

# Zephaniah

## I. The Man

A. The name means “he who Jehovah has hidden/protected.”

1. Commentators have attempted to connect the meaning of his name to his message. It may mean that he will be protected from the terror of “the day of the Lord.” All attempts are merely supposition.
2. Greek and Latin Bibles call him Sophonias.
3. Three men in the OT bear this name (1 Chr. 6:36; Jer. 21:1; Zeph. 1:1). There is no credible evidence provided to connect these men.
4. Zephaniah traces lineage back four generations (1:1) and is the only prophet to do so. The reason for his doing so is uncertain. Some have opined that it may be that “Hizkiah” is to be identified with Hezekiah. If so, they are separated by about 100 years. This would also mean that he was of royal descent and would have easy access to the royal court to deliver his message.
5. It is believed that he had lived in Jerusalem because of his detailed knowledge of the conditions there. Drawing from the language of 1:12, artists of the Middle Ages represented him as the man with the lamp, searching Jerusalem for sinners to bring them to punishment.
6. He has been called...
  - “the orator” (Robinson)
  - “the zealous” (Ward)
  - “the prophet of all nations” (Scofield Bible)
  - “The prophet of the goodness and severity of God” (Morgan)
  - “the prophet of the wrath and mercy of God” (Elliott)

## B. Date

1. According to 1:1 the prophecy was received by Zephaniah during the days of Josiah, just before his reforms (622 B.C.; 2 Kgs. 22:1-23:30). From passages such as 1:14-17, and 3:1-7 we read that the religious and moral condition of the people was low.

2. Josiah reigned from 640-609 B.C. Like his contemporaries Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, Zephaniah preaches before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.
3. Josiah inherited a legacy of moral and religious degeneration from Manasseh and Amon (2 Chr. 33:1-25; 2 Kgs. 21:1-26). Josiah came to the throne at the age of 8. In his 18<sup>th</sup> year, with the discovery of a copy of the law, he carried out a sweeping reform. He lost life in a futile attempt to prevent Pharaoh Necho from assisting Assyria in their campaign against Babylon. Thirty-four years following one of the most notable reforms Judah had seen, Nebuchadnezzar swept over them, carried the people into exile, imprisoned and blinded their king and destroyed the temple.
4. A question here is whether the book of Zephaniah was before or after Josiah's reform of 622 B.C. The fact that Zephaniah denounces foreign customs, worship of the heavenly bodies, religious syncretism and skepticism provides some basis for the belief that he preceded these reforms. There is no evidence, as claimed by some, that he helped to motivate these reforms.
5. A safe date for the book of Zephaniah is about 630 B.C.

## II. The Message

A. Paul R. House: "Though a variety of structures has been suggested, the prophet set forth his message of the God who punishes to create a remnant in three parts. First, 1:2-17a depicts the God who sweeps away sin. Second, 1:17b-3:5 describes the God who consumes the nations. Third, 3:6-20 examines the God who creates the remnant.

B. Zephaniah's purpose:

1. The immediate purpose is to warn Judah of approaching doom. The ultimate purpose is to warn all sinners and give encouragement to all who repent.
2. The book focuses largely on the theme of God's wrath. However, it also provides a sense of hope and the promise of redemption.
3. According to Payne, 47 of the 53 verses are predictive (89%). These statistics make Zephaniah the most predictive book of the Bible.
4. The theme of the book is "the day of the Lord." Zephaniah emphasizes that punishment is imminent (1:2-3; 2:14-15; 3:8), it is universal (1:14ff.) and the terror of that day (1:17). He shows that "the day of the Lord" is a day of judgment against the wicked (2:3; 3:9ff.), but mercy for the remnant.

Structure of Zephaniah		
Looking Within	Looking Around	Looking About
The Sin Of Judah	The Sentence Against the Nations	The Salvation Of the Remnant
1:2-2:3	2:4-3:8	3:9-20
Day of Wrath		Day of Joy

### III. Sins of Judah

#### A. Religious syncretism

##### 1. Zephaniah attacks them for worshipping...

- Baal (1:4)
- Milcam (1:5)
- Host of heaven (1:5)

2. At the same time they bowed down and swore by the Lord. Those practices had been introduced and fostered by Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Kgs. 21:3-5; 23:11ff.; Jer. 7:17ff.).

B. Wearing of foreign apparel (1:8), leaping over the threshold (1:9; cf. 1 Sam. 5:5).

C. Fraud and Violence (1:9)

D. Prophet, priest and judges are condemned as violent, sinful men (3:3-4)

E. A practical skepticism of indifference prevailed which insisted that the Lord was not concerned with human behavior, either to reward or punish (1:12). In contrast, Zephaniah insists that God will operate on a just basis (3:5).

F. Jerusalem refused to take correction (3:2, 7). She refused to learn from history; she listened to no voice (3:2).

### IV. The Day of the Lord

A. The major theme of Zephaniah is the approaching Day of the Lord.

1. Amos is the first writing prophet to specifically use this phrase (5:18). This phrase seemed to have been a popular expectation of God putting down all enemies and the exaltation of God and Israel.

2. The prophets reinterpreted the phrase to describe a day within history (as contrasted to a day at the end of history in which a nation would receive its doom – cf. Joel 1:15; 2:11; Obad. 15).

B. Zephaniah is heavily involved in this development of thought.

1. There is the first sacrificial imagery in which the invited guests are the nations – God’s agents in this calamity.
2. The victims are the members of the royal house who are guilty of violence (1:7-8), but others will also suffer (1:8-12).
3. These are to be searched out for punishment as one searches with a lamp (1:12).
4. About this time Jeremiah was searching for a righteous man that the city might be spared (Jer. 5:1).

C. The day is near at hand.

1. Using poetry describing the foundations of the earth quaking, Zephaniah describes the terror of the day affecting man, beast, bird and fish (1:2-3).
2. The day is described as a dark day (1:15-16).
3. It is a day of God’s wrath from which neither gold nor silver can deliver (1:18) and life is counted as worthless as dung (1:17).

D. Zephaniah’s day of the Lord played an important role in the forming of the concept of the final Day of Judgment. At times it is difficult to avoid feeling that he is speaking of the final day (e.g. 1:2-3; 3:8).

## V. The Nations

A. The judgment that Zephaniah sees upon Judah enlarges itself to include the nations.

1. Zephaniah does not denounce any sin or crime on the part of the nations, except for Moab and Nineveh, whose sin seems to be that of taunting (2:8-10) and pride (2:15).
2. While the Philistines and Nineveh feel the blow of the Scythians, the presence of other nations in the denunciation make it clear that the Scythians are not the only threat.
3. Zephaniah threatens the Philistine plain.

1. Gaza shall be forsaken.
2. Ekron shall be rooted up.
3. Ashdod and Ashkelon are also mentioned as are the Cherethites, a clan of the Philistines (cf. Ezek. 25:16; 2 Sam. 8:18).

C. Zephaniah then turns his attention to Ammon and Moab, indicating that they will become like Sodom and Gomorrah, to be plundered by “the remnant” (2:8-9). Next are the Ethiopians (2:12). This threat was probably fulfilled in a campaign of Nebuchadnezzar in 568 B.C.

D. Particularly severe are threats against Nineveh, which was to become a desolation and the object of scorn from all who pass by (2:13-15). This fall comes in 612 B.C.

## VI. After the Calamity

A. Zephaniah’s “day” fits into a historical framework. He promises a restoration of the fortunes of Judah in the form of a remnant possessing the land of the Philistines (2:7) as well as the land of Ammon and Moab (2:9).

B. This “better age” is not the result of social reform; rather, it is the result of God’s action. The doctrine of the remnant is also found in the books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

1. Zephaniah sees a people of pure speech who will call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him (3:9).
2. None will make them afraid (3:13).
3. Israel will no longer be proud (3:11). Jehovah is king in their midst and all nations will worship Him (3:9-10).

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## Outline

### I. The Coming Day of Yahweh – Zephaniah 1

- A. Judgment on the World – A general threat (1:2-3)
- B. Judgment on Judah – A specific application (1:4-18)

- 1. Cause of the judgment (vs. 4-6)
- 2. Nearness of the day (vs. 7)
- 3. Extent of the destruction (vs. 8-13)
- 4. The terror of God's judgment (vs. 14-18)

### II. A Call for Repentance – Zephaniah 2

- A. A Direct Call for Repentance (2:1-3)

- 1. An appeal for humility (vs. 1-2)
- 2. An appeal for action (vs. 3)

- B. An Oblique Call to Repentance – focus on the nations (2:4-15)

- 1. In the West – Philistia (vs. 4-7)
- 2. In the East – Moab and Ammon (vs. 8-11)
- 3. In the South – Ethiopia (vs. 12)
- 4. In the North – Assyria (vs. 13-15)

### III. The Results of the Great Day – Zephaniah 3

- A. A Woe on the City (3:1-5)

- 1. The addressee (vs. 1)
- 2. The general indictment (vs. 2)
- 3. The specific indictment (vs. 3-4)
- 4. The efforts of Yahweh (vs. 5)

- B. A Word to the City (3:6-8)

- 1. Word of justification (vs. 6-7)
- 2. Word of encouragement (vs. 8)

- C. Salvation of the Remnant (3:9-13)

- 1. A united people (vs. 9)

2. An evangelistic people (vs. 10)
3. A purified people (vs. 11-13a)
4. A content people (vs. 13b)

D. Celebration over the Outcome (3:14-17)

1. Terms of endearment (vs. 14)
2. Confidence in forgiveness (vs. 15-16)
3. The presence of God (vs. 17)

E. Final Encouragement (3:18-20)

1. Consolation (vs. 18)
2. Vindication (vs. 19)
3. Restoration (vs. 20)