

# ZEPHANIAH

The Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction

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ZONDERVAN

## Exegetical Commentary

ON THE

## Old Testament

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

JASON S. DEROUCHIE

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Daniel I. Block, General Editor

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*Zephaniah*

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The Hebrew text is from Deuteronomy 31:11–13, which highlights the importance of “hearing” the voice of Scripture:

When all Israel comes to appear before יהוה your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this *Torah* before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can *listen* and learn to fear יהוה your God and follow carefully all the words of this *Torah*. Their children, who do not know this *Torah*, must *hear* it and learn to fear יהוה your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess. (NIV, modified)

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# Author's Preface and Acknowledgments

I cannot believe that I started this book in the summer of 2014, and now 2024 autumn colors are blazing in the trees of northwest Missouri. My heart and this world have grown and changed in this decade, yet Zephaniah's exclamation remains: "Hush before the Sovereign YHWH, for . . . the great day of YHWH is near—near and hastening fast" (Zeph 1:7, 14). I dwell among a nation not longing for God, yet the prophet calls for all who may hear to seek YHWH together to avoid punishment (2:1, 3); he then urges them to wait for YHWH to enjoy salvation (3:8). May the humble hear, fear, and be glad, and may the offspring of those scattered at Babel now come before the great King in worship (3:9–10).

When I started on the ZECOT editorial board around 2007, I thought I would write on Deuteronomy. But life circumstances showed that God had that project for a later time. Early in my academic ministry, I was able to teach a course on the Minor Prophets ten different times in four years. Semester after semester Zephaniah's prophecy overcame my pride, as God called his remnant from Judah and other lands to "seek humility" (2:4), condemned those who had "become haughty" (2:8; cf. 2:10, 15), and promised to leave only "an afflicted and needy people" in his transformed Jerusalem (3:12). With this, I knew Zephaniah served during "the days of Josiah" (1:1), and I wondered whether the Torah scroll that guided the king's reforms (2 Kgs 22:8; 23:2–3) had influenced the prophet's preaching. Thus, I accepted the opportunity to write on this book.

What I did not realize was that Zephaniah was likely a black Jew whose biracial heritage highly influenced his message of divine punishment and renewal. Having adopted three children from Black Africa, in the region of ancient Cush/Ethiopia, I joined the prophet in celebrating his vision of the reversal of Babel's punishment and international reconciliation. I have also stood in awe of how later biblical writers have seen Zephaniah's testimony of God's end-times victory over evil and new creational renewal realized in the coming of Jesus Christ. The NT authors stress how *all* the prophets spoke of Christ's tribulation and triumph and the days of the church (e.g., Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43; 1 Pet 1:10–11). I hope that preachers and teachers will benefit from this interpretation of Zephaniah's prophecy that accounts for its close, continuing, and complete biblical context and that seeks to show the book's lasting relevance for doctrine and ethics.



The research and writing for this book took place during my tenure at two different institutions. I thank the trustees and administrators of both Bethlehem College and Seminary (Minneapolis, MN) and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Kansas City, MO) for affirming the importance of this project and for each providing me a research sabbatical. I rejoice that both schools are elevating Scripture's authority, prizing God's glory in the face of Christ, and celebrating God's saving work among the nations. May God keep these schools faithful.

Steve Dempster served as my primary editor for this book, and both he and Dan Block offered helpful and substantial suggestions and guidance on the final form. I thank them both. With them, numerous research assistants have helped me through the years, and among those I remember I thank Jonathon Woodyard, Josh Bremerman, Nicholas Majors, and Brian Verrett. I especially thank Brian for his extended multiyear service and significant efforts in helping me lower the book's wordcount. Finally, I thank Lee Fields and the rest of the Zondervan team for their careful preparation of the final manuscript. The ZECOT formatting includes many demanding issues, and I thank them for their perseverance. For all, I pray that God would keep us faithful.

My six kids have grown up with Dad having Zephaniah as a constant companion, and I thank them (and now my two sons-in-law and three grandkids) for cheering me to the finish line. My wife Teresa remains my dearest friend, closest partner, and best human helper, and I rejoice that I can engage in academic and local church ministry with such a companion.

I dedicate this book to Drs. Daniel I. Block and Peter J. Gentry, both of whom have mentored me in various ways through two and a half decades of ministry training and academic ministry. Dan invited me to study under him during my doctoral education at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He helped me learn to ask the biblical authors not only, "What did you say?" but also "Why did you say it like that?" After graduation Dan invited me to join the editorial team that has overseen what is now the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament, and I am grateful for our near two-decade partnership on this series. During a nine-month sabbatical that Dan took, Peter stepped in to help guide my dissertation that addressed discourse features and structure in Deuteronomy. Over the last two decades he has grown not only to be a dear mentor but a true friend whose hermeneutical and biblical-theological influence is evident in all these pages. I praise the Lord for how he has used these men to make me who I am, and I pray that in different ways the rigor, care, and concern for Christ and his church that this commentary expresses would honor these upon whose shoulders I stand.

*Jason S. DeRouchie*

*Satisfied in a God who saves sinners, Autumn 2024*



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# Translation of Zephaniah

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## Zephaniah 1

<sup>1</sup>YHWH's word that 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, Judah's king.

<sup>2</sup>I will surely gather everything from on the face of the ground—the utterance of YHWH. <sup>3</sup>I will gather human and beast; I will gather the bird of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the stumbling blocks with the wicked. And I will cut off humanity from on the face of the ground—the utterance of YHWH. <sup>4</sup>So, I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off from this place the remnant of the Baal—the name of the illegitimate priests with the priests, <sup>5</sup>and those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, and those who bow down, who swear to YHWH but swear by their king, <sup>6</sup>and those who turn away from YHWH and who have neither sought YHWH nor inquired of him.

<sup>7</sup>Hush before the Sovereign YHWH, for the day of YHWH is near, for YHWH has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated his invited ones. <sup>8</sup>And it will happen in the day of YHWH's sacrifice that I will visit [punishment] on the officials, and on the king's sons, and on all who dress in foreign attire. <sup>9</sup>Furthermore, I will visit [punishment] on all who step over the threshold in that day—those who fill their Sovereign's house with violence and deception. <sup>10</sup>And there will be in that day—the utterance of YHWH—a sound: a cry from the Fish Gate and a wail from the Second Quarter and a great crash from the heights. <sup>11</sup>The inhabitants of the Mortar have wailed, for all the people of Canaan have been silenced; all those laden with silver have been cut off. <sup>12</sup>And it will happen at that time that I will search Jerusalem with the lamps, and I will visit [punishment] on the men who thicken on their wine dregs, who say in their heart, “YHWH will neither do good nor do ill.” <sup>13</sup>Then their wealth will be for spoil and their houses for desolation, and they will build houses, but they will not inhabit; and they will plant vineyards, but they will not drink their wine.

<sup>14</sup>The great day of YHWH is near—near and hastening fast. The sound of the day of YHWH is bitter; a Mighty One is shouting there. <sup>15</sup>That day is 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 cloud and thick darkness, <sup>16</sup>a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the unassailable cities and against the high battlements. <sup>17</sup>Surely, I will bring distress to humanity, with the result that they will walk as the blind, for against YHWH they have sinned. Indeed, their blood will be poured out like dust and their belly like dung pellets. <sup>18</sup>Also, their silver—even their gold—will not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of YHWH. And in the fire of his jealousy all the earth will be consumed, for a complete, even terrifying, end he will deal against all the inhabitants of the earth.

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## Zephaniah 2

<sup>1</sup>Bind yourselves together, and become a sheaf, O nation not longing—<sup>2</sup>before a birthing of a decree (like chaff, a day has passed), before the fury of YHWH's anger surely comes on you, before the day of YHWH's anger surely comes on you. <sup>3</sup>Seek YHWH, all the humble of the land who have heeded his just decree. Seek righteousness; seek humility! (Perhaps you may be hidden at the day of YHWH's anger.) <sup>4</sup>For Gaza will be abandoned, and Ashkelon for a desolation. As for Ashdod, by the noonday they will drive her out, and Ekron will be uprooted.

<sup>5</sup>Woe, O inhabitants of the shoreline by the sea, nation of Kerethites! YHWH's word is against you, O Canaan, the land of Philistines. Surely, I will destroy you until there is no inhabitant. <sup>6</sup>The result will be that it [i.e., the land]—namely, the shoreline by the sea—will become grazing grounds with cisterns for shepherds and folds for sheep <sup>7</sup>and that it [i.e., the shoreline] will become a shoreline for the remnant of the house of Judah; on them [i.e., the tracts of shoreline] they will pasture. In the houses of Ashkelon at evening they will lie down, for YHWH their God will visit them, and he will restore their circumstance.

<sup>8</sup>I have heard the reproach of Moab and the abuses of Bene-Ammon by which they have disgraced my people and become haughty against their border. <sup>9</sup>Therefore, by my life—the utterance of YHWH of armies, the God of Israel—surely Moab will become like Sodom, and Bene-Ammon like Gomorrah—a possession of weed and salt pit and desolation perpetually. The remnant of my people will plunder them, and the remainder of my nation will inherit them. <sup>10</sup>This shall be to them in exchange for their pride, because they reproached and became haughty against the people of YHWH of armies. <sup>11</sup>YHWH is fearsome against them, for he has made lean all the gods of the earth, so that all the coastlands of the nations will bow down to him, each from his place.

<sup>12</sup>Also you, O Cushites—slain by my sword are they. <sup>13</sup>So, may he stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria. Then may he place Nineveh for a



desolation, dry as the wilderness, <sup>14</sup>with the result that in her midst herds will lie down—every beast of a nation. Even an owl, also a bustard, will lodge at her capitals. A sound will sing at the window. Devastation will be at the threshold, when he has exposed her cedar work. <sup>15</sup>This is the exultant city—the one dwelling in security, the one saying in her heart, “I am, and my limit is still [unreached].” How she has become a desolation, a resting place for the beast. Each one passing over her will hiss; he will shake his fist.

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## Zephaniah 3

<sup>1</sup>Woe, O rebellious and defiled one—the oppressive city! <sup>2</sup>She has not listened unto a voice; she has not received instruction. In YHWH she has not trusted; unto her God she has not drawn near. <sup>3</sup>Her officials in her midst are roaring lions. Her judges are evening wolves; they have not gnawed to the morning. <sup>4</sup>Her prophets are reckless, men of treacheries. Her priests have profaned what is holy; they have treated torah violently. <sup>5</sup>YHWH is righteous in her midst. He never does wrong. Morning by morning he gives his judgment for the light; it has never been lacking. But a wrong one never knows shame. <sup>6</sup>I have cut off nations; their battlements have been dismayed. I have laid waste their streets with none passing; their cities have become so desolate as to be without a person, so there is no inhabitant. <sup>7</sup>I said, “Surely you will fear me; you will receive instruction,” so that her Shelter would not be cut off—all that I have purposed to visit against her. However, they arose early; they corrupted all their deeds.

<sup>8</sup>Therefore, wait for me—the utterance of YHWH—for the day of my rising as witness. For my judgment is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them my indignation—all the fury of my anger, for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth will be consumed. <sup>9</sup>For then I will change for peoples a purified lip so that all of them may call on the name YHWH, to serve him with one shoulder. <sup>10</sup>From beyond the rivers of Cush, my supplicants, the daughter of my scattered ones, will carry my offering.

<sup>11</sup>In that day, you [i.e., Jerusalem] will never be ashamed on account of all your deeds by which you revolted against me. For then I will remove from your midst the exultant ones of your boast, and you will no more increase arrogance at the mountain of my holiness. <sup>12</sup>And I will cause to remain in your midst an afflicted and needy people, and they will take refuge in the name of YHWH—<sup>13</sup>the remnant of Israel. They will never do wrong nor speak a lie, and in their mouth will never be found a tongue of deceit, because they will graze and lie down, and there will be none who cause trembling.

<sup>14</sup>Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be merry, and exult with all



heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. YHWH has removed your judgments; he has turned away your enemy. <sup>15</sup>Israel's King, YHWH, is in your midst. Never fear evil again!

<sup>16</sup>In that day, it will be said to Jerusalem, "Do not fear! O Zion, may your hands not grow slack. <sup>17</sup>YHWH your God is in your midst. As a Mighty One, he will save! May he rejoice over you with merriment; may he renew by his love; may he celebrate over you with song! <sup>18</sup>Those tormented from an appointed time I have gathered. They were away from you; a burden was on her, a reproach." <sup>19</sup>Look, I will be dealing with all who afflict you at that time. And I will save the lame one, and the banished one I will assemble. And I will place them for praise and for a name in all the earth, their [place of] shame. <sup>20</sup>At that time, I will bring you—even at the time of my assembling you, for I will give you for a name and for praise among all the peoples of the earth in my restoring your circumstances before your eyes.

YHWH has spoken.



## Brief Outline of Zephaniah

### I. The Superscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (1:1)

- A. Origin, Author, and Setting of the Prophecy (1:1)
  - 1. The Nature and Source (1:1)
  - 2. The Messenger (1:1)
  - 3. The Historical Context (1:1)

### II. The Setting of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction: A Call to Revere YHWH in View of His Coming Day (1:2–18)

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  - 1. Global Punishment against the Rebels of Humanity (1:2–3)
  - 2. Local Punishment against the Rebels of Judah and Jerusalem (1:4–6)
- B. The Content of the Call to Revere YHWH (1:7–18)
  - 1. The Call to Revere YHWH (1:7a)
  - 2. A Reason to Revere YHWH Related to Jerusalem (1:7b–13)
  - 3. Another Reason to Revere YHWH Related to the Whole World (1:14–18)

### III. The Substance of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction: Charges to Seek YHWH Together and to Wait (2:1–3:20b)

#### III.1 Stage 1: The Appeal to Seek YHWH Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)

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  - 1. The Need to Unite (2:1)
  - 2. The Time to Unite (2:2)
- B. The Charge to Seek YHWH in Righteousness and Humility (2:3–4)
  - 1. The Charge to Seek YHWH (2:3)
  - 2. An Initial Reason to Seek YHWH: The Devastation of Philistia (2:4)
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  - 1. The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from the Foreign Nations (2:5–15)
  - 2. The Lamentable State and Fate of the Rebels from Jerusalem (3:1–7)

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- B. Promises to Motivate Waiting for YHWH: The Remnant's Satisfying Salvation (3:11–20b)
  - 1. The Promise that YHWH Will Not Shame Jerusalem (3:11–13)
  - 2. A Discursive Charge to Rejoice as if the Great Salvation Has Already Occurred (3:14–15)
  - 3. The Promise That YHWH Will Save Completely (3:16–20b)

### IV. The Subscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (3:20c)

- A. YHWH Has Spoken (3:20c)



# Zephaniah 1:1

## The Superscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction

### Main Idea of Zephaniah 1:1

The superscription stresses that the book contains God's very word that he delivered to his prophetic emissary Zephaniah during the reign of the Judean king, Josiah.

#### ➡ I. The Superscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (1:1)

- II. The Setting of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction: A Call to Revere YHWH in View of His Coming Day (1:2–18)
- III. The Substance of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction: Charges to Seek YHWH Together and to Wait (2:1–3:20b)
  - III.1 Stage 1: The Appeal to Seek YHWH Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)
  - III.2 Stage 2: The Appeal to Wait for YHWH to Enjoy Salvation (3:8–20b)
- IV. The Subscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (3:20c)

### Literary Context of Zephaniah 1:1

Following the pattern of many Old Testament prophetic writings (e.g., Hos 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1), the book of Zephaniah opens with a superscription in 1:1. This heading introduces the content that follows as “YHWH's word,” which includes both the setting for the Savior's invitation to satisfaction (1:2–18) and the substance of that invitation (2:1–3:20b).



# Zephaniah 1:1

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## A. Origin, Author, and Setting of the Prophecy (1:1)

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### Main Idea of the Passage

The superscription stresses that the book contains God's very word that he delivered to his prophetic emissary Zephaniah during the reign of the Judean king, Josiah.

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### Literary Context

The superscription identifies Zephaniah as God's human mouthpiece who speaks as a heavenly ambassador delivering the "word" (דְּבָרָה) God gave him. Thus, the book's heading characterizes the prophet's entire message (and perhaps even the superscription itself) as God's "word" to the prophet, which the rest of the book characterizes as a single, coherent oracle. Consequently, everything in the book has a divine origin and authority and derives from a unified will.<sup>1</sup> The book itself bears canonical consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 4. A "vision" (חֲזִיוֹן; e.g., Isa 1:1; Obad 1:1; Nah 1:1), an "oracle/burden" (מִשְׁפָּה; e.g., Isa 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 23:1; 30:6; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1), or simply "the words of X, who . . ." (e.g., Deut 1:1; Jer 1:1; Amos 1:1) introduce other prophetic messages.

2. For more on canon consciousness, see Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, New Testament Monographs 34 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014). On the link between divine origin and canon, see Meredith G. Kline,

*The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 27–75. Wolff believes the singular use of "word" in such contexts provides "an important step toward the formation of the canon," but he does not think the title yet means "Holy Scripture," for "the Word of God is an event that confronts the prophet again and again" (Wolff, *Hosea*, 4). The superscription, however, equates the whole written oracle that follows with the "word" that God delivered to the prophet, so the distinction between the revelatory "word" as event and the revelatory "word" as document is only one of form, not content, origin, or authority.



In three ways the prophet emphasizes that God is the oracle’s source: (1) by repeating the oracular formula “the utterance of YHWH” (נְאֻם־יְהוָה; 1:2–3, 10; 2:9; 3:8),<sup>3</sup> (2) by closing the book with the speech formula “YHWH has spoken” (אָמַר יְהוָה; 3:20),<sup>4</sup> and (3) by letting God regularly speak in first-person (“I/me”; e.g., 1:2–4).<sup>5</sup> Zephaniah needed *God’s* authority to confront Jerusalem’s political and religious elite (1:4, 8–8; 3:3–4). Through his prophet, *God* himself promises an impending day of punishment for both Judah and the world (1:2–18). *God* calls his righteous remnant to seek him together and to wait for him in joyful hope (2:1, 3; 3:8, 14). *God* motivates such a call by warning of the global destruction of the proud (2:4–3:8) and predicting the worldwide restoration of the humble (3:9–20). *God* himself as Savior King promises to satisfy completely his redeemed in his presence and celebrate those (3:14–17) whom he has recreated for his glory (3:19–20). Following the superscription (1:1), God’s word through Zephaniah graphically portrays the day of YHWH against Judah and the world (1:2–18) and then builds on this foundation by calling for a united, persistent pursuit of God to avoid punishment and enjoy salvation (2:1–3:20).

➔ I. The Superscription of the Savior’s Invitation to Satisfaction (1:1)	
A. Origin, Author, and Setting of the Prophecy (1:1)	
1. The Nature and Source (1:1)	
2. The Messenger (1:1)	
3. The Historical Context (1:1)	

Translation and Exegetical Outline

(See page 61.)

Structure and Literary Form

Zephaniah 1:1 contains no sentence but stands simply as the book’s title. It consists of a noun phrase and a relative descriptive clause. The noun phrase (“YHWH’s word”) clarifies the book’s nature and source. The relative descriptive clause indicates the book’s messenger (“Zephaniah”) and the time he prophesied (during Josiah’s reign).

3. Sweeney, *Isaiah* 1–39, 546; also called the “signatory formula” in Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 33.  
4. Sweeney, *Isaiah* 1–39, 547.

5. Even when Zephaniah blurs YHWH’s voice by referring to God in third person (“he/him”; e.g., 1:5–7), the divine origin and authority of the prophet’s pronouncements remain unchanged. Cf. Vlaardingebroek, *Zephaniah*, 29.



Zephaniah 1:1<sup>1</sup>

1:1 דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֶל־צְפַנְיָה בֶן־  
כוֹנָשִׁי בֶן־גְּדַלְיָה בֶן־אַמַּרְיָה בֶן־חִזְקִיָּה  
בְּיָמֵי יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ בֶן־אָמֹן מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה:

- YHWH's word that 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, Judah's king.
1. The Nature and Source (1:1)
  2. The Messenger (1:1)
  3. The Historical Context (1:1)

I. The Superscription of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (1:1)  
A. Origin, Author, and Setting of the Prophecy (1:1)

1. For information on the guidelines used for tracing the argument, see The Method in the introduction, pp. XX.



Formally, verse 1 is a “superscription” that introduces the book.<sup>6</sup> A prophetic word formula (here = דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֵלַי, “YHWH’s word that came to”) constitutes the heading, of which variations are common throughout the OT’s prophetic revelatory contexts.<sup>7</sup> The present pattern occurs elsewhere only in Hos 1:1, Joel 1:1, and Mic 1:1 (also LXX Jer 1:1), which suggests to some that a common preexilic editor may have completed these minor prophetic books.<sup>8</sup> While possible, because the formula varies from book to book and because the fronted placement at the books’ beginnings explains the distinctive wording, this view is unnecessary. The prophetic word formula itself characterizes the content of the book as the written expression of a revelatory encounter that YHWH speaks “to” a (usually named) human messenger for another audience.<sup>9</sup> The “coming” (translating הָיָה, “to be”) of the word means that God’s message in some way “became a reality” for Zephaniah.<sup>10</sup> Only in Gen 15:1 is the formula accompanied by a specific mode of delivery (i.e., a “vision”). Elsewhere we learn that, apart from YHWH conversing “mouth to mouth” with Moses (Num 12:6, 8), he spoke to his prophets through visions, dreams, and the Urim (1 Sam 28:6; Jer 31:26), all guided by his Spirit (e.g., Zech 7:12; Neh 9:30; 2 Pet 1:21).<sup>11</sup> The prophets’ sustained use of Scripture<sup>12</sup> also indicates that God’s Spirit inspired fresh words by “interpreting”<sup>13</sup> not only these oracular revelations but also other written canonical revelation through a process of exegesis, as the prophets “sought out and inquired” about the Messiah’s “person and time” (1 Pet 1:10–11). Zephaniah draws on much earlier Scripture,<sup>14</sup> but his book gives no other clues as to the means God used to convey his “word” to the prophet.

Two other significant features include genealogy and the temporal context of the original revelation. Through the repetition of the construct chain “the son of X” ([x]-בֶּן), the superscription names Zephaniah’s father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather. While other prophetic books open with similar constructions (Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Zech 1:1), only Zephaniah includes a five-member genealogy. The superscription also uses genealogy to connect

6. Sweeney, *Isaiah* 1–39, 539–40.

7. Sweeney, *Isaiah* 1–39, 546; also called the “word-event formula” (Block, *Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, 32). What follows is a sampling of instances in the Law, Prophets, and Writings of “YHWH’s word” (דְּבַר־יְהוָה) plus a form of the verb “to be” (הָיָה) plus the preposition “to” (אֵלַי): *Law*: Gen 15:1, 4; *Prophets*: 1 Sam 15:10; 2 Sam 7:4; 1 Kgs 6:11; 2 Kgs 20:4; Jer 1:2; Ezek 1:3; Isa 38:4; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; 3:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 2:10, 20; Zech 1:1; Mal 2:1; *Writings*: Dan 9:2; 2 Chr 11:2.

8. Wolff, *Hosea*, 4; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 46.

9. Berlin adds, “The syntax (with a noun, ‘the word of the Lord,’ at the head of the clause) does not seem to emphasize the process of communication to the prophet as much as to

specify ownership of the oracle to follow” (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 64). Three texts specify the ultimate addressee as the object of the preposition אֵלַי and not the prophetic vehicle or messenger of the “word” (1 Kgs 16:7; Zech 4:6; Mal 2:1).

10. Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 908.

11. See also 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 1 Kgs 22:24; Mic 3:8; Joel 3:1–2[2:28–29]; Ezek 11:5; Acts 1:16.

12. See, for example, Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

13. See the use of the verb συγκρίνω (“to draw a conclusion, interpret”) in 1 Cor 2:13 and the noun ἐπίλυσις (“explanation, interpretation”) in 2 Pet 1:20.

14. See Zephaniah’s Use of Scripture in the introduction.



King Josiah to his father Amon's dark days (2 Kgs 21:19–26), which stresses the need for Zephaniah's message. The temporal phrase “in the days of” (בַּיָּמִי) linked with the name of the reigning king signals the time of the original prophecy. Similar historical signals are common in preexilic books (cf. Isa 1:1; Jer 1:2; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1) and probably fix the prophecy's original temporal setting before Jerusalem's downfall and characterize the whole as a merciful message of divine warning.

## Explanation of the Text

### 1. The Nature and Source (1:1)

Like many prophetic writings (e.g., Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1; Mal 1:1), the book of Zephaniah opens with a title that characterizes the divine origin and authority of the book as a whole: “YHWH's word” (דְּבַר־יְהוָה). YHWH is Israel's covenant Lord (Exod 3:14–15; 6:6–8; 34:6–7), but because he also made the universe, he holds claim not only to Israel but also to everything (Exod 20:11; Deut 10:14; Neh 9:6). In Zephaniah, the uncaused One speaks a comprehensible “word” that contains words. Just as the Bible connects law with the priest and counsel with the sage, so it associates God's “word” with the prophet (Jer 18:18), which he receives as an ambassador of the divine council (23:18; Amos 3:7) for his audience (Jer 23:22, 28; cf. Deut 18:20–22).

After the superscription, Zephaniah declares words of reproof, direction, caution, and hope, but God is the source of every letter and thus gives the revelation canonical authority. The prophet's message flows from the great King's unified will; failing to heed this message makes one a spiritual traitor. Fulfilled prophecy, such as Babylon destroying Jerusalem in 586 BC (e.g., Zeph 1:10–13), initially

demonstrated that Zephaniah's words were God's “word” (Deut 18:22). Such events validated Zephaniah as one of YHWH's prophets, led others to recognize the book of Zephaniah's divine authority, and emphasized the certainty of the prophet's future predictions.<sup>15</sup>

### 2. The Messenger (1:1)

God's mouthpiece for his message is named “Zephaniah” (צְפַנְיָה, “YHWH has hidden”), a figure known in Scripture only from this book.<sup>16</sup> The superscription does not specify his vocation (cf. Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3; Amos 1:1), designate him as a “prophet” (נָבִיא; cf. Hab 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1), or identify his place of origin (cf. Jer 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1; Nah 1:1). However, the larger context demonstrates that Zephaniah is one of YHWH's prophets (i.e., a covenant-mouthpiece; cf. 2 Kgs 17:13; Zech 7:11–12).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, his association with “Josiah . . . Judah's king” (ca. 640–609 BC) clarifies that he prophesied to the southern kingdom after the northern kingdom's fall (ca. 723 BC) and just before Babylon invaded and destroyed Jerusalem (605, 597, 586 BC). The Babylonian Talmud (b. Meg. 15a) asserts that Zephaniah was

15. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Book*, 8–9; Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, 32–37.

16. See Zephaniah's Title and Authorship in the introduction and Berridge, “Zephaniah (Person),” *ABD* 6:1075.

17. Cf. 2 Chr 36:15; Jer 23:21–22; Hos 12:9–10; Zech 7:11–12; Mal 3:1.



from Jerusalem and that his father, Cush, was a prophet.

Zephaniah's five-member genealogy<sup>18</sup> draws attention to the earliest member, Hezekiah, who is likely the godly reformer and thirteenth king of Judah who reigned from 729–686 BC (see 2 Kgs 18–20; Isa 36–39).<sup>19</sup> Some question this connection because the text does not name Hezekiah as “king,” but this is probably because “Josiah” was already reigning. Furthermore, if the author referred to a different “Hezekiah,” why would he include him in the genealogy at all and why does he not explicitly distinguish him from King Hezekiah? Finally, four generations could pass between Hezekiah (age twenty-five in 729, 2 Kgs 18:1) and Zephaniah (likely between twenty and thirty around 622 BC) given the early ages of fathers in Judah's royal house: Amon at age sixteen (2 Kgs 21:19; 22:1), Josiah at age fourteen (22:1; 23:36), and Jehoiakim at age eighteen (24:8). Even if we assume each man was twenty-five years old when he fathered his son, Zephaniah would be thirty-two in 622 BC.<sup>20</sup> It is chronologically probable, therefore, that the Hezekiah in the book's heading is the Judean king.

Such a connection with Hezekiah, the royal reformer, places the prophet's own role as spiritual and social reformer in context, perhaps even justifying his ministry.<sup>21</sup> The link with the royal family would also explain Zephaniah's awareness of both the royal court (1:8; 3:3–4) and the international scene (2:4–15) and establish his Judean royal heritage. Specifically, it highlights how God, in alignment with his Davidic kingdom promises (2 Sam 7:12–16), had preserved a faithful remnant in the Davidic line, even amid an age of spiritual darkness. The inclusion of God's name in three of Zephaniah's forefathers likely accents this generational faith: Gedaliah (“Yah[weh] is great”), Amariah (“Yah[weh] has spoken”), and Hezekiah (“Yah[weh] is my strength” or “Yah[weh] has strengthened me”).

The only name of the five generations that is not theophoric (i.e., bearing God's name) is “Cushi” (כּוּשִׁי), Zephaniah's father, who may be identified with the great-grandfather of Jehudi (Jer 36:14), who served as a royal official during the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 BC). The name appears related to the ethnic title “Cushite” (כּוּשִׁי) and the

18. Outside superscriptions to prophetic books, see 2 Chr 20:14 for a five-member genealogy; Jer 36:14 for four; Zech 1:1 for three; see also Tob. 1:1 for seven; and Bar 1:1 for six. For non-prophets, see Num 27:1 (//Josh 17:3); 1 Sam 1:1; 9:1.

19. For arguments that “Hezekiah” in Zeph 1:1 is indeed the godly reformer and thirteenth king of Judah who reigned from 729–686 BC (2 Kgs 18–20; Isa 36–39), see, e.g., J. M. P. Smith, “Book of Zephaniah,” 182–83; Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 898; David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 27 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 91; Robertson, *Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 253; Renz, *Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 455–57. Both Berlin and Sweeney review the question but make no conclusions (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 65–66; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 48). Roberts, Ben Zvi, and Shepherd question the plausibility (Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 166; Ben Zvi, *Book of Zephaniah*, 47; Shepherd, *Commentary on the Book of the Twelve*, 353). Shepherd asserts that the extended genealogy is there only to distinguish the prophet from others bearing his name, but this insufficiently accounts for the fact

that Zephaniah is the only prophet to include a five-member genealogy. While Zephaniah's spelling of “Hezekiah” (חֶזְקִיָּהּ) is used of figures other than the king (see 1 Chr 3:23; Neh 7:21; 10:18[17]), and while his spelling is not identical to the spelling of the king's name in other prophetic superscriptions (חֶזְקִיָּהּ in Isa 1:1; cf. 2 Kgs 20:10; Jer 15:4; חֶזְקִיָּהּ in Hos 1:1; Mic 1:1), it is a common spelling of the king's name elsewhere (e.g., 2 Kgs 18:1, 10, 13–16), along with חֶזְקִיָּהּ (e.g., 16:20; 18:9, 17, 19, 22, 29–32, 37), which always refers to the king except in 2 Chr 28:12.

20. For example, if Hezekiah fathered Amariah in 729, and he fathered Gedaliah in 704, and he fathered Cush in 679, and he fathered Zephaniah in 654, Zephaniah could have been thirty-two in 622 BC. Manasseh fathering Amon at age forty-five (21:1, 19) explains why Josiah is but three generations from Hezekiah. Cf. J. M. P. Smith, “Book of Zephaniah,” 183; Gene Rice, “The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” *JRT* 36 (1979): 21–22; Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 68–69; contrast R. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, 125.

21. Cf. Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 65.



geographical designation “Cush” (כּוּשׁ), which stand prominently in the book’s respective declarations of punishment and restoration (Zeph 2:12; 3:10).<sup>22</sup> Cush was the center of black Africa in the region of modern Sudan (cf. Jer 13:23) and one of the most southern and western kingdoms of the OT age (see Esth 1:1).<sup>23</sup> Because the mention of the “Cushites” (Zeph 2:12) and “Cush” (3:10) are both distinctive in the flow of Zephaniah’s oracle, the author is likely anticipating the book’s international restoration theme by including “Cushi” in the superscription (see esp. Zeph 2:9, 11; 3:9–10; cf. 2:12).

We know that a colony of Cushite mercenaries was located in Gerar of the northern Negeb between the tenth and eighth centuries BC (see 1 Chr 4:39–41; 2 Chr 12:3; 14:9–15; 21:16).<sup>24</sup> We also know that Jerusalem’s leaders worked with Cushites (2 Sam 18:21; Jer 38:7; 39:16)<sup>25</sup> and that Judah made political alliances with the nation of Cush, including one in the period prior to the birth of Zephaniah’s father (Isa 18:1–2; 20:5–6; 37:9//2 Kgs 19:9).<sup>26</sup> Zephaniah, therefore, was likely biracial, bearing both Judean royal and Cushite ancestry (potentially via Cushi’s mother, Gedaliah’s wife).<sup>27</sup>

22. Gene Rice writes of the name “Cushi”: “As in the case of Gadi, King Menahem’s father (2 Kgs 15:14), Hachmonie (1 Chr 27:32; cf. Job 32:2,6; Jer 25:32), it is a gentilic that has become a proper name. Just as Buzi transparently designates a man of Buz, or a Buzite, so Cushi inevitably suggests a man of Cush, or a Cushite” (Rice, “African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” 22). Rather than simply meaning “Cushite,” “Cushi” could also endearingly mean something like “my black one” or “my piece of Cush,” thus expressing his parents’ delight in this part of their son’s ethnic heritage.

23. See Robert Houston Smith, “Ethiopia (Place),” *ABD* 2:665–67; Donald B. Redford, “Kush (Place),” *ABD* 4:109–11; J. Daniel Hays, “The Cushites: A Black Nation in Ancient History,” *BSac* 153 (1996): 270–80; cf. J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, NSBT 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 87–103. Properly speaking, it is only in the Hellenistic period that the title “Ethiopia” was associated with ancient Cush; more properly, Cush, known from Egyptian material as “Nubia,” was the most significant black African nation and was centered south of Egypt in modern Sudan (Roger W. Anderson Jr., “Zephaniah Ben Cushi and Cush of Benjamin: Traces of Cushite Presence in Syria-Palestine,” in *The Pitcher Is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström*, ed. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy, JSOTSup 190 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995], 60).

24. See W. F. Albright, “Egypt and the Early History of the Negeb,” *JPOS* 4 (1924): 146–48. For alternative views regarding the identification of these groups, see Robert D. Haak, “Cush’ in Zephaniah,” in *The Pitcher Is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström*, ed. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy, JSOTSup 190 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 238–51.

25. Cf. Ps 7:1; Jer 36:14, 21, 23. See Gene Rice, “Two Black Contemporaries of Jeremiah,” *JRT* 32 (1975): 101–8. In contrast to Berlin (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 67), I see no reason why “Cush, the Benjamite” in Ps 7:1 could not be both a personal name given by his father and *also* a signal of a biracial heritage.

26. Rice, “African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” 25–27. Cf. Isa 30:1–7; 31:1–3 (where “Egypt” likely refers to the Twenty-fifth [Cushite] Egyptian Dynasty); Ezek 29:16; 30:5. There are two other potentially significant connections between ancient Cush and Israel’s leadership. First, Moses married a “Cushite” woman (כּוּשִׁיָּתָא; Num 12:1) (see David Tuesday Adamo, “The African Wife of Moses: An Examination of Numbers 12:1–9,” *African Theological Journal* 18.3 (1989): 230–37; J. Daniel Hays, “A Biblical Perspective on Interracial Marriage,” *CTR* 6.2 (2009): 12–19). For the alternative view that the text in Numbers is more properly read “Cushanite” (כּוּשִׁיָּתָא), which would allow the wife mentioned in Num 12:1 to actually be Zipporah the “Midianite” (Exod 2:15–22; cf. Hab 3:7), see W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 205n49; Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 98; Smith, “Ethiopia (Place),” *ABD* 2:666. Second, the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon to discern his wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chr 9:1a), and the OT associates Cush with both Seba and Sheba (Gen 10:7; 1 Chr 1:9; cf. Ps 72:10). Jesus referred to her as “the queen of the South” (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31), Josephus called her the “Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia” (*A.J.* 8.165–75), and Ethiopia’s national saga titled *Kebrä Nagast* (“Glory of the Kings”) claims her as their former queen and asserts that her visit to Solomon resulted in her adopting his religion and even having a son by him. Most scholars today place Sheba in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, and its placement just across from ancient Cush’s known center raises the possibility that the Cushite kingdom stretched across the Red Sea into this region. See Stephen D. Ricks, “Sheba, Queen of,” *ABD* 5:1170–71.

27. So Rice, “African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” 21–31. cf. Anderson Jr., “Zephaniah Ben Cushi and Cush of Benjamin,” 45–70; Robert A. Bennett, “The Book of Zephaniah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 659, 670–72;



Joseph Blenkinsopp agrees that “Cushi” is a gentile proper name, but he proposes that the superscription’s genealogy mentions King Hezekiah (1) to establish Zephaniah’s necessary Jewish heritage as a YHWH prophet (see Deut 18:15, 18) and (2) to curb any potential concerns that “Cushi” linked Zephaniah with ancient Cush (see Amos 9:7).<sup>28</sup> Deuteronomy 23:7–8 insist that only third-generation Egyptians could enter YHWH’s assembly, and Scripture commonly ties Egypt and Cush together. As such, in contrast to Blenkinsopp, the extended genealogy back to King Hezekiah may have served to substantiate Zephaniah’s ministry as a YHWH-prophet even though his father was a Cushite.<sup>29</sup> Regardless, there seems no good reason why the prophet could not bear both Judean royal blood and a Cushite lineage, and the way the rest of the book highlights Cush supports this link in 1:1.

### 3. The Historical Context (1:1)

Zephaniah ministered in the days of “Josiah . . . Judah’s king,” who was Hezekiah’s great-

grandson. Josiah was Judah’s last good king (2 Kgs 23:25), who assumed the throne at age eight after the murder of his wicked father Amon (642–640 BC). During his three-decade reign (640–609 BC), Josiah accomplished religious reform by reestablishing YHWH worship at the Jerusalem temple (2 Kgs 22:1–23:30; cf. 2 Chr 34:3–35:19). It is not clear at what point in Josiah’s reign that Zephaniah prophesied. However, numerous factors suggest Zephaniah ministered before Josiah’s reform movement had fully begun but after he initially cleansed the land of religious defilement in 628 BC and found the Torah Scroll in 622 BC (see Zephaniah’s Date and Occasion in the introduction). We know that Josiah explicitly targeted many of the problems Zephaniah confronted (e.g., the eradication of practices and persons associated with “Baal” worship, Zeph 1:4–5 with 2 Kgs 23:4–5, 10, 24).<sup>30</sup> Hence, following the horrific reigns of Manasseh (696–642 BC) and Amon (642–640 BC) (see 2 Kgs 21), Zephaniah probably assisted Josiah’s reformation.

## Canonical and Theological Significance

### *Consider Some Implications of the Book of Zephaniah Being “YHWH’s Word”*

Since the book of Zephaniah comes from God, we must take it seriously and surrender to its authority. The book distinguishes itself from the utterances of any other deity or mere human since it is “YHWH’s word.” The Judeans preserved the book as Scripture because they recognized that Jerusalem’s 586 BC destruction validated the prophet’s message (Deut 18:21–22). Since then, the punishment and restoration

Hays, “The Cushites,” 396–409. Anderson provides the most detailed engagement with the primary and secondary sources, but he also views the biblical data as less important than the Egyptian sources for shaping a proper understanding of a Cushite presence within the Levant in the days of Zephaniah.

28. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 113, 263n1.

29. Cf. J. Heller, “Zephanjas Ahnenreihe: Eine Redaktionsgeschichtliche Bemerkung Zu Zeph. I.1,” *VT* 21 (1971): 102–4.

30. Cf. 2 Kgs 21:3, 5–6, 21.



that God wrought through Christ's death and resurrection and the church's growth inaugurated the ultimate day of YHWH and only reinforced the book's canonicity. Zephaniah was among those who "spoke from God while being carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). Though the original audience of the prophet was Judah in the days of Josiah, since his words are in the canon of Scripture, his primary audience is those in every age who now hear the words in this context instructing them in a way that nurtures endurance and encouragement leading to hope (Rom 15:4; cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12).

Zephaniah is part of the Christian Scriptures that Jesus designated as God's "word" (Mark 7:13; 12:36), viewed as authoritative (Matt 4:3–4, 7, 10; 23:1–3), and called people to embrace in order to avoid doctrinal error and hell (Mark 12:24; Luke 16:28–31; 24:25; John 5:46–47). As the "word" of YHWH, the book is "true" (1 Kgs 17:24; Ps 119:160), "upright" (Ps 33:4), a guide (Ps 119:105), fixed and lasting (Ps 119:89; Isa 40:8), and powerful (Ps 147:18; 148:8; Heb 1:3). Zephaniah is one of "all the prophets" through whom God foretold the good news of Christ (Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43).<sup>31</sup> These predictions "cannot be nullified" (John 10:35) and will be completely fulfilled (Matt 5:17–18; Luke 24:44; Acts 13:32–33). Because we can only enjoy life by obeying God's word (Matt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3; 32:47) and by encountering Jesus (John 6:35; 11:25), Zephaniah's message is imperative for the church. The question for us, therefore, is, "Will we listen?" Will we glorify God by heeding the Savior's exhortation to pursue him together in hope both to avoid punishment and to enjoy salvation?

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### *Celebrate How God Uses and Preserves a Remnant Without Partiality*

Here we rejoice in two truths. First, Zeph 1:1 orients sinners to treasure God as one who redeems and calls people without discrimination (Deut 10:17–18; Acts 10:34–35). Zephaniah was likely biracial, being a descendant of the black African Cushites and Judah's Jewish royal line. Therefore, God chose to write some of his Bible through a man with African-Israelite descent in anticipation of his Babel-reversing restoration blessings (Zeph 3:9–10; cf. Gen 11:7–9) that would culminate in an international bride of worshipers (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9–10; cf. Gen 12:3; 22:18). As a Caucasian American growing up after the Holocaust of World War II with children adopted from Africa and in a land that has often practiced racial prejudice and violence against African Americans, I celebrate God's beautiful purpose in choosing Zephaniah. Furthermore, within Zephaniah's book, YHWH willingly redeems any who call on his name. YHWH could have brought immediate punishment on the rebels from Judah and the world. Instead, he sent a prophet to motivate sinful people to repent by recalling the covenant curses and blessings. Indeed, our God is

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31. See also Luke 24:27, 46–47.



“compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6).

Second, Zeph 1:1 displays YHWH's commitment to perpetuate hope in the Davidic kingdom promises. Zephaniah's link to Judah's King Hezekiah places the prophet in the line of David to whom YHWH promised an everlasting throne (2 Sam 7:16). Zephaniah's own name and the names of three of his forefathers include in them an abbreviated form of the name YHWH. These names likely bear witness to a multigenerational trust in God as provider, protector, and ultimate fulfiller of his kingdom promises for Israel and all nations (Gen 12:3; Zeph 3:10). Despite Manasseh and Amon's sinister reigns (see 2 Kgs 21:1–26; cf. Jer 7:31), some fathers and mothers perpetuated hope in YHWH's promises. Like Moses, they regarded “the reproach for the sake of Christ as greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb 11:26). They also heeded God's call to pass on a passion for YHWH's supremacy to the next generation (Deut 6:7, 20–25; cf. Judg 2:10; Ps 78:4–8). Today we live in the age of fulfillment, and Jesus continues to capture the affections of men and women, boys and girls from every tongue, tribe, and people group.