

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Zephaniah

“That terrible day of the Lord is near. . . . It will be ... a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom” ([Zeph 1:14-15](#)). Zephaniah’s words send a chill through the soul. Will the day of the Lord spell the end to everything? Zephaniah’s prophecy portrays the coming judgment, but it also presents God’s promise that his faithful people will one day enjoy a world of everlasting righteousness and joy.

Setting

Zephaniah lived in changing times. Toward the end of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's last military campaigns, King Amon apparently led Judah to participate in the widespread anti-Assyrian uprising that took place in many of the western countries of the Near East. Since Ashurbanipal moved swiftly to crush the rebellion, Judah's leaders assassinated Amon (around 640 BC) and replaced him with his son Josiah.

Josiah was only eight years old when he became king of Judah. He enjoyed a long reign (640–609 BC) as a righteous king. In the eighteenth year of his reign, while repairs were being made to the Temple, a scroll of the Book of the Law was found ([2 Kgs 22:8](#); [2 Chr 34:14–15](#)). After hearing the law read to him, Josiah led his people in renewal and reform, reinstating God-ordained religious observances ([2 Kgs 23:1–25](#); [2 Chr 34:29–35:19](#)).

Before this pivotal event, the kingdom of Judah largely followed the idolatrous practices of Manasseh and Amon. Judah's people were so devoted to apostasy that it ultimately brought about their doom ([2 Kgs 21:10–25](#); [2 Chr 33:17, 21–24](#)).

Zephaniah prophesied early in Josiah's reign, after the death of Amon and before the Book of the Law was rediscovered. The time was characterized by religious indifference, social injustice, and economic greed ([Zeph 1:4–13](#); [3:1–4](#), [7](#)). A true prophet of God was needed, and Zephaniah was such a man; he may have helped prepare people's hearts for Josiah's sweeping reforms.

Summary

Zephaniah begins his prophecy by announcing *the day of the Lord*. This expression signified God's coming judgment on the sinful world ([1:2-3](#), [14-18](#)), including his people in Judah and Jerusalem ([1:4-13](#)). Much like the people of Israel in the time of Amos some 125 years earlier, the people of Judah looked forward to "that day" as a time when God would vindicate them by destroying their enemies. Like Amos, however, Zephaniah had to tell his people that their covenant relationship with God did not make them immune to judgment. Because the day of the Lord would fall impartially on all wicked people, Zephaniah urged his fellow citizens to repent, to seek the Lord, and to live righteously in all humility ([2:1-3](#)). Perhaps then they might experience the Lord's protection in the coming time of wrath.

The implications of Zephaniah's prophecy are clear. The nations neighboring Judah would suffer terrible judgment because of their crimes against God's people, their arrogant pride, and their defiance of the Lord ([2:4-15](#)). However, Judah would not escape the Lord's chastening hand, because its spiritual and civil leaders had led society into total corruption despite knowing God's standards. In addition, the people of Judah had not taken proper notice of God's sovereign judgment on other nations for crimes like their own ([3:1-7](#)).

These impending judgments were a precursor to a coming time of judgment that would engulf all nations on earth ([3:8](#)). However, judgment would not be the end: The day of judgment would come so that a day of salvation could follow ([3:9-20](#)). God promised restoration and blessing for a remnant from Israel and for all people ([3:9](#)).

Zephaniah records God's future plan to remove all proud and arrogant people from the earth; only those who "trust in the name of the Lord" will remain ([3:12](#)). God will gather his scattered people and restore them to their land, where they will live in righteousness and safety, worshiping the Lord ([3:9-12](#)). The "remnant of Israel" will enjoy the outpouring of God's blessings and rejoice in him forever ([3:13-19](#)). The judgment and salvation announced in Zephaniah foreshadow God's final act of bringing judgment and salvation at the return of Jesus Christ (see [Rev 19:11-22:5](#)).

Author

Little is known of Zephaniah beyond the lineage in [1:1](#), which traces his ancestry to Hezekiah. Jewish and Christian expositors traditionally equate this Hezekiah with the king bearing that name (see [2 Kgs 18:1-20:20](#)), which would mean that Zephaniah was of royal descent and probably a positive influence in the life of young King Josiah. The unusual attention to four generations of family lineage indicates at the very least that Zephaniah came from a distinguished family.

Zephaniah lived in Jerusalem and was aware of conditions there ([Zeph 1:10-13](#)). He was a man of keen spiritual sensitivity and moral perception who decried the apostasy and immorality of the people, especially those in positions of leadership ([1:4-6](#), [9](#), [17](#); [3:1-4](#), [7](#), [11](#)). He denounced the materialism and greed that exploited the poor ([1:8](#), [10-13](#), [18](#)). He was aware of current conditions in surrounding nations and announced God's judgment on those nations for their sins ([2:4-15](#)). Above all, this prophet had a deep concern for the Lord's reputation ([1:6](#); [3:7](#)) and for all who humbly trust in God ([2:3](#); [3:9](#), [12-13](#)).

Date

Zephaniah himself recorded that his prophetic ministry was during the time of Josiah (640–609 BC; see [1:1](#)). Several facts suggest that Zephaniah prophesied during the early days of Josiah's reign, before the discovery of the Book of the Law and the reforms that followed. Zephaniah reported that religious practices in Judah were still plagued by Canaanite syncretistic rites such as those that characterized the era of Manasseh ([1:4–5, 9](#)). Many people failed to worship the Lord at all ([1:6](#)), leaders were enamored of wearing the clothing of foreign merchants ([1:8](#)) who had extensive business enterprises in Jerusalem ([1:10–11](#)), and Judah's society was beset by socio-economic ills ([1:12–13, 18](#)) and political and religious corruption ([3:1–4, 7, 11](#)). Josiah's reforms corrected much of this (around 622 BC; [2 Kgs 23:4–14](#)). Therefore, a date for Zephaniah's prophecy between 635 and 622 BC is likely.

Meaning and Message

Like his contemporaries Nahum and Habakkuk, Zephaniah presents God as the sovereign Lord of earth's history. God, the judge of all ([Zeph 1:2-3, 7, 14-18; 3:8](#)), punishes the wickedness of people ([1:8-9, 17; 3:7, 11](#)) and nations ([2:4-15; 3:6](#)). This sovereign Judge has determined a time when he will intervene in the world's history to subdue wickedness and bring in everlasting righteousness. That day (the *day of the Lord*) will include all nations ([1:2-4; 2:4-15; 3:8](#)). God will pour out his wrath in judgment against humanity's sin and rebellion.

Zephaniah focuses on the basic problem of human pride ([2:15](#)), which engenders a spirit of inner wickedness ([1:3-6, 17; 3:1, 4](#)) and causes people to reason that God will not intervene in human affairs ([1:12](#)). They go on in their violence and deceit ([1:9](#)), and their greed oppresses those around them ([1:10-11, 13, 18; 3:3](#)). God may rescind the penalty that sinners deserve if they truly repent ([2:1-3](#)), but such spiritual virtues as righteousness, humility, faith, and truth are necessary ([3:12-13](#)). God will gather and purify a humble and faithful remnant ([3:9-10](#)), restore them to their land ([3:20](#)), and give them victory over their enemies ([2:7, 9](#)). Jerusalem will be a blissful place ([3:11, 18](#)) because God will save and bless his people ([3:14-20](#)).

Zephaniah's message of personal accountability for sin is echoed in New Testament teachings ([Rom 2:5-6; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 6:17; 19:11-21](#)). It remains true that God's rich grace is available to those of humble heart ([1 Pet 5:5-6](#)) so that they may find forgiveness of sin ([Eph 1:7](#)) and the sure hope of everlasting life and blessedness ([Titus 3:4-7; Rev 21:1-22:5](#)).