

# Zephaniah

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## Author

Although there is some disagreement, most scholars say his name means “Yahweh hides.” He gives his genealogy which shows he was the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah who was king of Judah from 716-687 BC. So, other than King David and King Solomon, this would make him the prophet with the most royal blood. We can be fairly certain from his references to Judah and Jerusalem (Ch 1:10-11) that he lived in or at least in the vicinity of Jerusalem. This would be expected for a descendant of a king of Judah.

## Date

Zephaniah dates his word from God to the reign of Josiah as king of Judah, which was 641-609 BC. His prophecy that Nineveh would be destroyed (2:13-14) puts the date before the fall of the city in 612 BC. Since the evil actions that Zephaniah lists against Judah were prominent before Josiah made his reforms in 622-621 BC, most scholars date his writing from 641-622 BC.

## Audience

Since Zephaniah dates his writing as being during the reign of Josiah (641-609 BC), this means his audience had to be the Jews of the southern kingdom of Judah because the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian kingdom in 722 BC and the people who were not killed were forcibly relocated throughout the Assyrian kingdom to intermarry with those people and become integrated as part of those communities of people. Since he references the princes, judges, prophets, and priests (1:8-9; 3:3-4) it seems likely that his intended audience was those people rather than the common people of the land.

## Background

In 2 Kings 20, we learn that King Hezekiah was ill and Isaiah told him that the Lord said he should put his house in order because he will die. Hezekiah immediately went to the Lord in prayer and with tears, asking for him to remember how he had faithfully walked before him. The Lord told Isaiah to go back and tell Hezekiah that he had heard his prayers and seen his tears and that he would add fifteen years to his life and save the city from Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, who was threatening to overrun and destroy the city. Within three years after that, Hezekiah had a son whom he named Manasseh.

Manasseh (695-642 BC) may have been the worst king in Judah’s history because he overturned the reforms that his father had made and led the people to do more evil than before. Manasseh rebuilt the high places that his father, Hezekiah, had torn down. He erected altars to the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth, to the Moabite god Chemosh, to the Ammonite god Milcom, and to the Canaanite god Baal. Manasseh restored the practice of child sacrifice (2 Kings 21) and even sacrificed two of his sons in the Valley of Hinnom. He named his son, Amon, after an Egyptian god which went against the usual practice of naming a child after Yahweh. Manasseh also paid tribute to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, so he wouldn’t invade Judah, instead of trusting in God’s provision. Manasseh did repent of his evil ways before his death, but his son Amon (642-640 BC) continued the idolatrous ways that Manasseh had started.

Amon’s son, Josiah, was only eight when he became king in 641 BC and he instituted his reforms in 622-621 BC after Hilkiah, the priest, discovered the Law of Moses as a repair of part of the Temple was being done. There is nothing definite to indicate it, but it is possible that God’s word through Zephaniah, along with the word from the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:18-20) helped move Josiah in the direction of reform after he

read the Law of Moses that was found. Josiah eliminated the display and worship of idols throughout the land and revived the celebration of the Passover (2 Kings 23). By his genealogy and the history of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, Zephaniah was part of the royal line and would have been the second cousin, once removed, of Josiah and third cousin with Josiah's children.

## **Assyrian Empire History**

The Assyrian power arose with Ashurnasirpal II (884-859 BC) and Shalmaneser II (859-824 BC). Tiglath-pileser III (Pul in the Scriptures) began the conquering of Syria and Palestine. Shalmaneser V (727-722 BC) began the deportation of Samaria, and Sargon II (722-705 BC) completed it. Sennacherib (704-581 BC) attacked Judah during Hezekiah's reign. Esarhaddon (681-669 BC) led campaigns against Egypt and his son, Ashurbanipal (669-631 BC) ruled much of upper Egyptian around the city of Thebes. Assyria's decline began around this time and the kingdom fell when Nineveh, its capital, was destroyed in 612 BC by a coalition between the Babylonians (Chaldeans), the Medes (Persians), the Scythians and Cimmerians (people from the middle and western area of modern Turkey). This allowed the Babylonians to rise in power and begin to conquer other nations. In 609 BC, the Babylonians had driven the Assyrians to the area of Carchemish and were doing battle with them. The Assyrians sought help from the Egyptians so Pharaoh Neco started north to provide help. Josiah tried to take advantage of this and went out to battle Pharaoh Neco. They met at Megiddo and Neco killed Josiah, whose body was taken back to Jerusalem for burial and the people took his son, Jehoahaz and anointed him king.

## **Major Theme**

The Day of the Lord. He describes a time when God will come to his people and deliver them by destroying evil. As with the other prophets, he saw this as happening in his day with the destruction of the Assyrians who were threatening them. But from the perspective of over 2600 years of further history and with the first advent of Jesus, the Messiah, and his Revelation to John, we can see that his prophecy only had a partial fulfillment in his time and will have its complete fulfillment when Jesus returns in his second advent as King of kings and Lord of lords. At that time he will deliver the Jewish people and all others who believe in and trust him. He will seal up Satan and keep him from tempting or deceiving anyone until the end of the Millennium when Satan will be released to give everyone a chance to choose to follow Satan or Jesus.

The book of Zephaniah contains more references to the "Day of the Lord" than any other Old Testament book. Sometimes the phrase refers to the past, sometimes to the near future, sometimes to the distant future, and sometimes to the far distant, "end times" future. It always refers to a period of time when God works in the world in a recognizable way. It often refers to a time when God is disciplining people or destroying evil, but it can also refer to a time of blessing.

Note: The verse quotations are a direct translation of the Hebrew by Bayit haMashiyach.

## **Chapter 1**

**1:1** translates as "The word of YHWH which came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Yahudah."

This is Zephaniah's statement of who he is, when he is writing, and for whom he speaks.

**1:2-3** translate as "I shall completely remove all things from the face of the earth, declares YHWH. I shall remove man and beast. I shall remove the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea and the ruins along with the wicked. And I shall cut off man from the face of the earth, declares YHWH."

Here he warns of a coming destruction where God will sweep everything from the face of the earth – birds of the air, fish of the sea, and men. Also any ruins still standing after previous destructions and things that have

caused people not to accept and follow Jesus will be destroyed just as the wicked. This worldwide judgment obviously hasn't happened yet, but some of it may be partially fulfilled during and at the end of the Tribulation, but it will be completely fulfilled at the end of the Millennium.

**1:4-6** translate as “So I shall stretch out my hand against Yahudah and against all the inhabitants of Yerushalam. And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven and those who bow down and swear to YHWH and yet swear by Milcom, and those who have turned back from following YHWH, and those who have not sought YHWH nor inquired of him.”

Now he lists things God has against Judah's activities and says God will stretch out his hand against Judah and all who live in Jerusalem who practice such things. This would indicate that Josiah's reforms weren't completely followed by some of the people, but God would still bring judgment upon them for their evil practices. Whether their practices were overtly pagan, appeared to be obeying God but also incorporated some pagan items of worship, for were just indifferent to what God said should be done, those people would receive judgment. Nobody can deceive God because he knows everything that is happening as well as the thoughts of people.

**1:7-13** translate as “Be silent before the face of Adonai (Master) YHWH for the day of YHWH is near, for YHWH has prepared a sacrifice. He has consecrated his called ones. Then it shall come about on the day of the sacrifice of YHWH that I shall visit upon the princes, upon the king's sons and upon all who clothe themselves with foreign garments. And on that day I shall visit upon all who leap on the threshold, who fill the house of the masters with violence and deceit. And it shall be in that day, declares YHWH, the sound of a cry from the fish gate, a wail from the second quarter, and a great breaking from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the mortar, for all the people of Canaan shall be silenced. All who weigh out silver shall be cut off. It shall come about at that time that I shall search Yerushalem with lamps and I shall visit upon the men being settled on their lees who say in their hearts YHWH shall not do good nor shall he do evil. And their goods shall become plunder and their houses desolate. They shall also build houses but not inhabit them and plant vineyards but not drink their wine.”

God says to be silent because the day of the Lord is near. “Near” doesn't mean short in time span but certain in its arrival. The people should be silent because God is preparing to accomplish his work among the people. God has prepared a sacrifice for his day and consecrated those he has invited to attend. The sacrifice would appear to be the people of Judah who refuse to obey and follow God, especially the princes (leading families), the king's sons, and everyone who clothes themselves with foreign garments (showing their love of and support for values other than God's).

Josiah's sons did suffer YHWH's punishment. Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt (2 Kings 23:36). Jehoiakim was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and died in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1-6). Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16), but later, in the 37<sup>th</sup> year of the exile captivity of the Jews in Babylon, he was released and until his death was given a place of honor to eat at the table of the Babylonian king (Evil-Merodach). The last son of Josiah to rule over Judah, Zedekiah, was made to watch while his sons were killed and then his was blinded and taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:18-25:7).

The consecrated would appear to be those who were accepting and following God's leadership. The people who do not follow God at that time will wail because of what is happening to them.

There was a later, partial fulfillment of this judgment upon those who refuse to follow God's values. Jesus was God's sacrifice for man's sin of not having in God and following him but trying to be God's for themselves – the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Jesus paid the debt of death for that sin for all mankind. Those who accept that and let Jesus be the Lord (Master) of their lives are God's called ones who are consecrated for living with Jesus. When Jesus died in 33 AD there was wailing throughout the city and on the hills. And when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD the goods and houses of the people became plunder for the soldiers and the people wailed at what was happening. There will be another partial fulfillment of this judgment during and

at the end of the seven year Tribulation described in Jesus' revelation to John and a final fulfillment at the end of the Millennium described in the revelation at the Great White Throne judgment. Here again, there will be wailing at what is happening to them from the people who refused to accept what Jesus had done for them and refused to follow God. Like many other statements by God, there may be several partial fulfillments before he brings about the final fulfillment.

**1:14-18** translate as "The great day of YHWH is near, it is near and it is very quickly; the sound of the day of YHWH! The mighty man shall cry out there bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. I shall bring distress on men so that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against YHWH; and their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of YHWH; and all the earth shall be consumed by the fire of his jealousy, for he shall make a full, indeed, a speedy end of all the inhabitants of the earth."

Zephaniah reports that YHWH says the great day of his judgment is near and coming quickly. Now he gives some description of the Day of the Lord. The crying will be bitter. Warriors will be shouting. It will be a time of distress, anguish, trouble, ruin, darkness and gloom. The trumpet will sound a battle cry against fortified cities. People will be so distressed they will walk like blind men because they have sinned against God. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their internal organs (entrails) like filth. No material thing they have will be able to save them from the Lord's wrath. Up to this point in the description, it can apply to the judgment upon Judah that results in many being taken into captivity to Babylon. This began in 605 BC with the first deportation of captives which included Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, all of whom were given new Babylonian names. (See Daniel 1:6-7) This description could also apply to many subsequent judgments by God upon the Israelite people and upon those claiming to follow Jesus, the Messiah, but who do not really live in obedience to God's will.

The last part of the description is that God's jealousy will cause the whole world to be consumed and he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth. We know from the book of Daniel and history that this has not occurred. We learn from God's revelation to Daniel (Dan 9:20-27; 12:1-4) and Jesus' revelation to the Apostle John that there will be a final time of judgment that fulfills the first part of the description and that there will be a partial fulfillment of the last part of the description at the Battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation and at the last battle at the end of the Millennium, but the complete fulfillment doesn't come until God destroys the physical universe by fire and imposes punishment at the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11-15).

## Chapter 2

**2:1-3** translate as "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather O nation without shame. Before the birth of the decree, the day shall pass like the chaff, yet not before the burning anger of YHWH comes upon you, yet not before the burning anger of YHWH comes upon you. Seek YHWH, all the meek of the earth who have carried out his ordinances. Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you shall be hidden in the day of the anger of YHWH."

Here, Zephaniah calls the nation to repentance, especially those who don't do what God commands. He admonishes them to seek righteousness and humility. Then maybe they will be sheltered and protected when the Lord's anger comes. This was partially fulfilled as Nebuchadnezzar captured Judah and took captives, like Daniel and his friends, back to Babylon in three different deportations. Those captives were not beaten, tortured or treated inhumanely, but were allowed to live and worship together in communities like where Ezekiel lived with the exiles (Ezekiel 1:1). They were allowed to build homes and businesses and prosper. This will have a greater fulfillment for the Jewish people during the Tribulation who are taken away and hidden from the reach

of the Antichrist until the last half of the Tribulation has ended (Rev 12:13-17)

**2:4-7** translate as “For Gaza shall be abandoned and Ashkelon a desolation. Ashdod shall be driven out at noon and Ekron shall be uprooted. Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of YHWH is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines! So the seacoast shall be pastures, the meadows of shepherds and folds for flocks. And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Yahudah. They shall pasture on it. In the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening for YHWH, their El, shall visit them and return their captivity.”

This begins to announce that other nations will be judged and destroyed. The Philistine kingdom will become a place for shepherds and sheep pens. It will belong to the remnant of the house of Judah. This will happen during the Millennium that Jesus reveals in his revelation to the Apostle John (Rev 20:1-6).

**2:8-11** translate as “I have heard the taunting of Moab and the revilings of the sons of Ammon with which they have taunted my people and become arrogant against their territory. Therefore, as I live, declares YHWH of hosts, the El of Yisrael, surely Moab shall be like Sodom and the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah, a place possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a ruin forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them and the remainder of the nation shall inherit them. This they shall be to them instead of their pride, because they have taunted and become arrogant against the people of YHWH of hosts. YHWH shall be terrifying to them, for he shall starve all the deities of the earth. And all the coastlands of the nations shall bow down to him, everyone from his own place.”

Now God’s judgment on Moab and Ammon is announced. The Moabites and Ammonites insulted and made threats against the Jewish people. So God says they will become like Sodom and Gomorrah which were destroyed and became a place of weeds and the salt pits of the Dead Sea today. The remnant of God’s chosen people will take control of everything they have. In this way, God will repay them for their pride and for insulting and mocking his people. This won’t happen until Jesus takes control of the earth after the Tribulation and during the Millennium.

**2:12** translates as “You also, Kushim, shall be slain by my sword they shall be.”

This is not a reference to the modern-day nation and people of Ethiopia who were sometimes called Kushim in the Bible. It is a statement that the people who follow the ways of Cush will be destroyed. Cush was the grandson of Noah, the son of Ham and the father of Nimrod who built Babylon. He is also responsible for the building of Nineveh in the land of Assyria. According to Josephus, "For of the four sons of Ham, time has not at all hurt the name of Cush; for the Ethiopians, over whom he reigned, are even at this day, both by themselves and by all men in Asia, called Cushites." (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.6) The people following the practice of Nimrod who worshipped everything but God, the Creator of the universe, and himself wanted to be worshipped as a god are the people being referred to as the Kushim. They will be slain by the sword of God which is the word of Jesus at the end of the Tribulation and at the end of the Millennium. (Rev 19:11-21)

**2:13-15** translate as “And he shall stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he shall make Nineveh a desolation, parched like the wilderness. Flocks shall lie down in her midst, all the beasts of a nation, both the pelican and the hedgehog shall lodge in her pillar capitals. A voice shall sing in the window, desolation shall be on the threshold, for he has laid bare the cedar work. This is the exultant city which dwells securely, who says in her heart, I am and there is none other still. How she has become a desolation, a resting place for beasts! Everyone who passes by her shall hiss and shall shake his hand!”

Now Zechariah announces the destruction of Nineveh which occurred in 612 BC. He says God’s hand will be against the city and it will be left utterly desolate and dry as the desert. Animals will make their home there but not people. This is what Nahum wrote about (660 – 650 BC) to encourage the people of Judah that God

would justly punish the Assyrians for the evil they had done to the northern ten tribes and many other nations and had begun to do to the two southern tribes before God had intervened.

### Chapter 3

**3:1-7** translate as “Woe to her who is rebellious and being defiled, the oppressing city! She did not listen to the voice. She did not receive correction. She did not trust in YHWH. She did not draw near to her El. Her princes within her are roaring lions. Her judges are wolves at evening; they did not leave the bones for the morning. Her prophets are reckless, treacherous men. Her priests have profaned the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law. YHWH is righteous within her. He shall do no iniquity. Morning by morning he brings his justice to light. He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame. I have cut off nations; their towers are ruined. I have made their streets desolate that none passing by their cities are laid waste, so that there is no man, that is, no inhabitant. I said, surely you shall fear me, accept instruction, so her dwelling shall not be cut off, all that I have appointed concerning her. But they rose early, they corrupted all their deeds.”

This is God’s pronouncement of a woe against Jerusalem and the leaders of Judah because of their deeds. In chapter 2:1-3, God called the nation, and especially those who do what he commands, to seek righteousness and humility so that they might be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger. God describes the leaders of the nation as oppressors, rebellious, defiled, accepting no correction, not trusting nor drawing near to God. He condemns the officials (judges), rulers (princes), prophets, and priests who were supposed to be guarding and preserving the people and the nation. He describes them as acting like roaring lions, wolves, and treacherous men who profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. God proclaims that he is there, doing no wrong, dispensing justice, and providing each new day. God expected the leaders of Jerusalem and the nation to learn from what he allowed to happen to the northern tribes and other nations and return to obeying him, but the unrighteous were shameless in their disobedience and eagerness to act corruptly.

This would have been written before Josiah made his reforms in 622 BC to bring the people back to obeying God. After he was killed in battle by Pharaoh Neco, the people began returning worshipping the Canaanite idols like Josiah’s grandfather, Manasseh, led the people to do. Ezekiel, the son of a priest who was about to begin his service as a priest, was taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC during the second time Israelites were deported to Babylon. That was 11 years before the last deportation of captives when the city and Temple were destroyed in 586 BC. Beginning with the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel’s book about what God had him to do and say among the exiles, God has him telling them about the destruction that God was bringing on Jerusalem, the Temple, the ruling people, and the priests. In his 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, which was written about 15 years after the destruction of the Temple, God’s Spirit shows Ezekiel what was occurring in and around the Temple that caused God’s anger which Zephaniah has written about in these 7 verses of chapter 3. Ezekiel sees women sitting by the north gate of the Temple mount weeping for Tammuz, a fertility idol. Then he is shown the inner court of the Temple on the east side where 25 men who were priests had their backs to the Temple and were bowing in worship of the sun, moon, and stars. This was directly forbidden by God in Deuteronomy 4:19. (You can read all about this in my study of the book of Ezekiel.) It is these things that God is having Zephaniah write about and the reason for his judgment upon the people, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple.

**3:8-10** translate as “Therefore wait for me, declares YHWH, for the day when I rise up as a witness. For my judgment is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them my fury, all my burning anger; for all the earth shall be devoured by the fire of my jealousy. For then I shall give to the peoples a clear speech to call all of them on the name of YHWH to serve him with one shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Kush my worshipers, the daughter of my scattered ones, shall bring my offerings.”

God calls upon all people to wait upon him because he will take action. He says he will gather the nations and kingdoms and pour out his wrath on them. This sounds very much like the Tribulation described in Revelation. He says he will purify the lips of the people so that all of them may call upon his name and serve him. This would be the people during the Tribulation who decide to trust God and his promise to give them a

right relationship with himself if they do trust him. He says that people from far away (beyond the rivers of Cush – the upper Nile region of Africa, sometimes called Ethiopia) will bring him offerings in worship. This would be during the time of the Millennium described in Revelation 20.

**3:11-20** translate as “In that day you shall not be ashamed because of all your deeds by which you have rebelled and you shall not again be proud on my holy mountain. But I shall leave among you a humble and lowly people and they shall take refuge in the name of YHWH. The remnant of Yisrael shall do no iniquity nor speak lies. A deceitful tongue shall not be found in their mouths for they shall feed and lie down, and no one shall frighten them. Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Yisrael! Rejoice and exult with all the heart, O daughter of Yerushalam! YHWH has taken away your judgments. You shall not fear evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Yerushalam: Do not be afraid, O Zion. Do not let your hands droop. YHWH your El is mighty in your midst. He shall save. He shall rejoice over you with joy. He shall be quiet in his love. He shall rejoice over you with shouts of joy. I shall gather the afflicted ones from the appointed place; they were from you, a lifting up of reproach over her. Behold, I shall deal at that time with all your oppressors. I shall save the lame and gather the outcast, and I shall turn their shame for a praise and for a name in all the earth. At that time I shall bring you in, even at the time when I gather you together, for I shall give you for a name and for a praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says YHWH.”

The phrase “on that day” brings us back to the time of God’s judgment, taking control, and making everything right. This not judgments and partial fulfillments of God’s statements he has given the Zephaniah but the final, complete fulfillment of what he has been saying will happen beginning in Zephaniah’s time until the end of time. Then God has Zephaniah describe the restoration of the Jewish people and the Promised Land. He will remove the prideful and haughty people from Jerusalem but will leave the meek and humble who trust in him. Then the remnant of Israel will do no wrong, tell no lies, and speak no deceit. Everyone will be able to eat and sleep without fear. (That is something that they long for right now.) He announces that he, the Lord, the King of Israel will be with them so that they will fear nothing. Then God says he will take great delight in them, quiet them with his love, and rejoice over them with shouts of joy (some translations say singing for shouts of joy). (If it really does mean that God is singing, then that must be something wonderful to hear.) God promises to gather his scattered people, bring them to the land, and restore their fortunes. That would be the time of the Millennium when God gives all the land promised to Abraham to his descendants and cause it to blossom with plants.