

Zephaniah Chapter 1

The prophet Zephaniah, who penned this book, was believed to be a direct descendent from Hezekiah. He prophesied in the urban area. His prophecy was during the reign of Josiah. Perhaps, his prophecy had something to do with the revival in the time of Josiah. Zephaniah was believed to be associated with Huldah, the prophetess, and with Jeremiah. This book is filled with prophecies of Judgment.

Zephaniah 1:1 "The word of the LORD which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hizkiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah."

“Hezekiah ... Josiah”: Zephaniah traced his royal lineage back to his great-great-grandfather Hezekiah (ca 715-686 B.C.), and placed his ministry contemporaneous with Josiah (ca 640-609 B.C.).

The prophet’s genealogy shows his royal relationship to “Hizkiah” (Hezekiah), the godly “king of Judah” (who had died in 686 B.C.).

“Josiah” was Judah’s last godly king, during whose reign the Law was rediscovered (in 621 B.C.).

This verse pinpoints the time of these prophecies as in the time of King Josiah. This judgement is spoken specifically on Judah, but it is, also, for all the world, God sends warning to those who are not faithful to Him.

Verses 2-6: Six groups are singled out for judgment:

1. “The remnant of Baal”;
2. “The idolatrous priests”;
3. “Them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops;”
4. “Them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham,” devotees of a syncretistic worship system;
5. “Them that are turned back from the Lord;” and
6. “Those that have not sought the Lord”.

“Baal” was the Canaanite storm god often worshiped by idolatrous Israelites (Jeremiah 7:9).

“Chemarim” was an honorable Canaanite term for their priests but may translate “idolatrous priest” in Hebrew, and is used here to designate non-Levitical priests (2 Kings 18:4-6; 23:4-15).

“Worship” of the stars of heaven “upon the housetops” refers to Sabaism here identified with “Malcham”. This practice was introduced by the ungodly king Manasseh (2 Kings 21:3-5), and was associated with the worship of the “queen of heaven” (Jer. 7:18; 44:17).

Verses 2-3: The prophet began by noting the far fulfillment of the Day of the Lord, when even animal and physical creation will be affected by His judgment of the earth (Gen. 3:17-19; Exodus 12:29; Joshua 7:24-25; Rom. 8:22).

Zephaniah 1:2 "I will utterly consume all [things] from off the land, saith the LORD."

“From off the land”: Generally translated “ground,” the term is used in reference to the whole earth (1:18). The phraseology is reminiscent of the Noahic Flood (Gen. 6:7, 17; 7:21-23).

This is spoken to all the world, as well as to Judah.

Isaiah 6:11 "Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate,"

God is very angry with the unfaithful. This is speaking of a time when desolation is everywhere.

Zephaniah 1:3 "I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD."

Comparisons with the Genesis Flood continue with “man and beast” and fowls of the heaven”: (Gen. 6:7; 7:23). The prophet also alluded to the creation, pairing man and beast (sixth day of creation), and birds with fish (fifth day of creation).

“Stumbling blocks”: An alternate translation is “ruins”. Whatever alienates man from God will be removed.

This wrath of God is spoken against man, and all of creation that God had provided for man, as well. God has been very patient with mankind, but this speaks of a time when His patience has run out. Once during the time of Noah, God was sorry that He had ever made man.

Verses 4-9: The Lord narrowed His words of judgment to specifically focus on Judah, specifying the causes of judgment as apostasy and idolatry (verses 4-6), as always coupled with moral and ethical corruption (verses 7-9).

Zephaniah 1:4 "I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, [and] the name of the Chemarims with the priests;"

“Cut off the remnant of Baal”: The worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility, was a constant source of temptation to Israel (Num. 25:1-5; Judges 2:13), as people tried worshiping him alongside the worship of the Lord (Jer. 7:9; 23:25-29).

This mix became a primary cause for judgment (2 Kings 17:16-20; Jer. 11:13-17; Hos. 2:8), which would forever excise the worship of Baal from Israel.

"Chemarims" is an idolatrous priest. The "stretching of God's hand" is showing that His judgement is about to be carried out. The hand symbolizes work. The judgement is against Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Judgement of a sinful world always begins at the house of God. "Baal" is a false god they had been worshipping.

Even the priests were involved in this. The temple of God was located in Jerusalem. They also, had the law of God to go by, that the heathen world around them did not. Their sins were with full knowledge. They were like an unfaithful wife. They had committed spiritual adultery.

Zephaniah 1:5 "And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship [and] that swear by the LORD, and that swear by Malcham;"

“Worship ... the host of heaven”: Astrology was also a prominent part of Israel’s idolatrous practices. They worshiped the host of heaven from as early as the Exodus, but they rebelled (2 Kings 23:5-6; Jer. 7:17-18; 8:2; 44:17-25). Altars were often erected on housetop roofs to provide a clear view of the sky (Jer. 8:2; 19:13; 32:29).

“Swear by Malcham”: Judah’s syncretistic worship was reflected in swearing by the Lord and, at the same time, by Milcom, who may be either the Ammonite deity (of 1 Kings 11:5, 33), or Molech, the worship of whom included child sacrifice, astrology, and sacred prostitution (Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 17:16-17; Ezek. 23:37; Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:40-43).

This is speaking of consulting the stars for answers. We call this horoscope reading today. They worshipped the sun, moon, and stars, rather than God who created the sun, moon, and stars. "Malcham" was the national idol of the Ammonites. This Malcham was the same as Molech.

God's people had stopped looking to God and started worshipping the false gods of the people around them. The sad thing is that some of them still went through the formality of worshipping God. They included God, as if there were many gods. God will not be God to anyone who has other gods. He will be the only One, or He will not be your God.

Zephaniah 1:6 "And them that are turned back from the LORD; and [those] that have not sought the LORD, nor inquired for him."

Zephaniah lastly mentioned those who had at first heeded calls to repentance but later had willfully turned away.

This is speaking of back-sliders, when it says that are turned back from God. The last part of this verse, also speaks of those who have never sought God at all. They are not interested in hearing about God. I guess they would be atheists, who do not believe God exists. In very plain language, they are the lost.

Verses 7-8: In Zephaniah “the Day of the Lord” refers to the impending Babylonian invasion of Judah and to the destruction of Jerusalem. He pictures the victims of this conquest as the “princes” (nobles), the “king’s” sons (royalty), and the wealthy who wear imported garments.

Zephaniah’s prophecy was fulfilled when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem (in 586 B.C.), slew the sons of Zedekiah (Josiah’s youngest son), blinded Zedekiah, and led him captive to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7).

Zephaniah 1:7 "Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD [is] at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests."

“Hold thy peace”: In view of the just judgment, there was no defense to be spoken. And in view of the devastation; only shocked and mute wonder (Hab. 2:20; Zech. 2:13).

“Day of the Lord” (see notes on Joel 1:15).

“Prepared a sacrifice ... bid his guests”: God’s judgment on Israel was viewed as His sacrifice. The guests were the dreaded Babylonians, who as “priest” were invited to slay the sacrifice, i.e. Judah (Isa. 13:3; 34:6; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 39:17; Hab. 1:6; Rev. 19:17-18).

Romans 9:20 "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed [it], Why hast thou made me thus?"

The sacrifice that God prepared for all of us was Jesus who was the perfect Lamb sacrifice. He provided salvation to all who would believe. God invited the Jews to come to the feast, but they did not. Then God sent to the Gentiles, and offered the gift of salvation to them.

Matthew 22:10 "So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests."

God would have His house full.

Zephaniah 1:8 "And it shall come to pass in the day of the LORD'S sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel."

“The princes ... Kings children”: Judgment began with the royal house. Lacking commitment to God’s covenant, they had adopted the customs and idolatrous practices of the heathen.

Since Josiah was only 8 years old when he assumed rulership (ca 640 B.C.), the reference would not be to his sons but to the princes of the royal house or to the children of the king who would be ruling when the prophecy was fulfilled (2 Kings 25:7; Jer. 39:6).

We see in the following Scripture, that those who try to get to heaven by ways other than those God has chosen, have a very hard time. Jesus is the way. To Go before God with any garment, other than the robe of righteousness Jesus provides all believers, is dangerous.

Matthew 22:11-14 "And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:" "And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless." "Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast [him] into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." "For many are called, but few [are] chosen."

Verses 9-13: "Those that leap on the threshold" probably are the priests of Dagan who would not step on the place where he had fallen (1 Sam. 5:5). They may also be creditors who crossed over the threshold of their debtors (Deut. 24:10-11).

"The merchant people (Hebrew "*Kenaan*", also a word for "Canaanite"), indicates they transacted their business like Canaanites or Phoenicians.

Zephaniah 1:9 "In the same day also will I punish all those that leap on the threshold, which fill their masters' houses with violence and deceit."

"Leap on the threshold": This describes the eagerness with which the rich hurried from the temple to plunder the poor.

This "leaping on the threshold" could be when they went into homes as a burglar.

Verses 10-11: The merchants, made wealthy from dishonest gain (verse 9), were singled out to depict the anguish of the coming judgment.

The Fish Gate, known today as the Damascus Gate, is located on the north side. The Second Quarter was a district within the city walls. "Maktesh" was a name applied to the Valley of Siloam from its shape; it was a district where merchants carried on business.

Zephaniah 1:10 "And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD, [that there shall be] the noise of a cry from the fish gate, and a howling from the second, and a great crashing from the hills."

"And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord": In the day of the Lord's sacrifice, when He shall punish the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem by the Chaldeans. Which, as well as what follows, shall surely come to pass, because the Lord has said it. For not one word of His shall pass away, but all be fulfilled.

"That there shall be the noise of a cry from the fish gate": A gate of the city of Jerusalem so called, which suffered as the rest in the destruction of the city by the Babylonians. And, after the captivity, was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah (Nehemiah 3:3).

According to Jerom, it was on the west side of the city, and led to Diospolis and Joppa. And was the nearest road to the Mediterranean sea, or any of the roads to Jerusalem, from whence fish were brought, and brought in by this gate. And very probably the fish market was near it, from whence it had its name.

Though Cocceius places it in the north corner of the east side of the city. And so was nearer Jordan, the sea of Tiberias, and the city of Tyre, from whence fish might be brought there, and sold (Nehemiah 13:16).

However, be it where it will, the enemy it seems would attack it, and enter in by it. Upon which a hideous cry would be made, either by the assailants, the Chaldeans, at their attack upon it, and entrance through it. Or by the inhabitants of it, or that were nearest to it, upon their approach, or both.

"And a howling from the second": Either from the second gate; and if the fish gate is the same with the first gate (Zechariah 14:10), then this may be pertinently called the second. Jarchi calls it the bird gate, which was the second to the fish gate. So the Targum, "from the bird, or the bird gate"; though some copies of it read, from the tower or high fortress.

Or else this designs the second wall, and the gate in that which answered to the fish gate. For Jerusalem was encompassed with three walls. The fish gate was in the outermost, and this was in the second, to which the Chaldeans came next. And occasioned a dreadful howling and lamentation in the people that dwelt near it.

Kimchi interprets it of the school or university that was in Jerusalem. The same word is rendered the cottage in which Huldah the prophetess lived (2 Kings 22:14). And there, by the Targum, "the house of doctrine or instruction".

So then the sense is, a grievous outcry would be heard from the university or school of the prophets. The enemy having entered it, and were slaying the students, or seizing them in order to carry them captive.

"And a great crashing from the hills": Either that were in Jerusalem, as Mount Zion and Moriah, on which the temple stood.

Or those that were round about it, as Gareb, and Goath, and others. Though some interpret this of the houses of nobles that stood in the higher parts of the city, where there would be a shivering. A breaking to pieces, as the word signifies, of doors and windows without, and of furniture within.

The fish gate was in the northern wall, and was a gate where the fishermen brought their fish to the market. There was usually a fish market just inside the gate. The army, that came to attack them, would have an easier chance to get in at this gate.

We know in some of the other prophetic books, the enemy was supposed to come from the North. This would be the logical gate for them to enter. The enemy will come crashing into Jerusalem.

Zephaniah 1:11 "Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off."

"Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh": The name of a street in Jerusalem, as Aben Ezra. Perhaps it lay low in the hollow of the city, and in the form of a mortar, from whence it might have its name, as the word signifies. Which is used both for a hollow place and a mortar (Judges 15:19).

Unless it might be so called from such persons dwelling in it that used mortars for spice, and other things. The Targum is, "howl, all ye that dwell in the valley of Kidron"; and Jerom thinks the valley of Siloah is intended, which is the same. Which, Adrichomius says, was broad, deep, and dark, and surrounded the temple in manner of a foss, or ditch.

And was disposed in the form of a mortar, called in Hebrew "machtes"; in Latin, "pila"; in which merchants and tradesmen of all kinds dwelt. It is thought by others to be the same which Josephus calls "the valley of the cheese mongers", which lay between two hills Zion and Acra.

"For all the merchant people are cut down": Either cut to pieces by the sword of the enemy, and become silent, as the word sometimes signifies. And the Vulgate Latin version here renders it; become so by death, and laid in the silent grave, and no more concerned in merchandise.

Or else stripped of all their wealth and goods by the enemy, and so cut down, broke, and become bankrupt, and could trade no more. The word for merchant signifies a Canaanite. And the Targum paraphrases it thus, "for all the people are broken, whose works are like the works of the people of the land of Canaan".

"All they that bear silver are cut off": That have large quantities of it, and carry it to market to buy goods with it as merchants. These shall be cut off, and so a great loss to trade, and a cause of howling and lamentation.

Or such that wear it in their garments, embroidered with it. Or rather in their purses, who are loaded with this thick clay, abound with it. The Targum is, "all that are rich in substance shall be destroyed."

"Maktesh" means "her that is broken down". This was, probably, a valley that the enemy entered by. This was, possibly, the route the merchant people from the North used to enter the city. They would be the first cut off. Those that bear silver are the wealthier of the merchant tradesmen.

Zephaniah 1:12 "And it shall come to pass at that time, [that] I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil."

"I will search": None would escape the punishment of the Lord (Amos 9:1-4).

“Settled on their lees”: With this term referring to the thickened crust which forms on wine when left undisturbed for a long period of time, the prophet described the people’s indifference and slothfulness toward God. Their indifference led them to regard God as morally indifferent.

"Lees" means settlings. These are a people who have given up on God. They are so complacent they do not believe good, or evil, of God. They are very much like agnostics who have no mind set at all. They have hidden in every conceivable place to keep from being found of those who will destroy. They cannot hide from God.

The Light reveals all. They will be found and dealt with. Many of them will die where they are found. No evil-doer can escape the Light of God. They have not directly come out against religion, but they have great doubts in their hearts that God exists. These people believe in luck, not in divine providence.

Zephaniah 1:13 "Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses, but not inhabit [them]; and they shall plant vineyards, but not drink the wine thereof."

"Therefore their goods shall become a booty": To the enemy; the riches they trusted in, and thought themselves so secure of; and therefore denied divine Providence. Which ought to be depended upon amidst the greatest affluence. Or otherwise the Lord has various ways by which he can soon strip men of all their enjoyments, and dispose of them to others.

"And their houses a desolation": Be pulled down by the enemy; or left uninhabited, they being killed or carried captive, even their whole families.

"They shall also build houses, but not inhabit them": Not long, at least; not always, as they expected, and promised themselves when they built them.

"And they shall plant vineyards, and not drink the wine thereof": But before the vines planted by them bring forth grapes, and these are pressed, and wine made of them, they should fall into the hands of the enemy, who would drink it, and not they. And all this agreeably to what was threatened them in the Law of Moses, which they ought to have regarded (Deut. 28:30).

They had trusted in their earthly wealth, and now, that is gone. They built fine houses to live in, but will not get to live in them. They will either die in the attack, or be carried off captives to Babylon. Someone else will benefit from their work.

Verses 14-18: Zephaniah vividly described the Day of the Lord in staccato fashion, rehearsing the ominous conditions characterizing that day. This section seems to point to the near fulfillment when Babylon subdued Judah (verses 4-13), as well as a far fulfillment which will involve the whole earth (verse 18).

Zephaniah 1:14 "The great day of the LORD [is] near, [it is] near, and hasteth greatly, [even] the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly."

"The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly": Not the day of judgment, but the day of God's vengeance upon the Jews, which yet bore some resemblance to that day of the Lord.

And it may be therefore so called; as the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans had some likeness to it, and therefore the signs of the one and of the other are given together by our Lord (in Matthew 24:1).

And this was a day in which he would do great things, by the Chaldeans, and against the Jews. And this is represented as very "near"; and repeated again for the confirmation of it. And to arouse the thoughtless and careless about it, and who put away this evil day far from them.

Yea, it is said to make great haste, and to fly away swiftly, even faster than time usually does. Though in common it has wings ascribed unto it.

"Even the voice of the day of the Lord": In which the Lord's voice will be heard. Not his voice of grace and mercy, as in the day of salvation; but of wrath and vengeance, which will be terrible; hence it follows:

"The mighty men shall cry there bitterly": Not the voice of the mighty men besieging the city, making a hideous noise to animate the soldiers in making the assault, as some. But the mighty men within the city of Jerusalem besieged.

Who, when they see the city broken up, would be in the utmost terror, and cry bitterly, like women and children, being quite dismayed and dispirited. Even the men of war, who were upon the walls and in the garrisons with their officers and generals. And if this would be the case with them, how must it be thought to be with others, the weak and those lacking confidence?

Zephaniah has told of all who will suffer under this judgment of God for their sins of idolatry. Now, he emphasizes the nearness of this judgment being carried out.

Isaiah 13:6 "Howl ye; for the day of the LORD [is] at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty."

The great day of the LORD could easily be the time of judgment God brought upon Judah by the Babylonians. It can also, be the time when God brings judgment upon any people.

There is a great day coming in our lifetime that is speaking of the second coming of the Lord. The mighty men will have no more protection than anyone else in the day that God judges them. They are no match for God.

Zephaniah 1:15 "That day [is] a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness,"

"That day is a day of wrath": Both of the wrath of God against his people for their sins. These judgments being the effects of his wrath, provoked by their iniquities; and of the wrath and cruelty of the Chaldeans, exercised in a furious manner.

"A day of trouble and distress": To the inhabitants of Jerusalem, they being taken and led captive, their houses plundered and demolished, and the whole city and temple laid in ruins.

"A day of wasteness and desolation": Of the whole country of Judea, and the metropolis of it. Of their houses, fields, and vineyards.

"A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness": As it might be in a natural sense; the displeasure of God being shown in the very heavens, by the darkness and gloominess of them, and the thick clouds with which they were covered.

And made still more dark and gloomy by the burning of the city, and the smoke of it. And, in such circumstances, gloominess and melancholy must sit upon the minds of men. And thick clouds and darkness portend greater troubles and calamities coming on. And the whole is expressive of great adversity; for, as light frequently designs prosperity, so darkness adversity.

This is certainly speaking of that great day, when the end of the Gentile age comes. It is also, speaking of that day when the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and Judah.

Revelation 6:17-18 "For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;"

Mark 13:24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light,"

Zephaniah 1:16 "A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers."

"Day of the trumpet and alarm": In accordance with God's instructions, a trumpet was fashioned for the purpose of sounding an alarm (Num. 10:1-10).

The trumpet was blown to gather the people, and for war. The high towers were the places where the soldiers tried to ward off the attack. In this day, that will do no good. They cannot fight God.

Numbers 10:9 "And if ye go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresseth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies."

1 Corinthians 15:52 "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

Verses 17-18: As though worthless, their blood and flesh were discarded as dust. Their silver and gold, corruptly gained (verses 9-13), would be of no avail to protect them from the wrath of holy God (Jer. 46:28).

Zephaniah 1:17 "And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung."

“Walk like blind men”: As blind men, they would grope unsuccessfully for escape routes (Deut. 28:29).

They were walking like blind men, because they knew not where to go for safety. There was no escape. They have waited too late to repent.

Deuteronomy 28:28 "The LORD shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart:"

2 Corinthians 4:4 "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Their blindness is of a spiritual nature. They are worthless, because they have sinned against God, and not repented. Their fate is death, and then hell.

Zephaniah 1:18 "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD'S wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land."

“All of them that dwell in the land”: The discussion expands to include the whole earth (as in verses 2-3).

They cannot buy off the enemy with their silver and gold. The enemy will get all of that anyway. Fire is a way of purging. They will be purged by the fire of God. The earth will experience the very same thing at the end of the age. The earth will be destroyed by fire.

Silver and gold will not be able to help in that day. Those, who trust in silver and gold to save them, will be disappointed. The only safety from the wrath of God is the blood of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 1:10: "And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, [even] Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come."

Those, who put their faith and trust in Jesus, but will be saved from the wrath of God. The wrath of God is for the unbelievers.