

# OpenTheo

## Zephaniah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

A prominent uniting theme of the Book of the Twelve is the Day of the Lord, and this theme arguably arrives at one of its most pronounced expressions in the Book of Zephaniah, the ninth prophet of the Book of the Twelve, after Habakkuk and prior to Haggai. Like Hosea, Amos, and Micah before it, Zephaniah is introduced to us with the king during whose reign the prophet ministered. The Book of Haggai is set after the return to the land, while Habakkuk was likely written in the final decade of the 7th century BC, during the reign of Jehoiakim.

If this dating of Habakkuk is correct, then the Book of Zephaniah must be dated prior to its predecessor, during the reign of Josiah. Josiah was a godly reforming king who succeeded his wicked father Ammon upon the throne at the tender age of eight, after his

father's assassination. Josiah ruled for thirty-one years, from around 640 to 609 BC.

His reforms, which began during his teens, were designed to bring Judah back into conformity with the law. During his lengthy reign of over fifty years, Josiah's grandfather Manasseh had reversed the reforms of Josiah's great grandfather Hezekiah. Manasseh had been peculiarly wicked, leading Judah into idolatrous practices, extending the worship of Baal and Asherah and of the celestial bodies, and participating in the worship of Molech.

Despite the repentance of Manasseh towards the end of his life mentioned in the Book of Chronicles, the legacy of Manasseh's wickedness and the idolatry and sin that had become entrenched in Judah during his reign would prove devastating for the people, and despite the zealous reforming efforts of his grandson, would end up spelling doom for the entire nation. In Jeremiah 15 verse 4 for instance, the Lord declares that the judgment to fall upon the nation through the Babylonian captivity was because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem. 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 3 to 4 make a similar claim concerning the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians and others.

Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed, for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon. The writing then was already on the wall. While Josiah's reforming program brought Judah a temporary reprieve, it was not sufficient to arrest or to reverse the course of the nation.

The nation was careening towards oblivion through its wickedness and idolatry. 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 25 to 27 speak of Josiah. Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses.

Nor did any like him arise after him. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.

During Josiah's reign Assyria was in decline and was in free fall during his final years. The dramatic cutting back of Assyrian power freed Josiah and Judah from their thrall and the pull that this had represented towards idolatry, as Judah had been a vassal of Assyria. This is important background for considering the reforms of Josiah's reign.

In the latter years of Josiah's reign, Babylon's power was rising. They would soon come to dominate the entire region. Zephaniah speaks into the context of religious syncretism

and paganism that Josiah's reforms were designed to address.

In his message we can see something of the prophetic impetus to reform that accompanied the priestly work of Hilkiah and the royal work of Josiah. Likely Zephaniah was one of the prophets mentioned in 2nd Kings chapter 23 verse 2, who accompanied King Josiah and the in the renewing of the covenant in the house of the Lord. Zephaniah was likely also a contemporary of Nahum who prophesied the downfall of Nineveh.

Nahum foretold the downfall of Nineveh and Habakkuk addressed the rise of Babylon. Zephaniah also deals with the radical political changes of this historical juncture. But within his prophecy the desolation of the entire region and of Judah and Jerusalem is more pronounced and prominent.

While likely written prior to Habakkuk, its prophetic subject matter might make its later placement in the book of the Twelve fitting. Zephaniah's place among and unity with the prophets is underlined by the extensive commonality between the language and themes of Zephaniah and those of other prophets. The superscription of the book introduces it as the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is given a surprisingly extensive genealogy going back to his great-great-grandfather. Thomas Rennes remarks upon the speculations of some commentators that what seems to be Zephaniah's father's name, Qushai, was either a statement of Zephaniah's own Qushite origin or a name that Zephaniah's father received on account of his, and that the more extended genealogy might be intended to highlight Zephaniah's Israelite ancestry which might not be immediately obvious from his darker skin. That is if we take the Qushan view to be the region of southern Sudan.

These are possibilities but tenuous ones so we shouldn't rest too much upon them one way or another. Another possibility, again highly speculative, is that Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather Hezekiah was King Hezekiah and that the genealogy is traced back to him because of his royal significance and reforming work. Rennes suggests that the reference to the name Hezekiah could be taken as a reminder of the reforms of that earlier king, whether or not Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather was King Hezekiah.

In the verses that follow, Zephaniah announces the destruction that is about to come upon the earth. Adelber Lin remarks upon themes of de-creation at the beginning of Zephaniah and the way that they draw upon Genesis chapters 1 to 11, both as a reversal of the creation work of the Lord in Genesis chapters 1 to 2 and also as a new general cataclysm about to devastate the region, akin to a new flood. The language of verse 2 in particular evokes the extinction of all life in the flood of Noah's day.

Later parts of the book explore themes of Babel. The picture of comprehensive annihilation first announced in verse 2 is filled out in the verses that follow. Some have seen a reversal of the days of creation in verse 3. In sweeping away man and beast, the

Lord is reversing day 6 of creation.

In sweeping away the birds and the fish, he is reversing day 5. The next element of the verse is variously translated but Rennes opts for that which causes the wicked to stumble, which might be a possible reference to the sun, moon and stars, the astral bodies that the wicked were worshipping, the creatures of day 4. This allusion to the filling days of creation in reverse order is tentative but suggestive. However, there are other possible ways of understanding the expression that which causes the wicked to stumble. Perhaps it refers to the or to the false priests.

While a more general judgment will fall upon the region, in verse 4 the Lord singles out Judah and Jerusalem. While reforms may already have begun, the Lord would crush the remnant of Baalism in the land, along with the worship of the celestial bodies and Milcom, a god of the Ammonites. The people had broken the first three of the ten commandments, fundamentally perverting their worship and rejecting the Lord.

From verse 5 it seems that the people's worship was syncretistic, combining elements of the worship of the Lord with the worship of false gods like Milcom. The theme of the day of the Lord is a thread running throughout the book of the 12. Joel chapter 1 verse 15.

Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Amos chapter 5 verses 18 to 20. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord.

Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light, as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? Obadiah verse 15. For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations.

As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head. The day of the Lord is the day when the Lord takes decisive action, an appointed time when he comes on the scene to judge and to deliver.

In verse 7 it is described as a sort of cultic occasion, with guests being summoned for a sacrificial feast. Who are the guests and what is the sacrificial victim? The startling reality is that the invitees seem to be the nations and the sacrificial victim is Jerusalem. The nations are coming to feast on the flesh of the wicked nation of Judah.

At this time of judgment, the judgment will fall particularly upon the leaders of the people, the officials, the members of the royal household, and those who array themselves in foreign attire. The reference to foreign dress might be a reference to the extravagance of the dress of the rich. More likely, however, it refers to the cultural appropriation of the behaviours, attitudes, and forms of worship of other peoples and nations of the region.

A common problem throughout the history of Israel and Judah was their adoption of the ways of the foreign nations, particularly among the elite, their intermarriage, cultural appropriation, and the adoption of foreign gods. Verse 9 presents a number of questions for the interpreter. What does it mean to leap over the threshold? What building is in view here? Whose is the master's house? Over history, many commentators have related this to the superstitious practice mentioned in 1 Samuel 5, verse 5, where the priests of Dagon would not step on the threshold after Dagon had been humiliated there.

Some then suggest that this is an adoption of the pagan practice from the Philistines that is then practiced in the temple. The hopping or leaping over the threshold might not, however, be a reference to a particular superstitious practice. It might merely refer to the careless self-confidence with which people cross the threshold in question.

What is the threshold in question? Is it the threshold of the temple? Many argue that it is. It is not, however, clear that the expression their master's house refers to the house of the Lord. It might refer to the house of the king or to other masters.

Renz raises the possibility that this refers to the servants of the various great houses of the land, to those who served in the palace, but also to those who served the elite of the land and their complicity with violence, oppression, and injustice. The verses that follow describe the process by which the judgment would come upon Jerusalem. A commotion would be heard from the fish gate.

Some invaders entered the north of the city. Following that, shouting from the second quarter as another part of the city fell. Soon wailing would be heard from Morta, presumably a place of trade and commerce.

The life of the city is being extinguished. All of the people who had lived as practical atheists, not believing that the Lord would act in their situation, would be hunted down by the Lord, the Lord searching them out with lambs and punishing them. They would all suffer the curse of futility, something that we also see in Micah chapter 6, verse 15.

You shall sow but not reap. You shall tread olives but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes but not drink wine.

Also it's a great curse of the covenant. In Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 38 to 41. You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locusts shall consume it.

You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worms shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity.

The concluding verses of the chapter give a powerful and dramatic presentation of the coming day of the Lord, expressing the urgency of the rapidly approaching day with great literary artistry. Repetition of the term day is used for rhetorical effect. There's an agglomeration of dramatic descriptions.

We are told of the threatening sound of its approach, the shouting of the warrior for instance. The character of the day is described in verse 15. We might here recall the Theophany of Sinai.

The Lord is coming to meet with and to judge his people. Exodus chapter 19, verses 16 to 19. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly and as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder.

The language here combines theophanic imagery associated with the Lord's war chariot to do battle against his foes and also the theophanic imagery associated with covenant assembly and the founding of the covenant that we have in Sinai. Continuing themes of decreation, mankind will be plunged into darkness walking around like the blind. As they have rejected the light of the Lord's truth this is a fitting judgment for their sin.

Their blood will be poured out like dust. They return to the dust. Another image of decreation.

The same is true of comparing their flesh with dung. All of the things that they had put their trust in, their silver and their gold, would prove to be of no avail on the day of the Lord's judgment. The blow of the Lord's judgment would be sudden and decisive.

The whole earth consumed by the fire of his jealousy. A question to consider. Considering the various elements of teaching in the book of the twelve to this point concerning the day of the Lord, how might we draw a bigger and more comprehensive picture of what the day of the Lord involves? How might this account of the day of the Lord speak beyond the immediate circumstance of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon to relate to other and greater judgments yet to come? In Zephaniah chapter 1 the prophet announced the coming of the dread day of the Lord, an imminent disaster that would sweep away everything from the face of the earth.

While chapter 1 particularly focuses upon the impact of this event in Jerusalem, in chapter 2 the impact of the day of the Lord beyond Judah, the fact that it will be a more

general judgment of the nations of the region, is made more apparent. Having declared the rapidly approaching destruction, in chapter 2 verses 1 to 3 the prophet exhorts the people to prepare for the Lord's advent, to batten down the hatches as it were, before the storm of divine wrath hits them. The imagery of the opening verse of the chapter is variously understood.

Commentators commonly understand it to be referring to some act of gathering, but doing so using atypical terminology rather than relating to a generic act of gathering. A specific sort of gathering might be in view here. Jim Roberts is one of several commentators who argued that the terms used here present the gathering of the people under the image of the gathering of worthless stubble.

As such stubble, the people cannot presume upon the Lord's concern for their preservation. Evildoers are elsewhere compared to chaff who are removed by the Lord's judgment, most famously in Psalm 1 verses 4 to 6. The people of the land are marked for removal in the imminent judgment, and so they must prepare themselves for the Lord's advent with some urgency. They are like stubble, chaff and straw, and the wrath of the Lord is approaching like a consuming fire.

Their only hope lies in seeking the Lord and walking righteously before Him. Perhaps He will have some mercy upon them. In the next chapter we are told of those who will be left standing after the judgment, in verses 12 and 13.

However, as in the Passover in Egypt, the righteous are also under threat, unless they heed the Lord's warnings and take action in preparation. As with Jesus' teaching concerning the poor in the Gospels, we should beware of over-spiritualizing the language here. While there is an appropriate posture of spiritual humility in poverty, such a posture is more easily cultivated and more readily found among those who are lacking in social standing and wealth.

The judgment that we have read about so far is focused upon the wealthy and the powerful of the land, and anyone wanting to escape it would be much more likely to do so among the poor and humble. Renz observes that the focus on those in the land might also present those to be spared the disaster as principally being those of the countryside, in contrast to the urban elites. We might think here, for instance, about the way that the poorest of the land were left after the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem, under the short-lived rule of Gedaliah, enjoying peace and arguably improved circumstances for a period of time.

We might see in this a temporary initial fulfillment of the Lord's promise. In verse 4, the prominent cities of the Philistines are mentioned, ordered in a way that moves towards Jerusalem. The devastation about to fall will fall upon all of the lands.

The Hebrew of the text also plays upon the sounds of words like Gaza and Ekron, in a

manner similar to Micah's word plays using place names in Micah chapter 1 verses 10 to 15. The use of descriptions of judgment in a manner that recalls the names of the places to be judged is a literary means of implying the fittingness of the judgments about to fall. The surprising thing here, however, is that Zephaniah does not pun as extensively as he could have done.

Renz references an intriguing theory of Lawrence Zalcman that seeks to explain this. Renz writes, Gaza will be like a betrothed or married woman abandoned by her man, Ashkelon will be like a desolate wife following desertion by her husband, Ashdod will be driven out like a divorced woman, and Ekron will be like a barren woman. What then might happen to the daughter of Zion is the unspoken question that motivates the call to seek Yahweh.

How we regard the place of verse 4 within the division of the chapter is a question worth considering. Its introduction suggests a reference back to material that preceded it. The cities aren't directly addressed as well.

Perhaps the point is to describe the judgment about to fall upon the whole land as it approaches Jerusalem. Verse 5 begins a statement of woe and presumably a new section. However, the fact that verse 4 also speaks about the judgment of the Lord falling upon nations beyond Judah might associate it with the material that follows.

It would seem to function then as a sort of hinge verse, connecting the two sections. Verses 5-15 speak of judgment about to fall on a number of nations. Upon the Philistines in verses 5-7, continuing the judgment spoken of in verse 4, Moab and Ammon in verses 8-11, and Cush and Assyria in verses 12-15.

Interestingly, there are no oracles against Edom or Egypt. The Philistines inhabited the Mediterranean coast to Judah's west. Cherethites were formally mentioned in scripture as being represented among David's fighting men, along with the Gittites and the Pelethites, the Pelethites possibly being another name for the Philistines.

It is likely that the Cherethites were a people associated with the Philistines. Given their coastal location, Philistia and its cities were of strategic significance, and the Philistines were often vassals of, or loyal to, Egypt. The Philistines are here associated with the land of Canaan.

Canaan, of course, evokes the memories of the first conquest of the land, the division of the land, and as a name is also associated with merchants. The great cities of the Philistines would be devastated. The description of verse 6 suggests that there would be ruins, wilderness places in which shepherds could keep their flocks.

Throughout this chapter we see old urban ways of life collapsing, and herdsmen and farmers coming up in their place. There will be a remnant of Judah that remains, and



they will use the land of the Philistines as pasture land. Next in line are Moab and Ammon, two nations towards the east of Judah.

Historically these nations descended from Lot, so it seems appropriate that there is a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah here. Lot had been delivered from Sodom, and yet the nations descending from him would suffer the fate of the cities of the plain. The Moabites and the Ammonites had boasted against the people of the Lord, and in consequence they would be possessed as a people by the remnant of the house of Judah.

This would also serve as a judgment against false gods. The Cushites that are mentioned in verse 12 might be surprising. The Cushites were far away from Judah to the south of Egypt, and did not seem to pose any threat to the land, and had minimal involvement with it.

It is possible that this looks back in time to an event also mentioned in the book of Nahum, to the overthrow of Thebes by the Assyrians in 663 BC. What had seemingly been a demonstration of the power of the Assyrians, was really a demonstration of the power of the Lord, and that power that Assyria claimed for itself, would now be proved to be nothing when the Lord's hand turned against them. As foretold by the prophet Nahum, the Lord's judgment would come upon Assyria.

Nineveh, once a place of great buildings, and a place of great canals and waterworks, would be made like a dry waste. The destruction of Nineveh would occur in 612 BC at the hands of a Medo-Babylonian army. Where there had once been a great city, there would be ruins, occupied by the beasts of the desert.

A city and people marked out by their pride and their cruelty and brutality, would be subject to the derision of people that it had once dominated. A question to consider, how many examples can you see in this chapter of the Lord, bringing low the proud, and raising up the humble? Much of Zephaniah chapter 2 was a woe oracle addressed to various nations, to Philistia, Moab, Ammon and Assyria. Chapter 3, the final chapter of the prophecy, opens with a new woe oracle, this time addressed to Jerusalem.

However, the hearer of the beginning of this woe oracle is not immediately told that the addressee is Jerusalem. We might perhaps initially think that another of the cities of the nations is being condemned. The addressee is described as rebellious and defiled, and as the oppressing city.

It is only in the next few verses that it becomes clear that Jerusalem is in view. This alone serves to underline the ugly truth that Jerusalem has become like one of the pagan cities of the nations. So fully has she adopted their ways.

There is a possibility of an arresting pun or wordplay raised by Thomas Rennes here. The

word used here for oppressors is elsewhere more commonly encountered as a noun. As dove or Jonah.

This would give us city of Jonah, which in the immediate context would make us think of Nineveh, although the city being addressed is manifestly Jerusalem. Once again, this would serve to accentuate the ambiguities of the addressee, and the ways in which Jerusalem has become indistinguishable from the oppressive, idolatrous cities of the nations. The city is condemned for its willfulness and moral corruption.

The stubborn rebellion of Zion is displayed in its refusal to listen to counsel, discipline or correction, and its resistance to the Lord, whom she neither trusts nor serves. The condemnation of the city focuses upon the leaders of the people. The rulers and authorities are compared to devouring predators, who chiefly operate under the cloak of darkness.

Jerusalem's officials are similarly creatures of violence, who rather than guarding the people, prey upon the vulnerable. From the civil authorities, Zephaniah turns to the religious authorities. Prophets are supposed to be faithful messengers of the Lord, but have become untrustworthy and unreliable deceivers.

Priests are supposed to be guardians of the holy, and upholders of the law. However, they profane what is holy, treating the things of God with little concern, and doing violence to the law. In sharpest contrast, the injustice of the authorities, the Lord who dwells in the midst of Jerusalem, is unwaveringly righteous and just, the light of his truth as dependable as the dawn.

The shamelessness of the sinful leaders of Jerusalem is seen more fully against the foil of the Lord's righteousness and truth. The period running up to the destruction of Jerusalem was one during which the whole face of the region was dramatically transformed, from the high watermark of the power of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, with the overthrow of Thebes, to the fall of Nineveh and Haran, and the battle of Carchemish. The great powers of the region were dramatically changed.

In all of this, the hand of the Lord had been at work, fulfilling his word, bringing great nations low, and raising up new powers in their place. Verse 6 describes the desolation and devastation left in the wake of this, the destruction of cities, their walls and their citadels, the desolation of their now empty streets, and the depopulation of places that were once full of people. Of course, this was not the first time that the Lord had done this.

The pages of Israel's histories were littered with accounts of the humbling and destruction of once proud powers. Reflecting upon current events and the events of the last few decades, in addition to the accounts of their longer-term history, Israel should have recognized the hand of the Lord and humbled itself before him. Each new reversal

in the region was another warning to Jerusalem that its time would also come very soon.

However, rather than heed the warnings, at each warning Jerusalem had merely become more brazen in its sin, hardening its heart. In verse 8, the Lord announces that his judgment is about to come. As in places like the book of Jeremiah, the judgment is described as a universal judgment about to fall upon all of the nations, notably including Judah.

The whole earth will be consumed by it, even Babylon when its time comes. We might expect an elaboration upon the destruction that the Lord will affect. Yet, in the verses that follow, we are surprised by a prophecy of salvation.

While the nations were in rebellion against the Lord, as Judah also was, the Lord is not merely going to bring them down as he has declared. On the other side of judgment, he is going to effect transformation. In Genesis chapter 11, the nations' speech had been confused at Babel.

The people had been all of one lip and one speech, but the unity of the people was used for the hubristic project of the building of the tower and city of Babel, designed to set up their dominion against the Lord's. The Lord here promises a sort of reversal of Babel, not merely in frustrating the Babelic projects of Assyria and Babylon, two nations associated with Nimrod and the original empire of Babel, but in accomplishing a true unity of the nations in the place of their false unity. The Lord is going to transform the lip of the peoples to a pure lip, one manifested in the united worship of the Lord.

It is not entirely clear where the kush of verse 10 is located, whether it is Mesopotamian or the Nubian empire. It is most likely that it is the latter though, and the arrival of worshippers from such a great distance, from the very ends of the known world, would be an indication of the extent of the worship of the Lord and the way that it would spread over all of the lands. The daughter of my dispersed ones might be a reference to the exiles of Judah.

Perhaps the image is of the nations coming to Jerusalem, not now to make Jerusalem a sacrifice, as in chapter 1, but to bring Israelites once exiled as tribute to the Lord. In that time the character of Jerusalem would be transformed. The once proud and rebellious city, humbled on account of its iniquity, would now be freed of its shame and populated no longer by the haughty but by a humble and lowly people, a godly remnant that would seek the Lord and find security in Him as their shepherd.

In contrast to the current rulers of Jerusalem, they would not be corrupt or unjust, and as the Lord promises concerning the nations, their tongues would also be changed, their now truthful speech corresponding to the pure lip that the nations would be given. After the judgment and their restoration, Jerusalem and Israel will have reason for celebration and rejoicing. The slate will have been cleaned, the sentence concluded, the enemies

removed.

The Lord will once again be in the midst of His people as their true and mighty King, giving them security, safety and strength, releasing them from the tyranny of fear. Not only will Jerusalem be rejoicing in the Lord, however, the Lord will be rejoicing over Jerusalem. We encounter similar imagery in Isaiah chapter 65, verses 18 and 19.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people. No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. The meaning of the expression the ESV translates as He will quiet you by His love is variously understood.

Some take it as the ESV translates it as a reference to the Lord's soothing of His people. Fanny Snyman takes it to refer to the Lord's refraining from reacting in judgment to His people. Renz takes it to refer to the Lord's joy in the silent contemplation of his people, not merely in the exuberance of loud song.

Verse 18 is extremely difficult to translate and to understand, leading Adele Berlin to call it unintelligible. However, as Snyman argues, in context the general meaning seems to be fairly apparent. There will no longer be cause for sorrow at the festivals.

As the Lord has saved the people and raised them up, they will no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. Indeed, as the following verses declare, for Jerusalem's former shame will be given glorious renown and praise, as their fortunes are reversed and their reputation exalted. A question to consider, how might this chapter be seen as a fulfilment of the Lord's purpose in calling Abraham?