

INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH

- III. Comfort and Consolation
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CHAPTER XIX

INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH

THE DATE

Zephaniah is a companion book to Nahum in two respects: (1) The two were contemporary and (2) the judgements against the nations surrounding Palestine are general in Zephaniah. Nahum singles out one of these objects of God's judgement and deals with it specifically and in detail. What Nahum described in Nineveh at the time of her downfall was in some measure true of all the cities and nations mentioned by Zephaniah.

Zephaniah probably wrote in the latter half of Josiah's reign. Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight, following the death of his father, Amon c. 639 B.C. His reform of Judah began c. 621 with the discovery of the book of the law which some scholars identify as Deuteronomy. (Cf. *II Kings* 22) It seems likely that Zephaniah's prophecy was meant to assist in Josiah's reform.

Some argue for an earlier date, *ie.* the first part of Josiah's reign, on the ground that such pronouncements were more needed prior to Josiah's reform. This seems a rather spurious argument, since it was precisely the pre-reform conditions at which the reform was aimed. Such a reform would be greatly enhanced by the appearance of a prophet of God on the scene after some seventy-five years of divine silence.

Not since Isaiah, Micah and Amos had an inspired spokesman for Jehovah stood in the midst of His people.

ZEPHANIAH THE PROPHET

We know little about Zephaniah aside from the first verse of his book. Three other Old Testament men wore the same name, which means "Jehovah hides," but there is no reason to identify the prophet with any of the three.

He was born some time, probably late, in the reign of the blood-thirsty Manessah c. 687-641 B.C. (*II Kings* 21:16)

Zephaniah's ancestry is stated in the first verse of his writing. He is a fourth generation descendant of Hezekiah (716-687 B.C.). He was, therefore, of royal blood and very familiar with the court of Judah (1:8, 3:3). No doubt he calls attention to Hezekiah rather than his most recent royal relatives because of their departure from the faith. The most recent, before Zephaniah's contemporary, Josiah, was Amon who was actually named for the pagan god of Egypt.

ZEPHANIAH'S MESSAGE

Like the other writing prophets of the Old Testament, Zephaniah was acutely aware of the international circumstances of his day. It is impossible to understand him without some knowledge of the world situation in which he lived.

In the last quarter of the seventh century B.C. the world stood in terror of a federation of wild tribes from what is now southern Russia. The Sythians smashed Syria and poured over all of western Asia. They pressed to the Egyptian delta before being bought off by Pharaoh Psammitichus I.

They rode bareback on wild horses, drank their enemy's blood and used his scalp for a napkin. The women rode with their men as warriors until they married and marriage was forbidden until a woman had killed three enemies.

The Sythians finally became relatively civilized, inheriting the remnants of the earlier Hittite culture. Their second king was the legendary Midas of the golden touch.

Acutely aware of the Sythian threat, Zephaniah nevertheless seems to have seen it for what it was, *ie.* relatively minor and short-lived. He looks beyond this immediate danger and, without naming the empire, describes the Babylonian domination of the world. This, of course, is only reasonable, since it was the Babylonians (Chaldeans) whom God revealed to Habakkuk as those He was raising up for judgement.

Some have said Zephaniah foretold the Sythian invasion of Judah, but if he was inspired as we believe, he could make no such historical blunder. The Sythians did not invade Judah.

The time before Josiah's reform and, therefore, the conditions to which Zephaniah addressed himself, constitute what has been called the dark age of Judah. Following the death of the good king Hezekiah, his son Manasseh set about to throw the nation into complete idolatry. It became a crime to preach the God known to Isaiah and Micah. The high places of Baal, destroyed by Hezekiah, were rebuilt. Altars to the unholy trinity of the sun cult were erected everywhere in the

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names of Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Milcom and the other local titles for Baal. (See introductory chapter on Baal Worship.)

The temple itself was desecrated by heathen altars, and to Baal worship was added the abominable Assyrian worship of the planets, the sun and the moon. Witchcraft ran rampant throughout Judah and sacred prostitution was the order of the day. Even the sacrificing of babies to Baal was revived. (Cf. *II Kings 21*)

Manasseh himself seems later to have repented but the damage was done. (*II Chronicles 33:22*)

Manasseh's son, whom he had named Amon for the Egyptian version of the sun god, succeeded his father to the throne of Judah, but his two year reign was so brief as to be unimportant. At the age of eight, Josiah the reformer ascended the throne.

Nothing changed during the years of Josiah's regency, but when he reached the age of twenty-six, he initiated a wide-ranging reform. (*II Kings 22:3-ff*) Zephaniah's prophetic ministry no doubt played a large role, both in bringing about the reform and in implementing it.

The idolatrous priests, the worship of strange deities, the adoration of heavenly bodies, all come in for their share of denunciation by Zephaniah. So also do those who forsake the true worship of Jehovah, the atheists who have altogether abandoned worship, those who give only lip service to God, and those who believe Jehovah will passively do neither good nor evil to anyone.

God's judgement against Judah Zephaniah sees as accompanied by universal judgement. Assyrian power was crumbling. The Sythians, fierce though they were, would not become a major power. The Chaldean empire of Babylon would be raised up by God to smite not only Judah but those nations north, south, east and west of her. Both those afar off and those who were near neighbors would feel the wrath of God.

The message addressed to the world of his time is summed up in Zephaniah's repeated use of the term "day of Jehovah." Two major ideas are included in this term: (1) the universal judgement of God and (2) the comfort and hope reserved for the remnant.

In addition there seem to be two minor ideas which are never clearly defined in Zephaniah: (1) The Messianic period and (2) the final judgement of all nations.

Special attention must be given the term "day of Jehovah" if we are to understand the prophecy of Zephaniah. He did not coin the phrase. It had been in popular usage for at least a century. Amos

had attempted to correct a popular misunderstanding of it. (*Amos 5:18-20*)

To the Jews of Amos' day, the day of Jehovah was a day when the Hebrews would finally overcome their enemies. God would utterly destroy all Gentile power, and the world would be ruled from Jerusalem. Such Jewish nationalism and racism are not unknown today. Dispensationalism, so wide-spread among today's Evangelical denominations also propagates this mistaken concept.

Throughout the Old Testament the term *yom YHWH* (day of Jehovah) denotes the time when God's kingdom will be finally consummated and free from attack from without or corruption within. (Cf. *Isaiah 2:12, 13:6-9, 34:8, Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3, Joel 1:15, 2:11, Amos 5:18, Zephaniah 1:14 and Zechariah 14:1*)

To bring this consummation to its fullness four characteristics are described in various contexts, both in the Old and New Testaments: (1) The judgement of Israel, Judah and the nations of the pre-Christian world; (2) The deliverance and preservation of the remnants during and after the captivity; (3) The first coming of the Messiah; and (4) The second coming of the Messiah and His final judgement of all men and nations.

Conceived of in terms of judgement, the day of the Lord is described as a "day of wrath" or "day of judgement." In its ultimate fulfillment it is "that great and notable day." In general reference it is "that day," "the day of the Lord," "day of God." In terms of Christ's second coming it is "the day of Jesus Christ" or "the day of Christ."

In keeping with the nature of His kingdom, which is "not of this world," the Scriptural teaching concerning the "day of Jehovah" is concerned more with the qualities of the day than with the time of its fulfillment. God is thought of as manifesting Himself in His fullness, punishing wrong, especially wrong worship and social injustice, then rewarding faithfulness and loving service. The final fulfillment of the "day of Jehovah" is the final triumph of righteousness and truth over sin and falsehood.

Any period of history in which God raised up a nation to punish wickedness or unfaithfulness answers to the first characteristic of "that day." Indeed, considering God's constant rule over the history of man, it could not be otherwise.

It is in this sense that Zephaniah places most of his emphasis on "the day of Jehovah." There is a fever of wrath revealed in the overthrow of wicked Judah and her equally wicked neighbors. There is

an unrelenting certainty to Jehovah's judgements in the ebb and flow of international relationships. There is the over-riding warning that a nation which does not turn from sin to God is "living on borrowed time."

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the Messianic and eschatological overtones of Zephaniah's "day of Jehovah." Dr. G. A. Smith is quoted by T. Miles Bennett in this regard: "In short, with Zephaniah the Day of the Lord tends to become the Last Day. His book is the relation of prophecy with apocalypse. That is the moment which it supplies in the history of Israel's religion." Nebular and undefined though it seems, Zephaniah's eschatology marks a definite step forward in the nature of prophecy.

Chapter XIX—Questions

Introduction to Zephaniah

1. Zephaniah is a companion book to _____.
2. Zephaniah probably wrote in the _____ half of Josiah's reign.
3. Discuss the relationship between Zephaniah's prophecy and Josiah's reform.
4. Why does Zephaniah mention Hezekiah particularly in listing his own ancestry?
5. Why does Zephaniah discuss the rise of Babylon rather than the Sythian threat?
6. In addition to the corruption of their worship by turning to Baal, the people of Judah also worshipped _____.
7. God's judgement against Judah, Zephaniah sees as accompanied by _____.
8. The two major ideas presented by Zephaniah are (1) _____ and (2) _____.
9. Two minor ideas never clearly defined by Zephaniah are (1) _____ and (2) _____.
10. Discuss the four characteristics of the fullness of the "day of Jehovah."

CHAPTER XX

JUDGEMENT OF GOD

SALUTATION . . . Zephaniah 1:1