

The Book of Zephaniah

Introduction

Zephaniah is the last of the prophets before the captivity, according to the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are post-exilic. His name means "Jehovah hides." His genealogy is traced back for four generations. Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hizkiah. We have therefore more information concerning him than of most of the other minor prophets. There must be a reason why these four generations are given. We believe the reason is to show that he was of royal descent, the great-grandson of the pious king of Judah, Hezekiah. Hizkiah is the same as Hezekiah in the Hebrew. Jewish tradition as well as the reliable rabbinical sources confirm this. The objection that the royal title is not given in connection with Hizkiah is insignificant; at any rate "king of Judah" is mentioned in connection with Josiah in the first verse of this book of Zephaniah, so that it may have been left out in connection with Hizkiah on purpose. As to his personal history we have no further information. It seems as if the Lord has hidden for a good reason these details of His chosen instruments.

The Date of Zephaniah

The date is given in the first verse. He prophesied in the days of Josiah the king of Judah. We are therefore not left in doubt about the time in which he exercised his office as prophet; he was the contemporary of Jeremiah and Micah. As to the exact time during the reign of Josiah in which Zephaniah prophesied, we can be quite sure that it was during the time of the reformation instituted by the king, that is between the twelfth and eighteenth year; yet the reformation was still in process and not yet fully completed. The temple must have been purified from the idol abominations, for Zephaniah presupposes the maintenance of the temple worship.

The Message of Zephaniah

To understand the message we must consider the character of the times in which the prophet lived, and the conditions in Judah. We have done so already in connection with the annotations on Jeremiah, but add here another description. As already stated a great reformation was in progress, which, like all reformation, ended in deformation, producing a reaction which plunged the house of Judah into the final apostasy. It seems the reformation was mostly an outward one; in their hearts the people still had a longing for the idols and the abominations connected with them (1:4). We shall point out in the annotations some of the details of the evils prevailing at that time.

Like the other minor prophets, judgment is announced first, followed by exhortations to repentance, with the promises of glory for the remnant of His people when the day of Jehovah is passed and the Lord is King over all the earth. He proclaims the judgment to come for the whole earth, as well as upon Judah and Jerusalem, and then gives a fuller description of the day in which that judgment is to be executed, the still future day of Jehovah. As we have seen, Obadiah and Joel are the earliest prophets, and both announced the day of Jehovah. The last of the prophets before the captivity bears his additional testimony to the same day, describing it as a day of wrath, of trouble and distress. This is the first chapter.

In the second chapter the exhortations begin. He exhorts the nation to repent and to seek the Lord, so that they might be hid in the day of the Lord's anger. Then he announced that the day is surely coming upon all the nations, and that the isles of the nations will not escape.

In the third chapter the prophet shows how the Lord will deal in judgment also with the ungodly among His people. He announces His purpose concerning the nations with the expectation that the godly remnant among the Jews will fear Him then, and receive instruction and wait for Him.

Then follows the joyous message of the future salvation of the elect people. It will be a poor

afflicted remnant which trusts in the Lord, which, born again, will be a holy people separated from evil. This is followed by the singing times. "Sing, daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all thy heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, He hath cast out thine enemy; the King of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee; thou shalt not see evil any more."

The Division of Zephaniah

Like Nahum's prophecy, Zephaniah's is one great prophetic utterance. The division into three chapters, as given in the Authorized Version, is the correct arrangement, with the exception of the first eight verses of chapter 3, which should be added to the second chapter. The subdivisions will be pointed out in the analysis and annotations.

Analysis and Annotations

CHAPTER 1 The Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment

1. The judgment of all the world (1:1-3)
2. The judgment will destroy the evildoers in Judah (1:4-13)
3. The day of the Lord (1:14-18)

Verses 1-3. The first verse is the superscription, and tells us, as pointed out in the introduction, of the connection of Zephaniah and the date of his prophecy.

Then comes the announcement of the judgment. It is to consume all things from off the face of the land, man and beast, the fowls of heaven, the fishes of the sea, and end the stumbling blocks of the wicked, that is, their idols and idol worship. The land is not to be understood as being Israel's land exclusively; it means the earth. That the judgment vision of Zephaniah has a wider scope than the land and the people is fully confirmed by other passages. The great day comes upon men everywhere (1:17); it is universal (2:4-15); all the isles of the nations are mentioned (2:11).

Verses 4-13. It will fall especially upon the house of Judah and Jerusalem. In the verses which follow we have a description of the moral conditions of the Jews when Josiah started his reformation, which prophetically gives us a picture of the conditions among the Jews when this age closes, and a portion of them is back in the land of their fathers, as they are attempting to get it back now through political Zionism.

The hand of the Lord will be stretched out upon Judah and Jerusalem. The remnant of Baal will be cut off and the Chemarim, with the priests. Idolatry, whatever remains of it, should then be completely abolished. "Baal" was the idol of god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites; the word means "lord" or "possessor." With the worship of this god licentious practices were connected. Chemarim is the name of the idolatrous priests which conducted the high places, appointed for this service by the kings of Judah (2 Kings 23:5). In verses 5 and 6 other forms of idolatry are mentioned. They worshipped the hosts of the heavens from housetops. They worshipped the stars, and studied their movements as if they could give them help and a revelation. Astrology, so widely practiced among civilized nations today, is an old cult (2 Kings 21:3, 5; Jer. 8:2; 19:13). Others used the Holy Name of Jehovah, and at the same time they used the name of Malcham. All was a turning back from Jehovah and dishonoring His Name.

As to the future curse of idolatry among the Jews, the passage in Matthew 12:43, 45, the words of our Lord, gives us the full information. The unclean spirit there is the spirit of idolatry, from which the Jews in their dispersion are free; the unclean spirit has left the house, but it is to return, and the last state is worse than the first: "Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation." They will worship the man of sin, the masterpiece of Satan, who in the end of the age will take his place in

the temple of God (2 Thess. 2).

The day of the Lord is at hand; a statement which verifies our interpretation that this prophecy refers to the future day. The Lord has prepared His sacrifice and bidden his guests. It is the supper of the great God, to which He invites His guests. Read in connection with this Revelation 19:17-18. What that day will bring is described in verses 8-13. All the evil doers will be dealt with by the Lord.

Verses 14-18. The great day of the Lord is now more fully described. It is the day when the announced judgment will take place. Higher criticism sees nothing but some invasion of the land by hostile forces. But it is the same great day, the culmination of the past ages, when Jehovah is revealed, so vividly described in Joel 2:11. On that day the voice of the Lord will be heard (Psa. 29; Isa. 66:6). When that day comes the mighty man will cry out in bitterness, for he is unable to save himself from the judgment tempest. In two verses the prophet describes vividly the greatness of that day.

A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A day of ruin and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and cloudy darkness; A day of the trumpet and the war cry Against the fortified cities, And against the lofty battlements.

Thomas of Celano used in 1250 the Vulgate translation of the first sentence "Dies irae, dies illa" in writing his famous judgment hymn. It is well to compare Scripture with Scripture about that day. (For instance verse 15 with Joel 3; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9; Isaiah 13:10, and many other passages.) When that day comes the wicked will perish; distress will be upon all. They will walk like blind men, that is, trying to find a way to escape, but not able to find one. Nothing will be able to deliver from the fury of that day, neither silver nor gold will avail anything.

CHAPTERS 2-3:8 The Call to Repentance in View of the Judgment

1. The call to repentance (2:1-3)
2. The judgment of the Philistines (2:4-7)
3. The judgment of Moab and Ammon (2:8-10)
4. The judgment of the other nations (2:11-15)
5. The woe and warning to Jerusalem and His people (3:1-8)

Verses 1-3. As we found it in Joel, so it is here. In view of the coming of the day, the call goes forth to the nation to humble themselves and to repent. On the near horizon in Joel the Assyrian invasion was threatening. In Zephaniah it is the Babylonian power. But all points to the future day of the Lord. They are to gather themselves together. The word used for "gather" has the meaning of gathering stubble or wood for burning. In their unbelief they were worthless as stubble and dry wood, fit for the burning. The phrase "not desired" has been translated "which does not turn pale." But this cannot be sustained. The better meaning is "unashamed."

The second verse gives the reason why they should humble themselves and be ashamed of all their evil doings. Because the decree of judgment has gone forth, the fierce anger of the Lord in His day is about to pass as the chaff. This is followed by the appeal to seek the Lord. This is addressed to the meek in the land, the godly remnant which fears the Lord, both in Zephaniah's day and in the end of the age, when "that day" comes. They are meek and seek to keep the statutes and judgments of the Lord in a righteous life. Still they are exhorted to seek meekness. For it is this, meekness and lowliness, that pleases the Lord. The promise is held out that they would be hid in the day of the Lord's anger. Zephaniah means "hidden by the LORD" or "whom the LORD hides;" His name comes into play as a comfort that the godly will be hid in the day of the Lord. In Isaiah we

have a more direct word about this. "Come, My people, enter thou in thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee; hide thyself as it were for a moment, until the indignation be overpast" (Isa. 26:20). This has often been used as a proof text that the true Church is not to pass through the great tribulation period. But it has nothing whatever to do with the Church, but is the promise given to the godly remnant (Rev. 12, the preservation of the seed of the woman). It is the teaching of the New Testament that the true Church will be taken to her heavenly abode by the coming of the Lord for His saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Thess. 2).

Verses 4-7. Judgment is to come in that day upon Gaza and Ashkelon, upon Ashdod and Ekron, the chief cities of Philistia. The inhabitants of the seacoast, the nation of the Cherethites, and all the land of the Philistines, will undergo judgment. The seventh verse gives the connection with the opening message of the chapter, the call to repentance. "And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed thereupon; in the house of Ashkelon shall they lie down in the evening; for the LORD their God shall visit them, and turn away their captivity." Because the remnant is to possess this territory when Philistia is judged they ought to repent and seek the Lord. That this is still unaccomplished hardly needs to be pointed out. It was not fulfilled in the remnant which returned from the Babylonian captivity. Since the day of their rejection, when they rejected Christ, they have been out of the land. Here is a prophecy of ultimate blessing to the remnant in the day of the Lord, when they will be regathered.

Verses 8-10. Moab and Ammon had sinned against Israel, they reviled them and magnified themselves against their border. Their judgment is announced, as it is in the former prophets, like Joel, Amos, and Ezekiel. Moab will be overthrown like Sodom, and Ammon will become like Gomorrah. Then when the judgment of Moab and Ammon finally takes place, as it will in His day, the remnant of His people shall spoil them, and the remnant shall possess them. It is obvious this also remains to be fulfilled.

This judgment of Moab and Ammon is the harvest which their pride and self-exaltation has brought to them (verse 10).

Verses 11-15. The Lord, in that day, will be terrible unto all these nations. The idol gods will all be abolished. In their place He alone will be worshipped (Zech. 14). All the isles of the nations will turn in worship to Him. The Ethiopians, the African nations, will fall under the judgment. He will stretch out His hand against Assyria, the power of the north, including both the Assyrian which then was and the Assyrian of the end-time, still to come. It is evident from verse 13 that when Zephaniah penned these words Nineveh had not yet fallen. Her utter desolation is predicted by Zephaniah as it was predicted by Nahum. The fate of Nineveh announced was literally accomplished. And some day all the proud cities of the nations, steeped in iniquity, will also fall as Nineveh was dethroned from her place of mistress of the world.

Chapter 3:1-8. The filthy, polluted and oppressing city is Jerusalem. Four charges are laid against her.

1. She obeyed not the voice. 2. She received not correction. 3. She trusted not in the Lord. 4. She drew not near to her God.

And because she was untrue to her God and Lord, oppressive cruelty and evil persisted. It was the outcome of her wrong attitude toward the Lord. Her leaders, the princes, were like roaring lions, devouring the prey. Her judges in oppressing the poor were like ravening wolves, ferocious and destructive. How all this fits Christendom today. There is disobedience to the Lord, no faith in Him, no humiliation and no repentance. Hence the moral conditions of today.

Their prophets and priests were also corrupt, as we have learned before in the former prophets. Yet the holy and just Jehovah was in the midst of them. Yet the unjust was not ashamed, but continued in evil-doing.

Then Jehovah addresses the nation: "I have cut off nations; their towers are desolate; I have made their streets waste, that none passeth by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant. I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off; howsoever I punished them, they rose early, and corrupted all their doings." But they did not heed His plea. They did not take warning from what happened to other nations.

CHAPTER 3:8-20 Judgment and Glory

1. The waiting for the end (3:8)

2. The glory that follows (3:9-20)

Verse 8. "Therefore wait for me, saith Jehovah, for the day when I arise for the prey; for my determination is to gather the nations, to assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, all my fierce anger; for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy." This verse leads us back to the opening exhortation of this chapter. They are as a nation to wait for Him, till the day comes in which He arises to execute the judgment of the nations. It has been a long waiting. Centuries have come and gone; His earthly people have been the wanderers among the nations of the world, where they have been a byword and a curse, yet witnesses for Him also. Still they are waiting for "that day," the day which closes the times of the Gentiles, when the stone strikes the great man image and becomes a mountain filling the whole earth (Daniel 2).

Verses 9-20. The opening verse of this glory section has been variously interpreted. It has been used by the "Pentecostal-delusion" as being a prophecy concerning their imagined gift of tongues restoration. In the first place it must be noticed that in the Hebrew the word people is in the plural. We read therefore this verse as follows: "For then will I turn to the nations a pure lip, that they may all call upon the name of Jehovah, to serve Him with one shoulder." Luther paraphrased this verse in the following way: "Then will I cause that nations to be preached to otherwise, with friendly lips, that they may call upon the name of the Lord." But this interpretation is not sustained by the text. It means that the nations which escaped the judgment-wrath of the day of the Lord will be converted, and as a result of their conversion they will call upon the Lord with pure lips; all idolatry will cease and all serve the Lord as one man.

While the peoples in verse 9 are the Gentiles, the suppliants in verse 10 are Jews brought back from the dispersion. They are brought back by the converted Gentiles as an offering unto the Lord (Isa. 66:20). When that takes place the restored nation will not have need to be ashamed for all their doings, for the Lord in infinite grace will have cleansed them from their iniquity, and now they are no longer proud and haughty, but a remnant humbled, trusting in the Lord. The great chapter in Ezekiel tells us of the conversion of this remnant (Ezek. 36). They will then be a righteous nation, do no iniquity, nor speak lies. The speaking of lies, the use of deceit, is one of the traits of the Jews today, and has often been responsible for their sufferings among the Gentiles. But when that day comes the deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouth. They will feed and lie down and none shall make them afraid. They have become once more "the sheep of His pastures, gathered by the Good Shepherd. The time of singing and rejoicing has come.

Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice With all thy heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem.

Jehovah has removed thy judgments; He has cast out thine enemy; The King of Israel, Jehovah, Is in the midst of thee, Thou wilt see evil no more.

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear not, Zion, let not thy hands be feeble.

Jehovah, thy God is in the midst of thee, A mighty One who saves; He rejoices over thee with

gladness; He rests in His love; He rejoices over thee with singing.

What a glorious day that will be! It will be glory for Him and glory for His people. The great prophetic song recorded by Isaiah (chapter 12) will then be heard in the midst of His redeemed people. The great Psalms of praise and worship will fill Jerusalem. Judgments are forever gone; no enemy will threaten them again. He Himself is in their midst, none other but He whom their fathers delivered once into the hands of the Gentiles, over whom they cried, "His blood be upon us and our children." He is King. The throne of His father David is now filled. The Mighty One saves, and rejoices over His redeemed people. He has the travail of His soul to the full and is satisfied.

Then He will make them a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth. Thus ends the great message of Zephaniah, the great-great-grandson of the pious King Hezekiah.