

Introduction to Zephaniah

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August, 2016

Background

Prophet's Name

The name *זְפַנְיָהּ*, *Zephaniah*, is a combination of the verb *פָּנַי*, *to hide*, *to conceal* and *יְהוָה*, *Yah*, the shortened form of *Yahweh*, the name of the Lord. Thus: *Yahweh hides [him]*.

Identification

Zephaniah Himself

Nothing is known about Zephaniah except what may be deduced from his book. It will be noted from 1:1 that he is the only prophet who traces his genealogy back four generations. The last name listed is "Hezekiah," and some, like Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 234, and Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 221, take this as a reference to King Hezekiah (728-697). Archer, *SOTI*, p. 354, n. 1, however, argues against this identification. Zephaniah probably lived in Jerusalem for he refers to it as "this place" (1:4) and is intimately acquainted with its topography.

His Style

Some have described Zephaniah's style as prosaic and unoriginal. This assessment, however, seems to be more severe than necessary. Though "he uses isolated expressions and striking words from his predecessors" (Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 233), he is unique in that he mentions the Day of Yahweh more than any other prophet. It might also be remarked that Zephaniah shows some characteristics of apocalyptic writing (cf. Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, pp. 82-84).

Date

The historical setting for Zephaniah is the reign of Josiah (640-609). Judah had sunk to its most depraved state during the reigns of Manasseh and his son Amon, the father of Josiah. Amon was

assassinated after a reign of only two years, and Josiah, then eight years old, ascended to the throne. By his eighth year, however, his heart was turned to Yahweh (2 Chr. 34:3), and he began what was to become Judah's greatest reform. Some years later in 621 when Hilkiyah, the high priest, found a copy of the book of the law (the Pentateuch, not Deuteronomy as some older critics imagined), the reform reached exciting proportions. The main impetus, then, was the written word of God. But Zephaniah's message of judgment may very well have been another contributing factor. Since he does not mention the reform or the highly significant event of 621, it is reasonable to conclude with Archer, *SOTI*, p. 354, and Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 234, that Zephaniah's ministry was somewhere between 640-621, probably more like 640-630, 10 or 20 years after Nahum. (Contrast Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 221.) For the history of Josiah, see 2 Kgs. 22:1-23:30 and 2 Chr. 34:1-35:27.

Basic Theme

The central theme of Zephaniah is the Day of Yahweh, bringing judgment upon both Judah and the nations. A penitent remnant from both, however, will be preserved and restored as the kingdom is ushered in. Archer summarizes as follows: "The theme of his message is that Jehovah is still firmly in control of all His world despite any contrary appearances, and that He will prove this in the near future by inflicting terrible chastisement upon disobedient Judah, and complete destruction upon the idolatrous Gentile nations. Only by a timely repentance can this wrath be deferred."

Outline With Interpretive Comments

I. The Day of the Lord (1:1-2:15)

A. Judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem (1:1-2:3)

1. Introduction (1:1)
2. Judgment announced (1:2-3) (upon all; cf. 3:8-10)
3. Reasons for judgment (1:4-9) (upon Jerusalem)
4. The terrors of the Day of Yahweh (1:10-13)
5. The nearness of the Day of Yahweh (1:14-18)
6. An exhortation to repentance before the day arrives (2:1-3)

B. Judgment upon the nations (2:4-15)

1. Philistia (2:4-7)
2. Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)

- 3. Ethiopia (2:12)
- 4. Assyria (2:13-15)

II. The woe pronounced upon Jerusalem: princes, prophets, and priests (3:1-7)

- A. Jerusalem's disobedience and faithlessness (3:1-2)
- B. Condemnation of her leaders: princes, prophets, priests (3:3-4)
- C. The justice and faithfulness of God (3:5-7)

III. The establishment of the future kingdom (3:8-3:20)

- A. Judgment upon the nations producing the salvation of a remnant (3:8-10)
- B. Judgment upon Judah producing the salvation of a remnant (3:11-13)
- C. The kingdom established (3:14-20)

Important Passages and Problems

The major theme, the Day of Yahweh: 1:7,8,9,10,14,15,16,18; 2:2,3; 3:8,21,26.

The remnant theme in the prophets:

Obad. 17	Isaiah 17:3; 37:32
Joel 2:32	Micah 5:6-7
Amos 5:15; 9:11-12	Zephaniah 2:7,9; 3:13,19

Some critics have questioned the authenticity of 2:14-15 and 3:18-20 and have assigned them an exilic date. Various reasons are given, such as Israel's religious "development" and the impossibility of the same prophet writing about both judgment and salvation. The judgment on Moab and Ammon in 2:8-11 is considered postexilic by Eisefeldt because it resembles Obadiah. Needless to say, these reasons are subjective and not very compelling.

Additional notes:

3:1: Accused of:

1. *Rebellion*: would not submit to the known will of God
2. *Pollution*: continuance in sin in spite of outward ceremonial exactness
3. *Oppression*: regarded not the rights of the poor, the orphans, and the widows

3:2: Charges:

1. "*Heeded no voice*" = obeyed not the voice of God in the law and the prophets
2. "*Accepted no instruction*" = when God's chastisements were upon her, she did not learn the lessons intended
3. "*Did not trust in the Lord*" = instead, in herself, her idols, and her allies
4. "*Did not draw near to God*" = in faith, worship, and repentance; she estranged herself, though he sought her to be nigh (cf. Deut. 4:7)

Bibliography

Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

Feinberg, Charles. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976.

Freeman, Hobart E. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968.