the Lord in Genesis chapters 1 to 2, and also as a new general cataclysm about to devastate the region, akin to a new flood.

The language of verse 2 in particular evokes the extinction of all life in the flood of Noah's day. Later parts of the book explore themes of Babel. The picture of comprehensive annihilation first announced in verse 2 is filled out in the verses that follow.

Some have seen a reversal of the days of creation in verse 3. In sweeping away man and beast, the Lord is reversing day 6 of creation. In sweeping away the birds and the fish, he is reversing day

5.

The next element of the verse is variously translated, but Wren's opts for that which causes the wicked to stumble, which might be a possible reference to the sun, moon and stars, the astral bodies that the wicked were worshipping, the creatures of day 4.

[ 9 : 49 ] This allusion to the filling days of creation in reverse order is tentative but suggestive. However, there are other possible ways of understanding the expression that which causes the wicked to stumble.

Perhaps it refers to the high places or to the false priests. While a more general judgment will fall upon the region, in verse 4 the Lord singles out Judah and Jerusalem.

While reforms may already have begun, the Lord would crush the remnant of Baalism in the land, along with the worship of the celestial bodies and Milcom, a god of the Ammonites.

The people had broken the first three of the Ten Commandments, fundamentally perverting their worship and rejecting the Lord. From verse 5 it seems that the people's worship was syncretistic, combining elements of the worship of the Lord with the worship of false gods like Milcom.

The theme of the day of the Lord is a thread running throughout the book of the Twelve. Joel chapter 1 verse 15 Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

[ 10 : 52 ] Amos chapter 5 verses 18 to 20 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.

It is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it. Obadiah verse 15 For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you.

Your deeds shall return on your own head. The day of the Lord is the day when the Lord takes decisive action, an appointed time when he comes on the scene to judge and to deliver. In verse 7 it is described as a sort of cultic occasion, with guests being summoned for a sacrificial feast.

Who are the guests, and what is the sacrificial victim? The startling reality is that the invitees seem to be the nations, and the sacrificial victim is Jerusalem. The nations are coming to feast on the flesh of the wicked nation of Judah.

At this time of judgment, the judgment will fall particularly upon the leaders of the people, the officials, the members of the royal household, and those who array themselves in foreign attire.

[ 12 : 04 ] The reference to foreign dress might be a reference to the extravagance of the dress of the rich. More likely, however, it refers to the cultural appropriation of the behaviours, attitudes, and forms of worship of other peoples and nations of the region.

A common problem throughout the history of Israel and Judah was their adoption of the ways of the foreign nations, particularly among the elite, their intermarriage cultural appropriation, and the adoption of foreign gods.

Verse 9 presents a number of questions for the interpreter. What does it mean to leap over the threshold? What building is in view here? Whose is the master's house? Over history, many commentators have related this to the superstitious practice mentioned in 1 Samuel 5, verse 5, where the priests of Dagon would not step on the threshold, after Dagon had been humiliated there. Some then suggest that this is an adoption of the pagan practice from the Philistines that is then practiced in the temple. The hopping or leaping over the threshold might not, however, be a reference to a particular superstitious practice.

It might merely refer to the careless self-confidence with which people cross the threshold in question. What is the threshold in question? Is it the threshold of the temple? Many argue that it is.

[ 13 : 16 ] It is not, however, clear that the expression their master's house refers to the house of the lord. It might refer to the house of the king, or to other masters. Wren's raises the possibility that this refers to the servants of the various great houses of the land, to those who served in the palace, but also to those who serve the elite of the land, and their complicity with violence, oppression, and injustice.

The verses that follow describe the process by which the judgment will come upon Jerusalem. A commotion would be heard from the fish gate. Some invaders entered the north of the city. Following that, shouting from the second quarter, as another part of the city fell, soon wailing would be heard from the mortar, presumably a place of trade and commerce.

