

# BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

---

**Approximate date:** 640-622 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate, some Left); 400s-200s B.C.E. (some Left)

**Time Period:** required change for the people of Judah

**Author(s):** Zephaniah (Right, some conservative-moderate); Zephaniah and/or anonymous other(s) (some conservative moderate, some Left); Zephaniah and anonymous redactors (some Left)

**Location of prophet/author(s):** somewhere in Judah (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

**Target audience and their location:** Southern Kingdom Israelites and Jerusalemites

**People:**

Zephaniah (son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah)

**People mentioned:**

Josiah, Judah (people), Baal (deity), Molech (deity), Kerethites, Philistines, Ammonites, Cushites, "Daughter of Zion"

**Places:**

Jerusalem, Fish Gate, New Quarter, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Canaan, Moab, Assyria, Nineveh

**Places mentioned:**

Sodom, Gomorrah

**Key Themes:**

God declares that fierce judgment is coming / God will severely punish those in Jerusalem who have followed after pagan deities / nothing on Earth will be able to save people from being engulfed by the Day of the LORD / Zephaniah calls those faithful to the Lord to turn to Him prior to His judgment being enacted / God will judge the Philistines / God will judge Moab and Ammon / God will judge the Cushites / God will judge Assyria / Jerusalem is described as being filled with unrighteousness and unfaithfulness / the Lord will dispense His own justice, and the remnant of His people will be brought to Him / Zion will be restored in the midst of the Earth

**Key Scriptures:** Zephaniah 1:12-13, 15-16; 2:3; 3:1-2, 5, 9, 14-15 / **The day of wrath** (1:1-3:8); **The day of hope** (3:9-20)

**Theological Summary:** The Prophet Zephaniah was likely a person of considerable social status in Judah, as indicated by his ancestry (1:1), which designates him a fourth generation descendant of King Hezekiah.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of Zephaniah's name (Heb. *Tzefanyah*, צְפַנְיָהּ) is disputed, with some favoring "the LORD has hidden," and others "watchman for the LORD."<sup>2</sup> Zephaniah demonstrates some knowledge of the political climate of the Southern Kingdom, and the prophetic works of Isaiah and Amos. Compared to Micah, whose prophecies focus on the plight of the common people of Judah, Zephaniah focuses his attention in more distinguished circles. Zephaniah could have known about a young Jeremiah.

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.E.), making him contemporary to Jeremiah, Nahum, and possibly Habakkuk, either just before or sometime during the Josianic reforms.<sup>3</sup> Some find evidence that the Josianic reforms were already underway<sup>4</sup> because of the reference to "the remnant of Baal" (1:4) and various allusions to the Book of Deuteronomy (1:13; cf. Deuteronomy 28:30; 1:17; cf. Deuteronomy 28:29). The Book of Zephaniah is the last pre-exilic text.

Conservatives hold to some kind of unity for the composition of Zephaniah, noting that "all of Zephaniah is intelligible as spoken in Josiah's reign" (*ISBE*).<sup>5</sup> It is possible, though, that some references to "the scattered ones" (2:7, 9; 3:10, 19) are post-exilic redactions, but nothing so as to dismiss a core of the text originating from Zephaniah.

Liberals have largely doubted some kind of unified authorship or composition of Zephaniah, arguing that sections of Zephaniah were written in the post-monarchic period, specifically 3:9-20. There are liberal trends, however, which indicate that some are willing to designate the salvific section(s) as *not* being later additions,<sup>6</sup> and more liberals are leaning toward a greater part of Zephaniah being authentic to the prophet.<sup>7</sup>

The Hebrew MT of Zephaniah is in good condition, even though consultation of the Greek LXX is helpful with some passages.<sup>8</sup>

The Prophet Zephaniah announced God's judgment upon the people of Judah. His words are given against a probable backdrop of the Scythian invasion of Assyria, as Josiah's reforms could be enacted without significant Assyrian reprisal<sup>9</sup> as a declining power.<sup>10</sup> A major focus of Zephaniah is the Day of the LORD when God will severely punish both the nations (ch. 2) and Judah.<sup>11</sup> In spite of God's judgment, God is also merciful and will restore His people in the end (ch. 3).

The Josianic reforms were only temporary, as the people of Judah would fall back into their previous sinful patterns. Many of the prominent families of Judah would participate in

---

<sup>1</sup> Dillard and Longman, 415.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Lee Walker, "Zephaniah," in *EXP*, 7:537.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 940.

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Schneider, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 4:1189; Dillard and Longman, 416.

<sup>5</sup> Schneider, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 4:1189.

<sup>6</sup> F.C. Fensham, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 984; Greg A. King, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *EDB*, 1416.

<sup>7</sup> John S. Kselman, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ABD*, 6:1078.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 943; Kselman, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ABD*, 6:1078.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 940.

<sup>10</sup> Fensham, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 984.

<sup>11</sup> Dillard and Longman, 419.

worship of the Queen of Heaven (2 Kings 23:11).<sup>12</sup> Zephaniah indicts the people of Judah for this idolatry (1:1-2:3), and then indicts the nations who influenced Judah (2:4-15). A key thrust of Zephaniah is God's holiness and His grace.<sup>13</sup>

Allusions to Zephaniah and his message are seen in various places in the Apostolic Scriptures,<sup>14</sup> certainly affecting some of the eschatological expectations of the Apostles,<sup>15</sup> as particularly seen in Revelation.<sup>16</sup> More modern engagement with Zephaniah largely takes the text to relate "to contemporary institutions, calling upon the authorities to make sweeping and effective reforms lest the judgment threatened by Zephaniah befall the present government" (*ISBE*).<sup>17</sup>

There has currently been no significant Messianic engagement with the Book of Zephaniah.

### **Bibliography**

ben Zvi, Ehud. "Zephaniah," in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, pp 1327-1332.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Zephaniah," in *Jewish Study Bible*, pp 1234-1242.

Carson, John T. "Zephaniah," in *NBCR*, pp 773-780.

Dillard, Raymond B., and Tremper Longman III. "Zephaniah," in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 415-420.

Fensham, F.C. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *IDBSup*, pp 983-984.

Gelston, Anthony. "Zephaniah," in *ECB*, pp 715-717.

Harrison, R.K. "The Book of Zephaniah," in *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 939-943.

King, Greg A. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *EDB*, pp 1416-1417.

Kselman, John S. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ABD*, 6:1077-1080.

Leslie, E.A. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *IDB*, 4:951-953.

McComiskey, Thomas Edward. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *NIDB*, p 1085.

Schneider, D.A. "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 4:1189-1191.

Walker, Larry Lee. "Zephaniah," in *EXP*, 7:537-565.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON ZEPHANIAH:

**1. How encompassing is God's judgment of sin as described in the Book of Zephaniah?**

**2. What is God's promise to His people and to Jerusalem?**

<sup>12</sup> E.A. Leslie, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *IDB*, 4:951.

<sup>13</sup> Schneider, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 4:1190.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:1191.

<sup>15</sup> Dillard and Longman, 420.

<sup>16</sup> King, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *EDB*, 1417.

<sup>17</sup> Schneider, "Zephaniah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 4:1191.

**3. Do you believe today's Messianic community takes the message and themes of Zephaniah seriously? Why or why not?**

REFLECTION ON ZEPHANIAH'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Zephaniah:*