



Zephaniah

Dr Charles Ray

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Author	5
Occasion and Date	6
The Day of the Lord.....	7
Message.....	7
Zephaniah 1.....	9
Zephaniah 2.....	23
Zephaniah 3.....	29
Excursus: Further notes on Zephaniah 1:1.....	40
Bibliography	41

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible commentaries
ESV	English Standard Version
KEL	Kregel Exegetical Library
KJV	King James Version
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995 edition)
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesis
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary

Introduction

“Of all the minor prophets, Zephaniah has suffered most from obscurity and from an academic ‘bad press.’ He is so obscure that he is often confused with Zechariah, whose much longer book occurs just pages later in the Bible. In the scholarly world Zephaniah is often dismissed as dull or derivative.”²

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” -- 2 Timothy 3:16

Author

A man named “Zephaniah” appears in at least four passages of the Old Testament (OT). One is found in 1 Chronicles 6:36-38. There the man is a Levite from the family of Tahath. Another Zephaniah is discovered in Zechariah (6:10-14) and is the father of one Josiah (not the king; 2 Kings 21:24). The third is mentioned several times, especially in the book of Jeremiah (2 Kings 25:18; Jer. 21:1, 29:25-29, 37:3, 52:24).³ This one was a priest who lived at the same time as Jeremiah, who prophesied “in the days of Josiah” (Jer. 1:2).

Interestingly, “our” Zephaniah also lived “in the days of Josiah” (Zeph. 1:1). However, because this character was both a priest and a prophet, it is not the same man as “our” Zephaniah. Of course nothing prevents him from holding both offices. Ezekiel occupied both (Ezek. 1:3). Nevertheless, most scholars believe the Zephaniah mentioned in 1:1 is the only reference to “our” Zephaniah.

The name Zephaniah has been translated in four or five different ways: “Watchman for the Lord,”⁴ “Yahweh hides,” “Yahweh has hidden,” “Yahweh treasured,”⁵ and “Jehovah is darkness.”⁶ The one that seems to be the most favored is “Yahweh hides.” This name may reflect the terror of the days of Manasseh at the time of Zephaniah’s birth.⁷ He may have been hidden for protection.

In unprecedented fashion, the prophet traces his genealogy back four generations. Usually only the name of the next of kin is given (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1; Ezek. 1:3; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; *etc.*).⁸ Why does Zephaniah do four? At least two reasons can be given. First, he may have been trying to distinguish himself from the other men with that name. Second, for some important reason he wanted to show he was related to Hezekiah.⁹ If this is King Hezekiah, then the purpose is obvious. Zephaniah not only had royal blood in him, he was a distant relative of the current king, Josiah. It could be they worked together to reform Judah. (See Excursus)

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986; 2002), 437.

³ Further complicating matters is the fact that the Zephaniah of 2 Kings 25:18 may not be the same as the one in Jeremiah because 2 Kings 25 has to do with the reign of Zedekiah, not Josiah. On the other hand, in both 2 Kings 25:18 and Jeremiah 52:24 he is identified as “the second priest.”

⁴ Larry Walker, “Zephaniah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-1988). This translation is based on the idea that the root of his name is *sapah* (“to watch”) and not *sapan* (“to hide”).

⁵ R. L. Smith, Vol. 32: *Word Biblical Commentary: Micah-Malachi* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 119.

⁶ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Men of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 346.

⁷ Read 2 Kings 21.

⁸ Zechariah is an exception. The heading of his book goes back two generations.

⁹ Hizkiah in the KJV.

Occasion and Date

Some radical suggestions have been proposed as to the approximate date of Zephaniah's ministry. A few scholars place it in Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 BC). They understand "the remnant of Baal" (Zeph. 1:4) to indicate that the reforms of Josiah were not totally successful and thus the book must be set later. Others assert the book of Zephaniah was put together piecemeal (believing most of the verses are not authentic to Zephaniah) and so did not achieve its final form until 200 BC. Obviously such theories have no manuscript support and ignore the very first verse which clearly states the prophet ministered "in the days of Josiah."

Josiah was on the throne from 640 to 609 BC. A handful of factors come into play in trying to narrow the date down from there. It seems likely the latest time for the writing of this book would have to be 612 BC, the year Nineveh, Assyria's capital, fell. Zephaniah 2:13 implies those fearsome warriors were yet to be defeated.

The following factors also come into play in this discussion. Josiah's revival and reforms began in the twelfth year of his reign (628 BC; 2 Chron. 34:3). Judah was under the harsh rule of the Assyrian Empire until 626 BC when their last powerful leader died, Ashurbanipal. Josiah felt freer to assert himself (in his reforms) now that Assyria was on the decline, "extending them even to the northern kingdom (2 Kings 23:1-25; 2 Chron. 34:32-35:19)."¹⁰ Soon thereafter the Book of the Law was found in the Temple (622 BC; 2 Kings 22:3, 8). It is assumed the judgment spoken of in Zeph. 1:4f was fulfilled by an attack by a foreign empire, which is a common way for the Lord to discipline His people. On the other hand, the severity of the opening verse seems to indicate something more than a foreign siege.

The question then is: what occasioned Zephaniah's ministry, the invasion by the Assyrians (or Scythians) or the moral decline of Judah?¹¹ A definitive answer is virtually impossible, and of course it could be both. There is simply not enough information. The Bible does not say how or when 1:4f was fulfilled.

Are the Scythians significant, as some scholars suggest, because they may be the people God used to bring judgment on Judah? Zephaniah may have thus been put on the scene to warn Judah. There are two problems with this theory, however. First, it is not known for sure that the Scythians invaded Judah. Our lone source is the ancient historian Herodotus and he speaks of the Scythians subduing only some Philistine cities with no explicit reference to Judah. Second, opinions vary as to when the aggression took place. Guesses range from 630 BC¹² to 611 BC.¹³ It is not out of the question, then, that any invasion played a major role in our background knowledge of Zephaniah.

Some believe the raiders were not the Scythians but the Babylonians who sacked Jerusalem beginning in 605 BC. They reason that Zephaniah *prophesied* during Josiah's days but the prophecies were not *fulfilled* until later. That is not the most natural reading of the text, however.

It could be that Assyria is the destructive enemy. As already noted, they were still a group to be reckoned with (2:13). If that is the case, then Zephaniah's prophecies must have been made no later than about 630 BC since Assyria lost its strength after this time. Assyria is perhaps the best

¹⁰ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 278.

¹¹ Josiah's predecessors, Manasseh and Amon, were quite wicked, even sacrificing the children (2 Kings 21:1-6).

¹² Patterson, 276.

¹³ Smith, 122.

choice.

The tone of the book indicates the Jews were very deep into idolatry and the worship of other deities (1:2-5). This interpretation has caused many Bible students to conclude that Zephaniah prophesied about 635 to 630 BC, and thus possibly triggering Josiah's spiritual awakening.¹⁴

So what was the occasion for the ministry of Zephaniah? In all likelihood it was the moral decline of the society, and perhaps an invasion by a foreign army.

The Day of the Lord

Students of the Bible are not in agreement as to what the expression "the Day of the Lord" (not to be confused with the Lord's Day of Rev. 1:10) signifies. Does it represent a single day of God's judgment, or could it refer to a longer period of time? In every instance is it associated with judgment only or is a blessing also in view? Many of the prophets speak of the Day of the Lord (Isaiah, Amos, Joel, *etc.*) yet for Zephaniah it "is a central motif."¹⁵ Further complicating the issue is that terms such as "in that day," "the day when," or "the day of" are used interchangeably with "Day of the Lord" (cf. Ezek. 30:2, 3).

Motyer has a good summary of the role of the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah.

Zephaniah identifies this disaster [Zeph. 1:2-6] as "the day of the Lord" (1:7-18) and calls for preparation (2:1-3). His next concern is to show this day in action, shattering the nations (2:4-15) but merited equally by Jerusalem (3:1-5). Unexpectedly – as if forcing itself into the prophet's consciousness – the day also has a spark of hope (2:6, 7, 9d, 11), and the remainder of the prophecy (2:8-3:20) is concerned with how this comes about.¹⁶

It seems best to conclude that a "Day of the Lord" (1) could be whenever God intervenes in human affairs, (2) can last more than 24 hours, (3) involves blessing (Zeph. 3:11-20) and not just judgment (1:8), (4) is sometimes local (Amos 5:18-20) yet can be world-wide (Zeph. 1:2, 3), and (5) will climax during the Tribulation (Isa. 2:12).¹⁷

Message

The book begins with quite an overwhelming declaration. The Lord announces He is planning to wipe out the whole world (1:2, 3) which causes our mind to think of the Flood of Genesis. He focuses His judgment on Judah beginning in verse 4 and continues it until verse 13. He first mentions the Day of the Lord in 1:7 yet doesn't describe it in detail until 1:14ff. After a brief exhortation to repent in 2:1-3, Zephaniah lists those nations which are on God's "hit list" (Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia/Cush, Assyria). Jerusalem is again the subject of God's wrath in 3:1-7. Verse 8 reiterates His judgments on the nations.

But 3:9ff brings hope. The Lord now announces His desire to bring about restoration, first to

¹⁴ The "remnant of Baal" (Zeph. 1:4) could be explained as either the people were starting to move away from Baal, or that Josiah had seen to this before his revival began in earnest.

¹⁵ Robert Chisholm, Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets" in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Roy Zuck, ed., Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 417.

¹⁶ J. Alec Motyer, "Zephaniah" in *The Minor Prophets* (Thomas E. McComiskey, ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 897.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of this topic see "The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah" by Greg King, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995) 16-32.

the Gentiles (vv. 9, 10) and then to the Jews (v. 11ff). This is a very common outline. Almost all the prophets begin with judgment and end with blessing.

Zephaniah 1

Chapter 1 speaks of God's judgment on the whole world and specifically on Judah

V. 1 The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah

We are told right off that the message (“word,” דבר) we are about to read is from Yahweh; therefore it is authentic and authoritative. We should listen to it. “This construction, putting ‘the word’ at the head of the verse, is a standard way of introducing a prophetic message and puts the emphasis on the contents of the message, rather than on the person of the prophet.”¹⁸ The Book of Zephaniah does not contain the notions of mere men.

The rest of verse 1 takes Zephaniah’s genealogy back four generations, an unusually long introduction. Six men (not even including the Lord and Zephaniah) are found in just this one verse. The prophet’s father¹⁹ is Cushi, possibly, but not likely, a man from Africa (This and other issues about Zeph. 1:1 are detailed the Excursus). “Cushi” and “Cushite” (Num. 12:1; “Ethiopian,” KJV) are used for a person’s name (Jer. 36:14) and as a nationality (Zeph. 2:12), respectively. “Cush” is generally accepted as another name for Ethiopia, as in Zeph. 3:10 (where ESV and NIV have “Cush”). The next name listed is Gedaliah (“Yahweh is great”), a name shared by four other Biblical characters. Gedaliah’s father was Amariah (“Yahweh has said” or “...promised”). Like Gedaliah, nothing else is known about him except that he shares his name with several other men.

We now come to Zephaniah’s great-great-grandfather, Hezekiah (“Yahweh is strength;” Hizkiah, KJV). There is some debate as to whether this is King Hezekiah (See Excursus). If so, that explains why Zephaniah’s genealogy goes back so far – he has royal blood in him and thus had access to the king’s court. Hezekiah was a good king of Judah from about 716 to 686 BC.²⁰

That is what we are told about Zephaniah’s lineage.

The last two names listed happen to be kings, too. Verse 1 informs the reader that Zephaniah received his message from the Lord “in the days of Josiah,” a name that means “Yahweh will support” or “...heal.” It was also during Josiah’s reign (640-609 BC) that the Book of the Law was discovered in the Temple (2 Kings 22:8). Obviously Zephaniah’s ministry took place sometime during the 640-609 BC time-period, but exactly when will be searched out in our analysis of Zephaniah 1:4.

Josiah’s father, Amon, completes the list of names in verse 1. He was on the throne for a rather short period of time (642-640 BC; 2 Kings 21:19). His name means “true” or “faithful.” He is the only one specifically identified as a “king of Judah.” Why the current king (Josiah) is not so identified has puzzled many. It may be out of respect for Hezekiah. Since Josiah was not labeled as a king, then neither should Hezekiah. Perhaps all three should have been given the title but that

¹⁸ Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah* (NY: Doubleday, 1994; AB), 63.

¹⁹ It seems safe to assume in this case that there are no gaps in the genealogy.

²⁰ He was the one who built the famous tunnel running from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam (2 Kings 20:20).

might have created confusion.

V. 2 “I will completely remove all things From the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

The reader is unprepared for such jolting statements in this and subsequent verses.²¹ It is true the books of the Prophets (Major and Minor) usually begin with judgment but to bring such on “the face of the earth” is extreme (cf. 3:8). “Zephaniah is proclaiming man’s loss of dominion over all the earth, and more importantly, the reversal of creation. ...Yahweh’s ‘sweeping’ will be just as bleak as his creating was abundant.”²² The word for “earth” (אֶרֶץ) can mean “land” (so KJV) yet the tenor of the entire book suggests the Lord has the entire globe in mind.²³

The Hebrew words behind “...completely remove...” (אָסַף אָסַף)²⁴ actually come from two different verbal roots even though they look the same in Hebrew.²⁵ The first one comes from אָסַף (“gather,” “remove”). The second word is derived from סָוַע which has the idea of “ceasing,” “coming to an end,” and even “destroying.” Therefore, we could say the Lord is gathering everything up in order to remove it.

Does God want to destroy the whole world as He did with Noah’s flood? Scholars have answered this question in at least three different ways. Some take “earth” to mean “land,” and thus only Israel or only the Mesopotamian region is in view. However, since verse 4 specifically names Judah and Jerusalem, the area in mind in verse 2 might indeed be the whole world (a second possible answer).²⁶ A third possibility is that these declarations are hyperbolic;²⁷ that is, exaggerated for effect.²⁸ These choices are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Asking the question “when” might help us come to a conclusion.

Concerning the first option, Zephaniah may have had a foreign invasion in mind which would totally destroy the land around Jerusalem and Judah. It’s a little more difficult to answer the “when” question for the second option. Will there ever be a time when not a single thing will be on planet Earth? Unless this is an exaggeration, the only time the Bible speaks of such a situation is after the Millennial Kingdom when the entire world “will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10, where the Day of the Lord is mentioned).

²¹ Shepherd believes Zephaniah has Jer. 8:13 in mind here. Jeremiah was a contemporary, however. Michael B. Shepherd, *A Commentary on the Book of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018; KEL), 354.

²² Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999; NAC), 412, quoting De Roche.

²³ Notice “all the earth” (1:18) and the many nations mentioned in chapter 2.

²⁴ Some scholars are of the opinion that this is one Hebrew word written two times in a row for emphasis and thus we add the word “completely” or “utterly” (KJV). In verse 3 it is written only once and thus we have simply “remove.”

²⁵ Bailey, 412 n27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

²⁷ For more reasons why this verse is likely hyperbolic see *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁸ If the NIV is the proper translation, then the statement is definitely hyperbole. The NIV has “The wicked will have only heaps of rubble...;” suggesting there will still be people on the earth.

Unger toys with the idea of a partial and complete fulfillment.²⁹ The invasion is *a* Day of the Lord, and the sweeping away (NIV) of the whole world is *the* Day of the Lord.³⁰ This may be the best answer (cf. Zeph. 1:18).

V. 3 “I will remove man and beast; I will remove the birds of the sky And the fish of the sea, And the ruins along with the wicked; And I will cut off man from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

In this verse and the previous one, strong emphasis is placed on the judgment’s certainty and pervasiveness. At the end of both we have the authoritative, “...declares the Lord.” This potent and intimate expression makes it clear that it’s God and not man Who will commence these terrifying events.³¹ In addition, we have four “I will” statements. Similarly, four times we see “remove” or the stronger “cut off” (כרת). The latter can mean “exterminate.”

The arrangement of the creatures may be significant. They were made in this order: fish, birds, beasts, man (Gen. 1). They are removed in the opposite order: man, beasts, birds, fish (although man is mentioned again at the end of the verse). It’s as if God were un-doing His creation.³² What makes this judgment even more severe and intense than that of Genesis 6-9 is that in the latter at least some survived (those in the Ark and presumably most of the fish).

Verse 2 is a general declaration whereas in verse 3 God gets more specific. Nevertheless, the words are arresting. The Lord intends to wipe out every creature on earth! That action would seem to contradict the Noachic Covenant, the stipulations of which include God’s promise not to destroy all creation again (Gen. 8:21). On the other hand, Genesis 8:22 implies this Covenant will be operative only until the end of the world (“While the earth remains...”³³)³⁴ Thus, this may be another indication that once we come to the end of the world, the judgments of Zephaniah 1:2-6 can or could come to pass.

He likewise wants to sweep away “the ruins along with the wicked.” “Ruins” can also be translated “stumbling blocks” (so KJV). Is it feasible that the creation is some sort of “stumbling block”? Yes. First, the creation can be worshipped instead of the Creator. Second, unbelievers can still reject the Lord despite the beauty and design of God’s world. Third, these “stumbling blocks” could refer to idols, idols fashioned in the shape of a creature and/or made from natural material (wood, metal, stone; cf. 2 Chron. 28:23).

Interestingly, Matthew 13:41 associates stumbling blocks with end time events: “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and

²⁹ I don’t like using the term “double fulfillment” because that makes it sound as if the passage can have two meanings.

³⁰ Merrill Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 1923, 1924.

³¹ Bailey, 412.

³² David Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988, 2009; TOTC), 90.

³³ Some would argue that phrase applies to 8:22 instead of to 8:21. However, there is no *waw* at the beginning of v. 22.

³⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; NICOT), 258, 259.

those who commit lawlessness” (cf. Matt. 16:23, 18:7). Jesus’ allusion to Zephaniah may indicate that the ultimate removal of the stumbling blocks will take place during end time events.³⁵ The Lord throws in the word “wicked” to sum up what men truly are.

In the last part of verse 3, God reiterates the wiping out of man and does so with a powerful verb. Why is man picked on here and not the other creatures? Because man is the only one with a moral responsibility (cf. Zeph. 1:6). Animals are not made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27). The verb here is “cut off,” a different word from “remove.” “Cut off” (כרת) has various shades of meaning. Literally it can refer to severing something (Exod. 4:25). Figuratively it has to do with making (cutting) a covenant (Gen. 15:18). Here it means exterminating man from the earth, a very vivid image.

V. 4 “So I will stretch out My hand against Judah And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, *And* the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.

Surprisingly, God’s favored people are the ones who are first in line to receive the judgment (1 Peter 4:17; cf. Lev. 10:3, Ezek. 9:6).³⁶ “And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Luke 12:48; cf. Amos 3:2). All the people of Judah and Jerusalem are the target of this judgment. No one is immune. “Those who ‘live in Jerusalem’ were in the very presence of the Lord (Deut. 12:5).”³⁷

How could this be since “[t]he scepter never was to depart from Judah (Gen. 49:10). God had sworn that he never would remove a lamp from Jerusalem for the sake of his servant David (1 K. 11:13, 36; cf. 15:4; 2 K. 8:19; 19:34; 20:6).”³⁸

The expression “stretch out My hand” is a figure of speech for bringing judgment upon something (Exod. 7:5, 9:22; Isa. 5:25, 14:26, 27). The addition of the word “against” reinforces the terrifying tone of the phrase. At other times God stretches out His hand to create positive events (Jer. 32:17).

“Cut off” is the same powerful verb used in verse 3. “The Lord will not be endlessly patient with usurping gods, and when the time comes he will deal finally with ‘whatever remains’ – that is, all that is then found...”³⁹

Baal was the main false god from Canaan. Unfortunately, the Jews began worshipping it as well. That the Lord wanted to remove what remained of Baalism suggests Josiah had already begun his religious reforms or possibly was near the end of doing so. “Remnant” has various shades of meaning, including “the rest of” (Dan. 2:18), “left” (Gen. 7:23), “survivors” (Isa. 14:22), and “those escaped” (2 Chron. 36:20).

³⁵ Ibid., 259, 260.

³⁶ Unger, 1924.

³⁷ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah” in *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, ed. by Thomas E. McComiskey), 912.

³⁸ Robertson, 261.

³⁹ Motyer, 912.

“This place” could refer to Jerusalem or to the Temple.

Zephaniah has narrowed it down further to the people directly responsible for the spiritual welfare of the populace: the priests. God expects His leaders to do what is right. To cut off the “name” of something means to eliminate everything about it, even from memory.

It is difficult to know for sure exactly which priests the Lord has in mind here. He seems to mention at least two groups of them. Various interpretations have been forthcoming. First it is to be noted that the word *כַּמְרִימ* (“idolatrous priests,” “Chemarim,” KJV) is found in only two other places in the OT. In Hosea 10:5 it refers to those who bow down to a calf idol, and in 2 Kings 23:5 to those who were Baal worshippers.

Berlin (p. 75) suggests the idolatrous priests are to be removed from among all the (Levitical) priests. A similar understanding views it as removing idolatrous priests (*כַּמְרִי*), who worship foreign gods (Baal?), and the wicked Levitical priests (*כַּהֲנֵי*), leaving only the pious priests. Still another opinion teaches that there is only one group in mind – all the priests who are not worshipping Yahweh exclusively will be eliminated (which would be all the priests apparently).

The grammar may support this last choice. The phrase *אֵת־שֵׁם...הַכֹּהֵן* (“the names...with the priests”) does not have a *vav* coordinator⁴⁰ and thus the verse may be rendered, “the Baal worshippers, even all the pagan priests.”

“The God who created in health and redeems in wholeness cannot be joined to a God (Baal) who fertilizes the earth through sacred prostitution and who claims his portion by child sacrifice.”⁴¹

V. 5 “And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven, And those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom,

The Lord continues His list of those who will be removed. Next in order are those who practice astrology. This is a classic example of worshipping the creation and not the Creator. Deuteronomy strictly forbids this kind of worship. Chapter 17 (esp. v. 5) makes it clear that such persons are to be executed (cf. 4:19)! “The epitome of the abuse of the principle that all Israel was a ‘kingdom of priests’ (Exod. 19:6) may have been found in this practice.”⁴²

It may seem strange to us for someone to worship on a roof since we are used to them being pitched, making it very difficult to even walk. People of the Middle East in ancient times, by contrast, put flat tops on their houses. Unfortunately, they didn’t receive much rain.

That this ritual is being conducted on homes and not at traditional places of worship suggests that it is very widespread. In other words, it is the populace doing it and not just the priests.

Not only are the people bowing down to the sun, moon, and stars (“the bearers of the powers of nature”),⁴³ they are also dividing their loyalties between Yahweh and Milcom (“Molech,” NIV; “Malcham,” KJV). If this is the god Milcom (See Berlin, pp. 75-77), that means they are performing horrible rituals such as sacrificing their children by burning them alive. Constable

⁴⁰ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 305.

⁴¹ Robertson, 262, 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴³ *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*, e-Sword edition.

asserts Milcom “probably represents all foreign gods.”⁴⁴

There is a subtle difference in the Hebrew here that may be of significance. Those people involved are taking an oath (“swear”) and they are doing it *to* (the preposition is ל) the Lord yet are doing it *by* (the preposition is ב) Milcom (so NASB).⁴⁵ It seems they are willing to bow down and swear *to* the Lord, but want to make their vow more sure by swearing *by* Milcom. “To swear by a deity meant to pronounce an oath under the threat of punishment by that deity if one failed to carry out his oath.”⁴⁶ What an offense to Yahweh!

This syncretism is a common feature of Baal worship (mentioned in the previous verse, also). It is somewhat surprising that they would want to have anything to do with Yahweh in the first place since He “will not do good or evil” (Zeph. 1:12) anyway (in their opinion). Second Chronicles 33 clearly states the people were blending the worship of Yahweh and Baal. This particular passage took place during the reign of Manasseh (693-641 BC). “Nevertheless, the people still sacrificed in the high places, although only to the LORD their God” (v. 17). The worshippers were trying to cover all the possibilities for a favorable outcome of their obeisance.⁴⁷ 2 Kings 21:3 is equally clear: “For he [Manasseh] rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah...and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them” (cf. v. 5).⁴⁸

Worship and service are similar concepts of which this verse is an example. Note Luke 4:8, “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY,’” a paraphrase of Deut. 6:13. A person is going to serve whatever he or she worships (cf. Matt. 6:21).

Of course, Yahweh wants and deserves all the praise and all the glory and all of our affection. That was not happening. The current situation must be removed because “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24; cf. Luke 16:13). Furthermore, the Jews were commanded in the Law not to swear by any other god (Deut. 6:13; cf. 10:20). “Worship in Zephaniah’s day parallels much of the practice of modern society. Many people are not irreligious; they simply refuse to give allegiance to the Lord God alone.”⁴⁹

V. 6 And those who have turned back from following the LORD, And those who have not sought the LORD or inquired of Him.”

Zephaniah concludes his “those who” list by focusing on sins of omission rather than commission.⁵⁰ It could be that just one group of people is in mind here who are identified by three

⁴⁴ Dr. Thomas Constable, notes on Zeph. 1:5. PlanoBibleChapel.org

⁴⁵ In Genesis 21:23 there is a similar prepositional arrangement. Abimelech wants Abraham to swear “to me” (ל) but “by” (ב) Elohim. See Motyer, 913.

⁴⁶ Hannah, John D., “Zephaniah” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., Wheaton: Victor, 1985), Libronix Edition.

⁴⁷ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986, 2007), 197, 198.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁹ Bailey, 420.

⁵⁰ Robertson, 265.

characteristics. They have turned their back (the niph'al suggests a willful turning away) on the Lord and have no desire to worship Him or to seek His counsel and blessing (cf. Deut. 4:29; 2 Chron. 20:3, 4; Ps. 105:3, 4; Jer. 29:13). Any works empowered by the flesh rarely have any lasting success.

Concerning “those who have turned back” Patterson writes that “...the Hebrew verb is commonly employed of vacillating or faithless behavior toward people (Jer. 38:22) or God (Ps. 53:3)...”⁵¹ “בִּקְשׁ [“not sought”] lays stress on general seeking or asking someone, while שָׁרַשׁ [“inquired of”] emphasizes the person's specific concern in the inquiry of God associated with repentance.”⁵² Ezra 8:22 says, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.”

V. 7 Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near, For the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests.

At first “Be silent before the Lord God!” may sound worshipful but it is actually in a context of judgment (cf. Hab. 2:20). Zechariah 2:13 and Revelation 8:1 are two other examples.

The “Sovereign Lord” [NIV; “Lord God,” NASB] reflects the combination of the divine personal name “Yahweh” with the Hebrew title meaning “lord” or “master.” It was common practice in the ancient Near East to use “Lord” in reference to a deity. Using both the name and the title indicates the personal nature and the power and majesty of God.⁵³

Why be silent? Because (“for”) the Day of the Lord is not far away, the day when God will mete out His judgment. “It is a call for submission, fear, and consecration.”⁵⁴ “Let noisy, rebellious men (Psalm 2:1-3) ‘be silent’..., for He is about to intervene visibly and publicly to chastise His sinning people and, having accomplished that, to punish their wicked punishers...”⁵⁵ In fact, the sacrifice is already prepared! The “sacrifice” here is probably Judah and Jerusalem. They were to be punished for their false worship.

Nowhere in this oracle [Zeph. 1] does the prophet suggest a course of action that might turn aside the fury of Yahweh’s Day. Not even in subsequent oracles calling for repentance does he suggest that the judgment of the Day might be cancelled. Only “perhaps” the pious remnant “may be hid” upon the arrival of the Day (Zeph. 2:3b).⁵⁶

What is meant by the unusual expression “He has consecrated His guests”? (See 1 Samuel 16:5.) “Consecrated” means “set apart” but it could also have the idea of inviting (so NIV and KJV). We may be able to come up with a more specific definition once we figure out who the “guests” are. There are basically two possibilities. One is that the “guests” are Judah and Jerusalem. That of course would make them both the sacrifice and the diners. Second, it makes more sense to understand them to be a foreign invading army. The Lord often uses other nations as the instrument

⁵¹ Patterson, 306, 307.

⁵² VanGemeren, Willem (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan Reference Software, 1997, 2001).

⁵³ Bailey, 425.

⁵⁴ Patterson, 308.

⁵⁵ Unger, 1925.

⁵⁶ Robertson, 271.

by which He disciplines His people. The Assyrians were on the decline at this time thus it is more likely the Babylonians were the ones who marched on Jerusalem.

Therefore, “consecrated” in this context may have a combined connotation. God has set aside the Babylonians as His tool and has also invited them to come to the feast. Yes, the Lord can set apart even a wicked nation for His purposes!⁵⁷

V. 8 “Then it will come about on the day of the LORD'S sacrifice That I will punish the princes, the king’s sons And all who clothe themselves with foreign garments.

Robertson’s summary of verses 8-14 (p. 274) is worth quoting.

These verses narrow the object of judgment even more specifically than had been done in the previous section. Originally the scope of God’s judgment had been indicated as including the entirety of the cosmos (vv. 2-3). Then Judah and Jerusalem were specified (vv. 4-6). Now particular Judeans are designated (vv. 8-9, 11), as well as specific districts within the targeted city of Jerusalem (vv. 10-11). The section also offers a more precise cataloguing of the consequences of the judgment soon to come, which may be described generally as despair, devastation, and frustration (vv. 11, 13).

There is an interesting literary device used in verse 8. The verse switches from a third person reference to God (“Lord”) to first person (“I”). That change may show God’s personal involvement in the judgments. The Hebrew word used here for “punish” (פָּקַד) has a vast range of meanings. It is sometimes translated “visit,” which can be either for good purposes (Psalm 106:4) or for negative purposes (such as here).⁵⁸

It appears that the sacrifice (v. 7) will be offered at the time of the Day of the Lord (which is not necessarily limited to 24 hours). As noted under the discussion of verse 7, the “sacrifice” is probably Judah and Jerusalem. Here He becomes more specific by focusing in on “the princes” and “the king's sons.” The question is, is Zephaniah making a distinction between those two groups of people, or does the latter identify the former?

If they are two different factions, then what is that difference? The Hebrew word for “prince” can also be translated “official” (ESV, NRSV). Thus, in the palace at this time there may have been, in addition to the king’s sons, some other administrators. However, it would indeed seem strange for God to punish Josiah’s sons since they were quite young at this time.⁵⁹ On the other hand, they were old enough to dress themselves, and maybe old enough to be rebellious (if that’s the reason for the reprimand; cf. Zeph. 3:3). “But given the rather broad reference to ‘the days of Josiah’ in Zephaniah 1:1, it is difficult not to think of the sons of Josiah who all lacked their father’s righteousness, especially the way they are described by Zephaniah’s contemporary, Jeremiah (Jer. 21:1-23:4).”⁶⁰

It could be that (1) “the king's sons” does not refer to literal sons but other members of the royal family, or (2) “the king's sons” simply explains “the princes.” Either way the meaning of the verse is not dramatically affected.

⁵⁷ Unger, 1925.

⁵⁸ For more information, see Motyer, 919.

⁵⁹ Based on 2 Kings 23:31, 36; Robertson (p. 275) calculates that they were ten and twelve at this time.

⁶⁰ Shepherd, 356.

Why isn't the king singled out in this pronouncement? Because he is a good one – Josiah. Since Zephaniah was likely in the kingly line (1:1), he would have special access to the inner workings of the palace.⁶¹ In addition, it must be kept in mind that occasionally a verse (or section) in the Major and Minor Prophets jumps from the present to the past or to the future. Thus, some suggest that this punishment was earlier, in the days of Ammon. Josiah at that time would have been, of course, too young to be responsible for his attitude and actions (cf. 2 Kings 22:1, 2).

The Lord does include on His list “all who clothe themselves with foreign garments” (“strange apparel,” KJV). This apparently means some people are allowing other (pagan) nations to influence their lifestyle to a harmful degree. “...by their dress ... they were eroding the distinction between the Lord’s people and the world around and exemplifying a failure of loyalty to him and a carefree attitude toward his law.”⁶²

Furthermore it could indicate that they are wearing clothes used in foreign religious ceremonies (cf. 2 Kings 10:22, 23; 22:14).⁶³ Yahweh wants His chosen ones to keep themselves pure, not infected by the accoutrements of a pagan culture (Deut. 14:2, Neh. 13:3).

It should be noted as well that Solomon had brought many “foreign women”...to Jerusalem, and had allowed them to set up their own worship centers on the “hill of abominations” across the valley from the temple area (1 K. 11:1, 7-8;...) Very likely each of these foreign centers of worship possessed its own priesthood with its distinctive vestments. In the decades that ensued, the inhabitants of Jerusalem must have become accustomed to seeing the distinctly clad priests of various foreign gods parading their streets. Possibly Zephaniah addressed himself to this type of corruption.⁶⁴

V. 9 “And I will punish on that day all who leap on the *temple* threshold, Who fill the house of their lord with violence and deceit.

The Lord continues His list of who will be punished “on that day,” the Day of the Lord. It seems that the two designations given (who...who...) are referring to one group of people. The rest of this verse is quite an enigma. What does “leap on/over the threshold”⁶⁵ mean? Which threshold is in mind? Does “house” refer to a person’s home or to a house of worship? Does “lord” have reference to a deity or to a human master? Many combinations are possible and thus, as one can imagine, numerous suggestions have surfaced. Whatever the answers are, it can be said with some certainty that this leaping has a negative connotation in this verse. Obviously, the original hearers of Zephaniah’s day would have had much better insight as to the meaning of this verse.

Is the Lord upset with those who leap *on* the threshold or *over* it? The Hebrew verb דלג (“leap”) can mean either one. Many translations go with “over” (NKJV, ESV, NRSV).⁶⁶ Whatever threshold this is, the gist seems to be that stepping on it will release something bad, such as evil spirits. On the other hand, the leaping may indicate the person is in a hurry or is joyful. Whether

⁶¹ Robertson, 276.

⁶² Motyer, 919.

⁶³ Robertson, 276.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ This is not the more common word for “threshold” (cf. Zeph. 2:14). For more information, see *TWOT* #1538.

⁶⁶ The NIV has “avoid stepping on.”

it's associated with a house or a temple or whether the person is entering or leaving is not clear at this point. The superstition may have begun in 1 Samuel 5:1-5 (esp. v. 5) when Dagon's image fell on the threshold and it has carried over to Zephaniah's day. If that is true, then that along with the possibility that Zephaniah 3:4 is a parallel verse would suggest that a temple is in mind and not just a house.⁶⁷ In addition, "[i]f this connection [to 1 Samuel 5] is correct, then the sense of Zephaniah 1:9 would be that the Lord will judge anyone who respects and worships the image of an obviously false god like Dagon. Such false gods are the lords or masters of those who worship them..."⁶⁸

The word "lord" in Hebrew is plural, suggesting to some that it thus refers to the king (a plural of majesty), obviously in this case, Josiah. However, that guess doesn't make sense since Josiah's reign was not marked by "violence and deceit." Other versions do have it in the plural (KJV, "masters"; NIV, "gods"). Perhaps it should be. In that case, the second half of the verse could be interpreted as some wicked person running into "the temple of their gods" (so NIV) after committing some crime (stealing? conning someone?).

Whatever is happening, it is being done with "violence⁶⁹ and deceit." (No wonder God wants to punish them.) The word "violence" can often describe "the extreme corporate or individual wickedness of human beings against God or others..."⁷⁰ "Deceit" means "betrayal," "fraud" (so ESV, NRSV), or "treachery" (2 Kings 9:23; Psalm 38:12).

To sum up, it looks as though this verse is talking about the religious community just as 1:8 spoke of the political community.⁷¹ Wicked priests are exacting money or other valuables by any means necessary, and the Temple is their "hideout."

V. 10 "On that day," declares the LORD, "There will be the sound of a cry from the Fish Gate, A wail from the Second Quarter, And a loud crash from the hills.

The Lord gives further details as to what will happen "on that day." That is, the day of the Lord. The focus has now shifted from the general (the leaders) to the more specific (various sectors of Jerusalem, maybe more specifically the merchants). Perhaps their greed has brought this judgment on themselves. The Fish Gate and the Second Quarter are the areas of Jerusalem where commerce takes place. The Fish Gate was on the north side, the most common location for an invading army to attack. It is not known for certain exactly where the Second Quarter is but it is likely the section that was added to the old city (by Manasseh?, cf. 2 Kings 22:14).⁷²

So much chaos will reign that the hills surrounding the great city will echo with the sounds of lamentation and crying.⁷³ Others speculate that the noise is of the shattering of the idols which

⁶⁷ Motyer, 919.

⁶⁸ Shepherd, 356.

⁶⁹ The Hebrew word here is *hamas* (cf. anti-Semitic group of same name).

⁷⁰ William Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 767.

⁷¹ Motyer, 919. He goes on to write, "Just as the princes affected foreign dress, so the priests imported alien religious fetishes."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Patterson, 313.

dotted Judah (cf. Jer. 3:23).⁷⁴ The Hebrew noun שֹׁבֵר (“crash”) can also mean breaking or crushing.

Crying, wailing, and loud crashing – what a terrible time for the Jews.

V. 11 “Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar, For all the people of Canaan will be silenced; All who weigh out silver will be cut off.”

The basic meaning of this verse is clear although it is translated in somewhat different ways by the major versions.

- Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar! For all the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off. (ESV)
- Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off. (KJV)
- Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined. (NIV)
- The inhabitants of the Mortar wail, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off. (NRSV)

The people (especially the merchants) are now commanded⁷⁵ to wail and cry out because the judgement of the previous verses has taken place. Because of the use of יָלַל (“wail”) in various prophetic contexts, Berlin (p. 87) believes it “thus does not connote ordinary mourning, but rather the public reaction to extraordinary, large-scale destruction.” To make matters worse, the men are not sorry about their sin but about the money they lost.⁷⁶

What is this Mortar (or Maktesh)? Discussion and debate continue. Since a mortar is a bowl, it is likely this is a place which has been carved out for a certain purpose. Unger (p. 1926) suggests this place is in the Tyropoean Valley, a narrow depression⁷⁷ within the Old City of Jerusalem running northwest from the Temple Mount. At Judges 15:19, it is translated “hollow place” (see also Prov. 27:22).⁷⁸ It is very possible this area was created as a place to conduct business, as indicated by the NIV and NRSV. That it is a place for merchants and traders as well as “[a]ll who weigh out silver”⁷⁹ further enhances this possibility. The NASB uses “people of Canaan” because those tribes were well known for their trading.

The judgement on these people is they will be silenced (NASB) and wiped out (NIV). This silence indicates total destruction and is in contrast to “wail” as well as to the noisy verse 10.⁸⁰ The reason for this judgement is not specified but it probably has to do with dishonest business practices. “God is therefore concerned not only with religious perversion but also with economic

⁷⁴ Robertson, 278, 279.

⁷⁵ “Wail” is in the imperative mood.

⁷⁶ Patterson, 313, 314.

⁷⁷ *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2003), 1634.

⁷⁸ Motyer, 920.

⁷⁹ Berlin (87) is of the opinion that these who “weigh out silver” are not moneychangers but the expression simply refers to merchants in general. Motyer (920) agrees.

⁸⁰ Motyer, 920.

misconduct.”⁸¹

Unger adds, “The coming Day of the Lord in its final aspect is here prefigured in the judgment of commercial Babylon (Rev. 18) as the destruction of religious Babylon (Rev. 17), is reflected in verses 4 to 6.”⁸²

V. 12 “It will come about at that time That I will search Jerusalem with lamps, And I will punish the men Who are stagnant in spirit, Who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good or evil!’

During the days of Josiah’s son Zedekiah (597-586 BC), much destruction and looting took place in the holy city (2 Kings 25:13-17; 2 Chron. 36:17-19; Jer. 52:17-23). That situation was the immediate fulfillment of this passage.⁸³ The ultimate fulfillment will be at the end times, as suggested by the expression “at that time.” Similar expressions were encountered in recent verses such as “the day of the Lord” (vv. 7, 8) and “on that day” (vv. 9, 10).

The Lord is searching all of Jerusalem (with lamps) to find all who need to be punished. No one can escape the Lord’s gaze (Amos 9:3).⁸⁴ What is their sin? They are complacent (so ESV, NIV, NKJV, NRSV; “stagnant in spirit”).⁸⁵ They are not doing anything, or at least nothing good. Thus, it is a sin of omission rather than commission. Jerusalem’s citizens’ greed and self-satisfaction have led them to lose a desire for genuine piety.⁸⁶ They further are convinced God doesn’t care and will not lift a finger. “This is not atheism as a dogma but practical atheism; it does not say, ‘God is not there,’ but, ‘God is not here’ – not that God does not exist but that he does not matter.”⁸⁷ This concept is not some urban legend, but something they believe “in their hearts.”⁸⁸ Yahweh is not complacent and we should take care not to become so.

V. 13 “Moreover, their wealth will become plunder And their houses desolate; Yes, they will build houses but not inhabit them, And plant vineyards but not drink their wine.”

This verse gives some specifics which are the punishment mentioned in verse 12. The language is reminiscent of the curses in Deut. 28, especially verses 30 and 39. They are now rich and complacent but that condition will soon and swiftly change. Their riches will be looted. They will build houses and plant vineyards but other people will enjoy those possessions. “Building houses and planting vineyards required hard work and patience. What a tragedy when the person expending the energy and waiting for the reward loses the reward! Zephaniah affirmed the truth

⁸¹ Baker, 96.

⁸² Unger, 1926. Italics in original.

⁸³ Patterson, 314.

⁸⁴ Berlin, 87.

⁸⁵ The KJV captures the idea well with the appropriate word picture of wine which has set to long and the dregs have congealed at the bottom of the glass (“settled on their lees”), spoiling the entire drink.

⁸⁶ Patterson, 315.

⁸⁷ Motyer, 921.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

that human effort apart from the blessing of God is futile.”⁸⁹ See Deut. 8 17, 18.⁹⁰

You don’t think God will lift a finger? Just watch!

V. 14 Near is the great day of the LORD, Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly.

Verses 8-13 dealt with judgement for God’s people. The remaining verses of chapter 1 have to do with judgement for the world.⁹¹ The verse under consideration is designated by two words: near (as in 1:7) and great. Just as in the NASB, the first word in the Hebrew is “near.” This emphasis causes one to realize all these judgements are truly going to happen. “Great” suggests the universal scope of them. It is so close one can hear it. This is the chance for the people of Judah and Jerusalem to repent.

Events of the Day of the Lord (vv. 14-18) happened at various times throughout Israel’s history but will climax in the end times. The revelation of God’s wrath is so intense even brave men such as warriors will cry out in terror. Others translate this verse in such a way as to have God giving a terrifying shout “of outraged holiness and that of an anguished heart.”⁹² See KJ©

V. 15 A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness,

From here to the end of the chapter we get some details as to the horror and terror of the Day of the Lord. Five times in this verse we read, “a day of...” “Five couplets poetically arranged characterize the Day and describe its accompanying phenomena.”⁹³ The people will know what it is like to experience God’s wrath. No hope is in view. The victims will have emotional stress as well as devastation of the land, gloom, and darkness. When a person is distressed, he or she feels hemmed in.⁹⁴ One surmises this situation will lead to famine. Not an encouraging picture at all!

V. 16 A day of trumpet and battle cry Against the fortified cities And the high corner towers.

As with verse 15, this verse is both depressing and frightening. The cities of the area are about to be attacked with Jerusalem, even with strong, fortified walls, being no exception. Again, there is a crying out as in verse 14. The sounds depicted here (trumpet and battle cry) would alert the citizens to immediate assault.⁹⁵ The trumpet is actually the shofar, a ram’s horn used to give out instructions (2 Sam. 2:28; Job 39:25).⁹⁶ The Babylonians conquered the Holy City in 586 BC and it seems God Himself will besiege the city in the end times, as strange as that sounds.

⁸⁹ Bailey, 436.

⁹⁰ Robertson, 280.

⁹¹ Baker, 97.

⁹² Motyer, 923.

⁹³ Robertson, 283.

⁹⁴ Motyer, 923. See also Bailey (440) for a good explanation of the wordplay of these pairs.

⁹⁵ Bailey, 441.

⁹⁶ Motyer, 923.

V. 17 I will bring distress on men So that they will walk like the blind, Because they have sinned against the LORD; And their blood will be poured out like dust And their flesh like dung.

This verse not only describes more specific distress but also the reason the Lord (“I”) is doing all this. The people have sinned against Him but have not repented of their ways. “Sin is first and foremost against God...(Ps. 51:4).”⁹⁷ The word pictures are becoming personal (blood poured out) and absolutely terrifying.

Blindness is often used as a form of punishment (Duet. 28:28; Acts 13:11).⁹⁸ Sin causes people to lose their way in life and now they will literally be groping so as what to do next. Then it seems their bodies will be torn apart. “Dirt [dust] and dung are common, widespread, and filthy.”⁹⁹

One question is, who is included in this judgement? Is it the people of Judah only or the whole of creation (Zeph. 1:2, 3)? Certainly God’s chosen ones are at least part of it, yet the next verse mentions “all the inhabitants of the earth.” Perhaps near-term and far-term events are in view.

V. 18 Neither their silver nor their gold Will be able to deliver them On the day of the LORD'S wrath; And all the earth will be devoured In the fire of His jealousy, For He will make a complete end, Indeed a terrifying one, Of all the inhabitants of the earth.

What a sobering way to end the chapter! The intensity and extent of the words are mind bending (“all the earth;” “a complete end;” “all the inhabitants”). Some wealthy people are lulled into a false sense of security, thinking their money will somehow protect them. Not so here. “...no amount of silver or gold will be able to buy off their despoilers.”¹⁰⁰ Another possibility is that the silver and gold refer to their idols (who obviously cannot save them).¹⁰¹

What makes God this angry? The source of that anger is the same today. It is the response of One who has cared, loved, and invested deeply in people who have prospered under his care but have turned away. His people have either rebelled or ignored the One who provided everything for them. His people and religious leaders have tried to combine lukewarm faithfulness to the Lord with allegiances to a variety of other created things.¹⁰²

We don’t like to think about judgement and God’s wrath but they are realities nonetheless.

⁹⁷ Bailey, 442.

⁹⁸ Baker, 100.

⁹⁹ Berlin, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Patterson, 325.

¹⁰¹ Baker, 100.

¹⁰² James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, NIVAC), 298.

Zephaniah 2

Chapter 2 notes Judah and four foreign countries are warned to repent before the Day of the Lord

V. 1 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O nation without shame,

The first two Hebrew words of this verse are two forms of one rare word. The more common term behind these forms is a word that means “gather straw” or “gather stubble.” The idea seems to be the people are to come together (like straw) in order to prepare themselves for judgment (cf. Exod. 5:7, 12).¹⁰³ Repentance was in order. The shameful nation is Judah. It is shameful because it has acted wickedly before the Lord (idolatry, pride, *etc.*) for some time. “Not even a blush rises on its cheek from an awareness of its guilt before God.”¹⁰⁴ It likely puzzled and grieved the prophet to see how the Jews were self-destructing.¹⁰⁵

V. 2 Before the decree takes effect-- The day passes like the chaff-- Before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you, Before the day of the LORD'S anger comes upon you.

The word “before” is found three times in this verse. A sense of urgency is clear. Multiple times Zephaniah warns the people to repent before the judgments of chapter one take place (lit., “be born”). “Only a narrow space of time stands between the people and their utter devastation, for once the Day arrives they will have no future opportunity for repentance.”¹⁰⁶ The “decree” must refer to the horrors of the Day of the Lord (cf. v. 2d). The prophet could not be more forceful in his emphasis in portraying the holy anger of God. The destruction is likened to chaff being blown away in the wind – quick and thorough. “The chaff or stubble referred to the worthless part of the wheat”¹⁰⁷ (cf. Psalm 1:4).

V. 3 Seek the LORD, All you humble of the earth Who have carried out His ordinances; Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden In the day of the LORD'S anger.

Here the prophet seems to be telling the wayward Jews how to avoid the judgment. Their primary assignment is to seek (3 times; cf. 1:6). If they heed his words perhaps the Lord will withhold His anger. Of utmost importance is to seek the Lord Himself (cf. Matt. 6:33). One does not (virtually cannot) seek God unless there has been a change of heart. Also, the remedy is offered to “all...of the earth” just as the judgment would be worldwide (1:2). This change can and should include the characteristics mentioned in the rest of the verse. Virtues such as humility, obedience (“carried out His ordinances”), righteousness, and humility (noted a second time for emphasis) are what the Lord is looking for (cf. Isa. 66:2). Approaching God with a contrite spirit oftentimes averts His wrath. His goal has been reached; His children are once again worshipping Him only.

¹⁰³ The *Good News Bible* has “come to your senses.”

¹⁰⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; NICOT), 291.

¹⁰⁵ Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999; NAC), 445.

¹⁰⁶ Robertson, 291.

¹⁰⁷ Bailey, 447.

The last part of the verse indicates it is possible the people may be spared. “The ‘perhaps’ reminds us of God’s sovereignty and warns against a cheap view of grace, the idea of sinning with impunity (Ro 6:1).”¹⁰⁸ A little hope is better than no hope.

V. 4 For Gaza will be abandoned And Ashkelon a desolation; Ashdod will be driven out at noon And Ekron will be uprooted.

The four cities named in this verse are all in the land of the Philistines, an area west of Israel. One of the five cities of Philistia, Gath, is left out likely because it was conquered by David and it was under the control of the Jews off and on for a number of years (2 Kings 18:8; 1 Chron. 18:1; 2 Chron. 26:6). It seems as well that Gaza was already “abandoned” (NASB; “forsaken,” KJV) by about AD 33 based on Acts 8:26 where that region is described as a desert.

The other three cities (Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron) will likewise be attacked and demolished. That Ashdod will be overrun at noon is unusual. Fighting normally doesn’t take place in the middle of the day since that is a hot time, if not the hottest time, of the day. The sun is high in the sky. One of two possibilities exists which may explain this note. First, perhaps it is a surprise attack because Ashdod would not be expecting a battle at midday. Second, the verse may mean Ashdod will be overrun *by* noon.¹⁰⁹

V. 5 Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, The nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines; And I will destroy you So that there will be no inhabitant.

This “woe” is the first of two found in Zephaniah (cf. 3:1). It indicates a round of judgment is coming (see Matt. 23). In the immediate context the judgment is to fall on Philistia as detailed in verse 4. We see Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria next on the hit list. No specific reason is presented.

The Cherethites (“Kerethite,” NIV) were originally from Crete¹¹⁰ and lived on the shores of the area variously called Canaan or the land of the Philistines. The warning given is quite harsh: “the Word of the Lord is against you,” “I will destroy you,” “no inhabitant.” Ezekiel 25:16 echoes this outcome: therefore, thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I will stretch out My hand against the Philistines, even cut off the Cherethites and destroy the remnant of the seacoast.” The future looks very scary and bleak but Judah would rejoice at such news – at least for now! “The same Lord also judges the people of the modern age who ignore God and his ways.”¹¹¹

V. 6 So the seacoast will be pastures, *With* caves for shepherds and folds for flocks.

This verse explains the result of the judgment and destruction of verse 5. Canaan will be a flat, open land good for animals instead of people. A region once thriving with civilization will now be

¹⁰⁸ Larry L. Walker, “Zephaniah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Rev. Ed.; Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, Eds., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 672.

¹⁰⁹ Walker, 674, 675.

¹¹⁰ Deuteronomy 2:23, Jeremiah 47:4, and Amos 9:7 imply as much with Caphtor standing for Crete.

¹¹¹ Bailey, 456.

meadows.¹¹²

V. 7 And the coast will be For the remnant of the house of Judah, They will pasture on it. In the houses of Ashkelon they will lie down at evening; For the LORD their God will care for them And restore their fortune.

The land will not be desolate forever. The Lord will allow His people, “the remnant of the house of Judah,” to settle on it. It is a remnant because they will be the ones who survive the Babylonian exile. “Theologically, the word [שְׂאֲרִייתָ, “remnant, leftover”] describes the people through whom God carries on his redemptive activity (Gen. 45:7; Isa. 37:32; Mic. 2:12, 4:7).”¹¹³ As suggested in verse 6, they will use it as pasture land for their animals. That they will live in Ashkelon indicates the Jews will be settling securely on the region of their former enemies, the Philistines. The Lord will “care for them” as His sheep as they will shepherd their actual sheep. God will indeed bless their efforts (“restore their fortune;” “turn away their captivity,” KJV). What a gracious God!

The verb “care for” can be more literally translated as “visit.” Of course a visit from Yahweh can be either bad (judgment), or good (blessing). It is utilized in 1:9 as judgment but here as blessing.

V. 8 “I have heard the taunting of Moab And the revilings of the sons of Ammon, With which they have taunted My people And become arrogant against their territory.

This verse begins a section (vv. 8-11) which describes the judgment on Moab and Ammon. These two nations are mentioned together likely because they were both ethnically related to the Jews.¹¹⁴ Sadly, Moab and Ammon were the result of the incestuous union between Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:36-38).

The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom of Judah during Zephaniah’s ministry was now in decline (about 640 BC). Such circumstances bolstered the pride of their eastern neighbors Moab and Ammon. The Lord Himself (“I have heard...”) announces that He is aware that these two peoples are ridiculing His people. The implication is He will do something about it.

V. 9 “Therefore, as I live,” declares the LORD of hosts, The God of Israel, “Surely Moab will be like Sodom And the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah-- A place possessed by nettles and salt pits, And a perpetual desolation. The remnant of My people will plunder them And the remainder of My nation will inherit them.”

That “something” is destruction and judgment. The Lord here makes a very somber and firm vow. Notice the extent of the taking of the vow: “as I live,” “Lord of hosts,” “God of Israel.” In effect He is saying this doom will come about as definitely as the Person I Am. The comparison is made between Moab and Ammon with Sodom and Gomorrah, respectively. It should be recalled the cataclysmic annihilation of the latter. Genesis states the Lord pelted them with “brimstone and

¹¹² Verse 6 is fraught with numerous exegetical and grammatical problems. See Walker, 676. Also, compare NASB with NIV.

¹¹³ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah” in *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, ed. by Thomas E. McComiskey), 933.

¹¹⁴ Walker, 676, 677.

fire” (Genesis 19:24; cf. 2 Peter 2:6).

God promised that area would be littered with “nettles and salt pits,” a designation for desolation. “Nettles” (“weeds,” NIV) have to do with the outer part of certain prickly plants. Having numerous “salt pits” would render the land unusable for agriculture. There is no end in sight for this pitiful situation (“perpetual desolation,” NASB; “a wasteland forever,” NIV). To this day those regions are barren. Whatever is left will be taken by the Jews, and only a remnant will be needed (cf. Isa. 1:9).¹¹⁵ Israel would rejoice at this news if for no other reason than Moab and Ammon were “traditional foes”¹¹⁶

V. 10 This they will have in return for their pride, because they have taunted and become arrogant against the people of the LORD of hosts.

The style of writing now switched from poetry to prose, at least in some translations (*e.g.*, NASB), and from first to third person as the prophet gives his outlook on the matter. This verse is discussing what judgment will happen to those enemies of God who have been harassing the Jews, namely the Moabites and Ammonites. Those two people groups are the antecedent for the word “they.” The judgment is retaliation for the pride of these foes.¹¹⁷ The Lord always takes care of His children.

Zephaniah had already heard of their arrogance (v. 8). Earlier God had graciously warned Moab about its pride (Isa. 16:6-14, 25:10, 11; Jer 48:29). Isaiah 16:14 advises, “But now the LORD speaks, saying, ‘Within three years, as a hired man would count them, the glory of Moab will be degraded along with all his great population, and his remnant will be very small and impotent.’” Steveson adds, “Her nobles, her soldiers, her leaders, all will suffer in the judgment.”¹¹⁸

V. 11 The LORD will be terrifying to them, for He will starve all the gods of the earth; and all the coastlands of the nations will bow down to Him, everyone from his own place.

This verse explains how the Lord will destroy His and Israel’s enemies. It will be a most terrifying time for them. To “starve all the gods” (NASB; “famish,” KJV) may mean He will stop the food being brought to these idols (which supposedly feeds them), or it could have the idea of causing all worship of them to cease. Notice they are described as deities “of the earth” in contrast to the God of Heaven. These are really no gods because there is only one true and living Lord (Isa. 46:9; 1 Cor. 8:4-6).

The “coastlands” (NASB; “every shore,” NIV) refers to people all around the world. It is sternly predicted they “will bow down” and worship the true God. They will not necessarily have to come to Jerusalem but will reverence Him wherever they are (“from his own place”). His Name will be “great among the nations” (Mal. 1:11, twice; cf. 1 Cor. 1:2). When the Lord reveals Himself

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Walker goes on to discuss the irony here. Moab and Ammon used to be places of refuge for those who had already experienced judgment. Now they will receive God’s judgment. Remember as well, this region is the one which Lot picked for himself when he separated from Abraham. Now the sons of Abraham will obtain this land.

¹¹⁶ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 344. Patterson adds, “Both nations had been denounced by God’s prophets before Zephaniah’s day (Isa. 15:1-16:14; 25:10-12; Amos 1:13-15; 2:1-5) and would be again soon afterward (Jer. 48:1-47; 49:1-6; Ezek. 21:20; 25:1-7, 8-11).”

¹¹⁷ Moab and Ammon fought Israel frequently, even to the end (2 Kings 25:25; Jer 40:11-14). Patterson, 344.

¹¹⁸ Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2003), 139.

there will be “fear and awe”¹¹⁹ (Ps. 76:12). Finally, here is a subtle indication Gentiles are part of the plan of salvation.¹²⁰

V. 12 “You also, O Ethiopians, will be slain by My sword.”

The “also” in this verse indicates the Ethiopians will be judged as were Moab and Ammon. As Egypt was ruled by Ethiopians (or Cushites)¹²¹ at this time may suggest Zephaniah had all of Egypt in mind as well. Whatever the extent of the region mentioned in this verse, the populace will die in battle (“by My sword”). The Lord sent Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to this area in 568 BC. That war was probably the fulfillment of this prophecy. See Ezekiel 30:24, 25. Egypt was soundly conquered.¹²² Israel, take heed!

V. 13 And He will stretch out His hand against the north And destroy Assyria, And He will make Nineveh a desolation, Parched like the wilderness.

The focus now changes from Ethiopia to Assyria, a state north of Israel, and the “superpower” of the day. “For more than a century, Assyria dominated the region and forced subservience from small nations such as Judah.”¹²³

God plans to level that empire as well. He expresses as much with His promise to “stretch out His hand.” Of course God the Father does not have a true hand; this statement is anthropomorphic. That is, ascribing human attributes to the divine. A pagan, arrogant (2:15)¹²⁴, terrifying, and cruel people, the Assyrians finally fell in 612 BC. The capital of Assyria was Nineveh. Strong terms are used to indicate what will happen to the city: “desolation,” “parched,” “wilderness.”¹²⁵ One might think of a desert (ESV, NIV, NRSV) when considering such a picture.¹²⁶ This illustration is amplified when it is recalled that Assyria had a superior irrigation system.

V. 14 Flocks will lie down in her midst, All beasts which range in herds; Both the pelican and the hedgehog Will lodge in the tops of her pillars; Birds will sing in the window, Desolation will be on the threshold; For He has laid bare the cedar work.

This verse is a continuation of verse 13. The absolute desolation of Assyria and especially Nineveh is graphically portrayed. Not just a few animals but “flocks” will occupy the land. The exact identity of the beasts mentioned is difficult to pin down. The NASB has “pelican” and

¹¹⁹ Walker, 678.

¹²⁰ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1986, 2002), 203.

¹²¹ See Patterson, 349, 350, for reasons of utilizing “Ethiopians” instead of “Cushites.”

¹²² A somewhat puzzling aspect of this short verse is that there is a “they” at the end of the Hebrew text. Such posture may imply the Lord is first viewing the Ethiopians as a close friend (“you”) but later as a condemned people. Two somewhat awkward but accurate translations could be “you Cushites...slain by My sword are they” (Walker, 679; Robertson, 309) or “The Ethiopians...they are the slain of My sword” (Patterson, 349).

¹²³ Bailey, 464.

¹²⁴ See Nahum 1:14 and 3:1-4.

¹²⁵ “Desolation” (שׁוּמָה) has more to do with the desolation itself whereas with “wilderness” (מִדְבָּר) the emphasis is on the result of the devastation. See Patterson, 354.

¹²⁶ Xenophon, an ancient Greek historian and philosopher, went looking for Nineveh in 401 BC but found no trace of it. See Walker, 680.

“hedgehog” whereas the NIV has “desert owl” and “screech owl” (so NRSV also). The pelican was an unclean animal (Lev. 11:18). The point is that these are animals which inhabit desolate regions. They have nothing to fear such as human intrusion, and feel comfortable establishing their homes in the rubble of the ruins.

The next phrase is somewhat difficult to translate although the idea is clear. A literal translation may be “a voice sings.” The upshot is these birds will not be afraid to roost on the sill (“threshold,” NASB) of the deserted windows. Cedar is a symbol of wealth, and thus to have it exposed to the elements would mean their deterioration. The contrast is unmistakable. A once thriving city is now a home for all sorts of creatures.

This “news report” is especially hopeful for Judah and Jerusalem. With Assyria no longer a threat, Josiah could continue his reforms.¹²⁷

V. 15 This is the exultant city Which dwells securely, Who says in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” How she has become a desolation, A resting place for beasts! Everyone who passes by her will hiss And wave his hand in contempt.

This verse is also a continuation of the judgment on Nineveh. The verse splits neatly in half. The first four lines speak of the arrogance of the Assyrians. The second half has to do with the destiny of the empire, already mentioned in verse 14. The first part of verse 15 depicts what Nineveh (its inhabitants) says about itself. It is “exultant,” preeminent and prominent (“carefree,” NIV). Its high and thick walls give assurance that it is impregnable (“dwells securely”).

The third and fourth lines are not casual statements but come from “her heart.” The sentiment expressed here comes very close to what the Lord says about Himself. “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me” (Isa. 46:9; cf. 45:6). Thus, Nineveh is associating itself with divinity. Could the worship of its leaders be far behind?

The Lord puts a powerful stop to that kind of blasphemy. Lines 5 and 6 reiterate that the whole area will be a “desolation,” fit only for wild animals. No people will be left. The last two lines of the verse contain two figures of speech. They indicate those who look on Assyria’s judgment “will hiss”¹²⁸ and “wave his hand” (“hisses and shakes his fist,” ESV; “scoff and shake their fists,” NIV). It is not known with certainty exactly what these expressions mean. They likely involve various emotions: “scorn, defiance, and horror.”¹²⁹ These thoughts would be laughable to people in Zephaniah’s time,¹³⁰ yet most all would agree that Assyria is getting the judgment it deserves.

¹²⁷ Bailey, 467.

¹²⁸ The Hebrew word may also be translated “whistle” (Isa. 5:26, 7:18; Zech. 10:8).

¹²⁹ Walker, 681.

¹³⁰ “God was about to bring down the loftiest empire the world had yet known and reduce its grand capital to rubble.” Patterson, 353.

Zephaniah 3

Chapter 3 tells of the judgment on the nations but a remnant for Israel

V. 1 Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, The tyrannical city!

The word “woe” has not appeared since Zeph. 2:5. As noted there, this word is an indication judgment is just around the corner. The “city” mentioned here (cf. “her,” “she” vv. 1-5) is in all likelihood Jerusalem. No other city fits as well with this context (“rebellious,” “tyrannical,” “the Lord is within her” (v. 5), *etc.*). That she is rebellious means the people are not submitting to God. Also, she is repressing others, contrary to Exod. 22:21. In addition, she is also given the moniker “defiled.” That is, Jerusalem has been polluted and contaminated in the spiritual sense. Later we read, for example, that the “priests have profaned the sanctuary” (v. 4). Indeed, a very unflattering description. The next several verses expand on this “woe” judgment.

V. 2 She heeded no voice, She accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the LORD, She did not draw near to her God.

The “she” (4 times) of course refers to Jerusalem. The main thrust of this verse is that the Jews would have nothing to do with God. They virtually ignored Him. “She heeded no voice” means they stubbornly refused to listen to anybody, much less the Lord. The next line expresses a similar tone. No one could tell them what to do; they wanted to do their own thing. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah did not trust in God. They felt safe and secure without Him. For emphasis Zephaniah put “in the Lord” first in the Hebrew. “From this corrupted fountain of distrust has issued the whole polluted stream of the city’s sins.”¹³¹

Finally, to top off their attitude, the people refused to even worship their God (“draw near”), Elohim. No other city or people had that wonderful privilege. “Can any nation with such arrogance survive? Zephaniah knew that the answer was no.”¹³² The Word is clear: “So all these curses shall come on you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the LORD your God by keeping His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you” (Deut. 28:45). Today we must be careful not to trust in the flesh or in worldly pursuits.

V. 3 Her princes within her are roaring lions, Her judges are wolves at evening; They leave nothing for the morning.

Zephaniah now shifts our attention from the Jews in general to their leaders and officials in particular. The princes are roaring lions in that they devour the people, showing no regard or respect. Her judges are no better. They, too, are animals. They go out at night to do their devious deeds. In fact, their actions are so thorough there is nothing left by sunrise. The ones who should be setting the godly example are evil to the core. “Thus justice is perverted in the insatiable greed of Jerusalem’s leadership.”¹³³ Little wonder the people are not as they should be. Evidence against the “tyrannical city” (v. 1; “city of oppressors,” NIV; cf. ESV) is mounting.

¹³¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; NICOT), 318.

¹³² Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999; NAC), 475.

¹³³ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 359.

V. 4 Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men; Her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law.

The religious leaders (prophets and priests) are the target in this verse. Prophets are to represent God to the people but instead are arrogant and faithless, performing their duties for selfish reasons. Thus, the Jews cannot receive a proper revelation from God. According to Deut. 18:20 prophets could be killed for such negligence. The priests are no better. They have defiled those things which they are supposed to keep clean, the Temple and the Law. Again one gets the idea that they are “serving the Lord” only as it profits them personally. With the religious leadership in such disarray, the general population must have had severe spiritual problems. Such a situation could only result in improper behavior for most, especially worshipping other gods. “Zephaniah lashes out against his contemporaries. A single prophet dares to condemn the many.”¹³⁴

V. 5 The LORD is righteous within her; He will do no injustice. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame.

In contrast to the officials and leaders, the Lord will bring a righteous standard to Jerusalem (“within her”).¹³⁵ Imagine that – God is still in the city despite all the sinning that goes on! The people can be reassured He will not allow any injustice to continue. “Morning by morning” (NIV; cf. Lam. 3:23) He will see to it that justice is given a prominent place. A more literal meaning is “in the morning, in the morning.” Business was conducted in the cool hours of the new day. God is consistent on this matter; He won’t fail. The unrighteous are quite different. Apparently, their hearts are so hard that they feel no remorse when injustices mount. They have no integrity, yet the Lord has no iniquity.

Motyer writes,¹³⁶ “While we long for true spirituality, we know that the pressure to go the other way is constant and that every thought, word, or deed without or against the Lord hardens the heart, making us just a little bit more like what we choose. This is why rebellion comes: when the will refuses the rule of the Lord, inner defilement and then outward wrong follow until, busy with wrongdoing,...the conscience goes blank.”

V. 6 “I have cut off nations; Their corner towers are in ruins. I have made their streets desolate, With no one passing by; Their cities are laid waste, Without a man, without an inhabitant.

God here begins to speak in the first person, lending even more authority to what is revealed. We have here again a very strong verse on the coming destruction. The Lord has made entire countries wastelands. Exactly which nations are in view is not stated. What is known is they have come to the point of deserving God’s judgment. More specific descriptions fill up the rest of the verse. The “corner towers” (“battlements,” ESV, NRSV; cf. 1:16) are part of the sturdy walls protecting the city. They have not been just overtaken but have been left “in ruins.” Likewise, the streets have been made absolutely deserted (NIV), not even a soul walking through them. Expanding on that thought, it is obvious that the whole city has been turned into a vast wilderness. What was once a proud and activity-filled location is now desolate. These devastating descriptions happened to Jerusalem just a few years later. Would the Jews ever learn the lesson God was

¹³⁴ Robertson, 320.

¹³⁵ The “her” in question must be Jerusalem because the Lord dwells in no other city.

¹³⁶ Page 945.

showing them (cf. 2:1-3)?

V. 7 “I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me, Accept instruction.’ So her dwelling will not be cut off *According to* all that I have appointed concerning her. But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.

The Lord now gives the reason He is bringing about all these judgments. He wants His people to fear Him and do what they know to do in obeying Him. Note Deuteronomy 31:9-13. Every seven years the Jews were to renew the covenant. The reading of the Law, especially the punishment aspects, was designed to put the fear of God in them. He did not want to destroy His people entirely (“So her dwelling will not be cut off...”), apparently something which had been “appointed.” Yet Jerusalem would not listen. They were not only corrupting matters, they were also more than ready to do so (cf. Gen. 6:12). The KJV even states “they rose early” to carry on with their shameful deeds.

V. 8 “Therefore wait for Me,” declares the LORD, “For the day when I rise up as a witness. Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, To assemble kingdoms, To pour out on them My indignation, All My burning anger; For all the earth will be devoured By the fire of My zeal.

The word “therefore” causes one to conclude that the Lord is about to summarize His judgment on Judah and the nations. However, “wait” has the idea of expectant waiting. Despite the coming judgments (those long-awaited judgments),¹³⁷ perhaps there is hope for Judah. Nevertheless, God’s wrath is certainly about to be poured out. Somehow the two (hope and judgment) do not cancel each other out. “Judgment and hope, then, rather than being irreconcilable themes, are two aspects of one divine perspective. Both are designed and intertwined to accomplish God’s purposes.”¹³⁸ The people in Judah know all this is for God’s glory. Yahweh then declares there will be a day when He will gather the nations only to judge them. There is disagreement concerning the phrase “as a witness” (NASB Updated, NRSV; “testify,” NIV). Some versions emend the word to mean “to the prey” (NASB, ESV, KJV). The choice is difficult because both could make sense in the context. I go with “witness” because God is about to make His announcement.

That announcement is that He will bring all nations and kingdoms together in order to send His wrath on them. Specifically, all His “indignation” and “burning anger.” The idea that this destruction is for “all the earth” (“whole world,” NIV) causes one to recall 1:2, 3. Nothing will be able to avoid the Lord’s fire. It’s quite possible there are some eschatological overtures here. At the Battle of Armageddon in particular the nations will be assembled to attack Israel but the Lord will destroy them all (Rev. 19:19-21).

V. 9 “For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, That all of them may call on the name of the LORD, To serve Him shoulder to shoulder.

Verses 9-13 provide additional information as to what the Day of the Lord entails.¹³⁹ The previous verse (v. 8) tells of horrible judgment but now (“then;” “at that time,” NRSV, ESV) and because of the judgment (“for” meaning “because,” NASB, ESV, KJV) the Lord will purify

¹³⁷ Patterson, 366.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 329.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 328.

the lips of the people (not just Israel) since they had corrupted their mouth with idol worship.¹⁴⁰ That is, He will clean up their speech so that they can call on Him.¹⁴¹ Perhaps Zephaniah is indicating the Gentiles will be saved.

Jesus said, “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man” (Matt. 15:18).¹⁴² Thus here in verse 9 the implication is God will clean the hearts of the people also. In a sense they will be able to pray to Him, to praise Him, with one voice (Gen. 4:26; Rom. 15:6).¹⁴³ “Shoulder to shoulder” is literally “one shoulder” (“one accord,” NRSV, ESV; “one consent,” KJV). In that manner (united) they will be able to serve their God.

V. 10 “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My dispersed ones, Will bring My offerings.”

This verse is difficult in that the translation and interpretation bring disagreement among Bible students. The land referred to is translated either Ethiopia (so NASB, KJV, NRSV) or Cush (so ESV, NIV), but the area in question is not in dispute. It is several hundred miles south of Israel, virtually the extremity of the known world at that time.

Walker notes,¹⁴⁴ “Earlier, Isaiah had described Cush as a land divided by rivers (Isa. 18:2, 7) that sent envoys by sea in boats over the water (18:2). Isaiah also described a remnant returning from such distant places as Cush and Egypt (11:11; 27:13); he depicted these peoples as bringing gifts to the Lord (Isa. 18:7).” Indeed, it is commonly held that the Blue and White branches of the Nile are found in Ethiopia.

The Hebrew word behind “worshipers” (so NASB, ESV, NIV; “suppliants” in KJV, NRSV) interestingly is found only twice in the OT, here and in Ezekiel 8:11 (KJV), and can literally be translated as “burners of incense.”

The next expression is the most varied in its translation. It could be “My dispersed ones” (NASB), “My scattered people” (NIV), or “My scattered ones” (NRSV). However, the ESV more literally translates it as “the daughter of my dispersed ones” (so KJV also). The words are different but the meaning is the same. The phrase has to do with the Jews who are scattered all over the known world. The last part of the verse is rendered “will bring me offerings.”¹⁴⁵ Cush was at one time the object of God’s judgment (Zeph. 2:12) but is now in the sphere of God’s grace.¹⁴⁶

If “My scattered ones” is in apposition to “My worshipers” (which appears to be reasonable), then the verse as a whole seems to be teaching that the Jews and Gentiles¹⁴⁷ will be restored to the

¹⁴⁰ Larry L. Walker, “Zephaniah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Rev. Ed.; Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 688.

¹⁴¹ Some believe the Tower of Babel curse will be reversed in that there will be one language during the Millennial Kingdom, and that language will be Hebrew since Israel is the primary nation of the time and the capital will be in Jerusalem.

¹⁴² Walker, 688.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 689.

¹⁴⁵ The Hebrew is actually singular. See KJV, ESV, and NRSV.

¹⁴⁶ J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah” in *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, ed. by Thomas E. McComiskey), 952.

¹⁴⁷ The Gentiles were likely in view in verse 9 also.

Lord and worship Him.

V. 11 “In that day you will feel no shame Because of all your deeds By which you have rebelled against Me; For then I will remove from your midst Your proud, exulting ones, And you will never again be haughty On My holy mountain.

“Verses 11-13 describe the future restoration of God’s people.”¹⁴⁸ “That day” probably has to do with the Day of the Lord, or certainly with end-time events. Unger understands the first part of this verse to mean the Tribulation will purge all the evil from among the Jewish people and thus will no longer be ashamed of their rebellion (“transgressed against me,” KJV). The following Millennial Kingdom will usher in tremendous blessing,¹⁴⁹ and verses 9 and 10 will be fulfilled.¹⁵⁰ Before, the people did not even acknowledge their sin and shame (2:1; 3:5).¹⁵¹ The verse also indicates one of their sins was pride. Perhaps many Jews and even Gentiles will have a “pharisaical spirit.”¹⁵²

It is at least somewhat encouraging that not *all* the people were very sinful. That the proud “will [be] remove[d] from your midst” implies some will remain. However, later, “God will remove Israel’s guilt and shame by removing the cause of them—the prideful element of society.”¹⁵³ Robertson expresses a similar thought: “Not only will guilt be eliminated; all the crippling psychological effects of sin shall be wiped away.”¹⁵⁴ There will be a pure community with a pure heart. They will rely on God’s righteousness and not their own (“you will never again be haughty”). “My holy mountain” refers to Jerusalem¹⁵⁵ if not the Temple itself. Even there they dared to carry their pride.¹⁵⁶

V. 12 “But I will leave among you A humble and lowly people, And they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.

In the previous verse the proud and the haughty were removed, and now by contrast the “humble and lowly” (“afflicted and poor,” so KJV; cf. Job 34:28, Isa. 26:6) have been left behind (Psa. 118:8); that is, a remnant (cf. Zeph. 3:13). This removal could have caused consternation among the people that perhaps God is ending the existence of Israel. However, that is not the case. These remnant are not so much destitute (although they can be described as that as well) as they are of a meek spirit (cf. Matt. 5:3). By this exchange, God “will create a people such as he has always wished to possess as his very own (Exod. 19:5, 6; Deut. 7:6).”¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁸ Walker, 690.

¹⁴⁹ Merrill Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 1938.

¹⁵⁰ Walker, 690.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Unger, 1938.

¹⁵³ Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah* (NY: Doubleday, 1994; AB), 135-36. Quoted by Bailey, 490.

¹⁵⁴ Robertson, 330.

¹⁵⁵ The “you” at the beginning of the verse is feminine singular which most scholars understand to be a clue that the holy city is meant.

¹⁵⁶ Bullock, 199.

¹⁵⁷ Motyer, 953.

Such a humble attitude will cause them to completely trust in (so KJV, NIV; “take/seek refuge in,” NASB, ESV, NRSV) the Lord. “Their confidence and strength are derived from God himself.”¹⁵⁸

V. 13 “The remnant of Israel will do no wrong And tell no lies, Nor will a deceitful tongue Be found in their mouths; For they will feed and lie down With no one to make them tremble.”

This verse further describes the wholesomeness and blessings which will mark the restoration after the judgement. The word “remnant” indicates the judgement is indeed completed (cf. Zeph. 2:7, 9). Yahweh will never break His promises nor totally do away with His chosen ones. The Lord always provides hope for His people. The Jews will be in a world where there is no lying, want, or fear. The words “feed and lie down” reminds one of the first two verses of Psalm 23. What a picture of contentment and peace of mind.¹⁵⁹ No doubt the Millennial Kingdom is in Zephaniah’s thoughts here. This society, in contrast with the pre-judgement one (3:3, 4), will not offend the Lord again. He forecasted this arrangement centuries earlier (Lev. 26:5, 6).¹⁶⁰

Although not stated specifically, one can safely assume the Lord has dealt with the hearts of those in this remnant. This verse is not implying these virtues are merely external show. Jesus made it very clear that what comes out of the mouth had its source in the heart (Matt. 15:11, 18).

The Day of the Lord is not over, however. The prophet continues to refer to “that day” (Zeph. 3:16) and to “at that time” (vv. 19, 20) later in this passage. The Day of the Lord does not involve judgement only. The term has to do with any direct intervention into the world by God, whether judgement or blessing.

These last few verses (vv. 9-13) suggest the Gentiles will experience the favor of God as well (“peoples,” v. 9). Also, in verse 8 He declared “all the earth will be devoured By the fire of My zeal.” This worldwide provision and protection is the appropriate response to the global destruction depicted in Zeph. 1:2, 3.

V. 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

The first word in the Hebrew (רני) is an interesting word in that it can have so many nuances. The basic idea is to raise one’s voice. It was utilized as a cry of lamentation (Lam. 2:19), awe (Lev. 9:24) and joy (here and Psalm 96:12).¹⁶¹

Here Zephaniah (and the Lord) encourage the Israelites to give the appropriate response to the Lord’s blessings and the grace by which it came about. Such encouragement begins here and continues to the end of the book. All God’s children should thank Him for not treating us the way we deserve to be treated. The repeated imperatives (“shout,” “rejoice,” “exult”) indicate these are not thoughts and actions which should be quickly forgotten and are not to be just outward but “with all your heart.” Further, these actions are to be just as intense as are the worldwide and severe

¹⁵⁸ Walker, 690.

¹⁵⁹ Patterson (372) summarizes this passage with an alliteration: “sustenance, serenity, and security.”

¹⁶⁰ Robertson, 332.

¹⁶¹ Motyer, 956. Usually the NASB, Updated translates it as “sing” but here as “shout.” Most major English versions have “sing” (ESV, KJV, NIV, NKJV, NRSV).

actions of the judgement. Some scholars doubt the authenticity of these verses (14-20) because the exile is yet to come. Nevertheless, when God says it, it *will* come to pass. It's as good as done! The Israelites are assured everything will be alright in the end. Such a utopia will be established ultimately and permanently when Jesus returns ("in that day," v. 16).

V. 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more.

This verse likewise counteracts all the difficulties (external and internal) with which Israel has been dealing: their judgements, their enemies, and their fear. Israel's enemies are not specified here but would certainly include Assyria and all other foreign powers which might afflict the Jews. Verse 11 also addressed internal matters ("you will feel no shame"). Even more exciting, their King will be right there with them. Verse 17 makes this bold declaration, too: "The LORD your God is in your midst" (cf. Zechariah 9:9, 10.¹⁶²).

V. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp.

The opening words ("in that day") make it clear Zephaniah primarily has the future in mind. God is going to bless Israel after the exile (the near-future fulfillment of these recent verses) yet a thorough fulfillment awaits the end times. However, this verse raises a question: why was Jerusalem told to not be afraid? What did they have to fear? Perhaps this is a "leftover" reaction. The Jews of Zephaniah's day were so used to constant fear of invasion that they might have a difficult time trying to break this "habit." In addition, it is likely many Jews were in near constant fear that the Lord would rain down judgement for the nation's wickedness.¹⁶³ The following verses provide more assurance.

In Hebrew culture, the hands represented power. Thus, for one's hands to "fall limp" meant there was no strength to go on in life. The person was basically paralyzed in the face of fear.¹⁶⁴ The verb "fall limp" is one word in Hebrew (רפה). The idea is to relax or sink down. An example is found in Judges 19:9, "the day has drawn to a close." "In the parallelism of these two lines, fear is the inward state and listless hands the external evidence and consequence." By contrast, Israelites would lift their hands in prayer (Psalm 28:2), praise (Psalm 63:40), and worship (Psalm 134:2).¹⁶⁵

V. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

Verse 17 continues the theme of verse 16. The thoughts expressed here result in great inspiration and encouragement! It is easy to think God is "out there," not readily accessible. Here the firm declaration is made: "The LORD your God is in your midst" (cf. v. 15). The word *your* is singular and a nice personal touch. That God is personal is likewise reflected in the second half of the verse. There He expresses great emotions concerning His people.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps the Israelites

¹⁶² Robertson, 337. Berlin, 143.

¹⁶³ Berlin, 143.

¹⁶⁴ Bailey, 495.

¹⁶⁵ The last three sentences come from Motyer, 957.

¹⁶⁶ Robertson, 339.

greatest fear was an attack from a foreign empire. They no longer need to be afraid because the Lord Himself has fought for them – and won! He is the “victorious warrior.” Other places where this Hebrew word (גִּבּוֹר) has to do with a military victor are Psalms 24:8 and 45:3, 4.¹⁶⁷ The word “victorious” can also mean “save” (so ESV, KJV, NKJV, NIV). This warrior is in contrast to the one who “cries out bitterly” (Zeph. 1:14).¹⁶⁸

Again, notice the upbeat tone of the second half of the verse: “exult,” “joy,” “rejoice,” “joy.” Dictionary.com defines “exult” as “triumphant joy; rejoice exceedingly.” The last occurrence of “joy” is translated as “singing” in most other versions (ESV, KJV, NKJV, NIV).

Students of the Scriptures have debated a long time as to what “He will be quiet in His love” suggests. The NIV has “he will quiet you with his love” which is extremely similar to ESV. Patterson (p. 383) lists six proposals which have been given over the years. “He will quiet you”

has been explained variously as (1) keeping silent about or covering up people’s sins...(2) God’s silence due to the overwhelming depths of His love...(3) God’s preoccupation with planning Israel’s good...(4) God’s resting in His love...(5) a means for the believer to cultivate in his heart peace and silence...and (6) God’s singing out of the joy of His loving concern.

Although I like the ESV and NIV here, the word “you” is not in the Hebrew explicitly. However, it is not unreasonable to insert “over you” (or more preferably, simply “you”). It is not unreasonable because the last three sentences are in parallel and the first and last sentences *do* contain “over you.”¹⁶⁹ Number (1) above is also attractive. The Lord has finished His judgement against Israel and will thus not bring up their sins again, motivated by His love.¹⁷⁰ “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” declares Jeremiah 31:34. At least one major version (NET) emends one letter in the Hebrew to come up with “renew,” the basis of which may be from the LXX. Such a maneuver doesn’t really resolve the matter because the sentence can still be legitimately interpreted in numerous ways.¹⁷¹ Whichever way is the best English translation, the basic idea is the same. Yahweh is going to soothe His people with His love, either by not mentioning their sins, protecting them from enemies, or whatever.

Many people raise the question, how can the Lord have such a deep love for sinners (cf. Psalm 8:4)? The answer lies in the nature of God. There is nothing in sinful mankind which invites His love, but He can love them because “God is love” (1 John 4:8).¹⁷²

V. 18 “I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts-- They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The tone for the last of this prophecy has become dramatic and personal. Up till now Zephaniah has been “speaking” this prophecy. Now it is God Himself speaking directly. Numerous times in this book the expression “I will” has appeared, but in the last three verses (18-20) alone, “I will” occurs seven times in the NIV (five times in the NASB). The Lord is personally promising that all

¹⁶⁷ Motyer, 957.

¹⁶⁸ Patterson, 378.

¹⁶⁹ Robertson, 340, 341. It should be noted as well that here we have another personal touch. The “you” is singular.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. (339) labels Zeph. 3:17 “the John 3:16 of the OT.”

¹⁷¹ See Walker (693, 695) for some details.

¹⁷² Robertson, 341.

things will be restored – and we know God keeps His promises! Specifically, He will judge Israel’s enemies and place His people in the Promised Land.

The current verse is perhaps the most difficult of Zephaniah’s to translate into English. “Even so conservative a scholar [of yesteryear] as Keil admits, ‘Every clause of ver. 18 is difficult.’”¹⁷³ Motyer even speculates Zephaniah was so excited about what was going to happen that he couldn’t write out his Hebrew very well!¹⁷⁴ A survey of the other major versions will affirm this statement.

- “I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach.” (ESV)
- “I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.” (KJV)
- “The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you.” (NIV)
- “as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.” (NRSV)

Only the NASB mentions Zion, and it’s italicized because it isn’t in the Hebrew. However, its occurrence here is not too far-fetched because “Zion” does appear in verses 14 and 16.

The first part of verse 18 mentions “those who grieve.” Why are these people grieving? Because they are in exile and cannot participate in the feasts of Israel. God promises (“I will”) to resolve the problem. He is going to gather them, meaning He will return them to the Holy Land. They had been in Zion before (“they came from you”), and now they will come out of exile. Exile is rarely pleasant and it had become “a burden on them.”

V. 19 “Behold, I am going to deal at that time With all your oppressors, I will save the lame And gather the outcast, And I will turn their shame into praise and renown In all the earth.

The word “behold” is meant to get our attention. It’s as if God is skywriting, “Hey, look what I’m going to do!” It thus also connotes a measure of certainty.

Here, the Lord specifies what exactly He is going to do for His repressed people.¹⁷⁵ His first course of action is to deal with those who harassed them. The Jews were likely further encouraged that Yahweh was going to do so with “all” their foes; not one would escape His judgement. Next on His list (not necessarily chronologically) is His intent to “save the lame.” From what does the Lord intend to save (or deliver) them? Keep in mind those in ancient Israel who were physically challenged had it even worse than those of today. Not only were they looked down upon but also they were unemployable.¹⁷⁶ Since women had no way to make money except through immorality and thus had to completely rely on a husband, a lame man would probably never marry, or, if married, would not be able to support his family. Those in such a situation completely depended

¹⁷³ Patterson, 385.

¹⁷⁴ Motyer, 960.

¹⁷⁵ Note again, “I am going to...” = “I will...” Too, who are these oppressors? Jews? Foreign empires? Both? Zeph. 3:1 may indicate they are Jews. See Bailey, 498.

¹⁷⁶ It is tempting to say they couldn’t go to the synagogue but that doesn’t appear to be the case. In Matt. 12 (parallels Mark 3 and Luke 6) and Luke 14, a person is present who is physically challenged.

on the generosity of other family and friends. God promised to save them from such a destitute and lonely place in society.

The outcasts were even more destitute. That label suggests they had no part of the social *or* religious aspects of the culture. The Lord promises to bring them (“gather”) back in. Robertson (p. 345) points out 2 Samuel 7:10: “I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly.” It is also wonderful to view this gathering as being “to [God] and his care.”¹⁷⁷ What a gracious Lord we have!

Finally, He will “turn their¹⁷⁸ shame into praise and renown.” The word “renown” (רָם, “fame,” KJV, NKJV) is most frequently translated “name,” usually in the sense of good reputation.¹⁷⁹ Instead of being the dregs of society in the eyes of their fellow citizens,¹⁸⁰ they will be the cream of the crop. Instead of being looked down upon, they will be looked up to. The expression “in all the earth” (“in every land,” NIV) indicates even these were taken into exile.

God did restore the fortunes of Israel in ancient times, yet this is also a preview of what is going to happen in the end times as well (“at that time”). The Lord had scattered them (ch. 1) but now He is bringing them back.¹⁸¹

V. 20 “At that time I will bring you in, Even at the time when I gather you together; Indeed, I will give you renown and praise Among all the peoples of the earth, When I restore your fortunes before your eyes,” Says the LORD.

Even a brief reading of this verse leads to the correct conclusion that it is very similar to the previous verse. No doubt the Lord did so to make sure we got the point: He is going to bless and restore His people. Note some parallels:

Verse 19	Verse 20
“gather”	“bring in”/“gather” ¹⁸²
“praise and renown”	“renown and praise” (same Hebrew nouns)
“at that time”	“at that time” (twice)
“all the earth”	“all the peoples of the earth”
“I will” (twice)	“I will” (twice)

When Yahweh promises “I will bring you in,” He is, of course, referring to the Promised Land. One day every single Jew throughout the world will be brought into Israel! “The work of

¹⁷⁷ David Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988, 2009; TOTC), 119.

¹⁷⁸ The antecedent of “their” is unclear. Is it “just” the lame and outcast, or are all Israelites included? I tend toward the former, but certainly God watches over all His people.

¹⁷⁹ If you like rhyming words, consider: lame, shame, name!

¹⁸⁰ Jesus does not look upon anyone as “dregs.”

¹⁸¹ Walker, 694.

¹⁸² Both occurrences of “gather” are the same Hebrew verb, קָבַץ.

redemption is the work of the Lord.”¹⁸³

Also throughout the world, they will have a good name (literal meaning of “renown;” so KJV; “fame,” NKJV). Berlin adds (p. 148), “This last section of the book marks a reversal of previous parts, especially 1:10-16: the noise of battle and defeat becomes the sound of celebration and triumph; God the destructive warrior is now the protector...” As if that isn’t enough, God will give them material blessings, too (“restore your fortunes”). It is not clear what is suggested by the words “before your eyes.” As stated in the Introduction, Zephaniah’s prophecy took place between 635 and 630 BC. The return from the seventy years of captivity was about a century later. One possible solution is the word “fortunes” (שְׁבוּיָהּ) could also be translated “captivities” (so Robertson). Thus, Zephaniah’s contemporaries returning to the land was the immediate fulfillment and the return after the seventy years was the ultimate fulfillment.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Walker, 694.

¹⁸⁴ Bailey, 499, believes the return from the seventy-year exile was the immediate fulfillment but I don’t see it.

Excursus: Further notes on Zephaniah 1:1

1) Does the name Cush (1:1) mean Zephaniah was an Ethiopian since Cush is often used in the Bible for Ethiopia (Gen. 2:13 and many other passages, especially Isaiah)? The short answer is: I don't think so. To conclude Zephaniah was an Ethiopian is based on flimsy evidence. The name Cush does not automatically indicate that person was from Cush. In Psalm 7:1, a man named Cush is identified as a Benjamite. However, there are some scholars who are of the opinion that Cush was an Ethiopian.

This issue may be related as to why the genealogy for Zephaniah is so lengthy (see commentary). Just in case people did get the idea that the prophet was an Ethiopian, and thus a foreigner, the author made Zephaniah's ethnicity certain by mentioning Hezekiah specifically. The Jews would have been very skeptical about a message from a Gentile.

2) Is this Hezekiah the man who was king of Judah (716-687 BC)? Some scholars assert this person is *not* that Hezekiah. They reason that if this were *the* Hezekiah there would be the word "King" before his name. After all, they would continue, Hezekiah was a common name. That reasoning is understandable, but the question must be asked: why would verse 1 mention this Hezekiah if he weren't important? The lengthy genealogy of Zephaniah 1:1 served at least two purposes. First, it proved Zephaniah was indeed a Jew (see above). Second, it suggests the prophet had royal blood in him, as implied by the fact that King Hezekiah was his great-great grandfather. This second point explains how and why Zephaniah was able to be so familiar with the royalty at the time of Josiah's reign (see commentary).

One other related issue needs to be addressed. At least one conservative scholar has noted that Manasseh, Hezekiah's oldest son, was 12 when he became king (2 Kings 21:1), which was about 697 BC. If that is the case, then there would not be enough time for Zephaniah to be a man by the time Josiah took the throne (640 BC) and thus that scholar maintains this was not *the* Hezekiah. Specifically what this scholar is thinking is this: **1)** Manasseh had to have been born about 708 BC if he were 12 in 697 BC. **2)** Hezekiah's second son was Amariah (Zeph. 1:1). **3)** Thus, Amariah had to have been born after 708 BC. **4)** Therefore, even if Amariah had been born in 707 BC, one would have to "squeeze" in Cush and Gedaliah before Zephaniah was even born, much less a grown man, in order to be in Josiah's administration. Even if each of these men were 20 when their eldest son was born, that would mean Zephaniah would have been born about 647 BC, making him just 7 when Josiah became king. It is not likely Josiah (or anyone else) would believe a little kid had received a message from the Lord.

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