

# THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

**F**or the historical context of Zephaniah, see 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35.

## **Zephaniah 1**

### ***1:1–3***

Zephaniah means “Jehovah hides” or “Jehovah has treasured.” These first verses serve as an introduction to the writings of Zephaniah, who is the ninth of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. (They are called minor prophets not because they are unimportant but because we have far fewer records from them than from others such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.) Zephaniah is the only Old Testament prophet who included his genealogy, which he probably did to establish his influence as a great-great-grandson of Judah’s king Hezekiah (variant spelling of Hizkiah), who ruled about 715–686 BC during the time of Isaiah the prophet. Zephaniah, therefore, had influential social standing in Judah. Other clues as to his standing come from his familiarity with the court and with political issues, which is evident in his writing especially in chapters 2 and 3.

We also learn that Zephaniah prophesied during the beginning of King Josiah’s reign (640–609 BC), which makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum, and Lehi, who prophesied in Jerusalem, and of Daniel and Ezekiel, who prophesied in Babylon.

These verses also introduce Zephaniah’s major theme: that because Jehovah treasures—that is, loves—His people, He will purify them either through their repentance or, if they refuse to repent, through the judgments that will befall them.

### **1:4–9**

Before King Josiah's reign, the Israelites were greatly influenced by the Assyrians. *Chemarim* are wicked priests, and Malcham is thought to be the Ammonite fertility god Molech, whose worshippers performed human sacrifice. These verses criticize the people of Judah for participating in idolatry and urge them to return to the faith of their fathers. God will destroy idolatrous things and all those who follow after idolatry, such as those who worship the moon and stars from their housetops, who dress in foreign (probably Assyrian) clothing, and who adopt foreign customs instead of wearing the robes of righteousness and following the ways of the Lord.

Avoiding stepping on thresholds was a pagan custom. Many think it originated when the Philistines captured the Israelite ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments received from God at Mount Sinai. The Philistines took the ark to the temple dedicated to their principal god, Dagon, and placed it next to a statue of Dagon to demonstrate his superiority over the God of the Israelites. But the next morning when they arose, the statue of Dagon had fallen on its face in front of the ark. They restored the statue to its standing place, but the next morning they found that it had toppled again. This time the symbolism was intensified because the head and both hands had been severed from the body on the threshold, leaving the statue merely a stump. Afterward, the priests and those who worshipped Dagon would not step on thresholds (see 1 Samuel 5:1–5). So, a more correct translation of verse 9 is “all those that leap *over* the threshold.”

Despite all the pronounced judgments, God lovingly reminds the people that they have been invited to be His guests and can avoid the judgments that will befall the unrepentant.

### **1:10–13**

Maktesh is a valley in the Jerusalem area, and in the days of judgment a great howling will come from there and from the marketplaces as the merchants and the wealthy lose what they have treasured, which will then be worthless like lees, or sediments. To these people, the Lord is powerless and capable of doing neither good nor evil. They will not be able to escape or hide because the invaders will use lamps to hunt them down. Their houses will be plundered and destroyed by invading armies, and they will never reap the fruit of their vineyards.

### **1:14–18**

In the past the Lord God has fought for His people, but because they have turned against Him, He will no longer fight their battles. Thus, mighty men will be left to their own devices and will cry bitterly. Their blood will be shed by their enemies, and the silver and gold they have treasured will not be able to save them. Without God, wrath, trouble, distress, desolation, darkness, and gloom will prevail. Everything and everyone will be speedily destroyed. We see a similar pattern play out many times in the Book of Mormon.

## **Zephaniah 2**

### **2:1–3**

Chapter 2 opens with an invitation from the Lord for His wayward people, whom He calls the “not desired” to repent and become righteous and meek. He pleads for them to accept His power and exercise it patiently and according to His will. If they will do this, they are promised that they will be hidden and will avoid the impending judgments that Zephaniah foretells. They are reminded that it is not too late to turn from the world’s idolatry and follow God.

### **2:4–7**

Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron were four of the five heavily populated Philistinian cities located west of Judah on the fertile coastal plains of the Mediterranean Sea. Philistine—a nation of soldiers trained from youth in the skills of warfare (see 1 Samuel 17:33)—was the oldest and most relentless enemy of Israel and Judah. It existed from the twelfth century BC to 604 BC, when it was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia shortly after Zephaniah made these prophecies, thus fulfilling them.

The meaning of Cherethites is debated. The word derives from the Hebrew word *kawrath*, which means “to eliminate or kill.” Therefore, it could be a derogatory epithet describing the Philistines as executioners. Others think it is a name referring to the Cretans.

Zephaniah makes it clear in these verses that all these great cities and their wicked inhabitants will be destroyed and that the cities will become fields in which a remnant of God’s people will tend their flocks and be restored.

### **2:8–11**

The Moabites, descendants of Lot and his oldest daughter, lived in Moab, east of the Dead Sea, and the Ammonites, descendants of Lot and his youngest daughter, lived north of Moab. Although the Moabites and Ammonites were related to Abraham through his nephew Lot, most had adopted idolatrous practices, were enemies of Israel, and encouraged the Israelites to worship Baal. However, some of the Moabites and Ammonites who trusted in Yahweh became part of Israel (see Ruth 1–4).

Idol worshippers believed their gods were fed by the fumes and smoke that wafted up from the burnt offerings made to them, and so if the sacrifices to those gods ceased, the gods would starve.

Here Zephaniah speaks against the Moabites and Ammonites who have reviled against God, and he prophesies that if they do not repent, their land will be as Sodom and Gomorrah, places where only weeds and salt thrive.

After the unrepentant Moabites and Ammonites are destroyed, a remnant of God’s people will inherit the land.

## **2:12–15**

Zephaniah continues his prophecy by explaining that the Ethiopians (people of Egypt) will be killed. In addition, Assyria, the ruling empire of the day, will be destroyed, and its capital, the prideful city of Nineveh, will become a desolate home for “beasts of the nations.” The Hebrew word translated in verse 14 as “nations” is *goyim*, and while it sometimes refers to the nations that are descended from Abraham, it usually refers to non-Hebrew peoples.

Zephaniah further explains that the cries of cormorants (web-footed waterbirds considered unclean under the law of Moses) and bitterns (porcupines or hedgehogs also considered unclean) will fill the deserted land. The message here is that unlike other destroyed cities, this land will not eventually be inhabited by a remnant of God’s people but will remain a place for unclean animals, who will sit in and sing from the once beautiful windows.

In the future those who pass by the ruined Nineveh will sneer and shake their fists at the place that has become a reminder of divine displeasure.

Since Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC by the Babylonians, we know that Zephaniah preached before that time.

## **Zephaniah 3**

### **3:1–8**

After expressing His wrath for Judah’s enemies, God turns His anger once more on apostate Jerusalem, the city He intended to be the center of righteousness. He declares that Judah’s political leaders are arrogant and self-indulgent and that its religious leaders have profaned the very laws they are supposed to teach.

Judah has been called to repentance repeatedly and has refused to obey. The people have rejected the Lord, who laments that they refuse to acknowledge Him even though He has been with them, wanting to help and bless them. Because they rejected Him, the Lord has let catastrophes fall upon the people, hoping that would lead them to repent, but instead they have continued in their wicked ways. All His efforts to cause them to remember Him have been in vain. Thus, Judah must endure the final judgments.

### **3:9–13**

Zephaniah’s words now take a dramatic turn. God’s judgments will not destroy those who remain faithful but will purify them. The New International Version translates “then will I turn to the people a pure language” as “then will I purify the lips of the peoples.” Both indicate how the sanctified people the Lord

gathers will talk and act, perhaps in a reversal of what happened at the tower of Babel when the language of the wicked was confounded and the people were scattered (see Genesis 11:1–9).

Just as the beginning of Zephaniah describes both the historical destruction of Judah and the judgments that are to come in premillennial days, these verses fill us with hope as they describe the grace that the faithful of Judah received and the grace that will come to those who gather to Zion in the last days. The righteous will be purified, the scattered remnant restored, and Jerusalem and latter-day Israel purged of all evil. In that day, the people will serve the Lord with offerings and great rejoicing. They will not be ashamed, for the wicked and arrogant who have taunted and led the people astray will be cut off. The poor and all who have been afflicted will trust in the Lord and be obedient, and they will no longer fear anything.

### **3:14–20**

Zephaniah continues to describe the redemption of Zion in powerful images bursting with the love and joy God has for his righteous children, the pure in heart, who are Zion. He delights in the blessings they will receive for their faithfulness in times of great adversity. No more judgments! No more enemies! No more evil! No more fear!

“Let not thine hands be slack” (verse 16) is a phrase that encourages the people to not weaken or grow discouraged, because the almighty God will be with them to save them and nurture them with His love.

All that will happen to Judah foreshadows all that will happen in the last days. The destruction will be followed by rejoicing, mercy, and blessings for the faithful, and all that has afflicted God’s people will be undone and recompensed. God will gather His people home to a solemn assembly and bestow upon them all His goodness.

This third chapter closes with a glorious summary of the redemption of Israel. God’s mercy, exaltation, and joy in the righteous are the reality of the final judgment.

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