

Introduction to Zephaniah

Author Zephaniah, the son of Cushi (1:1); a descendant of Hezekiah (1:1), taken by some interpreters (e.g., VanGemeren 674; Baker 851) to refer to the king of Judah (for discussion, see Schneider 1189)

Date 640-625 BC

- According to Schneider, “most scholars have accepted a date within the period stated in 1:1, namely, the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.)” (1189).
- Merrill judges that “lack of any reference to the reformation of Josiah suggests a date early in Josiah’s reign rather than after the cleansing of the temple (622)” (Merrill 456). VanGemeren proposes “that Zephaniah’s ministry may have been a factor in the great revival” (674). However, Baker observes that it could have occurred later in Josiah’s reign, reinforcing “the same call to godliness to which their king had already responded” (851).

Kings Mentioned

Judah Josiah (1:1)

Israel None

Nation(s) Targeted

Primary Judah (1:4; 2:7), as evidenced by the book’s references to Jerusalem and its features (1:4; 1:10-12; 3:14; 3:16), Zion (3:14; 3:16), “the oppressing city” (3:1), and the priesthood (3:4)

- Secondary*
- Philistia (2:4-7)
 - Moab (2:8-11)
 - Ammon (2:8-11)
 - Cush (2:12)
 - Assyria (2:13-15)

Representative Texts 1:1-9; 1:15-18; 2:3-4; 2:8-9; 2:12-3:5; 3:8-9; 3:14-17

Core Message

The Day of Yahweh is coming quickly—a day of wrath, darkness, and distress. Human strength and wealth will do nothing to deter its coming. Judgment will come to Jerusalem and Judah, and indeed to all the earth.

Jerusalem’s political and spiritual leaders are violent and corrupt. The city will be judged for its idolatry, violence, greed, and spiritual insensitivity. God will also pour out his anger on the nations that surround Judah. Philistia will be left desolate. Moab and Ammon will meet a devastating end because of their arrogance. Cush will be slain by the Lord’s sword. Assyria will be destroyed and its capital, Nineveh, will be laid waste.

The proper response to the reality of judgment is to seek Yahweh—to seek righteousness and humility. In the aftermath of judgment a remnant will be restored to holiness and divine favor. Jerusalem will rejoice in the Lord and he

will bless its inhabitants. His salvation and blessing will extend beyond the borders of Israel, as foreigners will call on and worship him.

**New Testament
References**

1:14-15 (Rev. 6:17)¹

Features

Zephaniah does not have the depth of literary features present in other prophetic books. Repetition is prominent (e.g., *day* in 1:14-15, *anger* in 2:2-3), and wordplay is evident in the Hebrew of texts such as 2:4 (Schneider 1190). According to Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, allusions are another important feature. For example, judgment is likened to Noah's flood in 1:2-3. Interestingly, "the sweeping away of all life ... is arranged in inverse order to God's original creation: humankind, beasts, the creatures of the air, those of the sea" (980).

Sources

Baker, David W. "Zephaniah, Theology of." *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, Baker Books, 2000, pp. 851-52.

Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Baker Academic, 2007.

Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. Baker Books, 1996.

Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. InterVarsity, 1998.

Schneider, Dale A. "Zephaniah, Book of." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, fully revised, vol. 4, Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 1189-91.

VanGemeren, Willem A. "Zephaniah." *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, Baker Books, 2000, pp. 674-81.

¹ This allusion to Zephaniah was identified by consulting Schneider's discussion in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1191) and Beale and Carson's *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (1106).