

ZEPHANIAH - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
-

1. What would be missing from your picture of God if Zephaniah were dropped from the Bible? Why do you think the Jews included it? Was it because it was written by a prince, a great grandson of Hezekiah? Is there anything that really distinguishes Zephaniah from his contemporary writers—Nahum and Habakkuk?

The name Zephaniah means ‘Yahweh has hidden’ or ‘Yahweh has treasured’. We know nothing about him except what is in this book. Zephaniah 1:1 suggests that he came from among the royal family of Judah. He states that he prophesied in the days of Josiah who was king from 640-609 BC and since he predicts the downfall of Nineveh (Zephaniah 2:13) he must have written his book before that event which occurred in 612 BC. Furthermore, he speaks of the great wickedness of Jerusalem suggesting that his messages came before the reforms of Josiah which are dated around 626/625 BC. His main theme seems to be “the day of the Lord” which is coming for Jerusalem and its enemies. He ends, as do many of these prophets with a poetic promise of restoration if the right conditions are met. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Habakkuk, Nahum, Huldah, Jeremiah, and perhaps Daniel and Ezekiel. What would it be like to have so many prophets alive at one time, most of them living near Jerusalem?

“AUTHOR: Zephaniah

“Beyond the information given in the opening verse of the book, nothing more is known of the prophet’s life. The name Zephaniah literally means ‘YAHWEH has treasured or hidden.’ This name is used of only three other individuals in the Bible (cf. 1 Chr. 6:36; Jer. 21:1; Zech. 6:10, 14). Perhaps the name may have been given to him providentially to reflect that aspect of his prophetic ministry which called on all to seek the Lord in order to be ‘hidden’ or ‘protected’ on the day of the Lord (2:3). Normally the genealogy of a prophet is carried no higher than his father; however, Zephaniah traces his ancestry back four generations in order to demonstrate his royal lineage as the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah. Thus, he is a distant relative of King Josiah and of the princes to whom he addresses his prophecy. Apparently Zephaniah lived in the city of Jerusalem because he refers to the city as ‘this place’ (1:4), and he also describes the topography with intimate familiarity (e.g., Fish Gate, Second Quarter, and Maktesh; see 1:10, 11).

“DATE: c.625 B.C.

“Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.). It is certain that he wrote the prophecy before 612 B.C., for he predicted the fall of Assyria which took place at that time (cf. 2:13–15). Nevertheless, the question remains whether Zephaniah’s prophecy belongs to the early or latter part of Josiah’s reign. Most biblical commentators attempt to date the book in accordance with Josiah’s sweeping moral and religious reform, which he instituted with the discovery of the Book of the Law in 621 B.C. (2 Kin. 22:8ff.). No such reform is evident in the prophecy; therefore, it is maintained that the book should be dated before 621 B.C.

Apparently there were two reforms attempted by Josiah (2 Chr. 24:2-13). The initial reform (c. 628 B.C.) probably lacked the zeal that accompanied the second reform, thus creating the possibility that Zephaniah's prophecy may have fallen somewhere in between the two reforms. Based on the preceding considerations, the prophecy may be tentatively dated c. 625 B.C., making the prophet's ministry contemporaneous with that of Jeremiah.

"HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: Josiah's Reform and the Babylonian Threat

"The moral state of the southern kingdom deteriorated rapidly after the reign of King Hezekiah (729–686 B.C.). The religious reforms he instituted were soon eradicated by the evil influence of Manasseh (696–642 B.C.) and Amon (642–640 B.C.; cf. 2 Kin. 21; 2 Chr. 33).

"Into this scene of moral and religious degeneracy came the boy-king Josiah. Upon the discovery of the 'Book of the Law' (2 Kin. 22:8ff.), in the eighteenth year of his reign (621 B.C.; 2 Kin. 22:3), Josiah launched a sweeping reform of the national order. His regime was backed by the prophetic ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah, but the prophets' call for repentance fell upon deaf ears. Wickedness remained unabated, and Judah was ripe for judgment. Through a quick succession of events, God's providence brought the dark and foreboding clouds of war and destruction over Judah's horizon. Assyria was being replaced by Babylon as the power beyond the Euphrates. In a futile attempt to delay Babylon's rise, Egypt under Pharaoh Necho advanced north for war; but as a means of courting Babylon's favor, Judah's forces under Josiah stood in Egypt's way. At Megiddo, Egypt trampled upon Judah, killed King Josiah, and made the nation its vassal (609 B.C.). The alliance and protection Egypt afforded were short-lived, because in 605 B.C. Babylon extinguished Egypt's aspirations at Carchemish—a catastrophe which served to pave the way for the Chaldean conquest of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar, God's instrument of the judgment about whom Zephaniah had prophesied only two decades before, was suddenly knocking at the portals.

"THEME: The theme of the book is the necessity of seeking the Lord in view of the coming 'day of the LORD' (1:7; 2:1–3)—the time of God's dire judgment upon the whole earth. The 'day of the LORD' is an important concept in Scripture and is fundamental to a proper understanding of biblical eschatology. Zephaniah uses the expression more often than any other prophet of the Bible. In the Old Testament the expression 'the day of the LORD' refers to occasions when the Lord manifested Himself providentially in the affairs of Israel as well as in those of heathen Gentile nations (cf. Is. 13:6ff.; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15). The New Testament expands the concept to include a future day when the Lord will ultimately return to bring universal judgment upon His foes and triumphant deliverance for His faithful remnant (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11)." (*Believer's Study Bible*)

"We humans keep looking for a religion that will give us access to God without having to bother with people. We want to go to God for comfort and inspiration when we're fed up with the men and women and children around us. We want God to give us an edge in the dog-eat-dog competition of daily life.

"This determination to get ourselves a religion that gives us an inside track with God but leaves us free to deal with people however we like is age-old. It is the sort of religion that has been promoted and marketed with both zeal and skill throughout human history. Business is always booming.

"It is also the sort of religion that the biblical prophets are determined to root out. They are dead set against it.

“Because the root of the solid spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between people and God, it is easy to develop the misunderstanding that my spiritual life is something personal between God and me—a private thing to be nurtured by prayers and singing, spiritual readings that comfort and inspire, and worship with like-minded friends. If we think this way for very long, we will assume that the way we treat the people we don’t like or who don’t like us has nothing to do with God.

“That’s when the prophets step in and interrupt us, insisting, “Everything you do or think or feel has to do with God. Every person you meet has to do with God.” We live in a vast world of interconnectedness, and the connections have consequences, either in things or in people—and all the consequences come together in God. The biblical phrase for the coming together of the consequences is Judgment Day.

“We can’t be reminded too often or too forcefully of this reckoning. Zephaniah’s voice in the choir of prophets sustains the intensity, the urgency.” *The Message*

“Zephaniah is a book of contrasts; for no other prophet paints a darker picture of God’s judgment, and no prophet paints a brighter picture of Israel’s future glory. Historically, the Book of Zephaniah was used in the providence of God to prepare Judah for the reforms and revival under King Josiah. Through the prophecy the nation of the prophet’s day was faced with its sin, reminded of coming judgment, and instructed concerning the ultimate glory that will come to Israel....Zephaniah goes farther than any other of the minor prophets in emphasizing the future conversion of the Gentiles to the worship of the true God....Zephaniah has been called ‘the orator’ because of the oratorical style evident throughout the prophecy. Zephaniah has some literary affinities with Isaiah, but more with Jeremiah and Joel. Both he and Joel paint very dark pictures of the day of the Lord, but in both books beautiful rays of light penetrate the darkness. Two recurring expressions are important: (1) ‘remnant’ (Zephaniah 1:4; 2:7,9; 3:13), and (2) the ‘day of the LORD’ (Zephaniah 1:7-10, 14-16,18; 2:2,3; 3:8,11,16).

“The purpose of Zephaniah’s prophecy is to set forth what the day of the Lord will mean to ungodly Judah, to the world powers (Zephaniah 1:2-3:7), and to the godly remnant (Zeph. 3:8–20). His theme is the day of the Lord, which destroys the false remnant of Baal (Zeph. 1), destroys the God-rejecting nations (ch. 2), and purifies the true remnant (Zeph. 3:8–20).” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

Some trivia: The Massorettes say that Zephaniah 3:8 is the only verse in the Old Testament that has all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in it!

2. How do you think the Israelis today feel about Zephaniah 2:9? Is this a good enough reason for them to think that eventually much of the Middle East will belong to the Jews?

Zephaniah 2:9: As surely as I am the living Lord, the God of Israel, I swear that Moab and Ammon are going to be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. They will become a place of salt pits and everlasting ruin, overgrown with weeds. Those of my people who survive will plunder them and take their land.” (*GNB*)

This verse could be understood to suggest that eventually the Jews will control all of the Middle East. But do notice that only a few of the Jews will survive to carry out this conquest!

3. How could the children of Israel say, after all that the Lord had done for their ancestors down through the years, “The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad?” (Zephaniah 1:12; Jeremiah

5:12; Compare 2 Peter 3:3,4) Was this wishful thinking on their part? Were they aware of their evil condition and hoping God would just leave them alone, or did they really think God was powerless?

Those who are disobeying God and aren't ready to do anything about it are always ready to hope that God will not disturb them just now! This is often the attitude of teenagers. But the children of Israel certainly had plenty of evidence that God had the power to do anything He wanted to. It is always difficult to admit that some evil that befalls one might be one's own fault! On the other hand, it did seem that other nations were winning all the battles and on that basis the ancient peoples often thought that was proof that their "gods" were more powerful than the "gods" of the losing nations.

4. What do you think Zephaniah had in mind when he repeatedly referred to "the day of the Lord?" (Zephaniah 1:2-18; 2:1-4; 3:16-20; Compare Joel 1:15; 2:1,2,11,31; 3:14) Was his strong language appropriate?

Zephaniah was a good "adventist"! Do we sound like Zephaniah when we talk about the three angels' messages? (See Revelation 14:6-12) Should we use Zephaniah 1:18-2:3 as a key text for God's anger and destruction?

Zephaniah 1:17-2:3: ¹⁷ The LORD says, "I will bring such disasters on mankind that everyone will grope about like someone blind. They have sinned against me, and now their blood will be poured out like water, and their dead bodies will lie rotting on the ground."

¹⁸ On the day when the LORD shows his fury, not even all their silver and gold will save them. The whole earth will be destroyed by the fire of his anger. He will put an end—a sudden end—to everyone who lives on earth.

^{2:1} Shameless nation, come to your senses ² before you are driven away like chaff blown by the wind, before the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day when he shows his fury. ³ Turn to the LORD, all you humble people of the land, who obey his commands. Do what is right, and humble yourselves before the LORD. Perhaps you will escape punishment on the day when the LORD shows his anger. (*GNB*)

The strong language in Zephaniah is very similar to words found in several other minor prophets that we have read. He has strong words against surrounding nations like other prophets as well. His condemnation of other nations was probably gratifying to them. But his very strong language against Jerusalem and the leaders of the people must have disturbed some of them. Zephaniah is one of the few books in the Bible where it is suggested that God's fury or anger seems to lead to His directly "destroying" people. (See Zephaniah 1:2-9, 14-16; 1:18-2:3; 3:6-8)

When were/are these passages to be fulfilled? There are a number of passages like this one in the prophecies of the Old Testament. See the handout *Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy*.

5. When the Ninevites repented, God waited over 150 years to bring destruction on them, but finally He had to do something. What could God do at such a point? Think of all the prophets God sent through the years—even His own Son—and think of the parables that Jesus gave and how they mocked and scoffed, and how they treated Him. Imagine God's people claiming that His Son's picture of God was Satanic! (John 8:48) How much further could God's people go

in rejecting Him? At such a point what else could God do but let them go? Is this the same message that needs to be given to our generation?

The Bible repeatedly describes God's wrath/anger/fury as nothing more than His letting go and handing over, in loving disappointment, those who are "bent on leaving" Him anyway, thus allowing them to experience the tragic and awful consequences of their own destructive and rebellious behavior. God does not do this until there is nothing else that He can do that will help. (2 Chronicles 36:15,16) What would you do with the people described in 2 Kings 17 or the ones described in 2 Chronicles 36?

6. Aren't Seventh-day Adventists Christians who have also accepted the "third angel's message?" (Revelation 14:9-11) Can we give this message in such a way as to be useful and meaningful to the world at this point in time? How many people in our world are worried about what is described in the third angel's message? Do you see people being very concerned about this message? Or are we like the people in Zephaniah 1:12?

We may feel that the language of Zephaniah seems a little harsh, but what about the third angel's message? (Revelation 14:9-11) Doesn't that sound like the strongest language in the entire Bible? And that message seems to be for people who live at the end of this world's history! If Zephaniah were standing on one corner preaching his message, and you were standing on an opposite corner preaching the third angel's message, would there be an obvious contrast between the two of you? Is the whole world sitting up and taking notice as we preach to them the third angel's message?

7. What does God ultimately want here? Isn't it that He be able to speak to us very plainly, yet quietly, without a great display of "human emotion", and yet have us take what He says very respectfully and reverently? How can God accomplish this balance? [See ***Jonah Teacher's Guide #8***]

As noted earlier this has been one of God's greatest challenges in dealing with us humans. How does God get reverence and respect without causing fear and terror? Without respect and reverence very little learning will take place (See Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; ***Proverbs Teacher's Guide #8***).

8. Were you sorry when you had to raise your voice to your children? How much nicer would the Bible read, if all the way through, people had been eager to listen quietly, respectfully and reverently to what God had said? Even if He had to give some very serious messages, He could do so quietly and plainly and people would realize the import of those messages. Could God have made the gospel as clear to such a group of people long ago as we understand it now? Could they have come to know God as we describe Him today?

It should be obvious that if we had followed God's guidance from the beginning we would still be living in the garden of Eden! Repeatedly, as we have wandered farther and farther away from God it seems He has had to go to greater and greater lengths through the use even of "crisis interventions" to maintain some kind of meaningful relationship with the human race. This is certainly not God's ideal. But at any point when God has had a few people who are seriously listening to Him, He has revealed Himself to them in a way appropriate to their circumstances. Are we taking God seriously in our time?

9. Amidst all the woes declared on different peoples notice that God still asks His people to turn and seek Him (Zephaniah 2:3). Isn't this what God has always wanted?

God has used almost every means imaginable to bring us back to Him. God's ideal has been spelled out in many places in Scripture: See Micah 6:6-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34.

10. Zephaniah was probably the last book written before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem the first time. Were circumstances serious enough to warrant this language? God originally called Abram out of Mesopotamia and promised him that he and his descendants would be a blessing to all nations. In the light of the messages of these minor prophets and 2 Chronicles 33:9 does God seem to be doing well with His plan? Is it ever possible to speak of God not succeeding in what He sets out to do? Could God even "fail" to accomplish His goals with the human race?

2 Chronicles 33:9, speaking of a time a few years before the days of Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Nahum, says, "Manasseh led the people of Judah to commit even greater sins than those committed by the nations whom the LORD had driven out of the land as his people advanced." (GNB)

Does this sound like Abraham's descendants were proving to be a great blessing to other nations or even themselves? God will soon allow them to be taken off into Babylonian captivity. Only a relative few of them will ever return and even those who did went back almost immediately to committing the same sins that had apparently led to their ancestor's going into captivity. Then under Ezra and Nehemiah they apparently experience a great reformation and revival. They never apparently went back to idols of gold and silver or to the "fertility cult" religions of those around them. But despite becoming exemplary blueprinting "adventists" they crucified Jesus Christ when He came to them! Was this what God intended? Did He have to wait so many years for a group who would kill His Son? What is He still waiting for in the days of Zephaniah? In our day?

© Copyright 2000-2006, Kenneth Hart
info@theox.org

Last Modified: August 20, 2006
C:\My Documents\WP\ITG\TG-2\ZEPHANIAHtg.wpd

Ellen White Comments

"The shortness of time is urged as an incentive for us to seek righteousness and to make Christ our friend. This is not the great motive. It savors of selfishness. Is it necessary that the terrors of the day of God be held before us to compel us through fear to right action? This ought not to be." (*Review and Herald* Aug. 2, 1881) *1RH 273:1:6; That I May Know Him* p. 320