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## *Chapter 7: Zephaniah, Prophet of the Day of YHWH*

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### 1. Historical setting of the book

Zephaniah is the only Old Testament prophet introduced by an extensive genealogy, with Hezekiah as the first forefather (1:1a). Quite likely this Hezekiah is the famous king of Judah and reference to him is a possible reason for the genealogy going back four generations. Zephaniah's membership of the royal family probably also gave him access to the royal court, a position from which he could observe Judah's leaders (1:8, 12-13; 3:3-4). His name is a cognomen borne by three other individuals in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 6:36; Jer. 21:1; Zech. 6:10). Usually it is explained as 'YHWH hides'.

The prophecies of Zephaniah are dated during the reign of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah (1:1b) circa 640-609 BC. The downfall of Nineveh, announced in 2:13-15, occurred in 612 BC, a few years before the death of Josiah.

During the reign of King Josiah in his eighteenth year, in 622 BC, a law book of Moses was found in the temple (2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chron. 34:8-28). Usually this find is identified as (the main part of) the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Zephaniah does not contain any clear allusion to the discovery of the law book or to the reform activities associated with it. The Book of Kings describes the reform thematically, centered around the discovery of the book, while the Book of Chronicles gives a chronological sequence. It seems very likely that the extensive reforms took place over the span of many years. The official reforming activities of the king could not speedily stop the abuses among the wealthy inhabitants of Jerusalem. Maybe the expression 'remnant of Baal' (1:4) is an indication of an earlier purging, but the phrase may simply mean that God would remove the worship of Baal. Hence, the description of the sins in the book cannot reliably be used to determine whether Zephaniah was active before or after Josiah's reform.

Yet, the book of Zephaniah contains a wealth of phraseology reminiscent of paralleling expressions in the book of Deuteronomy (see examples in "Theology of the book," 3). These parallels suggest that Zephaniah used the recently found law book and helped to advance the reform instituted by Josiah. If this was the case, we could then date the prophecies of Zephaniah after 622 BC and before the downfall of Nineveh in 612 BC.

Notable is that Zephaniah expects a foreign invasion that will bring about the destruction of Jerusalem (1:4, 10-13; 2:1; 3:1-4). Scholars disagree on the identity of the enemy anticipated. In the above mentioned period the Assyrians are no longer a likely option, as the prophet already announces the destruction of Assur and Nineveh (2:13-15). A second possibility is the Scythians, a group of tribes described by Herodotus (*Histories* 1:105). However, their raids were apparently brief and may have been confined to sites along the international coastal highway (Via Maris) with little direct impact on Judah. The disaster as announced by Zephaniah would also have affected the surrounding nations (2:4-12) and even Assyria itself (2:13-15). He appears to expect the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the population. The remaining candidate would be the upcoming Babylonian Empire. The author of Kings reports that the coming invasion by Babylon was already anticipated at the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:17) and of Josiah (2 Kings 22:15-20). The Babylonian

incursions into this region started after the battle of Carchemish (605 BC). We do well to read the prophecies of Zephaniah in this historical context.

## 2. Content and structure of the book

The structure of the book of Zephaniah compares fittingly with structures found in the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah (shorter LXX version), and Ezekiel. These oracles all begin with the immediate historical situation of Judah, then turn to foreign nations, and end with a future eschatological blessing.

Superscription (1:1)
I. Oracles against Judah, 1:2-2:3
A. Universal judgment, 1:2-3 B. Judgment of Jerusalem, 1:4-13 C. The Day of YHWH, 1:14-18 D. Means of avoiding judgment, 2:1-3
II. Oracles against foreign nations and Judah, 2:4-3:8
A. Philistia, 2:4-7 B. Moab and Ammon, 2:8-11 C. Cush (Nubia), 2:12 D. Assyria, 2:13-15 E. Jerusalem, 3:1-7 F. Universal judgment, 3:8
III. Oracles of blessing, 3:9-20
A. Universal worship, 3:9-10 B. Remnant in Sion, 3:11-20

The book of Zephaniah is characterized by a logical, orderly flow of thought, and reveals a carefully constructed unity. Several exegetes qualify the hopeful outlook of the last part of the book as a later addition, or assume three stages in the growth of the book: original material, redacted texts and later additions (Vlaardingerbroek, 1993, 32). However, the theological criteria for such reconstructions are not convincing. The theme of final salvation of the remnant (3:8-13), purified from sin in the coming judgment, was already familiar to the eight-century prophets, notably Isaiah. Other prophecies of judgment commonly concluded with an expectation of restoration and final felicity, for instance in the closing parts of the books of Amos, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. If we assume a covenantal background as formulated in Deuteronomy 28-30, then the coherence can be demonstrated between the prophecies with doom and the prophecies with salvation.

## 3. Theology of the book

### 1) *The word of YHWH*

The message of the prophet begins with “The word of YHWH which came to Zephaniah”. The prophet’s opening phrase positions him within a stream of servants of God, who were receptive to His message and did not speak their own words (cf. Deut. 18:15-20). The admission of this book into the Old Testament canon confirms that the Israelites have accepted this high claim. The booklet presents itself as the word of the God of Israel and not merely as the word of an individual with a message.

### 2) *The Day of the YHWH*

The theme unifying the entire book of Zephaniah is the notion of the Yom YHWH ('Day of the LORD'). Especially in the first chapter, this Day marks the message of the prophet. Related to this Day are the features of the destruction of the cosmos, the judgment on God's own people, the sacrificial feast of YHWH, and the terrors of a finalizing theophany. Zephaniah described the nature of the divine judgment by adopting ideas from older prophetic sources and in particular employing the concept of the Day of the LORD as is found in Amos (5:18f.) and Isaiah (2:7-22).

The first two verses of the message form confronting statements about the destruction of this world (1:2-3). The order pertaining to humans and animals is a reverse from the creation narrative (Gen. 1:20-27). Rather than leading up to a pronouncement of judgment by listing sins first, Zephaniah begins with a striking statement of total and devastating punishment. The Day of YHWH involves a theophany in which God manifests his power. It can be compared to a gathering for a sacrificial feast with consecrated guests, yet at which the officials, the royal household, and many inhabitants of Jerusalem will be punished (1:7-13; cf. Isa. 34:5-8; Ezek. 39:17-20). Other features of the message are frightful images of God's appearance with darkness and gloom, clouds and blackness, a day with a trumpet sounding, and a war cry. These aspects remind us of the phenomena accompanying the establishment of the Sinai covenant (Ex. 19:16-19), but now more so associated with war and punishment (cf. Judg. 5:4-5; Joel 2:1-2; Am. 5:18, 20). The rather immediate expectation of this Day refer to its nearness (1:7, 14) and to specific peoples. Other aspects suggest a later time of fulfillment, namely by the description of the cosmic proportions of the theophany. Zephaniah blended—as did other prophets—events both near at hand and expected in the future. The Day not only entails negative aspects, also such positive aspects as the salvation of those people from Israel and all the nations who will come to worship YHWH.

### *3) God's covenant*

The dark and light sides of the message of the prophet are based on the covenant of God with Israel. The many parallels with passages from Deuteronomy include the following: to build houses, but not dwell in them (Zeph. 1:13; cf. Deut. 28:30); to plant vineyards, but not drink their wine (1:13; cf. Deut. 28:39); a day of constraint and distress (1:15; cf. Deut. 28: 53-57); a day of thick darkness (1:15; cf. Deut. 4:11); to walk as blind men (1:17; cf. Deut. 28:29); in the fire of his jealousy all the earth shall be consumed (1:18; cf. Deut. 32:21-22); YHWH is righteous ... He will not commit iniquity (3:5; cf. Deut. 32:4); rejoice over you with singing (3:17; cf. Deut. 28:63); a praise and a name among all the peoples of the earth (3:19-20; cf. Deut. 26:19). More expressions such as 'the scattered ones', the concentration on the 'love' of God for Israel, and the representation of God as the King, a Mighty Hero, can be added (Robertson, 254-255).

### *4) God as universal judge*

The opening chapters of Zephaniah reveal God as a righteous judge, who is offended by moral and religious sins. The people of Judah had blurred the essential distinction between YHWH and the gods of the nations (1:4-5). They regarded God as indifferent and assumed that He would do neither good nor evil. However, Zephaniah announces the activity and wrath of God (1:12). God is pictured as the Creator, who may destroy His creation. He is the God of the whole earth who judges all the peoples according to their behavior. As a result of all the punishments and His further activities, a purified remnant will remain on earth. Amidst of God's wrath there is always His mercy and the possibility of redemption. This view of punishment fits the patterns already set in Genesis 1-11, Deuteronomy 27-28, Isaiah 40-66, Jeremiah 31-34, and other texts. God always retains a remnant.

### *5) Idolatry*

Because of their sins, the favored tribe of Judah and its locality in Jerusalem, both the city and its temple, will experience a devastating future. The ultimate reason is their prevailing idolatry. Five objects of extermination are mentioned: the remnant of Baal, the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roof to the host of heavens, those who swear by Milcom, and those who have not sought YHWH (1:4-6). This enumeration has striking similarities with the listing of reforms by Josiah in 2 Kings 23:4-5, 10-13. Zephaniah denounces the idolatry that he had witnessed in Jerusalem, where there had been no spiritual revival since the time of his ancestor Hezekiah. The royal court (not only the literal sons of the king) and the officials are mentioned, but not the king himself. Because of the reforming activities of King Josiah, it seems that this is an intended exclusion. Several idolatrous habits of the inhabitants of Jerusalem are listed, such as dressing in foreign attire (maybe priestly garments, 2 Kings 10:22), a leaping over the threshold (cf. 1 Sam. 5:5), as well as violence and fraud (1:8-9). The searching of Jerusalem with lamps means that no one can escape the pending judgment (1:12; cf. Am. 9:2-4). After dealing with the surrounding nations, also the officials, the judges, the prophets, and the priests are declared guilty (3:1-8). Now YHWH explicitly indicates His intention to devastate other nations as well as to chasten Judah. These measures would hopefully incite Israel to lead a God-fearing life. However, the inhabitants display eagerness in making all their deeds corrupt (3:7; cf. Deut. 31:29). As a consequence, Jerusalem will be included in the destruction of the earth (3:8).

### *6) Repentance*

The second chapter portrays a call to repentance. This call does not imply that the arrival of the Day can be averted. However, a possibility exists for the repentant to gain protection on the Day ('perhaps', cf. Lam. 3:29b). The prophet holds out this hope as primary motivation for urging the people to turn from their sinful ways (2:1-3). Three times the word 'to seek' is used (cf. Jer. 29:13). The people have to seek YHWH, righteousness and humility. The turning to God has consequences with regard to the daily behavior. Humility is a characteristic of listening to God and the opposite of the dismissive pride (2:10, 15; 3:12; cf. Mat. 11:28-30). Another motivation for repentance to be displayed by Judah is found in God's word of judgment on the nations (2:4-15). Judah has to realize that righteous retribution is coming about. The prophecy demonstrates YHWH's righteous character, His sovereign power over the nations and His redemption of the faithful.

### *7) The nations*

In the second chapter, five foreign peoples are mentioned: Philistia to the West, Moab and Ammon to the East, the Cushites to the far South, and the Assyrians to the North (2:4-15). All four main directions are thereby covered, which speaks of the Day's comprehensive judgment. In the announcement of the desolation of the Philistine's cities, a remarkable comment is made. The seacoast will become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, for YHWH will restore their fortunes (2:7). The prophet does not identify this remnant that will survive the devastating judgment of God. Apparently, they are the 'humble', as mentioned in verse 3.

The Moabites and Ammonites are treated next. These peoples, living in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, will experience the same fate as witnessed by their ancestor Lot (Gen. 19:24-38). Now, Moab will become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah (2:9). Again a positive message is added, the remnant of Judah will repossess their land. In these events, YHWH will destroy all the gods of the earth. Very striking is the fact that the nations of the world will worship YHWH. Not only in Judah, but also in defeated countries will the worship of the God of Israel be performed (cf. Isa. 19:19-23; Mal. 1:11). In the South the far-off Cush

(Nubia) is mentioned, not Egypt. Its inhabitants are personally addressed in a very short message. Although only threatening words are used here, in 3:10 a hopeful perspective is offered to the same nation.

The last of the peoples mentioned concerns Assyria, Judah's most threatening enemy. Almost unconceivable is the description of desolation that is to characterize the cultural metropolis Nineveh. The city will be dry as a desert and herds of cattle will lie down in it. A similar message had been delivered by the prophet Nahum. In 612 BC the Babylonians indeed destroyed that city. In about 401 BC, the Greek writer Xenophon passed the city of Nineveh and found not any trace of it in the shifting desert sands (*Anabasis* 3.4.8-12). The pride of Assyria as expressed in the words 'I am, and there is no one else' (2:15) had come to nought.

#### 8) *The remnant and the future*

The prophet depicts the formation of a new community of holy people, purified by God. This restored remnant (cf. Isa. 7:3) will not be limited to only a purged group from Israel (cf. 2:9; 3:11-13). The converted from the nations will join with His people in worship and service of YHWH (3:9-10; cf. 2:11). Zephaniah does not resolve the tension that might be felt among various aspects of his teaching, destruction of the nation, and the hope for a remnant. God converts the heart of the nations and makes them serve in unison. Even from beyond the rivers of Cush, scattered people will bring offering (3:9-10). Usually 'scattered ones' is an expression used for Israelites, but here they come from the nations. On that day, the Day, the remnant of Israel will be purged of sin and the wicked will be destroyed. Jerusalem will become free from shame, in contrast to the earlier situation (3:11; cf. 2:1; 3:5). Only a people humble and lowly will be left (cf. Ps. 37:11; Mat. 5:5). They will seek refuge in the name of YHWH, they will pasture and lie down in peace (3:12-13, cf. 2:7).

The closing verses of the book provide us with a moving description of the love of God for His people (3:14-20). Daughter Zion can sing, shout, rejoice and exult, because the King of Israel is in her midst (cf. Deut. 33:2-5; Ps. 93). The absence of any reference to the house of David is rather remarkable. Maybe it is possible to interpret the phrase "a mighty hero who saves" (3:17) as referring not only to God, but also to a helper (cf. Isa. 9:5). In His love, He will renew the people and He will rejoice over her (cf. Deut. 28:63). All the external and internal problems will be solved. Even the lame and outcast will be changed (cf. Mi. 4:6-7). The 'gathering' implies more than simply returning to their land. They will be assembled as a reconstituted community. Instead of being shamed, God will make them renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth. This is not only a restoration of Israel after the Exile, but a paradise restored. The book of Zephaniah starts with a cataclysmic overthrow yet ends with a glorious new order. The goal of God's judgment is redemptive, not only punitive.

#### 4. Relevance for our time

Zephaniah's Day of YHWH, in which the wrath of God was to be poured out on Judah, found expression in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The five other peoples mentioned received their punishment and disappeared as nations from the scene of history. However, the destruction was not as thorough as depicted, and the promised renewal of Judah has not yet totally been fulfilled. The earth is not up till now a paradise restored. The ultimate 'day of wrath' is yet to come (Rev. 6:16-17). Many will be consumed, but it remains possible to be saved. The both sides of God's revelation and covenant are still relevant today and urge us to believe and to obey. A remnant will be saved by the Messiah (cf. Mat. 3:7; 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 11:18; 14:10; 19:1-16) and the coming of a new heaven and earth is announced.

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