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Edited by

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays



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- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- **Zephaniah**
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

# Zephaniah

JASON S. DEROUCHIE

**Introduction.** Zephaniah, a contemporary with Jeremiah in his early years (and perhaps Nahum and Habakkuk), prophesied during the days of King Josiah of Judah (640–609 BC), prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 BC). His preaching probably aided with Josiah’s reforms around 622 BC (2 Kings 23:4–20; 2 Chron. 34:8–35:19). See the introduction in the commentary on Jeremiah.

## Superscription (1:1)

**Zephaniah son of Cushi (1:1).** Zephaniah’s father is named “Cushi” (“the Cushite”), connecting him to ancient Cush, the powerful and influential black African empire along the Nile River, south of Egypt, in what is modern-day Sudan (see the article “The Cushites”). Perhaps his father was an ethnic Cushite, or perhaps he looked like a Cushite (perhaps one of his parents was a Cushite), or perhaps he was named “Cushi” in honor of the Cushites, who had been allies with Judah against the Assyrians.<sup>1</sup>

**Son of Hezekiah (1:1).** Zephaniah’s great-great-grandfather probably was King Hezekiah, the faithful reformer and thirteenth king of Judah (729–686 BC) (2 Kings 18–20; Isa. 36–38). Listing four generations of ancestors was unusual, and this connection to King Hezekiah may be the reason for it.

**Josiah (1:1).** Josiah was Hezekiah's great-grandson, a good king who reigned in Judah from 640 to 609 BC and instituted much-needed religious reform (2 Kings 22:1–23:20; cf. 2 Chron. 34:3–35:19).

### Setting: A Call to Revere God (1:2–18)

**I will completely sweep away everything (1:2).** This echoes the warning that God gave to Noah just prior to the flood (Gen. 6:7).

**I will cut off every vestige of Baal (1:4).** Baal was a prominent Canaanite god, the god of storms, rain, and thus fertility (see the article “The Canaanites and Canaanite Religion”).

**The pagan priests along with the priests (1:4).** This suggests two corrupt groups of apostate priests: illegitimate priests of non-Levitical descent (1 Kings 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and legitimate but still apostate Levitical priests.

**Who bow in worship on the rooftops to the stars in the sky (1:5).** See comments on Deut. 17:3; 2 Kings 17:16. Astral deities were common in the ancient Near East. Although strictly forbidden by God (Deut. 4:19; 17:3–7), they were worshiped both in the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:16) and in the southern kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 21:3–21; Jer. 8:2; 19:13).

**Pledge loyalty to Milcom (1:5).** Milcom (or Molech) is an Ammonite god, often associated with child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). Yet this term could also be translated as “their king,” in which case it would be a reference to Baal, the Canaanite deity mentioned in 1:4.

**He has consecrated his guests (1:7).** This likely refers to the Babylonians, whom the Lord consecrated to destroy Judah (cf. Isa. 13:3).

**The officials, the king's sons (1:8).** These were Judah's public leaders as well as members of the royal court.

**All who are dressed in foreign clothing (1:8).** This may indicate foreign influence in the royal court. Some suggest that it refers to priests who worship foreign gods and thus dress in that foreign tradition.<sup>2</sup>



Mesopotamian king with astral deities above.



**All who skip over the threshold (1:9).** This probably is a reference to a pagan superstition about the entryway into a temple (1 Sam. 5:3–5).

**Fish Gate . . . Second District (1:10).** The Fish Gate was one of the main gates in Jerusalem, located on the vulnerable northern wall (2 Chron. 33:14; Neh. 3:3). The Second District (NIV: “New Quarter”) was an expansion of Jerusalem west of the Temple Mount started during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22).

**The Hollow (1:11).** The “Hollow,” or “market district” (CSB footnote; NIV), probably was located in one of the depressions in the Tyropoeon Valley, between the Temple Mount and the Second District.

**Who settle down comfortably (1:12).** Literally, the Hebrew phrase is “who thicken on their dregs.” The idiom refers to wine that would thicken and become syrupy at the bottom of the container (the dregs). The implication is that the people were indifferent and unmoved by the prophetic preaching.

**Their silver and their gold (1:18).** Sometimes an invading army could be bought off by paying it tribute of silver and gold (cf. 1 Kings 20:3–4). But in this case—the invasion by the Lord—that would prove ineffective. Alternatively, often idols were constructed of silver and gold, and this may be a metaphorical reference to the ineffectiveness of the idols to deliver Jerusalem.

### Seek the Lord Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)

**Gaza . . . Ashkelon . . . Ashdod . . . Ekron (2:4).** These are four of the five main Philistine cities, which the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed in 600 BC (see the article “The Philistines”). Gath’s absence from the list suggests its earlier destruction by the Assyrians (Amos 6:2).

**Philistines . . . Ammonites . . . Cushites . . . Assyria (2:5–15).** See the articles “The Philistines”; “The Cushites”; “The Assyrians.” Zephaniah builds a “compass” of punishment around Judah: the Philistines to the west (2:5–7), the Moabites and Ammonites to the east (2:8–11), and the imperial powers of the Cushites and Assyrians to the south and north (2:12–15).

**Cherethites (2:5).** The Cherethites are closely affiliated with the Philistines (Ezek. 25:16), and are perhaps a subgroup whose origin is associated with the island of Crete (see the article “The Philistines”).

**Moab . . . Ammonites (2:8).** Ammon and Moab were two neighboring countries to the east of Judah (see comments on Gen. 19:37–38).

**Like Sodom . . . like Gomorrah (2:9).** The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by God, described in Gen. 19:24–25, is used here as a graphic metaphor for upcoming terrible judgment on Moab and Ammon. The connection between this story and the Moabites and Ammonites is ironic, for

Lot, the main character in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, who survives the judgment, was the progenitor of both the Moabites and Ammonites (Gen. 19:30–38), those who will now be judged as if in Sodom and Gomorrah.

**Nineveh (2:13).** Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BC (see the article “The Assyrians”).

**Roaring lions (3:3).** Throughout the ancient Near East rulers often were depicted as lions in order to emphasize their strength and power (see comments on Nah. 2:11–13). Here, these “lions” are preying on the very people they were to protect.

### Wait on the Lord to Enjoy Satisfying Salvation (3:8–20)

**Beyond the rivers of Cush (3:10).** This likely refers to the White Nile and the Blue Nile, the two main tributaries of the Nile River that were associated with the empire of Cush (cf. Isa 18:1–2), which lay to the south of Egypt (see the article “The Cushites”).

**My holy mountain (3:11).** This is a reference to Mount Zion in Jerusalem (Ps. 121:1–2; 125:1–2; Isa. 2:2).

**The LORD your God is among you, a warrior who saves (3:17).** The image of the Lord as a powerful warrior who fights and defeats Israel’s enemies is common in the OT (e.g., Ps. 24:8; Isa. 42:13; 59:17). Likewise, throughout the ancient Near East numerous deities were described and depicted as strong, valiant warriors (see comments on Isa. 59:17).