

The Message of Zephaniah

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What do you think when you contemplate the Book of Zephaniah? In all probability, as a Messianic Believer, your experiences in encountering the words of the Prophet Zephaniah are more pronounced than they are with some of the other “obscure” texts of the Twelve Prophets (the Minor Prophets), but are not as pronounced as they would be with some of the more “well known” texts of the Twelve Prophets. You are likely to have encountered a verse, or a passage or two, embedded within your speech or within some common sentiment(s) expressed within the Messianic community. However, your engagement level with the Book of Zephaniah can definitely improve—at the very least in terms of being informed about what it communicates to Bible readers, and those wanting to have a better idea about the basic context of those various verses and passages that you have heard repeated from Zephaniah.

The time period of Zephaniah’s prophetic ministry is placed during the reign of King Josiah of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, in the Seventh Century B.C.E. (1:1) Recognizing that following King Josiah, the Southern Kingdom began a steady decline until the Babylonian invasion and exile, it should not be surprising that the judgment of God upon the sinners of His people, and the world at large, are themes which are easily detected:

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD” (1:2-3).

This language is common to many of the words which are found in the Prophets of the Tanach or Old Testament. A time of serious judgment will come to the Earth. The real debate among interpreters, as it concerns the coming Day of the LORD or *Yom ADONAI*, is whether it involves a future moment in history when the Messianic Kingdom will be established, various moments in history when God supernaturally intervenes in judgment and/or to vindicate His people, or some combination thereof. This is something that those encountering the Book of Zephaniah need to keep in mind, because in surveying its words, there are things that can be demonstrated to have directly affected an ancient audience in Judah—and there are some other things that might be demonstrated to more directly affect a future audience, who will be living at the time of Yeshua’s Second Coming.

That judgment was coming to Seventh Century B.C.E. Judah is sure, from the first major oracle declared by Zephaniah:

“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests—those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech, those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him. Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. On the day of the LORD’s sacrifice I will punish the princes and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. On that

day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit. 'On that day,' declares the LORD, 'a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. Walk, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be ruined. At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, "The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad." Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine'" (1:4-13).

The declarations of the Prophet Zephaniah involving the coming Day of the LORD shift slightly. While this description of the time of judgment could apply to the Babylonian invasion and conquering of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, it might also very well apply to future situations and circumstances that will be manifest in the time before the Messiah's return:

"The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth. Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger" (1:14-2:3).

The audience of Zephaniah's word is labeled as *ha'goy lo niksaf*, "O nation without shame" (2:1, NASU). This could obviously be the Seventh Century B.C.E. Southern Kingdom, the descendants of the Southern Kingdom in the distant future, or a generic reference to God's people in the future—who are all riddled with sin. The NIV has probably taken a liberty by rendering 2:2 with "the appointed time," as *choq* is better translated as "decree" (NASU). The major point is that God's people are in a condition of not really caring about their sinfulness, severe judgment is inevitable, and people need to turn to Him in repentance and obedience.

Not only will God's judgment affect His own, but it will also affect Philistia (2:4-7), Moab and Ammon (2:8-11), and Assyria (2:13-15). Even with a definite level of past prophetic fulfillment of these words discernible, the interesting thing about prophecy in Scripture is how words regarding the future are often delivered in the language of the then-present in antiquity. So, there might be some elements of futuristic fulfillment seen in Zephaniah ch. 2 to be experienced in the future. At the very least, however, much can be learned about the spiritual and ethical character of some of modern-day Israel's neighbors by reviewing 2:4-15:

Zephaniah ch. 3 is where the most attention of readers will necessarily be focused, because of how the errors committed within the city of Jerusalem are described. In spite of great sin, religious abuses, unrighteous judgment, and profane words spoken—and certain judgment to be issued by the Holy One of Israel—there is also the promise present of restitution and cleansing. The main situation in view is summarized by Zephaniah:

"Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are

arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. The LORD with her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame” (3:1-5).

Even though there is great sin, rebelliousness, and defilement present in Jerusalem—actually labeled “The tyrannical city” (3:1, NASU) or “the oppressing city” (RSV)—we thankfully see how *ADONAI tzadiq b’qirbah*, “the LORD in her midst is righteous” (3:5, NJPS), as God is fully aware about what is going on and what needs to be done about it. Zephaniah’s prophetic oracles remind readers how the Lord’s judgment upon other nations, their cities, and their realms has been most thorough—so why would His judgment on Jerusalem itself, or His own people, be any different? The Prophet summarizes,

“I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left—no one at all. I said to the city, “Surely you will fear me and accept correction!” Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did. Therefore wait for me,’ declares the LORD, ‘for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger” (3:6-8).

Even though there is a great severity in what the Lord has decreed—“For all the earth will be devoured by the fire of My zeal” (3:8, NASU)—there is also the expectation of a restoration to those people who call out to their Creator, and who desire to be purified:

“Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings. On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD” (3:9-12).

The word of Zephaniah 3:9, “For then I will make the peoples pure of speech” (NJPS), is one which is commonly heard in various parts of today’s Messianic community. Some Jewish views of Zephaniah 3:9 have implied that the *safar beruah* to be given to the peoples is the ability to speak the Hebrew language. This is not an interpretation which is specified by the prophecy of Zephaniah itself. The problem to be resolved is how wrongdoing, pride, arrogance, haughty words, and profane janglings—need to be replaced with a purity of speech, so that God’s people might serve Him, worship Him, and place their complete and total trust in Him. The thrust of Zephaniah 3:9 is picked up in the First Century, in the Apostle Paul’s word, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).¹ As the Prophet Zephaniah himself states, “The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid” (3:13).

The Book of Zephaniah ends with an admonition for Israel to rejoice, because restoration to Zion, Jerusalem, and the people will come from an Eternal King who truly desires to see His people saved and redeemed from their transgressions. It is clear that the final oracle of Zephaniah has yet to be fulfilled:

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. One that day

¹ For a further review, consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Hebrew, Pure Language.”

they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.' The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,' says the LORD" (3:14-20).

When you review what the Prophet Zephaniah communicates, what impacts you the most? Have you ever really looked at the Book of Zephaniah before? Have you heard different statements made or references provided from the Book of Zephaniah in the past, and a short summary review like this has now offered you some better context for them? How can you make sure that the promised condition of God's people in the Book of Zephaniah—one where they are restored to proper fellowship with Him, and where they have **a clean manner of speech** by which to praise and serve Him—is present within today's Messianic movement?

Unless otherwise noted, primary Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version (NIV)*, © 1984, published by International Bible Society.