



Zephaniah - Книга Софонии

The book of Zephaniah contains messages of divine judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, as well as against other nations. It addresses a rare concentration of references to central issues in the history of ancient Israel. Idolatry, violence, and deception abound in Judah when Zephaniah began prophesying. Zephaniah's prophesying made it clear that Yahweh would execute vengeance upon unrepentant wrongdoers. His adverse judgments would be visited not only upon Judah and Jerusalem, but also upon other peoples: the Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites, Ethiopians, and Assyrians. Significantly, Zephaniah, the prophet, never stands at the center of the book of Zephaniah; the word of Yahweh is at the center of the book. Zephaniah is mentioned only insofar as he is necessary for the interpretation of the text.

Zephaniah neither performs miracles nor claims that his prayers may influence or even change the expected course of events, he does not perform any symbolic acts and is not related to the Temple. Instead, he is a speaker who delivered a sophisticated speech concerning the future and called for repentance (Zvi). Relatively little is known about the prophet Zephaniah, whose name in Hebrew, Stephan-Yah' means, «Jehovah has concealed (Freedman). In contrast with other prophets, however, Zephaniah provided his genealogy to the fourth generation, back to Hezekiah. (Zephaniah:1:1, Jeremiah: 1:1, Ezekiel:1:3) Most commentators agree that his great-great-grandfather was King Hezekiah. Therefore, Zephaniah was of royal descent and this would have added to his harsh condemnation of the princes of Judah and have shown that he was a courageous prophet of Yahweh.

In Zephaniah 1:1 the «Word of Yahweh» came to Zephaniah at a certain historical time, in the days of Josiah. Thus, the days of Josiah are set as a background against which the text is read. (Zvi) Josiah ruled from 640-609 B.C.(Mason) However, when in the days of Josiah, whether it was before or after the reform is a question that does not have a definite answer. The arguments brought on behalf of the idea that he prophesied before the reformation are that the kings are not mentioned in Zephaniah 1:4-9, and especially in verse 8 where the officers and «the sons of the king» are mentioned. Therefore one may infer that the king had no real influence and power. An additional argument supporting his prophesy before the Reformation was that the cultic notice in Zephaniah 1:5 reflects the situation before the reform but not after. The proposal that Zephaniah prophesied after the reform is based on the understanding in Zephaniah 1:4 as «the remnant of Baal.» Provided that this understanding is correct, one may assume that Zephaniah knew about the reform, and in spite of it, or because its success was only partial, prophesied the coming judgment.

The book of Zephaniah opens on a note of doom. «I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD» (Zephaniah 1:2). Nothing will escape, of man or of the beast. Baal worshipers, foreign god priests, rooftop worshipers of the heavens, those who mix Yahweh's worship with Baal's, those



drawing back, and those not interested in seeking him- all must perish. The prophet commands, «Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests» (Zephaniah 1:7). And in Zephaniah 1: 4-6 Judah is given special mention. Zephaniah 1:7-13 describes how the day of the LORD is at hand. It describes how there will be wailing and mourning in the city of Jerusalem, and the LORD will search out and punish the complacent. This day is described as «a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness» (Zephaniah 1:15). Zephaniah 1:8 describes how Yahweh will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who dress in foreign attire. A post-monarchic community can be interpreted that the supposed saying of Zephaniah concerning the day of Yahweh in Zephaniah 1:7-8 as prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Then, the temporal awareness along with a minimum of historical knowledge leads to the conclusion that Zephaniah must have prophesied about a future not too distant from his days but by no means imminent, if his prophecies were fulfilled.

Zephaniah proclaimed the coming day of the LORD, «The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against fortified cities and against lofty battlements». Chapter 2 begins with a call for the nation to repent before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon them to seek the Lord, to seek righteousness, and to seek humility. The book of Zephaniah then continues to describe God's wrath coming upon surrounding nations who had mistreated his people. In verses 2:4-7 it describes Philistia and how it's cities will be made desolate, and the inhabitants destroyed. The land will be for the remnant of Judah, whose captivity God will restore. Then it continues to describe Moab and Ammon in verses 2:8-11 and how they shall be like Sodom and Gomorrah because of their pride, and for their derisive criticism of God's people. Moab and Ammon were Israel's traditional enemies. Also, Jeremiah, a contemporary of Zephaniah, spoke of the Amorites occupying the Israelite territory of Gad in the name of their God Malcam. Psalm 83 mentions a number of nations, including Moab, Ammon, and Assyria who will put on great heirs against Israel and braggingly stated, «»Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more.» The prophet Zephaniah courageously announced that all these haughty nations and their gods would be humiliated. Furthermore, Ethiopia will be slain by the sword and Assyria with its capital Nineveh will become desolate.

Chapter 3 starts off by describing how Jerusalem has rebelled against the Lord and has not obeyed his voice nor drawn near to him. Jerusalem ignored God's judgment upon other nations, which should have prompted Jerusalem to receive God's instruction, but instead, the people corrupted all their deeds. The third chapter of Zephaniah then continues into the blessings that will occur. The faithful are told to wait for the Lord to carry out his judgment. His judgment, God will restore to the peoples a «pure language» to worship and serve Him in one accord. It further describes how God will then remove the proud from His «holy mountain», leaving a meek and humble people who will trust and rest in the Lord.



Zephaniah 3:14-15 describes how there will be joy in Jerusalem for the Lord will remove their judgments and their enemies. Then in verses 16-20 of chapter 3 it further describes how the Lord will be in their midst, providing them with gladness, love, and singing, and how the Lord has given them great assurance. The last verses of Zephaniah talks of how God will gather those who sorrow over the reproach of his people and they will deal with those who afflicted his people, he will gather those who have been driven out, and give them fame and praise.

The message of the prophet, if taken on its face value, announced that whatever community does the day of judgment will come, and only those «humble» people who seek Yahweh will perhaps live. Since the book was written for a certain audience and assumes that this audience could actually identify with this ideal society, then it is reasonable to assume that this audience could understand itself as a post-monarchic group whose horizon and focus is not that of creating a political center of power, a new and just bureaucracy. Instead, this group centers on a set of equally accepted religious attitudes such as total reliance on Yahweh, humbleness, truthful speech, and on its «knowledge» that Yahweh is just, that will redeem and will bring the ideal world that the community knows about it by reading the prophetic book.