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## Zephaniah, Book of

Zephaniah prophesied in Judah to support King Josiah's reforms, and he likely did so soon after the discovery of the Deuteronomic book of the law (2 Kings 22–23) but before much spiritual and societal change was evident (ca. 622 BC) (Robertson, 33, 254–56). He warns of Yahweh's impending day of wrath and urges the remnant in Judah and beyond to seek the Lord together and to wait upon him to avoid punishment and to enjoy satisfying salvation. The prophet envisions Yahweh's fiery fury overcoming all unrepentant sinners in the world, yet he also foresees a multiethnic, transformed community of worshipers who would celebrate the presence of God in Zion amid a new creation and whom the Lord would take pleasure in and deliver from all their oppressors.

### Composition, Structure, and Message

The superscription identifies the prophecy as “the word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah . . . in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah” (Zeph. 1:1 ESV). Nothing in the book suggests anyone other than Zephaniah penned his message. The book witnesses an antiphonal-like character switching between the voices of Yahweh and his prophet (see Wendland and Clark). Nevertheless, the lack of introductory speech formulas and the sustained cohesion and coherence of the whole show that the frequent shift in person neither governs the flow of the argument (so Sweeney, “Reassessment” and *Zephaniah*; Floyd; contra House) nor distinguishes levels of authority.

Following the superscription in 1:1, Yahweh invites all who will listen to be saved through surrender. A single oracle runs from 1:2–3:20b and includes two parts: The *setting* of the Savior's invitation occurs in 1:2–18, and here the prophet calls those in Judah and beyond to revere the Lord in light of his coming day of punishment. The reality of coming punishment provides the context for the call (1:2–6), and then the makeup of the call includes a further unpacking of the fury Yahweh will pour out on both Jerusalem (1:7–13) and the world at large (1:14–18). The main body or *substance* of the book then comes in 2:1–3:20b, as the prophet charges the people to patiently pursue God together. Stage one of this summons initially urges those in Judah and beyond to gather together (2:1–2) and then commands those who have heeded to seek the Lord in righteousness and humility (2:3). A foundational reason why they must pursue Yahweh in this way relates to the lamentable state and fate (“woe”) of the rebels from both the foreign nations (2:4–15) and Jerusalem (3:1–7). God intends to bring global destruction that will implode on Jerusalem itself. Building on this reasoning, stage two of the Savior's invitation directs the remnant to wait on the Lord in order to enjoy satisfying salvation (3:8–20b). The charge to wait stands as an inference from what precedes

(“therefore,” 3:8) and is grounded in the certainty that Yahweh will both put an end to all his enemies (3:8) and preserve and restore a single yet global community of worshipers, reversing the effects of the tower of Babel (3:9–10). Motivating the call to wait are promises that “on that day” the Lord will not put Jerusalem to shame (3:11–13) but will instead save completely (3:16–20b)—realities that should result in fearless joy among the saved (3:14–15). The book closes in 3:20c where it began in 1:1—by affirming the whole as God's word.

### Table 1. Outline of Zephaniah

- I. The *superscription* of the Savior's invitation to satisfying salvation (1:1)
- II. The *setting* of the Savior's invitation to satisfying salvation: a call to revere God in light of the coming day of the Lord (1:2–18)
  - A. The context for the call to revere God: coming punishment (1:2–6)
  - B. The makeup of the call to revere God (1:7–18)
- III. The *substance* of the Savior's invitation to satisfying salvation: charges to patiently pursue the Lord together (2:1–3:20b)
  - A. Stage 1: the need to seek the Lord together in order to avoid punishment (2:1–3:7)
  - B. Stage 2: the need to wait on the Lord in order to enjoy satisfying salvation (3:8–20b)
- IV. The *subscriptio*n of the Savior's invitation to satisfaction (3:20c)

### The Hermeneutics of Zephaniah

Zephaniah views the day of the Lord as a climactic de-creation and re-creation that will both echo and reverse all negative effects of the primeval curses associated with the garden of Eden, the flood, and the tower of Babel. He also portrays the day of wrath as a new divine conquest by which God will put an end to rebellion and reestablish a new promised land with global scope.

**Examples of OT allusion.** Coming fires of judgment parallel the waters of judgment at the flood. Zephaniah's oracle opens with a promise of encroaching punishment that will result in Yahweh's destroying mankind on the earth. He will gather “everything from on the face of the ground” for judicial assessment: “man and beast . . . the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked” (Zeph. 1:2–3 AT). The phrase “from on the face of the ground” (1:2–3) consistently occurs in contexts of divine punishment (e.g., Gen. 4:14; Exod. 32:12; Deut. 6:15; 1 Kings 9:7; 13:34; Jer. 28:16; Amos 9:8), and the use of “ground” recalls the sphere of the original curse (Gen. 3:17–19). Zephaniah is probably linking the coming global judgment with the past

flood by which the Lord punished the whole earth (Gen. 6:7; 7:3–4, 23; 8:8) (see esp. DeRoche). Nevertheless, because Zephaniah includes “fish” (Zeph. 1:3), the scope of Yahweh’s new assessment will be even wider, for the sea creatures were never explicitly targeted in the great deluge. The prophet is not here subverting, replacing, or even qualifying God’s earlier promise to never “again strike down every living creature as I have done” (Gen. 8:21 ESV) (contra DeRoche, 105–6; Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 82). Indeed, Yahweh himself had specified, “Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood” (Gen. 9:11 ESV; cf. Isa. 54:9–10). Furthermore, the most natural reading of Zeph. 1:2–3 is that the Lord promises to “gather” all creatures but to “cut off” only mankind (cf. Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; DeRouchie, “Ingathering”).

The day of the Lord as a new conquest to claim a global promised land. The prophet alludes several times to the original conquest of Canaan, suggesting that he envisions the day of the Lord to be a greater divine conquest by which God will atone for sin and establish his kingdom on a global scale. First, in Zeph. 1:11b, the prophet declares that Jerusalem’s inhabitants would wail when Yahweh silenced “all the people of Canaan” (NIV: “merchants”). These were most likely the Philistine traders (see 2:5) who were negatively influencing Judah with both their worldly goods and perspectives (cf. Isa. 2:6–8; Hosea 12:7). In declaring that God would destroy these “Canaanites,” Zephaniah recalls the original conquest, wherein their wickedness matched by God’s choice of their land demanded their extermination (Deut. 7:1–2; 9:4–5; 20:16–17; cf. Gen. 9:25–27). Similarly, the prophet carries on his conquest motif when he mentions the “trumpet blast” of war and of God’s overpowering “unassailable cities” (Zeph. 1:15–16 AT)—all likely allusions to the Canaanite strongholds (Num. 13:28; Deut. 1:28; 3:5; 9:1) and to Israel’s subduing them (Deut. 6:10–11; Josh. 6:5, 20; cf. Neh. 9:25).

Second, the prophet depicts Jerusalem as spiritually deaf, heedless, faithless, and motionless (Zeph. 3:2; cf. 1:6, 12)—those who had lost sight of Yahweh’s greatness and had sourced their strength and affluence in the Canaanite traders. These foreigners had reshaped Judah’s worship (1:4–5), dress (1:8), and lifestyle (1:6, 9) so much that Zephaniah could tag these Judeans as “the remnant of Baal” (i.e., the chief god of the Canaanites, 1:4b ESV). And having identified with Canaan, they will receive the same punishment (Deut. 8:19–20; cf. 20:18).

After highlighting how Yahweh would seek to destroy all those in Jerusalem who were complacent (Zeph. 1:12), the prophet stresses the futility of the nation’s future by alluding to the conquest: “Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them” (1:13 ESV). Zephaniah’s descriptions and vocabulary regarding the loss of possessions and hopeless deprivation recall Mosaic covenant curses, which foretold that

one evidence of divine wrath would be sustained futility in building, planting, and other endeavors (Deut. 28:30, 39; cf. Amos 5:11; Mic. 6:15). Even more, the language identifies that God is reversing his original covenant blessings and treating Israel as Canaanites. He had pledged that Israel would enjoy “great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant” (Deut. 6:10–11; cf. Jer. 29:5–7). Now they are the ones who will experience substantive loss, as Yahweh will reestablish a new promised land for his earthly kingdom and faithful remnant.

Third, what was an original blessing of the Mosaic covenant will become a restoration blessing for “the remnant of the house of Judah” who survive the day’s tribulation unto triumph: “In the houses of Ashkelon [the remnant of the house of Judah] shall lie down at evening” (Zeph. 2:7 ESV; cf. Isa. 65:18, 21–22; Ezek. 28:26). Thus, Zephaniah recalls the original conquest to stress how the day of the Lord will both cleanse the earth of its defilements and provide a context wherein God can establish a restored, now global kingdom.

Cush, the Table of Nations, and the reversal of the tower of Babel judgment. Several features from the early chapters of Genesis appear to have conceptually and literarily guided Zephaniah’s portrayal of devastation and deliverance in 2:1–3:20b. In 2:5–3:7, Zephaniah sketches Yahweh’s object of wrath like a compass of punishment around Judah that will implode upon them—Philistia to the west, Moab and Ammon to the east, Cush and Assyria to the south and north. Adele Berlin (*Zephaniah*, 120–24; “Oracle”) helpfully argues that the prophet chose and described the particular nations in 2:5–15 based on the Table of Nations in Gen. 10, thus highlighting that their pride arose from Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). Zephaniah “made the reality of his time fit the pattern in Genesis 10 by choosing the countries from Genesis 10 that were important [Philistia, Assyria], omitting those that were obscure [e.g., Put], and adding crucial ones, lacking in Genesis 10, in terminological equivalents to those in Genesis [Moab, Ammon]” (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 121).

While Berlin fails to appreciate enough that God, showing no ethnic favoritism, promises to destroy the nation of Judah and its capital city Jerusalem (3:1–7) right alongside their neighbors (2:5–15), the prophet does hold out hope—not for the nation of Judah as a whole but for a remnant from it (2:3, 7, 9) and from the foreign nations (2:9, 11; 3:9–10). Specifically, the phrase “the remainder of my nation will inherit them [i.e., some from the foreign nations]” (2:9d AT) points to a multiethnic community arising out of the fires of Yahweh’s wrath. Furthermore, peoples from the farthest reaches of the planet will “bow down” to the Lord, some in worship and others in defeat (2:11c). Finally, by smiting Cush (2:12) God begins what will become



a universal eradication of the human pride dispersing from the tower of Babel (Gen. 10:32–11:9) (see Floyd, 210–13). The prophet declares that on the very day when Yahweh gathers the world for judgment (Zeph. 3:8), he will “change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech” and generate a community of “worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones” that will rise from “beyond the rivers of Cush” (3:9–10 ESV). The imagery of speech purification implies the overturning of judgment (Ps. 55:9) and likely alludes to a reversal of the tower of Babel episode, where a communal pride against God resulted in his confusing of “language/speech” and “dispersing” the rebels across the globe (Gen. 11:7, 9). As if following the rivers of life back to the garden of Eden for fellowship with the great King (Gen. 2:13; cf. Rev. 22:1–2), the prophet envisions that even the most distant lands upon which the Lord has poured his wrath (Zeph. 2:11–12) will become one with “those who are left in Israel” (3:13), compelled by the presence of the saving God. As many prophets anticipate (e.g., Isa. 2:2–3; Jer. 3:17; Zech. 8:23), the people of the new covenant—here described as a “daughter” of the dispersed—will include a worldwide, multiethnic community descending from the seventy families that the Lord “dispersed” in punishment at Babel after the flood (Gen. 11:8–9). Indeed, even some from Cush, Zephaniah’s own heritage (Zeph. 1:1), would gain new birth certificates declaring that they were born in Zion (Ps. 87:4; Isa. 18:7; 45:14).

**Zephaniah’s hermeneutical and theological strategy.** Three factors appear to have guided Zephaniah’s hermeneutical use of Mosaic covenant blessings and curses and of the accounts of the flood, the Table of Nations, the tower of Babel, and the conquest: (1) typology, (2) redemptive-historical reversal, and (3) event as blueprint.

**Typology.** Zephaniah likely portrays the scope of the coming day of judgment with imagery of the flood not only to draw an analogy between the two events but also to highlight the coming destruction of mankind as an indirect fulfillment of what the flood itself anticipated. Two reasons suggest that typology and not just analogy is at play: (1) Following the fall, God foretold that he would ultimately overthrow the source of all evil and reconstitute creation through a male deliverer (Gen. 3:15). Thus, we must read the pentateuchal narratives seeing every defeat of serpent-like hostility against God as an intentional foretaste of the ultimate deliverance to come. (2) Because the same inherent wickedness that sparked the need for the flood punishment (Gen. 6:5–7) continued after the deluge (8:21), the biblical author portrays the original flood account as anticipating a greater global destruction that would bring about a more lasting new creation.

A similar hermeneutical step appears evident in the use of the conquest and blessing/curse materials. Israel enjoyed the land God promised Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:8) in the Mosaic covenant period (Exod. 2:24; 6:8;

Deut. 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 30:20; 34:4), as realized in the days of Solomon (1 Kings 4:20–21). Nevertheless, hope always existed for the time when the “land” of the single nation would extend to “lands” of a multitude of nations (Gen. 17:4–6; 26:3–4), when Yahweh’s royal deliverer would perform a greater conquest of evil and bring God’s blessing to the ends of the earth (Gen. 3:15; 22:17–18; cf. 24:60; 49:8–10; Num. 24:7–9, 17–19). Zephaniah’s use of the conquest narrative indicates not only that God continues to fulfill his original covenant curses against rebellious Judah (Deut. 8:19–20; cf. 28:15–68) but also that he is working out Deuteronomy’s curses in an eschatological era against all his enemies, including unrepentant Israel/Judah (30:7). What the Canaanites were in the original conquest, all the evil ones of the world are to Yahweh. Thus, God “will bring distress on mankind . . . because they have sinned against the LORD” (Zeph. 1:17 ESV), and as he does, there is heightened hope for a worldwide purified kingdom.

**Redemptive-historical reversal.** Zephaniah sees the intrusion of the day of the Lord as inaugurating the definitive reversal of the tower of Babel and as reconstituting a people who are more concerned with his name than with their own (cf. Gen. 4:26; 11:4; Zeph. 3:9). God portrays the faithful remnant as “the daughter of my dispersed ones” (Zeph. 3:10 ESV)—that is, the offspring of those whose language Yahweh once altered and whom he scattered across the globe away from Babylon (Gen. 11:8–9). Noah’s grandson Nimrod, a Cushite, built Babel (10:8, 10), and then following Yahweh’s punishment, the Cushites established their kingdom in what the ancients considered the southernmost region on the planet—near the convergence of the Blue and the White Nile in modern-day Sudan. Zephaniah envisioned the Lord’s day of wrath as already starting with Cush (Zeph. 2:12), and he utilized a remnant from this region to represent the global restoration that God was going to accomplish (3:10). Whereas Yahweh once countered the unity of hostility by confusing the “lip/language” of the earth (Gen. 11:8–9), he now would purify the “lip/speech,” not by recreating a common language but by joining the profession and partnership, so “that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord” (Zeph. 3:9 ESV). Zephaniah’s use of redemptive-historical reversal signals that God will inaugurate the new creation that he first anticipated in Gen. 3:15 and then predicted in his promises to Abraham that he would bless all the families of the earth (e.g., 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4).

**Event as blueprint.** As Berlin identifies (*Zephaniah; “Oracle”*), the Table of Nations in Gen. 10 may have supplied a blueprint for the structure of Zeph. 2:5–15. With this, Zephaniah’s likely biracial link to the Cushites (Zeph. 1:1) may have drawn him to Gen. 10, which focuses heavily on the Hamitic line (Gen. 10:6–20), from which the Philistines, Canaanites (= Sodom and Gomorrah), Cushites, and Assyrians all arose. That the Table of

Nations precedes the account of the tower of Babel also works to the prophet's advantage, for he first addresses the scope of God's judgment (Zeph. 2:5–3:7) and then identifies the way the Lord's blessing will counter the effects of the Babel judgment and restore a lasting age where all survivors of Yahweh's day worship his name forever (3:9–20).

## Zephaniah and the NT

### ***The eschatological ingathering to punish and save.***

Using the root *'sp* (“to gather”), Zephaniah depicts Yahweh's day as a time of eschatological “ingathering”—a divine harvest that will result in his punishing the wicked (Zeph 1:2–3, 8; cf. Isa. 24:22; Jer. 8:13; Hosea 4:3, 6; Zech. 14:2) and in his delivering those seeking him (Zeph 3:8–10, 18; cf. 2:3; Isa. 11:11–12; 49:5, 12; Ezek. 11:17; Mic. 2:12; 4:6) (see DeRouchie, “Ingathering”; “Seek”). Both Jer. 3:8 and Zech. 14:2 may intentionally echo Zephaniah's materials, but Matt. 13:24–30 appears to deliberately allude to Zeph. 1:2–3 (cf. Matt. 3:12; 25:32, 46).

While comparing the kingdom of heaven to a field mixed with wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24–30), Jesus stresses how both must “grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (13:30 ESV). Later, in his explanation of the parable to the disciples, he says, “Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:40–42 ESV). Clearly parallel with Zeph. 1:2–3; 3:8, 18 is the theme of “ingathering,” which Matthew describes through the verbs *syllēgō* (“to gather by plucking or picking”) and *synagō* (“to gather up”), both of which are fine free renderings of the Hebrew *'sp* (cf. 1 Kings 10:26; Deut. 16:13) but the latter of which is found in 8HevXii gr (col. 20) at this point. The second parallel, this time with the Hebrew text of Zeph. 1:3, is the mention of the *skandala* (“stumbling blocks”; ESV: “causes of sin”) and the *anomian* (“lawless”) (Matt. 13:41). While the LXX does not render Zephaniah's phrase “the stumbling blocks with the wicked” in 1:3, Symmachus does, using the wooden *ta skandala syn [tois] asebesi* (“the stumbling blocks with the wicked”). It seems very likely that Jesus is alluding to the Hebrew text, identifying the great eschatological ingathering of which he speaks with that of Zephaniah (so too Robertson, 259–60; France, 536; Carson, 374).

### ***The inauguration of the day of the Lord in the death and resurrection of Christ and the birth of the church.***

Zephaniah 3:8–10. Several links between God's ingathering of a multiethnic group of worshipers in Zeph. 3:8–10 and the early chapters of Acts suggest that Luke saw the events of Pentecost and of God's saving work among the

nations as directly fulfilling Zephaniah's vision of Babel's reversal and of the new creation's inbreaking at the day of the Lord (Butcher; cf. Davis; Keener, 840–44; see too Jub. 10:22; T. Jud. 25:3; Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

The following are noteworthy connections: (1) Using similar vocabulary, both Joel 2:32 and Zeph. 3:9 foresee the faithful remnant calling on the name of Yahweh during his day of ingathering. While Peter cites Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:17–21, the Greek version of Zeph. 3:9 renders the term for “speech/lip” with *glōssa* (“tongue”), a term important to both the tower of Babel episode (Gen. 11:7; cf. 10:5) and the Pentecost narrative (Acts 2:3–4, 11, 26; cf. 10:46; 19:6) but not found in Joel. The “calling on Yahweh's name” in Zeph. 3:9 counters the quest for a name in Gen. 11:4 and links with Acts 2:21. (2) With Joel 2:31 and Acts 2:20, Zeph. 3:9 also employs the verb *metastrophō* (“to turn, cause a change in state or condition”) with respect to God's new-creation work, though with reference to the speech change and not the altering of the atmosphere and heavenly bodies. (3) Pentecost is a harvest feast of ingathering, which conceptually aligns with the ingathering motif in Zephaniah. (4) The image of serving the Lord *in unity* (Zeph. 3:9) may have influenced Luke to include the comment in Acts 2:42–47 regarding the early saints' corporate surrender and worship. (5) For Zephaniah, Yahweh's future transforming of speech (Zeph. 3:9) will happen in direct association (“then”) with his ingathering of the “nations” for judicial assessment (3:8; cf. Isa. 66:5). As for Luke, he stresses that the Jews present in Jerusalem at Pentecost who heard the gospel in their own tongues came “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), and it is this reality that will help fulfill Jesus's global commission to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). (6) Strikingly absent from the list of nations in Acts 2:9–11 is “Ethiopia,” the Hellenistic title for OT “Cush.” I propose the reason Luke did not identify any Jews from this region is because he wanted to wait until later to highlight that the story of God's saving the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) signals the Lord's initially fulfilling Zephaniah's prediction that worshipers from the region of Cush would lead the ingathering of the nations to Yahweh at the end of the age (Zeph. 3:9–10).

One implication of Luke's apparent use of Zephaniah is that he must have envisioned Christ's wrath-bearing, substitutionary work on the cross as fulfilling in part Zephaniah's vision of God's sacrificial fires of punishment on his day of fury (Zeph. 1:7, 18; 3:8; for more, see DeRouchie, “Zephaniah,” 565–68). Supporting this was Luke's conviction that the astronomical manifestations were to happen “before the day of the Lord comes” (Acts 2:20 ESV; cf. Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44; cf. Ortlund and Beale), whereas in Joel's prophecy the Spirit's outpouring flows out of Yahweh's visitation (see “afterward” in Joel 2:28). Further support is found in the allusion to Zeph. 3:14–15 in John 12:13, 15.

Zephaniah 3:14–16. Interpreters commonly recognize that John cites Ps. 118:25–26 and Zech. 9:9 in his account of Jesus's triumphal entry: "So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the *King of Israel!*' And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, '*Fear not, daughter of Zion*'; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt" (John 12:13–15 ESV). What some miss, however, is that the psalm does not include the phrase "King of Israel" and that Zechariah's opening charge is actually "rejoice" rather than "fear not." Christopher Tachick argues strongly that these differences identify that John is also alluding to Zeph. 3:14–16, which is the only place in the OT where we find the grouping "King of Israel," "Fear not," and "daughter of Zion." Within Zephaniah, this exhortation intrudes into his depiction of Yahweh's cleansing and renewal of his creation that he will accomplish "on that day" of his judgment (3:11, 16).

So how does John use Zephaniah both hermeneutically and theologically? As Tachick identifies (155–208), John's primary hermeneutical purpose was to identify Jesus's triumph through tribulation as directly fulfilling the prophet's prediction of God's end-time reign. In Christ, Zephaniah's eschatological day of the Lord has dawned. Theologically, John's use of Zephaniah closely associates Yahweh with King Jesus, and through his narrative he incorporates Zephaniah's motifs of both the warrior-king (John 12:13, 31) and gentile ingathering (12:19–20, 32). The very structure of Zeph. 3:8–20b may have informed John's narrative account.

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**Zion** *See* Jerusalem