

INTRODUCTION TO 36TH BIBLEBOOK

ZEPHANIAH (639-630 B.C.)(8th)

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A. THE WRITER, RECIPIENTS AND DATE OF THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH.

Zephaniah is the ninth of the twelve Minor Prophets. The name ‘Zephaniah’ means ‘*the Lord has hidden or treasured*’. Chapter 1:4 clearly teaches that Zephaniah worked in Judah. He prophesied during the reign of Josiah (1:1). Because he preaches against the gross idolatry in Judah, he must have prophesied before Josiah began his great reformation of wiping out idolatry. Zephaniah does not mention the invasion of the Scythes into Philistia in 630 B.C. We therefore conclude that Zephaniah most probably prophesied between **639-630 B.C.**

B. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH.

The book of Zephaniah may be given the title, “**God will hide his people in the day of wrath.**”

It has two parts:

1. Zephaniah 1:1 to 3:7. The day of wrath.

- The day of wrath for the whole earth announced (1:2-3).
- The day of wrath for Judah (1:4-13).
- The day of wrath for the whole earth pictured (1:14-18).
- Repent before the day of wrath comes (2:1-3).
- The day of wrath for nations (2:4-15).
- The day of wrath for Jerusalem (3:1-7).

2. Zephaniah 3:8-20. The great renewal.

- On the final day of judgement, God will be the Accuser, Judge and Executor of judgement (3:8).
- God will renew people from all nations (3:9).
- The New Jerusalem (3:11-13).
- The nature of salvation in the new Israel (3:14-17).
- The return from exile (3:10,18-20).

C. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH.

1. A prophecy that the day of the Lord’s wrath is certainly coming.

The day of the Lord’s wrath is near for the Lord’s own people.

Zephaniah saw all the idolatry and injustice in Judah during the early part of the reign of king Josiah. He prophesied that God would judge the wicked. He saw how Jerusalem had become a city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled. The people of Jerusalem were proud and arrogant, because they obeyed no one and accepted correction from no one. They did not trust in the Lord.

Their government officials, who should have maintained justice, were greedy robbers tearing their own people into pieces, like gluttonous wolves. Their prophets, who should have proclaimed God’s Word, were light-hearted deceivers. Their priests, who should have guarded the holiness of God’s temple, profaned the sanctuary and transgressed God’s law. And all the people and leaders continued to do this in spite of God’s constant and stirring pleading to fear him and accept correction (3:1-7).

The day of the Lord’s wrath is near for the other nations at that time.

Zephaniah also saw the wickedness of the surrounding nations and prophesied that God would judge them too. The people of the surrounding nations were also proud and insulted and mocked God’s people. They had no fear or respect for the Almighty God (2:10).

Zephaniah prophesied against the pride of the then still great Assyrian Empire, that she too would be judged. The great city of the Assyrians, called Nineveh, was a carefree city, who regarded herself as living in safety and as being the greatest city in the world (2:15).

The day of the Lord’s wrath is near for all future nations.

Zephaniah not only prophesied the judgement of the godless nations of his time, but also the judgement of the future godless nations. According to chapter 1:18, the day of the Lord’s wrath will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth! Thus, Zephaniah’s prophecy speaks also to our time and our nation.

2. A prophecy concerning the great renewal.

The future great renewal.

Zephaniah 3:8 exhorts all people to expect the Final Judgement Day, on which God himself will be the Accuser, the Judge and the Executor of judgement!

Zephaniah 3:9 prophesies that God will renew people from all nations on earth (the remnant, the chosen believers in every nation) and they will serve God not as separate nations, but united shoulder to shoulder.

Zephaniah 3:11-13 describes the New Jerusalem in which only people who trust in the Lord will live. As the Lord's sheep, they will be shepherded without anyone making them afraid¹.

Zephaniah 3:14-17 describes the nature of salvation of the new Israel: all their sins will be atoned, their punishment removed and their enemies destroyed. God himself will live among them². At times they will quietly enjoy his love for his people. At other times they will loudly rejoice with singing.

Zephaniah 3:18-20 describes especially the return from exile and the restoration of Israel in their land.

In summary, on the day of God's wrath and thereafter, God will hide and exalt the remnant of his own people (2:3).

3. Fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

Zephaniah, like the other Old Testament prophecies, show two characteristics:

- On the one hand, they are directed towards the immediate future of the nation of Israel, like their return from exile and restoration to the land.
- On the other hand, they are directed towards the end-time, when people from all nations including from the nation of Israel will face God's Final Judgement. Then God's people from all nations including the nation of Israel will become heirs of God's glorious new heaven and new earth.

Thus, *Old Testament prophecy summarises events to be fulfilled at different periods in the future together in one end-time picture*. These various events cannot be clearly separated into those which belong to the immediate future of Israel and those which belong to the end-time.

Three facts point towards this characteristic of Old Testament prophecy:

- The return from exile is described in much more glorious terms than actually happened in 537 B.C. and therefore waits a more complete fulfilment.
- The announced future judgement can to some extent be seen in the temporary judgements that God executed over Israel and the nations.
- And the beginning of the final glorious renewal has already been made in God's gracious salvation work through Jesus Christ.

¹ Hebrews 13:5-6

² Revelation 21:3-5