

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR ZEPHANIAH

- Content: oracles of coming catastrophic judgments against Jerusalem (thus Judah) and surrounding nations, plus an oracle of restoration for a remnant of Judah
- Prophet: Zephaniah of Jerusalem, possibly of the royal lineage of Hezekiah
- Date of prophetic activity: sometime during the reign of Josiah of Judah (640–609 B.C.)
- Emphases: the coming day of Yahweh; judgment against Judah for her sins; Yahweh as God of all the nations; judgments against the nations; eventual salvation of a remnant of Judah

B. OVERVIEW OF ZEPHANIAH

During the reign of Josiah (Judah's last good king), Zephaniah, who was possibly a member of the royal court, received a word from Yahweh, announcing that "the day of the LORD [Yahweh] is near" (1:7, 14, 18; 2:3). The burden of his prophecy is God's judgment on Judah for her idolatry and complacent wickedness (1:3b–18a; 3:1–5). But also included are a call to repentance (2:1–3), judgments against other nations (2:4–15), and the promise of restoration for a faithful remnant (3:9–20). Thus, as you will quickly recognize, Zephaniah—the ninth of the book of the Twelve—carries through with all of the significant concerns found in the Israelite prophetic tradition.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ZEPHANIAH

The historical context of Zephaniah is in some ways similar to that of Habakkuk (2 Kgs 22–23; 2 Chr 34–35). In this case, however, since his prophecies are directed primarily against Jerusalem, you may also wish to read the relevant sections about syncretism in the "Specific Advice" for reading Deuteronomy and Kings. Although it is not possible to determine exactly when this marvelous set of oracles was proclaimed—though they would seem to precede rather than follow Josiah's reforms—you will not be able to miss seeing that God's judgment is being pronounced primarily because Jerusalem continues to be a city of religion, but not of pure Yahwism, while at the same time—also over against pure Yahwism—there is little concern for social justice.

Since most people do not find Zephaniah easy reading, it may help you in this regard to see his careful literary structure, which takes the form of a series of concentric patterns (chiasms). First there is the larger frame itself:

- A God's Judgment of Judah, with Consequent Wailing (1:2–18)
- B God's Judgment of the Nations (2:1–3:8)
- A* God's Redemption of the Remnant, with Consequent Rejoicing (3:9–20)

Within each of these, and sometimes interlocking between them, there are further concentric patterns. Note, for example, how 1:2–18 is framed by announcements of judgment against the

whole earth (1:2–3//18b–c echoing the Flood [b–c = poetic lines in the verse]); in the same manner 1:2–3 and 3:8d frame the entire set of judgment oracles. Thus:

1:2–18

3:9–21

1:2–3

3:8d

1:2–3

1:18b–c

Similarly, the oracles against the nations are framed by a call to repentance on the part of Judah (2:1–3) and judgment because of her refusal to do so (3:6–8; see “A Walk through Zephaniah”).

Second, all of this is expressed in brilliant and powerful images. Note, for example, his deliberate placing of God’s judgment on Judah and Jerusalem in images and language that echo the Flood account in Genesis 6. This is related to Zephaniah’s frequent use of hyperbole (purposeful exaggeration for effect). Thus, for example, he predicts at several points that God will destroy the whole earth and all its inhabitants (1:2–3, 18b–c; 3:8), yet also predicts a great future both for the peoples (3:9) and for Israel (3:10–19). Such overstatement is not to be taken literally (cf. a sports fan’s understanding of the headline “Vancouver buries Boston” to indicate a lopsided victory, not the death and burial of a city); its effectiveness lies in the people’s taking seriously the extent of the tragedy that awaits them.

On the matter of the day of Yahweh, refer to “Specific Advice for Reading Joel,” pp. 218–19. In Zephaniah “the day” (used 17x between 1:7 and 2:3!) refers to a time of decisive change on behalf of the righteous and against the wicked—and Judah is among the wicked.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 248–250.