

Zephaniah

Time of Writing: In the days of Josiah (1:1).

Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah. Josiah became king at the age of eight, in about 641 BC. A short account of his reign may be found in 2 Chronicles 34 – 35 (also 2 Kings 22 – 23). Josiah is praised for his goodness in those accounts, yet Zephaniah recounts considerable ungodly behavior. Perhaps the two ideas can be reconciled by Jeremiah 2:22, 3:10, and 6:14. In those contexts, Jeremiah revealed that, although the leadership was heading in the right direction, the hearts of the people had not really changed.

Passage identified as Messianic by ancient rabbis (3:8 – 9).

In 3:8, various versions of “Until the day I rise up for plunder” exist. The Septuagint and Syriac versions have “Until the day I rise up for witness.” The Targum has “Until the day I rise up for the day of My revelation for judgment.” The rabbis who found verse 8 Messianic were using one of these versions.

In 3:9, most rabbis agreed that the time of the Messiah would be marked by the unification of all people to serve God.

Zephaniah is not quoted in the New Testament.

The Plot

- 1:2 – 6 Judah will be wiped out for their idolatry
- 1:7 – 13 God has prepared a sacrifice and Judah will be punished.
- 1:14 – 18 The great day of the Lord is near and none will escape.
- 2:1 – 3 If you repent, perhaps you will be spared.
- 2:4 – 15 Surrounding nations have sentence pronounced against them.
- 3:1 – 7 God has remained faithful and has been in their midst, yet they do not learn. Not even judgments on surrounding nations have taught them.
- 3:8 – 20 But God has a plan to bring back a remnant and build a universal kingdom.

Obscure References

- 1:4 Baal was the most common of the idols and was popular in several surrounding nations. Ahab and Jezebel brought Baal worship to prominence in the Northern Kingdom.
- 1:5 The Hosts of Heaven are mentioned among the gods the Israelites worshipped in the wilderness.
- 1:5 Milcom (or Malcam) was one of the Baals.
- 1:9 Leaping over the threshold may be a reference to Dagon worship (1 Samuel 5:5). When the Philistines captured the Ark and put it in Dagon’s temple, the statue fell down and broke its hands on the threshold. Therefore, the worshippers of Dagon would not tread upon the threshold.

- 1:10 – 11 The Fish Gate, the Second Quarter, and the Maktesh were locations in Jerusalem. There is probably a pun in the events described in each place, but the meaning today is conjectural.
- 1:12 “Search Jerusalem with lamps.” Having no streetlights, people often escaped capture under cover of darkness. Not this time.
- 2:4 Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron were four of the five cities of the Philistines. Gath, the fifth city, had already been demolished (2 Chronicles 26:6). The destruction of Ashdod is recorded in the same place but apparently had been rebuilt.
- 2:5 Cherethite was another name for Philistine.
- 2:14 “He will lay bare the cedar work.” In many cases, royal buildings were decorated with carved cedar which was then overlaid with precious metals (usually gold). Cedar was used because it did not rot. When a place was conquered, the precious metals of the overlay would be stripped off and melted down as plunder.
- 2:15 Hissing was a common method of expressing scorn.