

## Zephaniah

**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, king of Judah from 716-687 BC.

**Date:** Zephaniah dates his word from God to the reign of Josiah as king of Judah, which was 641-609 B. 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 had his reforms in 622-621 BC, most scholars date his writing from 641 – 622 BC.

**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 the 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 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 did repent of his evil ways before his death, but his son Amon continued the idolatrous ways. Amon’s son, Josiah, was only eight when he became king in 641 BC and he instituted his reforms in 622-621 BC. There is nothing definite to indicate it, but it is possible that God’s word through Zephaniah helped move Josiah in the direction of reform. That would put his writing closer to 622 BC. 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.

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. The usual practice was to name a child after Yahweh as in Zephaniah – “Yahweh hides.” Manasseh also paid tribute to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, so he wouldn’t invade Judah, instead of trusting in God’s provision.

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.

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, and only release him to give everyone a chance to choose to follow Satan or himself.

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.

Verse 1:1. This is Zephaniah’s statement of who he is, when he is writing, and for whom he speaks.

Verses 1:2-3. 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. This obviously hasn’t happened yet, but it will be partially fulfilled at the end of the Tribulation and completely fulfilled at the end of the Millennium.

Verses 1:4-13. 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. Then he 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. God has prepared a sacrifice for his day and consecrated those he has invited to attend. The sacrifice would appear to be the evil people and the consecrated those who will accept and follow God’s leadership. The people who do not follow God at that time will wail because of what is happening to them.

Verses 1:14-18. 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. His jealousy will cause the whole world to be consumed and he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth. There will be a partial fulfillment of this in the Battle of Armageddon and 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).

Verses 2:1-3. Now he calls the nation to repentance, especially those who 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.

Verses 2:4-7. This announces the destruction of the Philistine kingdom. It 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.

Verses 2:8-11. Now he announces God’s judgment on Moab and Ammon. 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 will happen in the Millennium.

Verses 2:12. This is a statement that the people 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)

Verses 2:13-15. Now he announces the destruction of Nineveh. 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.

Verses 3:1-7. Now God pronounces a woe against Jerusalem and the leaders of Judah. In chapter 2:1-3, God just 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 their condition 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 because they were acting like roaring lions, wolves, 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, but the unrighteous are shameless in their disobedience and eagerness to act corruptly.

Verses 3:8-10. 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) will bring him offerings in worship.

Verses 3:11-20. The phrase "on that day" brings us back to the time of God's judgment, taking control, and making everything right. Then he describes 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 singing. (The singing of God 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.