

Zephaniah

“Be silent in the presence of the Lord GOD;
For the day of the LORD is at hand.” (Zeph 1:7)

For many in Zephaniah’s day it may have seemed like the Lord had hidden himself from the plight of His people. Unrighteous leadership had all but abolished the worship of His name; moral and spiritual corruption was rampant. Judah had failed to learn the lesson of Samaria’s judgment and was about to experience the same. However, God was very much interested in Judah’s condition and in its future; which is why He sent Zephaniah with the message of the judgments of the Day of the Lord. God had regularly visited His people with discipline and destruction, not for the purpose of their demise but for their purification and restoration. Now He was about to do it again. Would the cycle ever end? Zephaniah’s prophecy of the Day of the Lord looked beyond the imminent judgment to a time when Israel’s remnant would not fail and Israel’s enemies would no longer afflict.

Authorship

Zephaniah, whose name means “The Lord hides” or “The Lord has hidden” has the most extensive genealogy of any of the prophets. If Hezekiah is the Judean king mentioned in 1:1, then the prophet was from the House of David. His knowledge of Jerusalem suggests that the capital city was Zephaniah’s home.

Date

The prophecy dates itself in the days of Josiah who reigned from 640-609 B.C. Nineveh’s destruction, which occurred in 612 B.C. is still future in Zephaniah. The description of Judah’s spiritual and moral decay would suggest that the prophecy was

given before Josiah's great reform of 622 B.C. A date between 630-622 B.C. is reasonable.

Historical Setting

Politically, Assyria's power was on the decline and Babylon was on the rise. Egypt was attempting to reestablish its influence and all other nations found themselves caught somewhere in the middle. Spiritually, Judah was still reaping the consequences of the long and wicked reign of Manasseh (686-642 B.C.) and his son Amon (642-640 B.C.). Canaanite cults had been reestablished and every kind of pagan religious practice was reinstated. Manasseh even practiced human sacrifice.¹ Hence, Josiah inherited a kingdom steeped in pagan religion and human corruption. The nation was headed for the judgment of Samaria, despite the sincere but short-lived reform of King Josiah in 622 B.C.

Original Readers

The prophecy was directed to the people of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, less than fifty years before the Babylonian captivity. The judgment of a number of other nations is predicted in Zephaniah's words, but the primary message was for Judah.

Occasion

It was not so much a historical event that precipitated Zephaniah's ministry as it was the moral and spiritual condition of Jerusalem and Judah. An instrument of judgment is supposed in Zephaniah but never named. Simply put, the time was ripe for Judah's judgment.²

¹ Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 433-36.

² Bullock, writing on Judah's spiritual condition, says: "The aftereffect of Manasseh's religious policies could be seen all over the land. Zephaniah may have had much to do with the changes

Special Issues

The Nature of the Day of the Lord. The Day of Yahweh seems to refer to immediate judgment and yet also, in certain contexts, to an eschatological out-pouring of God's wrath. It is a fluid concept that refers to a condition of judgment with the purpose of purifying the covenant people for obedience and blessing. The context determines whether it is being used historically or eschatologically or both.³

Message

Through the judgment of the Day of the Lord Yahweh will prepare Judah to realize her ultimate blessing by producing a purified remnant and removing hostile kingdoms.

Outline

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| I. | Introduction to Zephaniah's prophecy of the Day of the Lord: The Word of the Lord came to Zephaniah in the days of Josiah. | 1:1 |
| II. | The judgments of the Day of the Lord will prepare a people for covenant faithfulness. | 1:2—3:8 |
| A. | Prologue to the Day of the Lord: Yahweh's prerogative of judgment extends to the whole earth. | 1:2—3 |
| B. | The judgment of Judah will prepare a remnant. | 1:4—2:3 |
| 1. | It will purge the land of the wicked. | 1:4—13 |
| a. | It will rid the land of pagan religion. | 1:4—6 |
| b. | It will rid the land of foreign influence. | 1:7—8 |
| c. | It will rid the land of oppression. | 1:9—11 |
| d. | It will rid the land of the spiritually apathetic. | 1:12—13 |
| 2. | It will purify the land of all its dwellers. | 1:14—18 |

that occurred in Josiah's thinking and quite likely should receive a great deal of credit for the bold and courageous reform that grew out of them." (C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 169).

³ With respect to judgment in Zephaniah Merrill observes: "The line between historical and eschatological fulfillment is often a very fine one and difficult to discern. Here in Zephaniah, as in all the prophets, that demarcation is blurry. It is clear, however, that God's judgment on Judah and the nations took place more than once in Old Testament times and that there always emerged from it a purified people who embraced his covenant terms of salvation. It is equally true that the judgments and restorations of historical times did not exhaust what the prophets had in view, but that there yet remains a climactic and final encounter between the Lord and all humankind in which judgment and salvation will find ultimate expression." (Merrill, *Kingdom*, 457; see also Greg A. King, "The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March, 1995): 16-32).

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| | 3. | It will produce a remnant from the meek of the earth. | 2:1–3 |
| C. | | The judgment of the surrounding nations will secure the land for the remnant. | 2:4–15 |
| | 1. | Philistia will be removed for the flocks of the remnant. | 2:4–7 |
| | 2. | Moab and Ammon will become the possession of the remnant. | 2:8–11 |
| | 3. | Ethiopia will be slain. | 2:12 |
| | 4. | Assyria will be laid desolate. | 2:13–15 |
| D. | | The judgment of Jerusalem will remove the corrupt leaders. | 3:1–7 |
| E. | | Epilogue to the Day of the Lord: Wait for Yahweh’s judgments because they are determined. | 3:8 |
| III. | | The Blessings of the Day of the Lord shall be for all peoples. | 3:9–20 |
| | A. | All peoples will call on the name of Yahweh. | 3:9–13 |
| | | 1. The Gentile nations will worship and serve Him. | 3:9–12 |
| | | 2. The remnant of Israel shall dwell before Him in righteousness. | 3:13 |
| | B. | Jerusalem will rejoice in the salvation and love of Yahweh. | 3:14–17 |
| | C. | The sorrowful and afflicted will be restored. | 3:18–20 |

Argument

I. Introduction to Zephaniah’s prophecy of the Day of the Lord: The Word of the Lord came to Zephaniah in the days of Josiah (1:1).

Zephaniah ministered in a situation that was guaranteed to end in judgment, even though his king, Josiah, would make a valiant attempt at spiritual reformation. He was called to announce that judgment, though his message would go far beyond the punitive elements of the Day of the Lord.

II. The judgments of the Day of the Lord will prepare a people for covenant faithfulness (1:2—3:8).

The Day of the Lord was a recurring work of judgment whereby God dealt with his wayward people in punishment, purification, and preparation. It was always designed to produce a remnant of those who would walk in covenant obedience in the hope of realizing the full extent of the promised blessings of the patriarchs. The prophecy

opens with a prologue expressing Yahweh's prerogative of judgment (1:2–3). His is the sovereign right and divine power to judge the whole earth when necessary.

Though the Day of the Lord effects all nations, it is specifically designed for the purification and preparation of Israel. This is the subject of first section (1:4—2:3) though even the judgment of the nations described in 2:4–15 also has positive significance for the covenant people. When the Babylonian captivity arrived (though the identity of Yahweh's instrument of judgment is never mentioned) it would significantly rid the land of those elements that had so compromised and weakened Israel's faith (1:12–13). It would have the effect of fire purifying the earth (1:14–18) in preparation for the purified remnant that would return (2:1–3). There would need to be a land for the nation to come back to, and Yahweh's judgment provided for that (2:4–15). The remnant (cf. 2:7, 9) would find pasture for their flocks where the Philistines had lived (2:4–7) and extra land that had belonged to Moab and Ammon (2:11). Ethiopia would be no threat to the south (2:12) and the power of Assyria would be broken in the north (2:13–15). The uniqueness of Israel's experiences of the Day of the Lord was that they came out better off than when they went in with respect to their capacity to keep Yahweh's covenant. Since leadership was crucial to Israel's life as God's priest-nation (Exod 19:5–6) Jerusalem and her inhabitants would have to undergo purification as well (3:1–7). An epilogue on the Day of the Lord concludes the first part of Zephaniah's message. Israel is to wait for its purifying and preparatory work because it has been divinely determined (3:8).

III. The Blessings of the Day of the Lord shall be for all peoples (3:9–20).

Ultimately the Day of the Lord would result in a world at peace and in security, with Israel at the head of the nations and with Yahweh as the object of the nations'

worship. Zephaniah envisions these blessings in the conclusion of his message. The Day of the Lord is never without hope. The Gentile nations will worship and serve Yahweh (3:9–12) and Israel will do no unrighteousness (3:13). Jerusalem will be a joyous place where salvation and love are continually displayed (3:14–17). Sorrow, oppression, and affliction of all kinds will be overturned in a great restoration.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the conditions described in the Zephaniah's blessings of the Day of the Lord did not come to pass upon Israel's return from captivity, and that, indeed, they have not yet been realized. This is because the Day of the Lord has not seen its last manifestation. Someday Israel will experience Yahweh's wrath for the last time. In that day the Lord will give Israel "fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth" (3:20) and "the King of Israel, Yahweh, [will be] in [their] midst" (3:15) for the Day of the Lord will have accomplished its work.

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