

Zephaniah

Author

The prophet Zephaniah was evidently a person of considerable social standing in Judah and was probably related to the royal line. The prophecy opens with a statement of the author's ancestry (1:1), which in itself is an unusual feature of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Zephaniah was a fourth-generation descendant of Hezekiah, a notable king of Judah from 715 to 686 BC. Apart from this statement, nothing more is said about his background. Whereas the prophet Micah dealt carefully and sympathetically with the problems of the common people of Judah, Zephaniah's utterances show a much greater familiarity with court circles and current political issues. Zephaniah was probably familiar with the writings of such prominent eighth-century prophets as Isaiah and Amos, whose utterances he reflects, and he may also have been aware of the ministry of the young Jeremiah.

Date

According to 1:1, Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640 - 609 BC), one of the best of the kings of Judah. His reference to the future destruction of Nineveh (2:13), which took place in 612 BC, fixes his writing before that event. So the prophet ministered somewhere between 640 and 612 BC. His contemporaries were Nahum, Habakkuk, and the young Jeremiah. Jeremiah's ministry continued beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In view of his references to Baalism, and the lack of reference to Josiah's reform, his prophecy is probably to be dated relatively early in Josiah's reign. Most would place his writing before that reform which took place on discovery of the book of the Law in the temple (around 622 BC), although some level of reform had probably already taken place in the first place in order for the book to be discovered before that king's attempt at reform (and while conditions brought about by the reigns of Manasseh and Amon still prevailed) and before the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's death in 627 BC (while Assyria was still powerful, though threatened).

Purpose and Theological Theme

The intent of the author was to announce to Judah God's approaching judgment. A Scythian incursion into Canaan may have provided the immediate occasion. This fierce, horse-mounted people originated in what is now southern Russia, but by the seventh century BC they had migrated across the Caucasus and settled in and along the northern territories of the Assyrian Empire. Alternately the enemies and allies of Assyria, they seem to have thrust south along the Mediterranean sometime in the 620s BC, destroying Ashkelon and Ashdod and halting at the Egyptian border only because of a payoff by Pharaoh Psamtik

(Psammetichus). Ultimately, however, the destruction prophesied by Zephaniah came at the hands of the Babylonians after they had overpowered Assyria and brought that ancient power to its end.

Zephaniah's main theme is the coming of the day of the Lord when God will severely punish the nations, including apostate Judah. Zephaniah portrays the stark horror of that ordeal with the same graphic imagery found elsewhere in the prophets. But he also makes it clear that God will yet be merciful toward His people; like many other prophets, he ends his pronouncements of doom on the positive note of Judah's restoration by Yahweh, "**King of Israel**" in chapter 3: and verse 15.

The political situation in Judah during Josiah's reign was fairly peaceful. Following Assyria's capture of Samaria in 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire first advanced to new heights until it had overstretched itself, and then began to decline, and around one hundred years later Nabopolassar, the first of the Neo-Babylonian kings, (626-605 BC), began his campaign to free Babylonia from their grasp, in alliance with the Medes and Scythians. They were successful and finally destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC, by which time the Assyrian Empire was on its last legs.

In 605 BC it met its final end at Carchemish in alliance with its old enemy Egypt who feared the rise of Babylonian power. Josiah, in fact, met his end seeking to prevent the Egyptians from joining the Assyrians.

But the fact that Zephaniah does not target the Babylonians (or the Medes) as the instruments of God's judgment suggests an early date for the prophecy, before they came to prominence.

Josiah, who came to the throne at the age of eight, guided by the godly Hilkiah, followed the evil king Manasseh who in his long reign had strongly encouraged the worship of the Assyrian gods, and Josiah was able eventually to get rid of much of the Assyrian religious practices, partly due to Assyria's growing weakness. (Conquerors usually insisted that their gods were prominently worshipped by subject nations along with their own). He extended Judah's territory north into Naphtali.

But while the Assyrian gods strongly affected temple worship, it was Baal, the Canaanite god, and Melek (Moloch), the Ammonite god (who demanded human sacrifice), who gripped the idolatrous hearts of the people outside Jerusalem, something which the kings had never been able successfully to combat.

It was in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (622 BC) that Hilkiah the priest discovered the Law of Moses in the temple, (probably Deuteronomy at least), and when Josiah read it he instituted major reforms throughout Judah. Josiah's reforms were good. He eliminated much of the idolatry in the land and revived

the celebration of the Passover, but unfortunately his reforms could not change the hearts of all the people, and when he died they slipped back to their idolatry, as Jeremiah reveals in his earlier prophecies.

So the people to whom Zephaniah ministered had a long history of formal and syncretistic religion behind them without much real commitment to Yahweh. And God brought home to his heart that because of their formal religion and their negligence with regard to God's Law, and their willingness to compromise with idolatry, God would have to chastise and punish them in order to produce a remnant for the furthering of His purposes.

While we may see in what follows a pattern of the judgment to come in the final days, we must take note that Zephaniah specifically relates it to Jerusalem and Judah and the surrounding nations. It is not honoring to the word of God to make it say more than it does in order to support a theory.

Finally, we should note that Zephaniah was a member of the royal house. He had influence where others could not reach, and was directly related to those whose misdeeds and misgovernment would bring about what he prophesied. He is, however, not called 'the prophet' (compare Habakkuk 1.1; Haggai 1.1; Zechariah 1.1), and was thus probably not an official prophet.

Chapter 1

1. ***The word of Jehovah which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amarah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.***
2. ***"I will utterly consume all things from off the face of the ground," says Jehovah.***
3. ***"I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the face of the ground," says Jehovah.***
4. ***"And I will stretch out my hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarim with the priests;***
5. ***"and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship, that swear to Jehovah and swear by Malcam;***
6. ***"and them that are turned back from following Jehovah; and those that have not sought Jehovah, nor inquired after Him.***
7. ***"Hold your peace at the presence of the Lord Jehovah; for the day of Jehovah is at hand: for Jehovah has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests.***
8. ***"And it shall come to pass in the day of Jehovah's sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's sons, and all such as are clothed with foreign apparel.***

9. ***“And in that day I will punish all those that leap over the threshold, that fill their master’s house with violence and deceit.***

10. ***“And in that day,” says Jehovah, “there shall be the noise of a cry from the fish gate, and a wailing from the second quarter, and a great crashing from the hills.***

11. ***“Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh; for all the people of Canaan are undone; all they that were laden with silver are cut off.***

12. ***“And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with lamps; and I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, ‘Jehovah will not do good, neither will He do evil.’***

13. ***“And their wealth shall become a spoil, and their houses a desolation: yes, they shall build houses, but shall not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but shall not drink the wine thereof.***

14. ***“The great day of Jehovah is near, it is near and hastens greatly, even the voice of the day of Jehovah; the mighty man cries there bitterly.***

15. ***“That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of waste and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness,***

16. ***“a day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements.***

17. ***“And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against Jehovah; and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as dung.***

18. ***“Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of Jehovah’s wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy: for He will make an end, yes, a terrible end, of all them that dwell in the land.”***

Introduction (1:1-3)

Title: The Prophet Identified (1:1)

1. ***The word of Jehovah which came unto Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amarah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.***

The detailed genealogy, unusual for a prophet, suggests that his was an important family, and we are probably therefore to see the Hezekiah mentioned as the king of that name. Thus, Zephaniah was of the royal house.

“The word of Jehovah which came unto Zephaniah” signifies that he spoke as from God through revelation.

Prologue: Double Announcement of Total Judgment (1:2-3)

2. ***“I will utterly consume all things from off the face of the ground,” says Jehovah.***

3. ***“I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the face of the ground,” says Jehovah.***

Verses 2-3 of this chapter reveal God as Judge of the entire world. It is a general picture of the far future.

These first two verses speak of the apocalyptic future when Yahweh will finally bring His judgment on the world because of their sin. This coming ***“Day of the Lord”*** had first been spoken of by Amos which we studied earlier (Amos 5:18, 20). There the people of Israel were looking forward to the day when God would act to bring in His final kingdom and Amos has to warn them that in view of their sinfulness they should recognize that such a day would be darkness for them rather than light. It is echoed by Isaiah, although in the latter case more connected with historical events such as the destruction of Babylon (Isaiah 13:6, 9) and the destruction of Edom (Isaiah 34:8). But note Isaiah 2:12 where it is more general and has in mind God’s final judgment on mankind.

“For there shall be a day of Jehovah of hosts upon all that is proud and haughty, and upon all that is lifted up; and it shall be brought low;”

The two ideas continually intermingled in the minds of the prophets because each had the final hope of God establishing His everlasting Kingdom, and each hoped that the coming ***“Day of the Lord”*** that they saw as coming on the nations or on Israel/Judah might be the final one. So in their minds it had a near and not so near perspective. Zephaniah also has that idea. Thus he can commence with a declaration that the final Day of the Lord will come, and move on to deal with a Day of the Lord coming on Judah and Jerusalem. We must not simply apply every reference to the Day of the Lord as referring to the final one. They are simply one more portent of the fact.

This is a general declaration and can be compared with Genesis 6:7 on which it is probably based: ***“And Jehovah said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the ground; both man, and beast, and creeping things, and birds of the heavens; for it repents Me that I have made them.’”*** It is a picture of worldwide judgment, with the known world in mind. Here, however the fish replace the creeping things. This will not be by a flood. It is a general reminder that all creation is subject to the judgment of God, and will one day be judged and destroyed by Him. The world is temporary and not permanent. It is dependent upon God’s will.

Such a judgment is also declared in Isaiah 24:1-13, 17-23 where it will be by fire. This is also comparable to what Peter declared in 2 Peter 3:10-12:

10. “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the Earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

11. “Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy living and godliness,

12. “looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?”

But also included are **“the stumblingblocks with the wicked”**. The stumblingblocks in this case are probably to be seen as the idols of mankind, although in Ezekiel 7:19 it is man’s silver and gold, which have gripped their hearts, which were in mind. So it may mean all things that cause man to stray from God.

Both idols and idolaters are to be swept away, together with all that distracts man from God, and those who are so distracted. And finally it is emphasized that man himself will be cut off from the face of the ground.

This is all another way of saying “I am the Judge of all the Earth (Genesis 18:25), Who will one day bring all into judgment, and will totally destroy sinful mankind and all creation because they have turned away from me to evil, just as I did in the days of Noah”.

But that does not exclude the sparing of some, for in the days of Noah the remnant, that is Noah and his family, were spared. It is always understood that the righteous, the elect of God, will survive (as also in Isaiah 24:23: **“Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed; for Jehovah of hosts will reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem; and before His elders shall be glory.”**

In the light of this how we should examine our lives to see how we will stand before the searching light of the judgment of God when it comes to us, and opens up our very hearts and inner thoughts. For we will all have to give account, and everything is open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do.

The Day of the Lord Coming on Judah and the Nations (1:4-18)

Judgment on the Idolaters in Judah (1:4-9)

God's Particular Judgment Will At This Time Be Applied To Judah and Jerusalem (1:4-6)

4. ***“And I will stretch out My hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarim with the priests;***

5. ***“and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship, that swear to Jehovah and swear by Malcam;***

6. ***“and them that are turned back from following Jehovah; and those that have not sought Jehovah, nor inquired after Him.”***

In verses 4-6 we come closer to home, to His particular judgment on Judah and Jerusalem at this time. The prophets regularly see the far future and the near future together. To them they are in the future, and the timing is in God's hands. Every judgment He carries out is a picture and symbol of the final judgment, every ***“day of the Lord”*** is a picture of the final ***“day of the Lord.”*** Thus we must not read verse 4 onwards as referring to the apocalyptic future. On the other hand, as a day of the Lord that occurred in history it is a pattern of that day of the Lord yet to come, as described in verses 1-3, which introduce it.

Having described the general final judgment of God, Zephaniah now moves on to the particular judgment that is coming, how God will behave towards Jerusalem and Judah in the nearer future.

Judah and Jerusalem are to experience the activity of God against them because they have forgotten Yahweh and their covenant with Him. Stretching out the hand is a figure of speech which implies a special work of God in judgment (see Exodus 3:20; Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 4:34; 2 Kings 17:36; Isaiah 14:26-27; Isaiah 31:3; Jeremiah 6:12; Jeremiah 15:6; Jeremiah 21:5; Jeremiah 51:25; Ezekiel 7 times). This is in contrast with the stretched out arm, which delivers.

He describes those who will be subject to judgment, and will be cut off. The list is comprehensive and basically includes all who fail to worship Yahweh truly and be faithful to the covenant:

“The remnant (those who remain) ***of Baal”*** (although some translate as “Baal to the last vestige”). The word for remnant simply means what remains and is not necessarily a small proportion (see 1 Chronicles 11:8; 1 Chronicles 16:41; Ezra 4:3, 7; Nehemiah 10:28; Nehemiah 11:1; Esther 9:12; etc.). It need not thus suggest that this is after the reforms took place, it simply refers to all who still worshipped Baal, however large the number.

“The name of the Chemarim with the priests.” The Chemarim were burners of incense to the gods (2 Kings 23:5). They were depicted as rejoicing over the calves of Bethaven (Bethel), those set up by Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:28-29

(Hosea 10:5). In the few references they are seen in a bad sense. The priests would therefore be idolatrous priests.

“Those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops.” The host of heaven (the stars) were a prominent feature in Assyrian religion particularly and in idolatrous religion generally (Deuteronomy 4:19; Deuteronomy 17:3; 2 Kings 17:16; 2 Kings 21:3, 5; 2 Kings 23:5; 2 Chronicles 33:3, 5; Jeremiah 8:2; Jeremiah 19:13). They were often worshipped in small shrines on the housetops, from where the host of heaven could be seen (Jeremiah 19:13).

“Those who worship, who swear to Yahweh and swear by Malcam.” These were the syncretists who combined Yahweh and Malcam. Malcam means ‘their king (or their Melek)’ but should possibly be repointed as Milcom (i.e. the Ammonite god Melek (Molech) – 1 Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:13). Melek demanded that children be ***“passed through the fire”*** to him.

“Those who are turned back from following Yahweh.” This covers those who forsook the covenant and worshipped any other gods.

“Those who have not sought Yahweh, nor enquired after Him.” This covers anyone else who has not truly worshipped Yahweh. They are indifferent and ignore Him in their lives.

So all who have failed to worship Yahweh truly, whether through deliberate act or through neglect, are to be cut off. Neglect and indifference is as great a sin as open rebellion. It is more insulting to God.

The Day of the Lord Against Judah and Jerusalem (1:7-18)

7. “Hold your peace at the presence of the Lord Jehovah; for the day of Jehovah is at hand: for Jehovah has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests.”

All are to be silent in awe in the presence of the Lord Yahweh (compare Habakkuk 2:20; Lamentations 3:26; Zechariah 2:13; Revelation 8:1). The title the Lord Yahweh is a favorite one of Ezekiel. It stresses His overlordship.

“For the day of Jehovah is at hand.” This phrase ***“the day of Jehovah”*** appears in various forms in much prophetic literature. It can be a past day, a day in the relatively near future, or a day in the far distant, eschatological future. It is any day in which God is dynamically at work in human affairs. Wherever ***“the day of Jehovah”*** is found it is in contrast with the idea of man’s day (1 Corinthians 4:3), that is to say, the times when man is allowed relative freedom in his conduct of affairs. It is a day of God’s restraint. ***“The day of Jehovah”*** is the time when God more directly takes over and acts. It is a day of God’s judgment.

Thus here it is **“Jehovah’s day”** on Judah and Jerusalem fulfilled finally in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

“For Jehovah has prepared a sacrifice. He has consecrated His guests.”

The grim, ironic picture is of Judah and Jerusalem being offered as a sacrifice (compare Isaiah 34:6; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 39:17 on). The guests are either the people of Judah and Jerusalem, who will witness what is happening around them; the faithful of Israel who will watch Jehovah, at His invitation, offering His sacrifice; the nations round about who act as witnesses; or the invaders who will bring it about (the Babylonians) but are not named. This depends partly on whether we take “sanctified” as grim irony, “set apart for the purpose”, or as having its usual genuine meaning of guests being “set apart in purity” in readiness for a sacrifice (1 Samuel 16:5), in which case it would refer to the true people of God, the remnant, for they are the ones on whose behalf the sacrifice is made, who have cause to feast because they are His, and who are set apart in purity.

The idea of the people of Judah and Jerusalem being offered as a sacrifice is stark. They are being offered by God as a sin offering because they in their turn have refused to offer the substitutes that God had provided for. The price of sin must be paid in one way or another. In terms of our own day if we will not turn to the great Sacrifice provided in Jesus Christ, we will have to bear our sin ourselves.

8. “And it shall come to pass in the day of Jehovah’s sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king’s sons, and all such as are clothed with foreign apparel.”

9. “And in that day I will punish all those that leap over the threshold, that fill their master’s house with violence and deceit.”

It will be a day of punishment for sin. That the princes and the king’s sons did indeed suffer Jehovah’s punishment we know. Jehoahaz was taken captive to Egypt (2 Kings 23:36). Jehoiakim was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and died in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1-6). Josiah’s grandson, Jehoiachin, with his princes, was taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:8-16), and the last son of Josiah to rule over Judah, Zedekiah, was blinded and also taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:18-25:7).

To be **“clothed with foreign apparel”** may be metaphorical, signifying behaving like foreigners, or more likely refers to clothing that denoted those who were walking in foreign ways, in contrast with those who wore clothes which indicated their submission to the covenant (compare Numbers 15:38; Deuteronomy 22:11-12). There may indeed have been something about the clothing that indicated submission to foreign gods.

“Those that leap over the threshold.” The thought may be of those who eagerly leap into their masters’ houses in order to practice deceit and violence, because hardened in such ways, or may be descriptive of some religious activity to avoid and placate the demons seen as haunting the threshold (compare 1 Samuel 5:5).

“Master’s house” can refer to the king’s house as representative of his authority (2 Samuel 12:8; 2 Kings 10:3). Thus the thought here may simply be of the deceit and violence, either of the courtiers, or alternatively of all the people of Judah. Others have seen it as referring either to the temple, or to a sanctuary of the gods. But the major point remains the same. The people have reveled in deceitful practices and violence.

The way we live our lives reveals what we are. Some reveal what they are by the clothes they wear and their outward behavior. They reflect their inner hearts. Others reflect what they are by giving way to superstition, or occult practices. They trust in magic rather than in God. While others openly sin. But all will have to give account. The choice before us is stark. It is God or judgment.

Wailing throughout Jerusalem (1:10-13)

10. “And in that day,” says Jehovah, “there shall be the noise of a cry from the Fish Gate, and a wailing from the Second Quarter, and a great crashing from the hills.”

The Fish Gate was the gate through which fish vendors normally entered the city with their wares. It was a gate in Jerusalem’s north wall close to the fish market (compare 2 Chronicles 33:14; Nehemiah 3:3; Nehemiah 12:39). The Second Quarter appears to have been the name given to the extension to the city on the western ridge to the north (the Mishneh – 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22), protected by an outer wall but not in the main city. Both these would be the first to receive warning of Nebuchadnezzar’s arrival. (Compare Zechariah 11:3)

“And a great crashing (or ‘destruction’) **from the hills.”** Jerusalem was built in the hill country, and on hills, and was surrounded by hills. This may be intended to signify the noise of the cutting down of trees to make siege engines, or the cries of people being slain who had not reached the shelter of the city. Either way it would be the evidence of the nearness of the besieging army.

Or **“the hills”** may refer to an outer section of Jerusalem, (paralleled with the Fish Gate and The Second Quarter), possibly seen as already encroached on by the invader. Or the crashing may be some way of sounding the alarm.

11. “Wail, you inhabitants of Maktesh (the Mortar); for all the people of Canaan are undone; all they that were laden with silver are cut off.

12. “And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with lamps; and I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, ‘Jehovah will not do good, neither will He do evil.’

13. “And their wealth shall become a spoil, and their houses a desolation: yes, they shall build houses, but shall not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but shall not drink the wine thereof.”

The inhabitants of **“the Mortar”**, a business section of Jerusalem, are called on to howl because of the effect on their profits of the invasion. Those who were piling up wealth will be cut off. Then what benefit will they have from their wealth? Their businesses will collapse, and they will possibly be killed. Certainly the opportunity of trading will cease, and their silver will be taken from them.

“The Mortar” was probably a section of Jerusalem in the upper part of the Tyropoeon valley within the walls of Jerusalem which was a center of trade and industry.

“Canaan” was a Canaan or merchant. Cananean came to mean a merchant (Proverbs 31:24; Zechariah 14:21). In the context, in parallel with those laden with silver, the latter meaning seems more probable.

“I will search Jerusalem with lamps.” The picture is of Jehovah going out on a night search to find the wastrels (good-for-nothings) who are not abed preparing for the next day’s work, but frolicking and having a good time.

“And I will punish the men that are settled on their lees”, that is those who are lazy and dissolute, and living stagnant, ‘carefree’ lives. Wine thickened on its lees when it was left for a long time without being stirred or poured into another container. It became syrupy and sweet, lacking in strength and taste (see Jeremiah 48:11). The lees are the sediment at the bottom of the wine vat.

“That say in their heart, ‘Jehovah will not do good, neither will He do evil.’” They have settled into a somnolent state and think lazily and dissolutely, convinced that Jehovah is like they are, not ready to do anything (how easily we make God like ourselves). They think that as He has never interfered in their experience, He will not do so now. They are morally indifferent, and seek their consolation in wine. Compare Isaiah 32:9; Ezekiel 30:9; Amos 6:1.

“And their wealth shall become a spoil, and their houses a desolation: yes, they shall build houses, but shall not inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, but shall not drink the wine thereof.” Such people were usually of well-to-do families. But they will lose their wealth, taken from them by the plundering of the invaders, and their houses will be destroyed. Though they build houses (probably for renting as idle landlords) and plant vineyards they will not benefit from them (compare Amos 5:11). (The building of the houses and the

planting of the vineyards is, of course, seen as having been done earlier. Now they would see the fruits of their efforts disappear).

The Inescapable Day of the Lord's Wrath (1:14-18)

14. *"The great day of Jehovah is near, it is near and hastens greatly, even the voice of the day of Jehovah; the mighty man cries there bitterly."*

God's time is fast approaching, indeed is in a great hurry. Soon the sound of His day will be heard, the day when He brings His judgment on His faithless people. The war cry is raised by the mighty men, and it is very bitter, for they can see what is coming. They know that they have no hope.

As can be seen there are possible alternative translations. The consonants of "in a great hurry" can also mean "a soldier" (as evidenced in Egyptian papyri, at Ugarit, and in the Amarna letters). Thus it may indicate that the Day of Jehovah is coming speedily, or that it will result in the arrival of the soldiery. The latter would seem to be supported the parallel of the mighty man in verse 4.

In one sense the day of Jehovah is ever near, for in the midst of life we are in death. Each of us may suddenly be called on to give account at any time. But to every nation and people there will come a time when the nation is called to account, when the wrath of God falls on sin, and the nation collapses and is no more what it was. And there is the Final Day of Jehovah, when all will be called on to give account together.

15. *"That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness,*

16. *"a day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements."*

This is always the pattern of "**a day of Jehovah**", for days of Jehovah are days when He turns man's evil towards bringing about the final good. Zephaniah, although speaking of a soon coming event in this passage, may well have patterned his description on descriptions of both past prophecies relating to the near future, and those referring directly to the eschatological day of Jehovah (e.g., Isaiah 13:6-13; Ezekiel 7:5-9; Joel 1:15; Joel 2:1-2; and Amos 5:16-20). Indeed as far as he was concerned it might well have been that the eschatological day of Jehovah would commence around the same time. But he does not say so. His "day of Jehovah" on Judah and Jerusalem and surrounding nations is not worldwide.

"Days of Jehovah" are first of all a "**day of wrath**". God's anger at man's sin goes parallel with man's anger and fury revealed on Earth. But they are in total contrast, for they are at opposite ends of the scale. Man's anger is uncontrolled,

bitter, vengeful, greedy. God's anger is tightly controlled. It is describing His sense of the way in which sin violates everything that is good. Its aim is to remove sin and forgive the repentant. His anger is against man in sin. Man longs to destroy. God longs to redeem. He seeks nothing for Himself. He seeks only the removal of the curse of sin on creation. Man thinks he is fulfilling his own will, and to a certain extent it is true. But in the end he is but the instrument of the wrath of God against sin, for God will not allow sin to get out of control. Man's purpose is for his own ends. It is totally selfish and he ignores the hurt he causes. God's purpose is good, and in the end He bore in Himself the consequences of that sin.

God's wrath is never undeserved. These who will be treated violently are themselves violent, or live among the violent, and the consequences they receive are in the end the consequences of their own violence, or of their own indifference. We must not overlook the fact that all are involved in the sin, even the non-violent. Each in his own way behaves selfishly and without consideration towards others. Each contributes to the general ill-will. Even today men and women may give great consideration to good causes, but in their private lives there has never been a time when people were less considerate or thoughtful towards each other.

“A day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness.” This is how God's wrath is experienced. Destruction and desolation, darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness. Man feels his way and is lost. He cannot see. And because the means that God uses are human the distress reaches all. However, He knows how to keep His people in the day of trouble, and acts accordingly (Psalm 50:15). In the end not a hair of their head will perish (Luke 21:18). Meanwhile, they are assured that the chastening and tribulation will be for their good (Deuteronomy 8:5-6; Psalm 94:11-13; Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:11; and Romans 5:3-5).

“A day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements.” It is made clear of what this day consists. Invasion, siege and destruction. This is not the final judgment. It is judgment along the way, man's inhumanity revealed against man.

So Judah and Jerusalem were shortly to face the day of God's wrath, and when the unbelievable happened, and the walls of Jerusalem fell, and the temple was destroyed, and they were carried off in chains to Babylon, those who knew God would recognize that His hand was with them even in this, for had He not forewarned them through the prophets of what would happen?

17. “And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against Jehovah; and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as dung.

18. “Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of Jehovah's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy: for He will make an end, yes, a terrible end, of all them that dwell in the land.”

Again the description is vivid. Men distressed, stumbling blindly along. **“Jehovah will smite you with madness, and with blindness, and with astonishment of heart; and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind gropes in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways: and you shall be only oppressed and robbed always, and there shall be none to save you.”** So wrote Moses in Deuteronomy 28:28-29. They will grope first amid the blood and the ruins, the smoke and the devastation, blinded by grief and sorrow, and then in the chains of captivity as they are forced along, or as they flee for their lives with the little that they can carry. And he stresses that it is all because they have sinned against God.

“And their blood will be poured out as dust, and their flesh as dung.” Many will become a part of the Earth from which they came, their blood joining the dust, their rotting bodies acting as manure to the Earth.

Their wealth, for which many of them had lived, will do them no good. Once the enemy approach it is useless. It may buy a dead rat or two in the siege, but in the end it will all be lost. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

“But the whole land (Earth) will be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, for He will make an end, yes a terrible end, of all those who dwell in the land (Earth).” The whole land is going to be affected. It will be devoured by the fire of His jealousy. His jealousy arises from the fact that they have sought other gods, gods represented by earthly, debased creatures, and by silver and gold, which drag them downwards instead of lifting them upwards.

For He is jealous for their good, for their well-being, for their deliverance. He knows that such gods can only drag them downwards deeper and deeper into sin. And He is jealous for His own true people who have remained faithful through all the persecutions of the years, who have suffered injustice, maltreatment and ignominy. Without this dreadful judgment this would have continued into the future. In the midst of judgment God is delivering His own.

But should we translate “land” as “Earth”? It would make little difference. For to Zephaniah what the invader would do was to almost the whole known Earth of his day. But there is a deliberate localization. In chapter two further peoples and countries will be named, in a wide but limited area, in Canaan, Assyria and the Sudan. This is not the eschatological judgment of the last days. While a pattern of it, and widespread, it is localized and limited.

Chapter 2 Yahweh's Judgment Will Also Come on the Surrounding Nations for Their Sins.

God's Judgment on the Nations (2:1-3:8)

These judgments on the surrounding nations were declared to Israel as an assurance to them that they will not be alone in coming under God's judgment, and to demonstrate that God was the Judge of all the world. All nations come under His jurisdiction. All would be dealt with in accordance with His word. Their own gods are disregarded. And in the case of the first two, they will finally be possessed by God's people.

A Final Plea to Judah and Jerusalem (2:1-3)

Call to Judah to Repent (2:1-3)

1. ***“Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O nation that has no shame;***
2. ***“before the decree brings forth, before the day passes as the chaff, before the fierce anger of Jehovah comes upon you, before the day of Jehovah's anger comes upon you.”***

The “shameless” or “have no shame” (a translation based on an Aramaic root) or “not longed for” (i.e. unloved = the literal Hebrew) people of Judah are commanded to come together, to assemble themselves, before God's decree produces its final result in the coming of the invader. They are to do this before ***“the day passes as the chaff”***. The chaff is the waste matter which is rapidly blown away once the threshing of the grain takes place. So as quickly as the chaff is blown away will the time pass before God visits them in judgment. The idea is that they should come together to consider their position and repent before it is too late, before Yahweh's fierce anger comes on them. For all too soon will come the day of Yahweh's anger.

3. ***“Seek you Jehovah, all you meek of the Earth, that have kept His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be you will be hid in the day of Jehovah's anger.”***

The message is brought home. The purpose of the warning is that men might seek Yahweh. Indeed, had they all repented the day of the Lord would have been delayed as it was in Ninevah as described in Jonah 3:10. But Zephaniah, who as a member of the royal house, had no hope that they would respond, and he calls to the ‘humble’ of the land, those who have listened to Him and have wrought His demands as revealed in the covenant, the Law of Moses.

The “humble” or “meek” are often paralleled with “the needy” (Job 24:4; Psalm 9:18; Isaiah 11:4; Isaiah 32:7), and with the broken-hearted (Isaiah 61:1), for riches are often a hindrance to godliness (although we must remember that Zephaniah was probably from a wealthy family), and broken-heartedness is the sign of a godly spirit (Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 57:15). They are those who are ready to be taught His way (Psalm 25:9), they are those who hear Yahweh (Psalm 34:2), they are those to whom He gives His kindness and favor because they are not scornful (Proverbs 3:34), and they do not hunger after wealth (Proverbs 16:19). They are the godly.

They are to continue to seek righteousness and godliness. For them there may be a way of escape from the coming wrath (compare Amos 5:15). Or, they will find it easier to bear.

Judgment on Philistia (2:4-7)

4. “For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation; they shall drive out Ashdod at noonday, and Ekron shall be rooted up.

5. “Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea-coast, the nation of the Cherethites! The word of Jehovah is against you, O Canaan, the land of the Philistines; I will destroy you, that there shall be no inhabitant.”

The Philistines (Cherethites) who dwell on the sea-coast of Canaan are to be annihilated. Their great cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron are to be desolated and emptied of inhabitants (Gath had already been destroyed in 2 Chronicles 26:6). For Yahweh has spoken His word against them. He has passed judgment on them for their sinfulness, and for their attitude towards His people (Ezekiel 25:15; Isaiah 9:12). This judgment is a constant theme of the prophets (Isaiah 11:14; Jeremiah 25:17-20; Jeremiah 47:1, 4; Ezekiel 25:16; Amos 1:8; Amos 6:2; Zechariah 9:6), and indicates Yahweh’s universal sovereignty.

“At noonday” may be intended to suggest “at the height of their glory”. For **“in the evening”** is when they have become a desolation (verse 7).

The Philistines originally came from Crete (Cherethites) (see 1 Samuel 30:14; Ezekiel 25:16). They had had trading posts there since the time of Abraham, but had come over in large numbers in 1200 BC, not long after Israel’s invasion of Canaan, and had established themselves in a confederation of five cities in the coastal plain of Canaan. In the early days they had caused much trouble to Israel, until finally they were defeated by David. As Israel declined they once again became fiercely independent. Gath had previously been destroyed (2 Chronicles 26:6; Jeremiah 47:1) and now the same fate was to befall the other four.

Nebuchadnezzar's seizing of Ashkelon in 604 BC is reported in the Babylonian records known as the *Babylonian Chronicle*.

6. “And the sea-coast shall be pastures, with cottages for shepherds and folds for flocks.

7. “And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed their flocks thereupon; in the houses of Ashkelon shall they lie down in the evening; for Jehovah their God will visit them, and bring back their captivity.”

The vivid description of well-populated Philistia becoming simply a place for sheep, and its cities mainly being replaced by shelters for shepherds and folds for their flocks, brings home the enormity of what is to happen.

There may be an intended contrast here between the noonday (the hot part of the day is an unusual time for battle) in verse 4 and the evening, indicating the passage of time.

The idea is that finally the sea coast *“in the evening”* (verse 7), will become Israel's as part of the Promised Land. Once the “day” is past evening will come. They will dwell there and feed their flocks, and the Philistine cities will be available for their use.

Judgment on Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)

8. “I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of the children of Ammon, wherewith they have reproached My people, and magnified themselves against their border.”

Judgment is to come on Moab and Ammon, not only because of their sinfulness, but also particularly because of their attitude and antagonism towards God's people. Note that their sin is reproach and revilings, not invasion, although they are clearly threatening the border. This fits the fact that it occurred at this time, and not later when invasion had taken place. There was clear hostility indicated in all their dealings with Judah. This would later reveal itself in taking advantage of Israel's condition once the invader had done his work, by occupying their territory (Jeremiah 49:1), but that is not mentioned by Zephaniah. The fact that Edom is not mentioned here confirms that this is not written after the event, for it was Edom which incurred the greatest wrath from Israel once the exile had taken place.

Moab and Ammon were in Transjordan, east of the River Jordan, to the south and east of Israelite territory there (Gad). They had a record of constant enmity against Israel (Numbers 22; Numbers 24:17; Judges 3:12-14; Judges 10:7-9; Judges 11:4-6; 1 Samuel 11:1-11; 2 Samuel 10:1-14; 2 Kings 3) and always worked closely together, with first one and then the other in ascendancy.

9. “Therefore as I live,” says Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, “Surely Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, a possession of nettles, and saltpits, and a perpetual desolation: the residue of My people shall make a prey of them, and the remnant of My nation shall inherit them.

10. “This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified themselves against the people of Jehovah of hosts.”

Moab and Ammon were to be made as Sodom and Gomorrah, permanently destroyed and turned into wasteland. Moab occupied territory that had once been the surrounds of Sodom and Gomorrah. This should have been a continuing warning to them. Nebuchadnezzar, in fact, devastated both areas. Both territories suffered for a period of over two hundred years when there was no sedentary occupation (Jeremiah 48:42), and when resettled it was by different peoples. These consequences were put even more strongly by Jeremiah. Moab was to be destroyed from being a people (Jeremiah 48:42), and Ammon was to perish out of the countries and be destroyed (Ezekiel 25:7).

“ . . . the residue of My people shall make a prey of them, and the remnant of My nation shall inherit them.”

Compare Isaiah 11:14, which says,

“And they shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines on the west; together shall they despoil the children of the east: they shall put forth their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them.”

This probably refers to a period we know little about when Ammon and Moab were sparsely populated and partly taken over by a residue of Israelites. Later Judas Maccabaeus (second century BC) fought against the Ammonites and occupied Jazer and its surrounding towns (1 Maccabees 5:6) and Alexander Jannaeus subdued the Moabites in the second/first century BC, taking tribute from them. But these would be different peoples.

“This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and magnified themselves against the people of Jehovah of hosts.” The judgment that is coming on them is because of their pride in reproaching and assuming themselves as greater and more important than God’s people, and with it they have reproached Yahweh Himself. But this will lead on to them recognizing His power and glory in the future age of the church and being in awe of Him.

11. “Jehovah will be terrible unto them; for He will famish all the gods of the Earth; and men shall worship Him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the nations.”

God had promised that one day he would **“bring again the captivity of Moab in the latter days”**, and spoke similarly of Ammon (Jeremiah 48:47; Jeremiah 49:6 and compare verse 39). This must mean in the age of the church and be part of the idea that in that day all nations would worship Yahweh, because in the end none can be outside His offer of mercy (Isaiah 2:2). None today are outside His offer of mercy since Jesus became the atonement for the sins of all of mankind. He cannot be promising restoration to their land, for they are unidentifiable. They have ceased to be a people. There is no pure blood Moab today. And the same applies to Ammon. The idea is, rather, that they will be restored as part of the worldwide peoples who turn to Yahweh at the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Jehovah will be terrible unto them.” This must mean that one day even some of these enemies of Israel will acknowledge Yahweh as Lord, and will be in awe of Him, recognizing that He is the great and terrible God (Nehemiah 1:5; Nehemiah 9:32). They will have recognized Him for what He is. Then the “gods” of the Earth will starve because no one takes any notice of them. So much for the gods of the nations. All His own will worship Him in all lands, even the furthest known, **“the coastlands”**.

So this further prophecy regarding the ushering in of the church age confirms that in the end the residue of all nations will worship Yahweh, just as prophesied by Malachi in Malachi 1:11:

“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering: for My name shall be great among the Gentiles,’ says Jehovah of hosts.”

One day God alone will be God, and He will be all in all, worshipped by some of all the nations who have responded to Him. This has happened since the church first began in Acts 2, but its full fruition will take place when Jesus returns to gather up His church to take His Kingdom back to the Father.

“Then comes the end, when He shall deliver up the Kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign, till He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

Judgment on Cush [Ethiopia] (2:12)

12. “You Ethiopians also, you shall be slain by My sword.”

This brief reference takes us by surprise. The Ethiopians (Cushi) would probably be the furthest nation south known to Zephaniah. But we would have expected

more comment. This suggests that rather than having any particular reason for targeting the Ethiopians he was just deliberately thinking of as far south as possible. Basically he was indicating that almost the whole world of his day was to be included in the coming catastrophe. The “Ethiopians” were more in the area of the Sudan on the upper cataracts of the Nile, although they may have extended into Ethiopia.

It has been suggested that Egypt was in mind for they had been ruled by Ethiopian kings for sixty years in the not too distant past (up to 664 BC), with the reference being contemptuous, “you Ethiopians”. But it seems unlikely that if it were Egypt the reference would be so brief, whereas Zephaniah probably knew little about the Ethiopians apart from the fact of their existence.

Nebuchadnezzar would in fact conquer Egypt and include Ethiopia in his conquests.

Judgment on Assyria (2:13-15)

13. “And He will stretch out His hand against the north, and destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like the wilderness.

14. “And herds shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the pelican and the porcupine shall lodge in the capitals thereof; their voice shall sing in the windows; desolation shall be in the thresholds: for He has laid bare the cedar-work.”

Having dealt with the far south he quickly moves to the north with which he is more familiar, for there lay Israel’s arch-enemy, the Assyrians. They, too, will be caught up in Yahweh’s judgments. They will be destroyed, and that great city, Nineveh, will be flattened into ruins. It will be the dwelling place of herds, the beasts of the conquering nations. Birds will lodge in its ruined lintels and thresholds, and will sing in its window spaces. The wood will go dry having been exposed to the sun.

The words translated here pelican and porcupine are sometimes translated tawny owl and little owl. They may possibly have represented birds, although the type is not certain. The names pelican and porcupine were probably chosen because both began with p and would go well together. Alternately, qippod (here translated porcupine) might indicate something like lizards darting around the ruins.

But Zephaniah’s stopping short at Assyria counts against too much emphasis on a world-view. He was well aware of nations to the north of Assyria which could have been mentioned.

15. “This is the joyous city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, ‘I am, and there is none besides me’: how is she become a desolation, a

place for beasts to lie down in! Everyone that passes by her shall hiss, and wag his hand."

Attention is drawn to the attitude of Nineveh. In a world of poverty and suffering she was a good time city, a roistering city, that grew careless, as great empires do after a time, because they consider themselves invincible (compare Isaiah 10:12), saying "I am and there is none beside me" (compare Isaiah 47:8 of Babylon). She was sure that no one could be compared with her. But she would shortly become a scene of destruction occupied by beasts and all who went past her would hiss or shake their heads.

Nineveh would fall to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. For a time its ruins would be a thing to be derided, but in the not too distant future it would become a mound which passers-by simply looked on as a ruin. So quickly would the glory of Nineveh be forgotten.

It is a reminder to us how little there is of real, lasting importance in this world. If we wish to achieve anything lasting we should do it by building up the Kingly Rule of God.

Chapter 3 The Future Hope

In this chapter Zephaniah continues the theme of the judgment coming on Judah and Jerusalem, describing her present rebellious state, but then he moves on to the eschatological hope for the future. As with many prophets, he moves easily from the near to the far. They are two mountain ridges ahead and from his perspective he cannot see the distance between them.

The Condition of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1-7)

Judgment on Jerusalem (3:1-5)

- 1. "Woe to her that is rebellious and polluted! To the oppressing city!***
- 2. "She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in Jehovah; she drew not near to her God.***
- 3. "Her princes in the midst of her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they leave nothing till the morrow.***
- 4. "Her prophets are light and treacherous persons; her priests have profaned the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.***
- 5. "Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous; He will not do iniquity; every morning does He bring His justice to light, He fails not; but the unjust know no shame."***

- 1. "Woe to her that is rebellious and polluted! To the oppressing city!***

2. “She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in Jehovah; she drew not near to her God.”

Zephaniah returns to God’s verdict on Jerusalem, and pronounces a woe against her. She is a city of oppression, oppressing her people. She is rebellious against God and the covenant she has made with Him, and she has polluted herself through her disobedience. She is no more a holy city. Four reasons are given,

“She obeyed not the voice.” Central to all Yahweh’s requirements is obedience. He had spoken, but she had refused to obey His voice, and had gone her own way. As Jesus said in John 14:15, **“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”** Paul continues this theme of stressing obedience to the Lord when he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10:

“ . . . and to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from Heaven with the angels of His power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of His might, when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be marveled at in all them that believed (because our testimony unto you was believed) in that day.”

“She received not correction.” The prophets had been sent by God to rebuke her and turn her back into the right way, but she had refused even to listen. She was determined to go her own way and ignore all warnings.

We should welcome correction from God when it comes in our lives because God is acting on our behalf out of love for us as His children. Here is what the Hebrews writer says about God’s correcting His children in Hebrews 12:5-11:

“My son, regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d of Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. It is for chastening that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chastens not? But if you are without chastening, whereof all have been made partakers, then are you bastards, and not sons.

“Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.

“All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness.”

Sometimes the Lord will use our brothers and sisters in Christ as His means of correcting us. As Paul wrote to Timothy, ***“Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.”*** (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Paul also wrote the Corinthians, saying, ***“Sufficient to such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the many; so that contrariwise you should rather forgive him and comfort him, lest by any means such a one should be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you to confirm your love toward him.”*** (2 Corinthians 2:5-8)

And to the church at Thessalonica Paul wrote, ***“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother that walks disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us.”*** (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

“She trusted not in Jehovah.” She turned to other gods and other ways. Her eyes were taken off Him, and He was no longer central. She trusted rather to these strange gods, and to strange allies. Indeed, it would be one of these who came against her.

“She drew not near to her God.” Yahweh had become to her an irrelevance, a God of the past Who was no longer important. Her worship of Him was perfunctory, and for all practical purposes He was ignored.

3. “Her princes in the midst of her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they leave nothing till the morrow.”

The description painted here by Zephaniah is vivid. Her leaders are like animal seeking the prey, and her own people are the prey. Her princes are like roaring lions, frightening the inhabitants with their roars, and pouncing on their victims. Her judges are like wolves in the evening, hungry, unsatisfied, descending on the people to tear them apart, and so ravenous that they leave nothing for the next day.

4. “Her prophets are light and treacherous persons; her priests have profaned the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.”

The people had no word from Yahweh, for the prophets were unreliable and untrustworthy. They received no true vision. They treated all their great responsibilities lightly and without the honor they deserved. They treated the

truth lightly. They said what men wanted to hear, especially those in authority. They were men-pleasers. That was why Zephaniah had been raised up, so that at least **someone** would speak the truth and not what people wanted to hear. The priests profaned the sanctuary. They were careless, or worse, in their approach to Yahweh, ignoring the rules of “cleanness”, and the requirements of sacrifice, and many served other gods as well. They failed to follow and teach the requirements of the Mosaic law passed down by tradition and word of mouth. (The actual book of the Law would be discovered later in the temple, which suggests that it was not being read).

5. “Jehovah in the midst of her is righteous; He will not do iniquity; every morning doth He brings His justice to light, He fails not; but the unjust knows no shame.”

God is revealed as the opposite of all that was taking place with the people. He is among them in His dwelling place, but He is totally righteous. He will not behave in a wrong or unseemly way. He is completely open. Each day what He has done can be scanned in the light of day without anyone finding anything amiss. He does not need to hide anything. The picture would appear to be that of the steward or administrator who each morning produces details of what he has done and how he has looked after what he controls. He is not afraid to do so because he is totally honest and has acted only for good. So God is completely righteous in all His doings.

In contrast, the unrighteous do not bring what they have done into the light of day. That is how they avoid knowing shame. They are secretive and dishonest. Sadly, most men would not like their fellows to know the truth about some of the things that they have done. They are done in darkness, and that is where they want them to remain. Others are so wicked that they know no shame. They are even worse.

We are reminded of Jesus’ words when He said in John 3:21, “. . . **he who does truth comes to the light that his deeds may be revealed, that they are wrought in God. . . .**” We too are to “. . . **walk in the light . . .**” John tells us in 1 John 1:7.

Jerusalem’s Refusal to Repent (3:6-8)

6. “I have cut off nations; their battlements are desolate; I have made their streets waste, so that none pass by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, so that there is no inhabitant.

7. “I said, ‘Only fear Me; receive correction; so her dwelling shall not be cut off, according to all that I have appointed concerning her’: but they rose early and corrupted all their doings.

8. “Therefore wait for Me,” says Jehovah, “until the day that I rise up to the prey; for My determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the

kingdoms, to pour upon them My indignation, even all My fierce anger; for all the Earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.”

6. “I have cut off nations; their battlements are desolate; I have made their streets waste, so that none passes by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, so that there is no inhabitant.”

God gives the examples from the past of nations who were once powerful, but whose cities are now desolate wastes, totally unused by man. They should be acting as a warning to the people of Judah.

7. “I said, ‘Only fear Me; receive correction; so her dwelling shall not be cut off, according to all that I have appointed concerning her’: but they rose early and corrupted all their doings.”

God’s hope was that the example of these nations who had been cut off through His power would stir up His own people to give regard to Him, to take heed to Him and to hear and to heed His warnings, to seek His guidance and to walk in it. Then she would be secure in her land. All would be well. Her own dwelling would not be cut off, her cities would prosper, and she would receive all the good that God wanted to do for her.

But the people failed to take notice. They enthusiastically (arose early) and went about their sinful ways. They just ignored Him, giving Him perfunctory acknowledgement. In all they did they were deceitful and treacherous in their behavior.

It is a warning to us that we should learn the lessons of the past. If only we would do that just think how much anguish it would save us!

The Future Hope Will Follow Judgment (3:8-13)

8. “Therefore wait for Me,” say Jehovah, “until the day that I rise up to the prey; for My determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them My indignation, even all My fierce anger; for all the Earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.”

“Therefore wait for Me.” This indicates that there will be a delay. The world will have to await His timing. But God has determined that He will one day arise as a witness against the nations. He will gather them together so as to exact His anger on them, and all nations will experience His jealous wrath. Compare with this Joel 3:12-14 which depicts a similar idea:

“Let the nations bestir themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there will I sit to judge all the nations round about. Put in the sickle; for the harvest is ripe: come, tread; for the winepress is full, the

vats overflow; for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of Jehovah is near in the valley of decision.

See also Zephaniah 1:2-3 and Zechariah 14:2. The Lord will call the world into judgment. For God is the God of all nations, and all of them are accountable to Him.

His anger will be on them because of their worship of other things, of idols, of wealth, of prestige and position, with the result that they have not acknowledged God, and have ignored His commandments. He is jealous for all that His name stands for, and He will judge accordingly. This is reminiscent of what Paul says in Romans 1:18-23:

18. For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness;

19. because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them.

20. For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse:

21. because that, knowing God, they glorified Him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless heart was darkened.

22. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

23. and changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

These pictures of judgment are all worded in terms of the understanding of those days, but are rather to be seen as depicting the reality and universality of God's judgment than as literal descriptions of what will happen. The reality will be greater than the conception. Some of what happens in the future may, of course, come somewhere near to what is being described, nations may gather against Jerusalem, there may be catastrophes which come on those nations, but that is secondary. Such things are not required for the fulfillment of the idea. It is the *idea* that is important. It is God's final judgment on all nations that is in mind, not some comparatively local battlefield.

Redemption of the Remnant (3:9-20)

The Nations Purified, the Remnant Restored, Jerusalem Purged (3:9-13)

9. "For then will I turn to the peoples of a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of Jehovah, to serve Him with one consent.

10. “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My suppliants, even the daughter of My dispersed, shall bring My offering.

11. “In that day shall you not be put to shame for all your doings, wherein you have transgressed against Me; for then I will take away out of the midst of you your proudly exulting ones, and you shall no more be haughty in My holy mountain.

12. “But I will leave in the midst of you an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of Jehovah.

13. “The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.”

9. “For then will I turn to the peoples of a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of Jehovah, to serve Him with one consent.”

And the purpose of this judgment is to turn the nations in repentance towards God, to make their mouths pure so that they truly call on the name of Yahweh, and serve Him as one man. Contrast this with Isaiah 6:5:

“Then said I, ‘Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for my eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts.’”

The prophets, with their limited vision and perspective, had no way of knowing, nor would they have understood, how this would be accomplished in ways beyond their imagination, as the good news of the Kingly Rule of God went out to the nations, bringing them to Christ in partial fulfillment of these promises, resulting one day in the nations dwelling in His presence in the glory of a new Heaven and a new Earth.

What Zephaniah saw ahead was like a series of mountains in the distance. The first mountain was the nearest one, clear to the vision, and it was the coming judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem. Then came the more distant mountains, with no realization of the plains and distances that might lie between them. Neither could he determine the time frame of the fact of the facing up of the nations to the word and judgment of God. Neither did he know when exactly the conversion of many in those nations, and of God’s final judgment, followed by the everlasting relationship of peace between God and man, would be.

10. “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My suppliants, even the daughter of My dispersed, shall bring My offering.”

“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia. . . .” This expression represented a world unknown from which traders occasionally came, i.e., from beyond the furthest tributaries of the Nile. But even the people “out there”, converted to the true God by the witness of His dispersed ones, distant colonists, (compare the

Ethiopian eunuch who was a God-fearer in Acts 8:27) will come to God with their offerings, for all the world will come to know of His glory. This was fulfilled in the First Century. As the Apostle Paul states in Colossians 1:5-6, the Gospel message of Jesus Christ had been taken into the entire world:

“ . . . because of the hope which is laid up for you in the Heavens, whereof you heard before in the word of the truth of the Gospel, which is come unto you; even as it is also in all the world bearing fruit and increasing, as it does in you also, since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;”

Some believe that the ***“all the world”*** only means the known Roman world, but there is no reason to doubt that this actually means ***the entire world***. Why should it be so incredible to believe that the Creator of the Universe Who took on the form of man and was raised from the dead would find crossing the Atlantic Ocean too difficult an obstacle to overcome in getting His message out to a lost and dying world? There is even some evidence that points to Thomas journeying into South America and converting people to Christianity, and this is why the Spanish were able to conquer so quickly centuries later the indigenous peoples because of their belief in a pale skinned man coming again. Why should it be so difficult to believe that the Holy Spirit could not have transported the apostles across the ocean in the same miraculous manner in which He took up Philip the Evangelist in Acts 8?

“And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached the Gospel to all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.” (Acts 8:39-40)

This vision of the missionary movement, first of the dispersed Jews, preparing the way for the Gospel, then of the early church, ‘the new Israel’, reveals wonderful insight. And today around the world such converts daily bring their offerings of worship, praise and thanksgiving to Him, just as Zephaniah described.

11. “In that day shall you not be put to shame for all your doings, wherein you have transgressed against Me; for then I will take away out of the midst of you your proudly exulting ones, and you shall no more be haughty in My holy mountain.

12. “But I will leave in the midst of you an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of Jehovah.”

The work of God will bring about a transformation among His people. They will no longer need to be ashamed of their doings. For those who in their pride misbehave, and glory in the fruits of their misbehavior, will be no more, and those

who remain will be ***“an afflicted and poor people”***. In the Old Testament ***“the poor”*** were often the equivalent of the godly and pious and paralleled with ***“the meek”***, those who were humble before God (Isaiah 11:4; Isaiah 25:4; Amos 2:7), on the grounds that in a society like Israel’s it was the violent, the dishonest and the ungodly who accumulated riches.

“ . . . you shall no more be haughty in My holy mountain.” To be haughty in God’s holy mountain was a contradiction in terms. Man can have no pride in the presence of God. He can only confess his sinfulness and need. It was indeed a strange contradiction, only possible among human beings, that Israel could delight in having in their midst the holy mountain of God, and the awesomeness of His presence, and yet at the same time set themselves up against Him by worshipping idols and living contrary to His law. It is only paralleled by the way that today people can speak loudly of, and even exult in, the wonderful holiness of God and then go away and behave like devils. For the concept of ***“the holy mountain”*** compare Psalm 2:6; Isaiah 65:11; Isaiah 65:25; Jeremiah 31:23; Daniel 9:16; Daniel 11:45; Joel 2:1; Joel 3:17; and Obadiah 1:16.

“But I will leave in the midst of you an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of Jehovah.”

The sufferings of Israel (and of the world) had in it a good purpose (Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 3:2-3), that through its afflictions a people of God might result whose trust would be fully in God, a humble and lowly people made strong in God. They may seem unimportant to the world, but they are God’s jewels.

But as the New Testament shows us, when we hear of Israel, we must not just think in terms of the old Israel in the land, but in terms of the full Israel which includes all who call on His name, whether ex-Jew or ex-Gentile (Ephesians 2:12; Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 3:29; Galatians 6:16; Romans 11:17; and James 1:1).

13. *“The remnant of Israel will not do iniquity, nor speak lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths, for they will feed and lie down, and none will make them afraid.”*

“The remnant of Israel.” It is a regular stress in the Old Testament that only a remnant of those who profess to be God’s people will actually prove to be so (Isaiah 6:13; 1 Kings 19:18; Zechariah 13:9; Obadiah 1:17).

Once the suffering is finally over there will be a pure remnant who will forever be done with sin (Isaiah 60:21), who will speak only truth and be totally honest (compare Revelation 14:5; Psalm 32:2; Isaiah 63:8; John 1:47). This will only come to fruition in Heaven.

“For they will feed and lie down, and none will make them afraid.” They will be like sheep under a good shepherd (Micah 5:4; Isaiah 40:11). It is a picture of perfect serenity, and applies to all His people.

The Song of the Redeemed (3:14-20)

Rejoicing in the City (3:14-17)

14. “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

15. “Jehovah has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy: the King of Israel, even Jehovah, is in the midst of you; you shall not fear evil anymore.

16. “In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, ‘Fear thou not; O Zion, let not thy hands be slack.

17. ““Jehovah your God is in the midst of you, a Mighty One Who will save; He will rejoice over you with joy; He will rest in His love; He will joy over you with singing.””

14. “Sing, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel, be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

15. “Jehovah has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy: the King of Israel, even Jehovah, is in the midst of you; you shall not fear evil anymore.”

The final glorious triumph of God is here depicted, and this is brought into fruition with Jesus ascending to sit at the right hand of God in glory. He has become King of all His people. He has delivered fully. No evil will ever trouble His people again. We do not fear evil of any kind for Jesus has triumphed. This is just as Jesus said before He ascended, “. . . ***and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.***” (Matthew 28:20) The everlasting kingdom began just as prophesied on the Day of Pentecost, and eventually Jesus will return to gather it with Him into Heaven (Ezekiel 27:24-28; Daniel 7:14, Daniel 7:27). This is the eschatological vision of the prophets. The “daughter” of Zion includes all who have responded to God through His word going forth from Zion, who are the new and faithful Israel, having become part of the house of Jacob (compare Isaiah 2:2-4; Isaiah 56:7-8; Zechariah 8:23; John 10:16; Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 3:29; Galatians 6:16; Romans 11:17; James 1:1).

16. “In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, ‘Fear thou not; O Zion, let not thy hands be slack.

17. ““Jehovah your God is in the midst of you, a Mighty One Who will save; He will rejoice over you with joy; He will rest in His love; He will joy over you with singing.””

This would, of course, be fulfilled partly in His church, the new Israel. But it is Revelation 21-22 which brings out the full meaning of these words. In their lives lived in heavenly places, in the Jerusalem that is above (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22), and then in the new heavenly Jerusalem, which replaced the old after the death of Christ brought the old under a curse (Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 21:1-2; Galatians 4:26 see also Daniel 9:26), there will be no need for fear. God will openly dwell among them as the great Protector and Deliverer, mighty in deliverance, and His love will be on them, He will rejoice over them, He will enjoy with them the silence of a lover who is so content that he does not speak, He will sing with joy over them.

The Nation Restored (3:18-20)

18. *"I will gather them that sorrow for the solemn assembly, who were of you; to whom the burden upon her was a reproach.*

19. *"Behold, at that time I will deal with all them that afflict you; and I will save that which is lame, and gather that which was driven away; and I will make them a praise and a name, whose shame has been in all the Earth.*

20. *"At that time will I bring you in, and at that time will I gather you; for I will make you a name and a praise among all the peoples of the Earth, when I bring back your captivity before your eyes," says Jehovah.*

18. *"I will gather them that sorrow for the solemn assembly, who were of you; to whom the burden upon her was a reproach."*

Those who have been afflicted (see verse 12) are to be "gathered" by God "from the congregation, those who were from Zion", (that is from the congregation of all Israel). These afflicted ones are those who will have been purified by their afflictions. They will be gathered by God as His true people.

" . . . the burden upon her was a reproach." "Her" is feminine and probably therefore looks back to "love" which is a feminine noun. This is probably referring to the fact that Israel's sin was a burden on God's love, which brought reproach on the majority of Israel, that is on those whom affliction did not bring to repentance.

19. *"Behold, at that time I will deal with all them that afflict you; and I will save that which is lame, and gather that which was driven away; and I will make them a praise and a name, whose shame has been in all the Earth."*

But those who cause the affliction of God's true people will be dealt with by God, while the lame and the outcast will be saved by God. They have been a shame throughout the land, but they will be made ***"a praise and a name"***, that is will be made someone important and praiseworthy because they are those whom God has delivered. The deliberate contrast is that the so-called worthies will be brought low and brought to judgment, while the weak and the shameful who

repent will be exalted (as Jesus regularly taught in Matthew 21:31; Luke 13:30; and Luke 14:11).

Note the reference to the lame. It was to the lame and the blind that Jesus manifested His power (Isaiah 35:5-6; Matthew 11:5; Matthew 21:14).

20. “At that time will I bring you in, and at that time will I gather you; for I will make you a name and a praise among all the peoples of the Earth, when I bring back your captivity before your eyes,” says Jehovah.”

Zephaniah finishes with the promise of restoration of the people of Israel, which will make them a witness to all the world of God’s power and goodness, for their fortunes will be reversed. This was fulfilled in the church when the word of God was taken into all the world. This restoration has a near, a middle and a far view. The literal restoration to the land is the near view, which will take place after the exile, the gathering of those who responded in belief to the name of Christ is the middle view, but the final restoration comes when Gods people share glory with Him in Heaven.

So the message of Zephaniah is one of judgment that is coming, both in the near future and the far future, and of how God will use it to call out a people for Himself who will be purified through the afflictions they endure, and who in the end will rejoice in His presence.