

Book of Zephaniah

Title:

As with each of the 12 Minor Prophets, the prophecy bears the name of its author, which is generally thought to mean “the LORD hides” (compare 2:3).

Author – Date:

Three other Old Testament individuals share his name.

He traces his genealogy back 4 generations to King Hezekiah (ca. 715 – 686 B.C.), standing alone among the prophets descended from royal blood (1:1).

Royal genealogy would have given him the ear of Judah’s king, Josiah, during whose reign he preached.

The prophet himself dates his message during the reign of Josiah (640 – 609 B.C.).

The moral and spiritual conditions detailed in the book (compare 1:4-6; 3:1-7), seem to place the prophecy prior to Josiah’s reforms, when Judah was still languishing in idolatry and wickedness.

It was (in 628 B.C.), that Josiah tore down all the altars to Baal, burned the bones of false prophets, and broke the carved idols (2 Chron. 34:3-7).

While other prophets gave their pedigrees (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Zech. 1:1), none goes into such great detail as Zephaniah, whose lineage shows that he was the great-great-grandson of good King Hezekiah.

Zechariah traces his lineage back to his grandfather (Zech. 1:1).

Thus the prophet is a descendant of the royal line, which makes his rebuke of princes and nobles all the more significant (1:8, 13, 18).

By giving his lineage and citing King Josiah, during whose reign he ministered, Zephaniah linked himself with the godly kings and the godly remnant of Israel’s history.

Zephaniah ministered several decades after Nahum and was an early contemporary of Jeremiah.

Zephaniah has been called “the orator” because of the oratorical style evident throughout the prophecy.

Zephaniah has some literary affinities with Isaiah, but more with Jeremiah and Joel.

Both he and Joel paint very dark pictures of the Day of the LORD, but in both books beautiful rays of light penetrate the darkness.

Two recurring expressions are important:

- (1) “Remnant” (1:4; 2:7, 9; 3:13); and
- (2) The “Day of the LORD” (1:7-10, 14-16, 18; 2:2-3; 3:8, 11, 16).

The purpose of Zephaniah’s prophecy is to set forth what the Day of the LORD will mean to ungodly Judah, to the world powers (1:2 – 3:7), and to the godly remnant (3:8-20).

His theme is the Day of the LORD, which destroys the false remnant of Baal (chapter 1), destroys the God-rejecting nations (Chapter 2), and purifies the true remnant (3:8-20).

Historical Setting:

Zephaniah does not make great use of historical events in the course of his prophecy.

Against the dark backdrop describing the judgment of God upon Judah and the nation, Zephaniah goes farther than any other of the minor prophets in emphasizing the future conversion of the Gentiles to the worship of the true God.

Zephaniah dates his writing “in the days of Josiah” (1:1).

Josiah was the God-fearing son of Amon, who with his father, Manasseh, was two of the most wicked kings of Israel’s history (2 Kings 22 and 23).

During Josiah’s reign a spiritual reformation, which touched only the small remnant in Judah, took place (in 621 B.C.; 2 Chron. 34:3-7).

Zephaniah mentions nothing of this reformation; thus, it is logical to conclude that his ministry preceded it, and his preaching probably prepared the way for, greatly advanced, and furthered the power of the spiritual reformation under King Josiah.

If these observations are true, the prophecy must have been given before the reforms under Josiah (about 630 to 625 B.C.).

The place from which the prophet ministered is not known with certainty.

The fact that the 10 northern tribes had been in captivity nearly a hundred years, together with his royal lineage (which would give him access to the king’s court), making it most likely that he ministered in Jerusalem.

He may even have resided in the palace complex.

Background – Setting:

Politically, the imminent transfer of Assyrian world power to the Babylonians weakened Nineveh's hold on Judah, bringing an element of independence to Judah for the first time in 50 years.

King Josiah's desire to retain this newfound freedom from taxation and subservience undoubtedly led him to interfere later with Egypt's attempt to interdict the fleeing king of Nineveh (in 609 B.C.; compare 2 Chron. 35:20-27).

While repairing the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the high-priest found the Book of the Law (2 Kings 22:8).

Upon reading it, Josiah initiated extensive reforms (2 Kings chapter 23).

It was during the early years of Josiah's reign, prior to the great revival, that this 11th hour prophet, Zephaniah, prophesied and no doubt had an influence on the sweeping reforms Josiah brought to the nation.

But the evil kings before Josiah (55 years), had had such an effect on Judah that it never recovered.

Josiah's reforms were too late and didn't outlast his life.

Historical – Theological Themes:

Zephaniah is a book of contrasts; for no other prophet paints a darker picture of God's judgment, and no prophet paints a brighter picture of Israel's future glory.

Historically, the Book of Zephaniah was used in the providence of God to prepare Judah for the reforms and revival under King Josiah.

Through the prophecy the nation of the prophet's day was faced with its sin, reminded of coming judgment, and instructed concerning the ultimate glory that will come to Israel.

Zephaniah's message on the Day of the LORD warned Judah that the final days were near, through divine judgment at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (ca. 605-586 B.C.; 1:4-13).

Yet, it also looks beyond to the far fulfillment in the judgments of Daniel's 70th week (1:18; 3:8).

The expression “Day of the LORD” is described as a day that is near (1:7), and as a day of wrath, trouble, distress, devastation, desolation, darkness, gloominess, clouds, thick darkness, trumpet, and alarm (1:15-16, 18).

Yet even within these oracles of divine wrath, the prophet exhorted the people to seek the LORD, offering a shelter in the midst of judgment (2:3), and proclaiming the promise of eventual salvation for His believing remnant (2:7; 3:9-20).