

Zephaniah

The name Zephaniah means "The Lord has bidden." This book appears as the ninth among The Twelve or The Minor Prophets. The only biographical material found in the book is what can be deduced from the more revealing passages of the book. Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, a direct descendant in the fourth generation of King Hezekiah (ca 715 - 687 BCE.) He seems to have made his prophecies in about 625 BCE. Dates by various scholars range from 639 - 606 BCE.

He seems to be well aware of conditions and customs in the area of Jerusalem, giving a close view of aristocratic life, having firsthand knowledge of the situation in Jerusalem. He can be described as a youthful prophet of princely blood who boldly denounced the social clique with which he was identified. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

The book seems to deal with a period prior to 621 BCE. He has a sensitive moral and religious spirit that is overwhelmed with the impending doom that is awaiting those who are disobedient.

Zephaniah's work inspired Thomas of Celano (ca. 1190 - 1260) to write the medieval hymn "Dies Irae." He envisioned a time of judgment by an outraged God.

Assyria under Eserhaddon (682 - 669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (669 - 626 BCE) were the powerful forces in the Mediterranean world and their influence and thrust were keenly felt in Judah. The kings of Judah, while technically reigning, were subject to the Assyrian power.

Three parts are found in Zephaniah's prophecy. 1. Woe to Judah. 2. An extension of judgment to other nations. 3. Comfort to Judah following the world catastrophe.

Some scholars feel that chapters 2 and 3 contain later poems. There is no consensus on the part of scholars as to whether the prophecy is poetry or prose, though understanding the prophecy to be poetry seems to predominate.

The language of the book seems to be from the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 6th century, with Nahum, Habakkuk, Joel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deuteronomy. Fortunately recent studies have helped understand some of the hapax legomena which now can be explained as the result of recent Ugaritic studies.

James Moffatt says: "Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Nahum are short ominous 7th century pamphlets."

Zephaniah

<CHAPTER 1>

A Title 1:1

¹ The Word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah ¹ the son of Cushi ² son of Gedaliah, ³ son of Amariah, ⁴ son of Hezekiah, ⁵ in the days of Josiah ⁶ the son of Amon, ⁷ king of Judah. ⁸

B Threat of destruction 1:2 - 6

² "I will completely sweep away (*or, put an end to*)⁹ everything from the surface of the earth,"

declares the Lord.

³ "I will sweep away (*or, put an end to*) humanity and animals; I will sweep away (*or, put an end to*) the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea;

[I will overthrow¹⁰ the wicked

(*or, I will cause the wicked to be completely destroyed*)

I will wipe out all of humanity from the surface of the earth."]¹¹

declares the Lord.

⁴ "I will raise my hand in punishment¹² against Judah, and against all those who inhabit Jerusalem; and I will exterminate every vestige of Baal worship¹³ from this place; and the name of the spurious priests¹⁴ and the memory of the names of these spurious priests.¹⁵

⁵ Those who worship¹⁶ on the roof tops of houses,

1 The name means: "The Lord has hidden."

2 The name usually signifies a person from Cush (Sudan or Ethiopia). Someone who possibly is of African origin. A Cush dynasty ruled in Egypt in 715 - 663 BCE.

3 The name means: "The Lord has made great."

4 The name means: "The Lord said."

5 The name means: "The Lord strengthens." Ca. 715 - 687 BCE.

6 The name means: "The Lord heals." Josiah reigned from 642 - 640 BCE.

7 The name means: "master workman." Amon ruled from 687 -642 BCE.

8 The name means: "God be praised."

9 The Hebrew word "to sweep away" also can mean "destroy, remove, wipe away." It does not have a figurative concept as in the NRSV.

10 Hebrew uncertain. So: emended. "overthrow" is not in the LXX. Hebrew: "the stumbling block."

11 Some scholars feel the lines in brackets are a later insertion.

12 LXX: *εκτενω τη χειρα μου*. "I will stretch out my hand."

13 Baal was the name of the Canaanite fertility god. LXX: "the names of Baal."

14 So: emended to compare with LXX. Hebrew: "idolatrous priests with the priests." The term is only used for priests of 'heathen' gods.

15 A possible gloss which is not found in the LXX.

16 Literally: "bow down."

worshipping the heavenly objects,¹⁷
those who worship thus and yet vow their loyalty to the Lord,
and yet also swear their loyalty to Milcom.¹⁸
6 I will destroy those who have stopped serving the Lord.;
who have not sought the Lord or consulted him."

C The Lord's sacrifice 1:7

7 Be hushed¹⁹ before the Lord God!
The day of the Lord is at hand
(*or, the day of the Lord's judgment is at hand*).
The Lord has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated the guests
(*or, and his guests have received the rite of purification*).

D Punishment of the princes 1:8 - 9

8 On that day of the Lord's sacrifice ----
"I will inflict punishment on the officials and the king's family members²⁰
(*or, the king's chief advisors and family members,*)
and all who have clothed themselves in foreign attire.²¹
9 I will, at that time, punish everyone
who jumps over the threshold²²
and those who fill their master's house (*or, their lord's house*)."²³

E The effect of the day in Jerusalem 1:10 - 11

10 "On that day,"
declares the Lord,
"a distressful cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,²⁴
wailing from the Second Quarter (*or, northern portion of the city*),
a loud crash from the hills.
11 Wail, you inhabitants of Mortar (*or, Maktesh*)²⁵
for there are no longer any merchants (*or, traders*);²⁶
all transactions of silver have come to a halt.

F Fate of the indifferent 1:12 - 13

17 I. e. the sun, moon, stars and planets.

18 Possibly Moloch, the god of the Ammorites. The name is spelled in a variety of ways by translators. Sticks 3 & 4 are not found in the LXX.

19 A sign of reverence.

20 Literally: "the king's sons." LXX: "the king's house."

21 A reference to clothes used for the purpose of worshipping a foreign god, or following a foreign religious custom.

22 No doubt a reference to Philistine religious custom. Cf. I Samuel 5:5. Possibly this is also a reference to a raised platform where rituals took place.

23 A possible reference to the royal palace and wicked officers gathering funds by violent fraud. LXX: "All who fill the house of the Lord their God with violence and fraud."

24 A gate on the north side of Jerusalem. Cf. II Kings 22:14.

25 A portion of the city at the northern part of the Tyropoeon Valley which was perhaps the market district.

26 I. e. all the people whose principal occupation is trade.

12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,²⁷
 and I will punish the people
 who complacently have enjoyed uninterrupted wealth
 (*or, who sit in a drunken stupor over the dregs of their wine*);²⁸
 those who say to themselves;
 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do evil.'
 (*or, the Lord is indifferent to our situation.*)
 13 Their possessions will be looted (*or, pillaged*)
 and their houses destroyed.

[Even though they build houses,
 they will never inhabit them;
 and though they plant vineyards,
 they will never drink the wine from them.]²⁹

G Dies Irae 1:14 - 16

14 The great day of judgment by the Lord is approaching;
 and swiftly coming ever nearer;
 more swiftly than a runner! The day of the Lord
 is speedier than a warrior;³⁰
 For even those who are brave and powerful
 (*or, The day of the Lord is faster than a runner*),³¹
 15 it will be a day in which God will display his terrible anger:
 a day in which trouble and distress will be experienced;
 a day of calamity and destruction;
 a day of darkness and gloom;
 a day of clouds and thick darkness,
 16 a day with trumpet blasts and battle cries³²
 against the fortified cities
 and against the lofty perimeter walls.³³

H Universal judgment 1:17 - 18

17 The Lord declares:
 "I will bring distress on humanity
 so they will grope desperately like the blind,"³⁴

27 LXX: "a lamp." Implying the evening invaders seeking for wealth.

28 Hebrew difficult. Literally: "who thicken on their lees." People who like bottles of wine in which the sediment has settled to the bottom. They have remained at peace and uninterrupted for a long time, having no interest in the events around them.

29 Cf. footnote 11. Verse 3.

30 Hebrew uncertain. Literally: "the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; a warrior is crying there." The translation is an emendation.

31 Hebrew uncertain. The alternate version is an emendation. Another emendation could be: "The day will cry out with despair."

32 Calling the invaders to attack.

33 Literally: "corners." Possibly: "high towers."

34 With the result of being unable to find a way to escape.

because they have sinned against the Lord;
their blood will gush out like vomit,³⁵
and their flesh will become like dung.³⁶
(*or, I will cause people everywhere to undergo trouble,
and as a result they will grope about
because of their sins against the Lord.
Enemies will cause their blood to pour out
like dust in a wind storm
and their bodies will lie in the ground and rot.*)

18 No matter how rich they will have been,
their money will not help them to escape
on the day when the Lord demonstrates his judgmental fury.
The Lord will destroy the entire earth with fire,
the entire earth will be consumed³⁷
with the fire of his anger.³⁸

"This will be total and sudden!
The Lord will have this take place for all the inhabitants of the earth.

<CHAPTER 2>

II Judgments of the nation 2:1 - 15

A summons to gather and be punished 2:1 - 2

1 Huddle together! Assemble in crowds,³⁹
O nation that has no shame,⁴⁰
2 before the Lord's decree takes effect;
(*or, "you are driven away."*)
blown by the wind like chaff⁴¹
before the day comes when the Lord
shows his blazing wrath;
the day of the wrath of the Lord
before it comes to you (*or, happens to you*).

B Invitation to the humble to seek the Lord 2:3

3 Worship the Lord, O residents of the land
(*or, you humble ones who reside in the land*)

35 Literally: "dust." It is difficult to imagine dust "gushing out" hence the emendation.

36 Hebrew unclear.

37 Literally: "eaten."

38 Some scholars feel the last 3 stichs are a later scribal insertion.

39 "Huddle together" and "Assemble in crowds" are both forms of the same Hebrew word. The root word originally meant "stubble" then gathering straw. The French Common Language translation has "Take the trouble to consider (the situation), Take hold of yourselves."

40 The Hebrew word translated "shame" originally meant "to long for." A possible meaning might be "without desire." LXX has "unruly nation."

41 Hebrew obscure. So: emended to compare with LXX and Syriac. Literally: "before a decree is borne; like chaff a day has passed away." LXX: "Before you wither and die like a flower." Another possible translation would be: "as straw not gathered in, before you are driven like flying chaff."

who are faithful to the Lord
who are obedient to him.
Desire righteousness, desire humility
(*or, Do what is right, be faithful to the Lord*).
Perhaps you might escape⁴² punishment (*or, find shelter*)
on the day when the Lord punishes his people.⁴³

C Oracle against the Philistines 2:4 - 7

4 Gaza certainly will be deserted;⁴⁴
Ashkelon⁴⁵ will become devastated;
in a half day Ashdod's⁴⁶ people will be expelled.
(*or, The enemies will drive out the people of Ashdod in half a day*)
and Ekron⁴⁷ will be uprooted.

5 You are doomed ---

O Inhabitants of the seacoast;
you nation of the Cherethites!⁴⁸
God's verdict is against you (*or, is unfavorable*).
O Canaan,⁴⁹ land of the Philistines.⁵⁰
"I will cause you to be destroyed⁵¹
until no one is left."

6 And you, O seacoast⁵² will become pasture land,
meadows for shepherd's lambs⁵³
and enclosures for flocks of sheep.
7 [The seacoast will be taken over
by the survivors of the people of Judah
as the pastures on which their young will graze.
Among the estates of Ashkelon
will be the shepherd's resting place for the night;
for the Lord their God will deal kindly with them

42 Literally: "be hidden."

43 Verse 3 is thought by some scholars to be a latter insertion.

44 There is a play on words in Hebrew. Gaza means deserted. 4 Philistine cities are mentioned in this passage. The 5th, Gath, had already been destroyed by the Assyrian king Sargon II in 711 BCE. The cities are named from south to north, possibly the direction of the Scythian cavalry attack.

45 The name means "holm oak."

46 Ashdod means "stronghold."

47 Ekron means "exterminator." The play on words continues with each of the Philistine city names.

48 Sometimes spelled "Kerethites." A clan among the Philistines. King David's bodyguards were Cherethites. Cf. II Samuel 8:18.

49 Hebrew uncertain. Possibly "Phoenicians."

50 The Philistines possibly came from Crete but were assimilated by the Canaanites.

51 Possibly "humbled." The letters in Hebrew are virtually the same.

52 Hebrew uncertain. The meaning would be a reference to the Philistines who would be completely destroyed. .LXX has "Crete." "And Crete the borders of the sea will become pastures."

53 Hebrew uncertain. Possibly "wells" instead of "lambs."

and restore their property.]⁵⁴

D Oracles against Moab, the Ammonites and the Ethiopians 2:8 - 12

8 ["I have heard the insults of Moab,
and the jeers of the Ammonites,⁵⁵
how they have shown contempt for (*or, insulted*) my people
and boasted⁵⁶ (*or, gloated*) that they would conquer Judah.
9 Therefore, as surely as I live
declares the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,
"Moab will become like Sodom⁵⁷
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah⁵⁸
(*or, I will cause the people of Moab
and Ammon to be killed
like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.*)
Their land will be filled with⁵⁹ clumps of nettles and salt pits⁶⁰
and a desolation forever (*or, for everyone*).
The survivors among my people⁶¹ will plunder them
and the remnant of my nation will take possession of them."
10 Shame will be their destiny in place of their pride
because they insulted and jeered⁶²
against the people⁶³ of the Lord of hosts.
11 The Lord will be terrifying⁶⁴ against them;
he will assuredly disable (*or, weaken*)⁶⁵ all the gods of the earth.
(*or, he will make the gods of the earth so small
that nothing will be left of them*).
All the nations will worship⁶⁶ him;
each in his own land,
and the lands⁶⁷ of the earth.]

12 "You also, O Ethiopians (*or, Nubians*)⁶⁸
will be killed in warfare."⁶⁹

54 Possibly "bring back their captives." Some scholars feel this is a gloss made by an annotator.

55 Moab and the Ammonites were neighbors to the east of the river Jordan. All were of Semitic stock, descending from Abraham.

56 Hebrew: *witsddnli* "to make great (boast) or to enlarge (the border).

57 Sodom means "burnt." Cf. Genesis 19:12 - 22.

58 Gomorrah means "submission."

59 A hapax legomenon. Hebrew: *mshq*. Meaning uncertain. LXX: "Damascus."

60 Hebrew uncertain. The Hebrew word *hrwwl* is a weed associated with desolate places. Salt pits is possibly a reference to saltwort. Cf. NEB: "a heap of rotting saltwort."

61 Literally: "the remnant."

62 The Hebrew words translated as "scoffed and jeered" have the same Hebrew root as in verse 8. Cf. footnote 56.

63 Omitted by LXX.

64 Literally: "terrible." LXX: "will appear."

65 Literally "make lean" or "shrink."

66 Literally: "bow down."

67 The Hebrew word can also mean "isles" or "jackals" (i.e. ghosts or demons). Some scholars feel this is a later insertion.

68 Cf. footnote 2. Chapter 1, verse 1.

69 Literally: "by my sword."

E A warning to Assyria 2:13 - 14

The Lord will stretch out his hand (*or, use his power*) against the north
and cause Assyria to perish.

He will make Nineveh⁷⁰ a deserted wasteland,
an arid desert.

14 Herds will lie down in her midst;
all kinds of animals of the field.⁷¹

(*or, in all the valleys of the field*).

The vulture⁷² and the screech owl⁷³
will lodge in the columns (*or, capitals*).

The owl⁷⁴ will hoot at the window,
the ravens⁷⁵ caw on the threshold (*or, door step*),
for her cedar paneling will be laid bare.⁷⁶

F Editorial addition 2:15

15 This is what will happen to the buildings of the city
in which the residents that dwelt there felt so secure.

They said to themselves,

"We are the greatest and there is no one that is comparable."⁷⁷

What a desolate ruin it has become,

a haunt for wild animals (*or, where wild animals live*).⁷⁸

Everyone who passes by

will hiss and dismiss it with a wave of a hand.⁷⁹

<CHAPTER 3>

III Threats and promises 3:1 - 20

A Charges against Jerusalem 3:1 - 5

1 She (*i. e. Jerusalem*) who is rebellious⁸⁰ and corrupt,
that city that oppresses its own people ---⁸¹

70 The capital of ancient Assyria.

71 Hebrew obscure. Emended to correspond to Targums & LXX. LXX θηρια της γης. "every beast of the earth." Hebrew "nations": will lie down. The Hebrew word has a "o" which could possibly originally have been an "a" which would then read "valley." NAB: "the wild life of the hollows." TAN: "every species of beast." A possible translation is noted above.

72 Meaning uncertain. The Hebrew word is unusual. Cf. various translations for possible meanings.

73 This Hebrew word used to be translated "hedgehog" or "porcupine." Recent studies have opted for "screech owl" Hebrew: taq.

74 So: emended. Hebrew: "voice." HOTTP suggests: "Their calls will echo through the windows."

75 So: LXX & Vulgate. HOTTP suggests a Hebrew word meaning "desolation." There is one letter difference in Hebrew between the word used as the basis for the LXX and the suggestion of HOTTP.

76 Scholars question whether this line is in the original manuscript or a later insertion because of a confusion with the next line. A possible translation might be: "People will strip away the cedar wood from her buildings."

77 LXX: Εγώ ειμι, και ουκ εστιν μετ εμι ετι. "I am, and there is no other one with me."

78 Cf. ANET p. 445.

79 I. e. to ward off a similar fate for themselves. Cf. Jeremiah 18:16; Lamentations 2:15.

80 Hebrew: *maah* LXX reads the root word differently. απεφανης και απολελυτρωμενη "glorious and ransomed."

81 Hebrew uncertain. TAN "overbearing." Possibly "tyrannical."

2 is deaf to all others
 and rejects all corrective discipline.
 She refuses to trust in the Lord,
 nor does she seek God's help (*or, has not drawn near to God*).
 3 Her leaders have become as greedy as roaring lions;
 her rulers are hungry⁸² wolves that are too greedy
 to leave a bone to gnaw in the morning.⁸³
 4 Her prophets are unprincipled⁸⁴ men
 who are unable to be trusted (*or, are impostors*).
 Her priests dilute⁸⁵ what is sacred (*in the holy place*).
 They wrest (*or, adapt*) the law to their own desire.⁸⁶
 5 The Lord who is within her
 (*as over against the officials within her*) is righteous,
 never doing any wrong.
 Without fail his judgments are rendered each morning;
 each new day his justice is constant;
 yet the wrongdoer knows no shame.⁸⁷

B Failure of discipline 3:6 - 7

6 "I have destroyed⁸⁸ nations;
 their perimeter walls (*or, corner towers. I.e. they have no protection.*)
 I have made their streets impassable
 so that no one walks on them;
 their cities have become devastated.⁸⁹
 Every one is gone.⁹⁰
 7 I said, 'The city surely will be in awe of me
 and accept my corrective discipline.'
 Then her refuge would not have been cut off⁹¹
 nor would I have inflicted punishment upon her.⁹²
 None the less they rose up eagerly
 to make all their deeds corrupt.
 (*or, But they simply were as eager as before
 to do all sorts of depraved things.*)

C Proclamation of universal punishment 3:8

82 Hebrew uncertain. LXX: "wolves of Arabia."

83 Hebrew uncertain. Literally: "that leave nothing to gnaw in the morning."

84 Hebrew: *pchzim* "unrestrained, insolent." Cf. BDB pp. 757-758.

85 I. e. use things dedicated to the Lord for ordinary purposes.

86 I. e. 1. either they break the law, or 2. give interpretations favorable to people who can pay them.

87 Some scholars feel this stich has been added later.

88 Literally: "cut off."

89 Hebrew: *gtsddww* "to lay waste, destroy, desolated." A hapax legomenon in niphal form.

90 Some scholars feel this stich is a later insertion.

91 Literally: "her dwelling would not be cut off." LXX & Syriac: "she will not lose sight."

92 Hebrew: *kl anr pirtw ailih* The word translated "inflicted" may mean: 1. the intention of visiting punishment, or 2. giving responsibility. The Hebrew word is the same one used in 1:9.

8-The Lord declares: "You must wait for the day
when I rise up to accuse you⁹³ (*or, to give evidence of people's crimes*),
for I have determined to muster the nations
to gather⁹⁴ the kingdom,
to let them feel the force of my fury;⁹⁵
all my blazing wrath;
for the Lord will destroy the entire earth:
the entire world, with the fire of his anger."

D Conversion of the nations 3:9 - 10

9 "When that takes place⁹⁶ I will purify the manner in which people speak:
it will become acceptable speech,
so that all will invoke the name of the Lord,⁹⁷
and serve me with one accord⁹⁸ (*or, they will all obey me*).
10 From the distant rivers of Ethiopia (*or, Cush*)
my supplicants (*or, those who pray*), my scattered people⁹⁹
will bring me offerings."¹⁰⁰

E Security of the remnant 3:11 - 13

11 "At that time you will not need to suffer shame for your wicked deeds
for the wrongs by which you rebelled against (*or, defied*) me,
because then I will remove those who are proud
and arrogant from your midst.
You will never again exalt yourself (*or, be haughty*)
on my sacred hill.
12 A remnant will stay among you,
people who are humble and poor.
They will trust in the name of the Lord.
13 Those who remain in Israel;
will do no wrong and speak no lies,
nor will they be deceitful when they speak
for they will eat and lie down (*like sheep*),
and no one will startle them."
(*or, they will be like sheep that graze in safety;
they will rest and no one will make them afraid.*)

93 Literally: "rise up to plunder"

94 So: LXX. Hebrew unclear. Literally by adding a suffix: "that I may assemble."

95 NRSV: "indignation."

96 Literally: "I will turn over" as one turns a pancake to be baked on the other side.

97 CVE suggests an alternate translation: "I will change the hearts of all people and make them fit for praising me."

98 Literally: "with one shoulder" i.e. under the same yoke.

99 Hebrew uncertain.

100 Some scholars feel verses 9 & 10 are a later addition.

F Final picture of the golden age 3:14 - 20

(A song of joy)

14 "Sing aloud, people of Israel;¹⁰¹
and shout for joy, O Israel;
rejoice and be glad with all our heart,
O you who are faithful in Jerusalem;¹⁰²
15 the Lord has removed the condemnation against you;¹⁰³
he has routed¹⁰⁴ your enemy.
The Lord, the king of Israel, is present among you.
Because of this no one need be afraid.¹⁰⁵
16 When that day comes it will be said in Jerusalem:
'Fear not, O Zion.'
Let not your hands grow limp (*or, do not be discouraged*).¹⁰⁶
17 The Lord, your God, is in your presence,
you will be victorious through his presence.¹⁰⁷
He will be delighted about you,
he will renew you¹⁰⁸ in his love;
He will be joyful concerning you with loud singing,¹⁰⁹
18 as when a festival is celebrated.¹¹⁰

'I will remove the threat of disaster from you.¹¹¹
so that you will not undergo disgrace.¹¹²
19 The time is coming when I will deal
with those who have treated you cruelly,
and I will rescue those who are helpless,
and bring home those who had been exiled.
I will exchange their shame for praise
and renown in all the earth.
20 The time is coming when I will bring you home;
when I gather together those who were scattered
for I will make you famous and praised
among the people of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes.' "

101 Literally: "daughter of Zion." i.e. those who are faithful among the residents of Jerusalem.

102 Literally: "daughter of Jerusalem."

103 The Hebrew words are in the past tense. A so called 'prophetic perfect.'

104 Literally: "turned back."

105 LXX: "see."

106 Literally: "unable to grip your weapons." Some scholars feel verse 16 is a later insertion.

107 Literally: "a warrior who saves."

108 So: LXX & Syriac. Hebrew: "He will be silent."

109 Hebrew uncertain.

110 So: LXX & Syriac. Hebrew obscure.

111 So: emended. Hebrew: "they were."

112 Hebrew unclear. Possibly: "I will gather you who mourn for the appointed feasts. Your reproach is a burden to you."