

Profit from

The Minor Prophets

8: Zephaniah

“The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.”

Zephaniah 1:1

Apart from being given an unusually extensive family tree and being told that he prophesied in the days of Josiah we know nothing about Zephaniah’s background. It may be that he was a great-great-grandson of king Hezekiah, which would make him one of only two prophets to have royal blood in their veins, but he could have been descended from some other Hezekiah — it was a common name. His pedigree does establish that he was of Jewish descent.

When Did Zephaniah Prophesy?

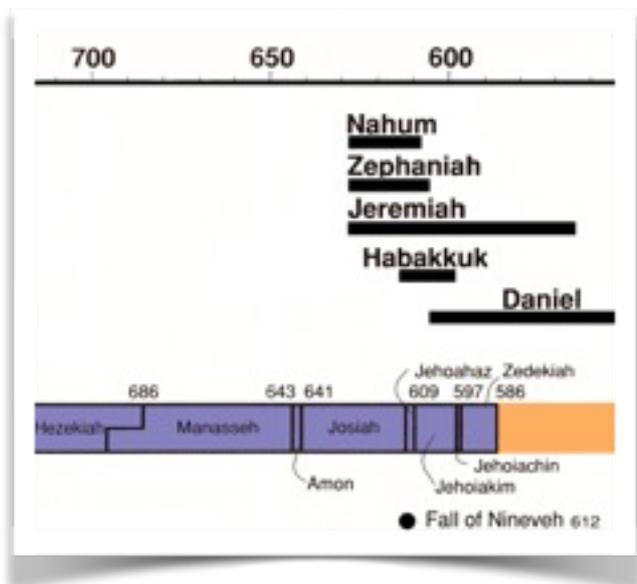
Josiah was one of Judah's good kings. His father Amon “did evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done” (2 Kings 21:20). Amon reigned for just two years but Josiah’s grandfather, Manasseh — probably the most evil king ever to have ruled Judah — had reigned for fifty-five years before that, so when Josiah was made king the nation was at a dreadful low as regards the worship of God. There were pagan idols in the Temple, religious prostitution was widely practiced, Baal and Ashtoreth were worshipped at shrines all across the land and children were being sacrificed to Molech. In fact, it was said that at this time the people of Judah were worse than the Canaanites God had put out of the land in the first place.

Josiah was only 8 when he became king. He seems to have had some good and godly advisors because even in his youth he set about ridding the country of idols. When he was 26 he had the Temple restored. The workmen engaged in the renovation work found a copy of the Book of the Law. It appears that the priests and scribes were not even sure what it was they had found; that is how bad it was. The work completed, the worship of God was restored and the Passover was celebrated — the last time that had been done properly was way back in the days of Samuel. Zephaniah himself was probably part of the reform movement.

Josiah's reforms affected every part of Judah and indeed their influence extended beyond Judah's borders into Samaria. But it would be wrong to assume that everyone changed. It is clear from the writings of the other prophets who were active in the reign of Josiah that that was not the case. Zephaniah began ministering as a prophet in 627BC, the same year as the prophet Jeremiah. Nahum, and Habakkuk were also contemporaries.

After Josiah's death, the people returned to their old ways and less than 50 years later, in 586BC, God used Babylon to discipline them. Nevertheless, although the influence of Josiah’s reforms was short-lived, we read that it did delay the coming of that judgment.

Whilst all of this was going on in Judah the surrounding nations were continuing in their idolatry and in their opposition to God’s people. The Philistines had been vying against Israel for the same land since the time of the conquest, while Moab and Ammon, distant relatives of the Israelites, had opposed Israel's passage



through their land in the days of the exodus. Cush, referred to in Zephaniah 2:12 possibly refers to the Egyptian Twenty-fifth (Ethiopian) Dynasty: Egypt too was a longstanding enemy.

Assyria, of course, was the foreign power that controlled Judah at the time of Zephaniah's prophecy but, through the years of Josiah's reign, the power of Assyria was declining and Egypt, Judah, and Babylon were regaining some of their autonomy. In 612BC Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, fell to the Babylonians who then became the dominant power in the Near East.

You can read about Josiah's reign in 2 Kings 21 – 23 and 2 Chronicles 33 – 35.

Outline

A warning of judgment 1:1–18

The judgment announced 1:2 – 6
The judgment defined 1:7 – 13
The judgment described 1:14 – 18

A call to repentance 2:1 – 3:8

Repentance is still possible 2:1 – 3
All the nations will face judgement 2:4 – 3:8
 Philistines (2:4–7)
 Moab and Ammon 2:8–11
 Cush 2:12
 Assyria 2:13 – 15
 Jerusalem 3:1 – 7
 A summary 3:8

A promise of blessing 3:9 – 20

The promise of conversion 3:9 – 13
The promise of restoration 3:14 – 20

Zephaniah's Message

Considering the reforms instituted by Josiah, you could be forgiven for thinking that things were on the up in Judah, so perhaps Zephaniah's first words come as a surprise.

“I will utterly consume everything
From the face of the land,”
Says the Lord;

Zephaniah 1:2

The rest of chapter 1 describes a very bad day that is on its way — the great day of the Lord. Judgement is coming on Jerusalem. Judah, and Jerusalem with it, will be utterly destroyed: it will be wiped out, all its wickedness and idolatry will go with it and in that day, says Zephaniah, nothing will be able to save its people.

“Neither their silver nor their gold
Shall be able to deliver them
In the day of the Lord's wrath;
But the whole land shall be devoured
By the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make speedy riddance
Of all those who dwell in the land.”

Zephaniah 1:18

Josiah was making reforms but laws cannot change people's hearts. A godly ruler can take away idols but the old superstitions people hold to do not then go away. When the influence of the king is no longer there things will inevitably be back as bad as ever. So, in chapter 2 Zephaniah issues a call to repentance — a change of heart. It is not too late, even now this judgement could be avoided.

“Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth,
Who have upheld His justice.
Seek righteousness, seek humility.
It may be that you will be hidden
In the day of the Lord's anger.”

Zephaniah 2:3

The rest of chapter 2 adds incentive to that call— more reasons to repent. Zephaniah's message is that the threatened day of judgement coming on Jerusalem is coming on all the surrounding nations too. So when it comes there will be nowhere to hide. Judah's neighbours — the ones they learned their idolatry from — will be of no help to them.

Zephaniah was talking about a day that did actually come about thirty years later when the Babylonians did what the Assyrians had done to Israel one hundred years before. Nebuchadnezzar besieged, ransacked and destroyed Jerusalem and took it's people — Daniel among them — into captivity.

The last part of Zephaniah's message is about a time beyond the day of the Lord: time of restoration and blessing for those who remain faithful to God. After seventy years of captivity in Babylon the People of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem. However the nature of the blessing Zephaniah promises is such that one cannot help but think that he is pointing to a day yet to come: a day of judgement for the whole world and blessing for those who remain faithful way beyond anything experienced by the returning Jews.

A Question To Think About

- What are the lessons from the way God dealt with Judah for our day?

For Further Study

Viewing them in their context, what can you learn from these verses?

- Zephaniah 2:7
- Zephaniah 3:8
- Zephaniah 3:12 – 13
- Zephaniah 3:17