

REVERING GOD: PUNISHMENT ON THE DAY OF THE LORD (ZEPH 1:2–18)

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SOME SCHOLARS REGARD the fifty-three-verse book of Zephaniah as the climax of the Minor Prophets.¹ Of Zephaniah, Luther declared, “Among the minor prophets, he makes the clearest prophecies about the kingdom of Christ.”² Far before Luther, the apostle Peter said, “God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets . . . that his Christ would suffer” (Acts 3:18) and that “all the prophets . . . proclaimed these days” of the church (v. 24).³ Zephaniah was one of these prophets, and his overarching message was this: Seek the Lord together to avoid punishment and wait for the Lord to enjoy salvation. This book portrays the day of the Lord in a furious fire that both consumes God’s enemies and purifies a multiethnic community of worshipers for a transformed Zion. Yahweh’s day both punishes and renews.

ZEPHANIAH’S HEADING (ZEPH 1:1)

As an introduction to this book, the superscription declares: “The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of

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¹ Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, JSOTSup 97 (Almond Press, 1990), 147–51.

² Martin Luther, “Lectures on Zephaniah,” in *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I: Hosea–Malachi*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Richard J. Dinda, vol. 18 of *Luther’s Works* (Concordia, 1975), 319.

³ Unless otherwise noted, English quotations of Scripture are from the ESV.

Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah” (1:1). We first learn of the prophecy’s nature—a word, a living and authoritative word because its source is Yahweh. In this book Yahweh is King over all (3:15), and he stands as a mighty Warrior (1:14; 3:17) who commands armies (2:9), who will famish all the earth’s gods (2:11), and whose just jealousy for the world’s allegiance blazes like fire and will consume all the earth (1:18; 3:8).

Next, we are told the prophecy’s messenger is Zephaniah, whose five-person genealogy shows that he has royal lineage because his great-great-grandfather was the reformer King Hezekiah. Furthermore, because his father was Cushi, Zephaniah was likely biracial. Cush was ancient Black Africa, and Zephaniah’s grandmother was likely African, married into the Jewish royal line, and named her son “My Blacky,” celebrating her ethnic heritage. Support for this view comes in the fact that Zephaniah shows a unique interest in Cush, making it the only region he uses as an example of the multiethnic, global restoration at the end of the age (3:9–10). As a biracial prophet, Zephaniah displayed in his life the hope of a diversified people of God in fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to Abraham regarding blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3; 22:18).

Finally, the prophecy’s historical backdrop is the reign of King Josiah of Judah, whom Yahweh redeemed from the darkness of his father Amon’s reign and who instituted a spiritual reform that Zephaniah’s preaching served to promote. I place Zephaniah’s proclamation in the fall of 622 BC after the Torah scroll was discovered but before Josiah’s reform movements had completely taken hold.⁴

⁴ Several factors support associating Zephaniah’s oracle with the fall Feast of Ingathering in 622 BC. First, Zephaniah regularly alludes to Deuteronomy, suggesting he knew of the Deuteronomic core. See Jason S. DeRouchie, “Zephaniah, Book of,” in *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, Benjamin L. Gladd, and Andrew David Naselli (Baker Academic, 2023), 886–90; and Jason S. DeRouchie, “Zephaniah’s Use of Scripture,” in *Zephaniah*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament 32 (Zondervan, forthcoming); cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1990), 254–55; and Clint Sheehan, “Kingdom Through Covenant: The Structure and Theology of Zephaniah,” *Baptist Review of Theology / La Revue Baptiste de Theologie* 6.2 (1996): 8–10. However, the Torah scroll began to directly influence Josiah’s reign only after Hilkiah the high priest found it in the temple. This likely happened in early 622 BC, for it led King Josiah in his eighteenth year to institute the Passover (2 Kgs 23:21–23), which always occurs in spring (March or April) in the religious calendar’s first month—Abib 14 or 15 (Deut 16:2–8). Second, Zephaniah’s message features issues consonant with Josiah’s 622 BC reform (2 Kgs 23:4–25): confronting religious syncretism, indifference, covenantal disloyalty, and political and social oppression (Zeph 1:4–13; 3:1–4, 7) and calling people to pray, patiently trust, and seek God, right order, and humility (e.g., 1:6; 2:3; 3:2, 8). Third, the book never mentions child sacrifice, suggesting Josiah’s re-

THE CONTEXT OF THE CALL TO REVERE GOD (ZEPH 1:2–6)

Zephaniah 1:2–18 provides the setting for the book’s main exhortations by calling readers to revere Yahweh in view of the nearness and nature of his impending wrath on Judah and the world. Verses 2–6 provide the context for the call to revere Yahweh, and verses 7–18 provide the content of the call.

We start in verses 2–3:

“I will surely gather [ESV = “sweep away”] everything
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
“I will gather man and beast;
I will gather the birds of the heavens
and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.⁵

You may rightly hear echoes of the flood judgment in these verses (Gen 6:7). You may also notice how Yahweh’s judicial assessment moves from “man . . . beast . . . birds . . . fish” (Zeph 1:3), which is the reverse order of how God created them (Gen 1:20–28). Thus, Zephaniah paints the coming judgment as a de-creation back to-

form had already curbed this evil from Manasseh’s and Amon’s reigns (2 Kgs 21:6, 21; cf. 24:3–4; Jer 7:31). Fourth, the book’s language of “ingathering” suggests that Zephaniah preached during the fall’s Feast of Ingathering (September–October). This final harvest celebration of the year ran from the religious calendar’s 15–21 of the seventh month, Ethanim/Tishri. For more on this possibility, see J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, OTL (Westminster John Knox, 1991), 169; and Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2003), 62. Fifth, a holdout of Baal worship including “illegitimate priests” remained in Jerusalem (Zeph 1:4), which means Josiah’s full reformation was not yet complete (2 Kgs 23:5).

⁵ Interpreters often read the repeated verb יִקְטֹל in Zephaniah 1:2–3b as the *hiphil* *yiqtol* first common singular of יָקַח (“to bring to an end”), which when preceded by יִקְטֹל, the *qal* infinitive absolute of יָקַח, would have to result in a combined meaning like “sweep away” (NRSV, WEB, ESV, NIV, CSB), “consume” (KJV, ASV, NKJV), “remove” (NASB), “destroy” (NET), or “take away” (BEB). However, normal Hebrew grammar does not allow for such a change in a verbal root (Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. [Clarendon, 1910], 339–47). It seems more likely that Zephaniah is following the common pattern of strengthening the verbal sense of the *yiqtol* verb by preceding it with an infinitive absolute of the same root (Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 342–43; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Eisenbrauns, 1990], 584; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 [Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006], 391–96; Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2nd ed. [Bloomsbury, 2017], 177). For more on this rendering, “I will surely gather,” see Jason S. DeRouchie, “YHWH’s Future Ingathering in Zephaniah 1:2: Interpreting יִקְטֹל יִקְטֹל,” *HS* 59 (2018): 173–91.

ward chaos. The “rubble” that God will destroy with the “wicked” are likely idols (cf. Ezek 7:19–20).

But lest those in Judah think they may escape, Yahweh moves from global catastrophe to local destruction in Zephaniah 1:4–6. “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 Baal” (v. 4). Yahweh’s earthly residence was Jerusalem. At the location of his temple-palace dwelt a holdout of those worshipping Baal, the Canaanites’ false storm and fertility deity. While English translations vary, the Hebrew of verses 4–6 suggests “the remnant of Baal” included four overlapping subgroups:⁶

1. “The idolatrous priests along with the priests” (1:4c)—that is, illegitimate, non-Levitical clergy who led in worshipping idols (1 Kgs 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and served alongside legitimate “priests” who failed to teach God’s law, guard knowledge, and preserve what was holy (Lev 10:10–11; cf. Zeph 3:4).
2. “Those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens” (1:5a)—the star worshipers (2 Kgs 17:16–18; 21:3, 5, 12; Jer 19:13).
3. “Those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by” their king [ESV = “Milcom”; NIV = “Molek”]—those paying lip service to Yahweh (i.e., swearing *to*) but giving highest allegiance to another god (i.e., swearing *by*) (Zeph 1:5b).⁷

⁶ In Zephaniah 1:4–6 Yahweh promises to “cut off” only one object—“the remnant of the Baal,” which is signaled by the definite direct object marker (ׇל) in verse 4b. In the series of four more object markers that follow, the first is asyndetic, and then this is conjoined to the following three by the repeated connector “and” (ו). The residue of Baal worship (ׇל) still in the land is defined by four different, though at times overlapping, groups: (1) various priests (ׇל), (2) star worshipers (ׇל), (3) syncretistic oath takers (ׇל), and (4) apostate rebels (ׇל), including those who fail to pursue Yahweh in any way. Most translations skew this pattern by *adding* connection where it is absent and/or by *removing* connection where it is present, thus altering the prophet’s meaning. One version properly representing it is Young’s Literal Translation (1898), following this pattern: $\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and}$.

⁷ The prophet clearly asserts that Jerusalem’s Baal worship included a form of syncretism that combined devotion to Yahweh with that of another. The Masoretic Text renders the second party ׀לך, which naturally means “their king,” as translated in the Septuagint (τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτῶν; cf. NET). However, following the path of the Greek Lucianic recension, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate, some find it more satisfying contextually to revocalize the Masoretic Text as ׀לם (“Milcom”), the national god of Bene-Ammon (1 Kgs 11:5, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13) (e.g., NASB, ESV, CSB). Still, others leave the Masoretic Text form as ׀לך but see it either as a variant spelling or at least a reference to “Milcom” (Jer 39:1, 3) (e.g., KJV, RV, ASV) or “the Molech

4. “Those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him”—those living self-ruled, self-dependent lives (1:6). To “turn back from following the LORD” always refers to covenant disloyalty (Pss 44:18; 78:57; Isa 59:13), which the people demonstrated by failing to rely on God (Deut 4:29; 2 Chr 20:3–4; Ps 105:3–4; Jer 29:13) or by not wanting to know his will or word (1 Kgs 22:5; Amos 8:12) (“seek” and “inquire”).

Elsewhere we learn that Josiah’s reform sought to eradicate all instruments and individuals associated with these very activities (2 Kgs 23:4–5, 10, 24). What is clear is that Yahweh is no respecter of persons. Whether priest or commoner, if you choose to turn away from God and refuse to seek him and pray to him, God will justly condemn you.

THE CONTENT OF THE CALL TO REVERE GOD (ZEPH 1:7–18)

Now we come to the heart of the setting section. Like a herald preparing courtiers for a king’s arrival (Judg 3:19), Zephaniah urges his audience to revere the Lord (1:7a) because of the temporal nearness and sacrificial nature of Yahweh’s punishment against Jerusalem (vv. 7b–13) and the world (vv. 14–18). “Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near” (v. 7). Notice how the impending nature of Yahweh’s day is not the main point of the prophet’s message. Within this book, every image of darkness and light, devastation and delight, serves to motivate the prophet’s exhortations. In verse 7a the exhortation comes not in the form of a command but in the form of the Hebrew exclamatory interjection שָׁם (“Hush! Be silent!”).⁸ Listeners must revere God. Why? “For the day of the LORD is near” (v. 7b).

Throughout the Prophets, the phrase יוֹם יְהוָה (“the day of Yahweh”) and its abbreviated parallels (“the/this/that day”) refer to the ultimate time when God will punish and restore the whole world and to the periodic penultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. That is, the day of the Lord includes both (1) God’s

god” (יְהוָה; see Lev 18:21; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 32:35) (e.g., NLT, NIV), a Canaanite deity some have questionably proposed is only a local manifestation of Milcom (1 Kgs 11:5, 7). King Josiah’s reforms targeted multiple foreign deities (2 Kgs 23:13), and the text addresses the remnant of Baal and no other god (Zeph 1:4). As such, “their king” likely stands as an epithet for a divine rather than human being and most probably the “Baal” of verse 4.

⁸ שָׁם is onomatopoeic. The Septuagint uses εὐλαβεῖσθε (“beware!”), which equally captures the call to trusting awe.

final and decisive move to execute justice and to reestablish right order in the world (e.g., 1:14–18; 3:8–10)⁹ and (2) the numerous historical foretastes of this end time by which God restores peace by judging wickedness—not only that of the broad world (e.g., Jer 46:10; Joel 3:9–16; Obad 15)¹⁰ but also that of Israel/Judah (Ezek 13:5; Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1).¹¹

Zephaniah anticipates the day of the Lord in both respects. With the statement “the day of the LORD is near” in 1:7, he introduces a unit that runs to verse 13, the whole of which is focused on the imminent and localized punishment that the unnamed Babylon will bring upon Jerusalem, progressively culminating in 586 BC (cf. 3:7). First, he directs his punishment on Jerusalem’s leaders. He initially rebukes the political elite: “I will

⁹ See 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10; 2 Peter 3:10.

¹⁰ See Isaiah 2:10–22; 13:1–22; Ezekiel 30:1–9.

¹¹ See Isaiah 3:1–4:1; Joel 1:15; 2:1–11; Malachi 4:5 [3:5 MT]. Scholars have defined the core of Israel’s day of Yahweh tradition in various ways—e.g., a vision of Yahweh’s enthronement (Mowinckel), anticipations of Yahweh’s future work on behalf of Israel (Černý), holy war and conquest (von Rad), treaty curses (Fensham), theophany (Hoffman), or various blends of these options (Cross, Weiss, Everson). From my perspective, we need an eclectic approach to the day of Yahweh. On the one hand, as J. Alec Motyer writes, “The Hebrew word *day* (*yôm*) is used idiomatically for a decisive event or series of events, a moment or period in which destiny is settled. . . . [The day of Yahweh is] the climax alike of history, sin, and the purposes of God.” “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Baker Books, 1998), 3:917–18. On the other hand, “In some sense the prophets saw significant historical events as the day of the Lord. . . . The prophets simply had in mind that these were events of such a dire nature that they exemplified a reality that would be fully demonstrated when the day finally came.” Motyer, 918; cf. Greg A. King, “The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah,” *BSac* 152.605 (1995): 16–32. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson, Biblical Resource Series (Blackwell, 1956); Ladislav Černý, *The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* (University of Karlova, 1948); Gerhard von Rad, “The Origin of the Concept of the Day of Yahweh,” *JSS* 4.2 (1959): 97–108; F. Charles Fensham, “A Possible Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord,” in *Biblical Essays: Proceedings of the Ninth Meeting of “Die Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika” and Proceedings of the Second Meeting of “Die Nuwe-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap van Suid-Afrika,”* ed. A. H. Van Zyl (Potchefstroom Herald, 1966), 90–97; Yair Hoffman, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in Prophetic Literature,” *ZAW* 93.1 (1981): 37–50; Frank Moore Cross, “The Divine Warrior in Israel’s Early Cult,” in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Harvard University Press, 1966), 11–30; Meir Weiss, “The Origin of the ‘Day of the Lord’—Reconsidered,” *HUCA* 37 (1966): 29–63; and A. Joseph Everson, “The Days of Yahweh,” *JBL* 93.3 (1974): 329–37. For some recent surveys of the issue, see Richard H. Hiers, “Day of the Lord,” *ABD* (Doubleday, 1992), 2:82–83; Mark A. LaRocca-Pitts, “The Day of Yahweh as a Rhetorical Strategy among Hebrew Prophets” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2000); and J. D. Barker, “Day of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Mark J. Boda (IVP Academic, 2012), 132–43.

punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire" (1:8). Then he targets the religious leaders: "On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold, and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud" (v. 9). In verse 7 God was called "Lord GOD," and now we read of their Lord's house (v. 9), which likely refers to the temple. Next, he identifies specific locations in Jerusalem, most likely the spheres in which the leaders were housed and had the most influence: "On that day . . . a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills" (v. 10). He then moves beyond the leaders to the common person. "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps [catching them unexpectedly], and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good nor will he do ill'" (v. 12). The complacent are those who neither fear God's wrath nor desire his blessings. They are those who live like deists or practical atheists, acting as though Yahweh is not really watching and does not really care. Yahweh's day of wrath against Jerusalem was near, and because of this, Zephaniah's audience needed to revere God.

But this localized punishment was to be matched by a more ultimate, global punishment. Compare the opening of verse 7—"The day of the LORD is near"—with the opening of verse 14—"The *great* day of the LORD is near." Verse 14 switches from the localized punishment of Jerusalem in 586 BC to the global, eschatological judgment coming on the whole world at the end of the age. Note the broader scope in verses 17–18: "I will bring distress on mankind. . . . In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth."¹²

Those listening to Zephaniah need to revere God with their hearts hushed before his presence. The preemptive, typological day came upon Jerusalem, bringing devastation and destruction. Therefore, we can be sure that the greater fury that sovereign Yahweh promises is coming. God takes sin seriously. He must, because he is just! He will pour out his fury against all forms of rebellion. Thus, he declares, "I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned

¹² The use of "humanity" (אָדָם) in Zephaniah 1:17 and the breadth of "all the inhabitants of the earth" (כָּל-יִשְׁכְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ) in verse 18 both signal that we have shifted from the local focus on Jerusalem's punishment in verses 7–13 to universal destruction in verses 14–18, which echoes the broader use of "human/humanity" (אָדָם) and "ground/tilled soil" (הָאָדָם) in verses 2–3.

against the LORD” (v. 17). Where there is sin, there will be retribution. Because God is just, he must hate and identify and punish every failure.

Within this book, the objects of Yahweh’s wrath include the idolatrous and self-led (1:3–6), the Scriptureless and prayerless (1:6; 3:4), the conceited and oppressive (1:9, 16; 2:8, 10, 15; 3:1, 3–4), the apathetic and passionless (1:11; 2:1), the deaf and unresponsive (3:2), the trustless and self-dependent (3:2). Yahweh’s enemies sit indifferent and self-righteous, with neither a concern for God’s judgment nor a longing for his blessing (1:12; 2:1, 15; 3:5, 8). Chaff is chaff, regardless of where it is found. Though in Zephaniah’s Judah the holdout of the faithful was mixed with the majority of the rabble, on the day of wrath, as Jesus says, God “will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12; cf. Zeph 2:1–2). He will eradicate all forms of iniquity, whether idolatry, syncretism, or self-rule (1:3–6); violence, deception, or complacency (1:9, 12); pride, vain boasts, or taunting (2:8–10, 15); rebellion, defilement, or oppression (3:1); resistance, unresponsiveness, or shameless treachery and abuse (3:2–5). Indeed, as he did at the flood (Gen 6:11–13; cf. Zeph 1:2–3), he will gather and destroy all who fail to fear him and who multiply their corruption (3:7). The Warrior-King (vv. 15, 17) will act decisively, removing arrogance from his city (v. 12) and eliminating those who afflicted her (v. 19). He will cleanse the earth and reconstitute the mountain of his holiness for his presence (vv. 11–12; cf. vv. 5, 15, 17). When he comes, the day will be unexpected and filled with cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice. Let’s consider these characteristics of punishment that Zephaniah associates with Yahweh’s day.

ZEPHANIAH’S PORTRAYAL OF YAHWEH’S DAY AS PUNISHMENT

THE DAY OF THE LORD AS CATAclysm

With echoes of Yahweh’s encounter with Adam and Eve following their sin (Gen 3:8) and of his appearance to Israel at Mount Sinai to establish the old covenant (Exod 19:16; Deut 4:11; 5:22), Zephaniah and other biblical prophets often associate Yahweh’s day of wrath with darkness, wind, earthquake, and clouds. “A day of wrath is that day, . . . a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Zeph 1:15). The foreboding images of tempest and shadow, gloom and quaking display Yahweh’s fierce and impending presence and highlight the nearness of his day of destruc-

tion against individuals (2 Sam 22:12; Job 15:22) and nations (Isa 13:10; 30:30),¹³ including Israel/Judah (Isa 5:30; 8:22; 29:6).¹⁴

Whereas many in Israel envisioned the day of the Lord as one of light, the prophets stressed that for all the unrepentant, it would be night. “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! . . . It is darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18).¹⁵ When God enters our space and time, natural forces react, storms awaken, and ground quakes. “You will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire” (Isa 29:6).¹⁶ With Joel, we must declare, “The day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?” (2:11). Such depictions of Yahweh’s day should cause hearts to tremble. In Zephaniah’s words, “Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near!” (1:7).

THE DAY OF THE LORD AS CONQUEST

The darkness of Yahweh’s day of fury may at times refer not to storm but to the sensory experience of dying as a victim of divine war. On the day of the Lord, the lights of life indeed go out for the enemies of God. Thus, Zephaniah portrayed this day as one of “distress and anguish, . . . ruin and devastation, . . . darkness and gloom, . . . clouds and thick darkness”—“a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements” (1:15–16). Such images recall Yahweh’s conquest of Canaan (see Num 13:28; Deut 1:28; 3:5; 6:10–11; 9:1; Josh 6:5, 20) and portray his day of wrath as a more ultimate conquest, wherein God reestablishes a new people in a transformed land.

Consider, for example, two facets of Yahweh’s day as Zephaniah describes it. First, Yahweh declares of the rebels in Judah, “Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them” (1:13; cf. Amos 5:11; Mic 6:15). Here Zephaniah applies Yahweh’s language of curse against the Canaanites to those in Jerusalem. Moses had told the Israelites that God would bring them into the promised land “with great and good cities that you did not build . . . and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant” (Deut 6:10–11). Yet he also noted that upon the people’s failure to heed the

¹³ See Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 3:15; Zephaniah 1:15.

¹⁴ See Joel 2:2, 30–31; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9.

¹⁵ See Ezekiel 32:7–8; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Micah 3:6.

¹⁶ See Isaiah 30:30; Joel 2:30–31.

covenant precepts, “you shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit” (28:30; cf. v. 39).¹⁷ Those from Judah following Baal were now the object of a divine curse, just as the Canaanites had been in the initial conquest.

Yet there is more. Not only is Yahweh bringing a curse, but through his day of wrath Yahweh is also fighting to claim a new global promised land where he will settle his faithful remnant. Thus, the prophet asserts against the Philistines, “The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall graze, and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For the LORD their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes” (Zeph 2:7).¹⁸ Then, with respect to the Moabites and Ammonites, Yahweh declares, “The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them” (v. 9). Zephaniah then adds, “The LORD will be awesome against them; for he will famish all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the lands of the nations” (v. 11).¹⁹ Fulfilling Isaiah’s earlier predictions (61:4; 65:21–22; cf. Ezek 28:26), the faithful remnant would survive Yahweh’s day of wrath and experience the blessings of his global conquest (Zeph 3:8–20).

Associated with Yahweh’s day are common sounds linked with war: cries of pain, terror, tumult (1:10–11), and the blast of a trumpet (v. 16). “The sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,” as a Mighty One, Yahweh the Sovereign Warrior “cries aloud there” (v.

¹⁷ See Leviticus 26:16; Hosea 4:10; 5:6; 8:7; 9:12, 16; Amos 4:8; 8:12; Haggai 1:16; Malachi 1:4. Comparable curses related to efforts that fail to produce are found throughout the ancient world, as in (1) the treaty inscriptions of Bar-Ga’yah of KTK and Mati’el of Arpad from Sefire (ca. 750 BC) (James B. Pritchard, ed., *ANET*, 3rd ed. [Princeton University Press, 1969], 659; William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, vol. 2 of *COS* [Brill, 2000], 214) and (2) Neo-Assyrian King Assurbanipal’s annals regarding his campaign against the Arabs (ca. mid-600s BC) (Pritchard, *ANET*, 300).

¹⁸ Of the four Philistine cities mentioned in Zephaniah 2:4, only Ashkelon was directly on the Mediterranean shore. By mentioning Ashkelon, Zephaniah shows that the remnant would reach the coast and completely conquer Philistia. The combined images of the “shoreline” being “grazing grounds” (v. 6) and Philistia still including houses that humans inhabit (v. 7) indicate the text’s figurative nature.

¹⁹ With Philistia (Zeph 2:7), God is promising his people will finally claim the land he once promised to Judah (Josh 15:12; Judg 1:18) and will dispossess those peoples who tested Israel for centuries because Israel had failed to eradicate them (Josh 11:22; 13:2–3; Judg 3:1–3). In contrast, God did *not* originally promise Israel Moab and Ammon’s territory (Deut 2:9, 19). Thus, the remnant dispossessing them partially fulfills God’s original commission that those made in his image fill and subdue the earth while operating as royal priests and displaying his glory (Gen 1:28; 2:15).

14; cf. 3:17). “The LORD utters his voice before his army. . . . For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome” (Joel 2:11; cf. Jer 46:10; Zech 14:1–3).

THE DAY OF THE LORD AS SACRIFICE

After highlighting the nearness of Yahweh’s day, Zephaniah grounds his declaration (using the Hebrew particle כִּי, “because”) in the reality that God had already “prepared a sacrifice” (1:7). Atonement reestablishes right order, and it is only accomplished by killing the sinner or a substitute (Lev 17:11; Isa 22:12–14; Heb 9:22). In Zephaniah 3:2 a key problem in Zephaniah’s Jerusalem was that the city had failed to “draw near to her God.” By failing to “draw near” to Yahweh, principally through his provision of a substitute sacrifice (Lev 9:1–10:3), those in Jerusalem and beyond had prepared themselves to be the sacrifice.²⁰

Sacrificial fires are nothing less than a divine war against wickedness. Hence, after describing the day with cataclysmic and

²⁰ Yahweh’s “invited ones” (קָרְאִים) that he has “consecrated” (הִקְדִּישׁ) in Zephaniah 1:7d could be either (1) the sacrificial victims themselves or (2) those who will “eat” the sacrifice, be they bird and wild animals who feast on the carcasses of the dead (see Ezek 39:17–20; cf. Deut 28:26) or, more likely, the enemy invaders that Yahweh set apart to destroy his adversaries (e.g., Isa 13:3–5; cf. Deut 28:39–52; Jer 10:25; 22:7). Against John Hans de Jong (“Sanctified or Dedicated? הִקְדִּישׁ in Zephaniah 1:7,” *VT* 68.1 [2018]: 94–101), three reasons suggest that the ones “consecrated” are likely the agents of slaughter (option 2). First, de Jong’s observation is too restrictive to cultic contexts and fails to appreciate that Zephaniah is blending images of the cult and covenantal curse. The biblical authors do employ the *hiphil* when designating individuals for a sacred covenantal purpose, whether as prophetic agents, as in “Before you came forth from a womb I consecrated you [הִקְדִּישׁ־תִּי]” (Jer 1:5, author’s translation), or cursed sacrifice, as in, “And consecrate them [וְהִקְדַּשְׁתֶּם] for a day of slaughter” (12:3, author’s translation).

Second, as Muraoka observed, some verbs like קָדַשׁ have “scarcely discernible difference in meaning or nuance” when occurring in both *piel* and *hiphil* forms (Joüon and Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 144n1). For example, in Exodus 29:44 God declares that he will “consecrate” (*piel* of קָדַשׁ) the tent of meeting, the altar, and the priests, but in 1 Kings 9:3 Yahweh asserts that he has “consecrated” (*hiphil* of קָדַשׁ) the Solomonic temple.

Third, de Jong fails to account for the relevant occurrences of the *qal* passive participle form for “invited ones” (קָרְאִים or קָרְאִים). These occurrences refer to either the instruments carrying out God’s punishment (Ezek 23:23, “men of renown”) or those feasting on a sacrifice (e.g., 1 Sam 9:13; 1 Kgs 1:41). Two further reasons support identifying the “invited ones” specifically as the enemy invaders. (1) Enemies bring climactic devastation within Deuteronomy’s list of curses (28:49–52). (2) Zephaniah is likely alluding to Isaiah 13:3, in which Yahweh uses similar language to announce that Babylon will serve as his instrument of slaughter against Judah: “As for me, I have commanded to those consecrated by me [לְמַקְדָּשִׁי]; also I have invited [קָרָאתִי] my warriors for my anger—those exultant in my eminence” (Isa 13:3; cf. Jer 22:7). Furthermore, Jerusalem’s cleansing in Zephaniah 3:11 probably alludes to Isaiah 13:3–5, which refers to enemy invaders. The Babylonians would be the most immediate referent for Zephaniah’s “guests” (Jer 34:21–22; Hab 1:6).

conquest imagery, God stressed, “I will bring distress on mankind . . . because they have sinned against the LORD” (Zeph 1:17). He then uses images of sacrifice to describe what he would do against his enemies: “Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. . . . In the fire of his jealousy all the earth shall be consumed” (vv. 17–18; cf. 2:2; 3:8; Mal 2:3). Zephaniah and other prophets commonly associate fire with the day of the Lord, and it aligns well with images of cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice (e.g., Hos 8:14; Mic 1:7; Zeph 2:2; 3:8; Mal 4:1 [3:19 MT]).²¹ With this, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel compare Yahweh’s punishing of his enemies with a great sacrifice (Jer 46:10; Ezek 39:17, 20–21).

The blended images of war and sacrifice depict how Yahweh justly secures atonement and reestablishes a state of right order in which the redeemed celebrate him as supreme and value those made in his image (Isa 22:14; 34:2, 6). Such is the goal of the day of the Lord.

HOW CHRIST FULFILLS THE DAY OF THE LORD AS PUNISHMENT

CHRIST AS THE AGENT OF YAHWEH’S DAY OF WRATH

Zephaniah associates the day of the Lord with Yahweh’s great ingathering at the end of the age to punish the wicked and renew the righteous. Yahweh declares,

“I will surely *gather* [גָּחַץ; ESV = “sweep away”] everything
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
“I will *gather* [גָּחַץ] man and beast;
I will *gather* [גָּחַץ] the birds of the heavens
and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. (1:2–3)²²

Then Yahweh charges, “Wait for me . . . for the day when I rise up” (3:8). What follows are two reasons for waiting that use the same vocabulary as 1:2–3 to highlight the ingathering of the wicked and the righteous.

[Wait for me . . .] For my decision is to *gather* [גָּחַץ] nations,
to *assemble* [אַסְּף] kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all my burning anger;
for in the fire of my jealousy

²¹ See Isaiah 29:6; Joel 2:3, 5, 30; Amos 5:6; Obadiah 18; Micah 1:4; Nahum 1:6; 3:15.

²² Author’s translation.

all the earth shall be consumed.
 For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples
 to a pure speech,
 that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
 and serve him with one accord. (3:8–9)

We thus see both the punishment of the wicked and the preservation of the righteous. Finally, the end of the book points to the latter when it declares, “Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and *gather* [גָּבַר] the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth” (3:19; cf. vv. 18, 20).

Matthew’s Gospel has three texts that speak of the great ingathering of the nations on the day of the Lord using Zephaniah’s very language (Matt 3:12; 13:30, 40–42; 25:32). Most significantly, in 13:30 and 40–42 Jesus uses verbs of ingathering (συνάγω, “to gather by plucking or picking”; συνάγω, “to gather up”) and then recalls what Zephaniah 1:3 terms “the rubble with the wicked.” In this text, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a field mixed with wheat and weeds. At harvest time, reapers should “gather [συνάγετε] the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather [συναγάγετε] the wheat into my barn” (Matt 13:30). While explaining the parable, Jesus said,

Just as the weeds are gathered [συνάγεται] 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 [συνάξουσιν] out of his kingdom all the causes of sin and all law-breakers [πάντα τὰ σκάνδαλα καὶ τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν], and throw them into the fiery furnace. (vv. 40–42)²³

Elsewhere, Jesus also speaks of the future “day of judgment” wherein God would judge all people in accord with their deeds

²³ Two parallels with Zephaniah exist. First, Matthew speaks of “ingathering” using the verbs συνάγω (“to gather by plucking or picking”) and συνάγω (“to gather up”). Both verbs of ingathering adequately render the Hebrew גָּבַר in Zephaniah 1:2–3b (cf. Deut 16:13; 1 Kgs 10:26), but the latter appears in the Greek Naḥal Hever scroll (8HevXII gr). Second, the Hebrew text of Zephaniah 1:3 mentions the σκάνδαλα (“stumbling blocks”; ESV = “causes of sin”) and the ἀνομίαν (“lawless”). The Septuagint lacks the phrase “the stumbling blocks with the wicked” in verse 3, but Symmachus contains it, using the wooden τὰ σκάνδαλα σὺν [τοῖς] ἀσεβέσι (“the stumbling blocks with the wicked”). Jesus alluded to Zephaniah’s Hebrew text to speak of the great eschatological ingathering. So too Robertson, *Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 259–60; Frederick W. Danker et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 926; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2007), 536; and D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew and Mark*, 2nd ed., Expositor’s Bible Commentary 9 (Zondervan, 2010), 374.

(12:36).²⁴ All those on earth “will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (24:30; cf. Acts 1:9–11), and at this time, Jesus says, “He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect” (Matt 24:31; cf. 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 8:7). Jesus associates Zephaniah’s great day of ingathering directly with his second coming (Matt 24:36, 42, 50; 25:13)²⁵ and with the future resurrection (John 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24), which would be unexpected for all who are in darkness (Matt 24:43, 50; Luke 12:46; 17:30). As Zephaniah foresaw, at this time, Christ will gather all nations to himself and separate the wicked from the righteous (Matt 3:12; 25:31–32; cf. Zeph 1:2; 3:8).²⁶ He will punish the former with “unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12).²⁷ However, he will welcome and feast with the latter (25:34; 26:29; Mark 14:25), and they will know him for who he is (John 14:20).

John calls the culminating battle of the ages “the great day of God the Almighty” (Rev 16:14) and “the great day of their wrath,” of which he asked, “Who can stand?” (6:17). John also envisions that this final war will be led by the Warrior called Faithful and True who rides on a white horse (19:11). In keeping with Zephaniah 1:7, John also notes that the results of this final war against evil will be a sacrificial feast for the birds (Rev 19:17–18). Peter stresses: “The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pet 3:7). He then adds that, for those in darkness, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (v. 10).²⁸ Christ’s second coming fulfills, in part, Zephaniah’s vision of global destruction at the end of the age. Then Christ will operate as the *agent* of God’s wrath. The Lord takes sin seriously, and so should we.

CHRIST AS THE OBJECT OF YAHWEH’S DAY OF WRATH

Yet there is more. Peter declared that “all the prophets” foretold Christ’s sufferings and the subsequent glories (Acts 3:18, 24; 1 Pet 1:10–11). Zephaniah never explicitly mentions the Messiah, yet his

²⁴ See Matthew 7:23; 10:15; 11:22–24; John 12:48.

²⁵ See Mark 13:32; Luke 17:24.

²⁶ See Matthew 13:24–30.

²⁷ See Matthew 7:21–23; 25:41; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10; 2 Peter 3:7–10.

²⁸ See 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Revelation 3:3.

portrait of the day of Yahweh as cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice likely foreshadows Christ's tribulation unto triumph.

Many features support the idea that Christ's saving work (his life, death, and resurrection) initiated the day of Yahweh as both punishment and renewal. Scripture portrays the cross event with images of cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice, thus suggesting that the biblical authors viewed Christ's death as inaugurating the day of the Lord.

First, building on imagery already linked to the messianic king in Psalm 18:7–15 [8–16 MT], each of the Synoptic Gospels applies cataclysmic phenomena typically associated with the day of Yahweh to Christ's death. For example, "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. . . . And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split" (Matt 27:45, 51; cf. Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44–45).²⁹ These images of darkness and destruction recall Zephaniah's vision of Yahweh's day as punishment (1:15–16). Furthermore, when Luke depicts the rise of the church at Pentecost, he highlights numerous cosmological signs including fire and darkness that would occur "before the day of the Lord comes" (Acts 2:20 with Joel 2:31; cf. Zeph 3:15). I will argue in my next article that Pentecost initially fulfills the day of the Lord as renewal, and this suggests that Luke views the darkness associated with the cross event as fulfilling the Old Testament's anticipations of cosmological disturbance at Yahweh's day of wrath.

Second, fulfilling Malachi's predictions (3:1–3; 4:5–6 [3:23–24 MT]), John the Baptizer's ministry prepared the way for "the Lord . . . the messenger of the covenant" to return to his temple on his day of anger (3:1; cf. Matt 11:9–15).³⁰ The Baptizer anticipated that a fiery display of divine fury would distinguish the righteous from the wicked on Yahweh's day, and he saw Jesus as both the sacrificial Lamb "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and as the Warrior agent of God's wrath through whom God would destroy and deliver (Matt 3:11–12). In Christ Jesus, "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (12:28). At the cross, God judged this

²⁹ See J. Bergman Kline, "The Day of the Lord in the Death and Resurrection of Christ," *JETS* 48.4 (2005): 757–70; and Dane C. Ortlund and G. K. Beale, "Darkness over the Whole Land: A Biblical Theological Reflection on Mark 15:33," *WTJ* 75.2 (2013): 221–38; cf. Daniel M. Gurtner, *The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus*, SNTSMS 139 (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 152–83.

³⁰ For a solid case that this "messenger of the covenant" is Jesus, see E. Ray Clendenen, "'Messenger of the Covenant' in Malachi 3:1 Once Again," *JETS* 62.1 (2019): 81–102.

world's ruler (John 16:11), killed the hostility between God and his elect (Eph 2:16), and “disarmed the rulers and authorities” that once held us captive (Col 2:15).

Zephaniah portrays Yahweh's day as cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice, and this predictively foreshadows not only Christ's second coming, when he will operate as the agent of God's wrath against all the wicked but also Christ's first coming, when he stood as the object of God's wrath on behalf of those God would save. Christ became sin and a curse for those who would believe in him (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). This results in those who were once God's enemies being “justified by [Christ's] blood” and “saved by him from the wrath of God,” thus securing us peace (Rom 5:1, 9). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed!” (1 Pet 2:24; cf. Isa 53:5).

CONCLUSION

Allow the seriousness of the day of the Lord to move you to revere God. Zephaniah 1 portrays a God who demands reverence (v. 7), whose just jealousy judges with flames of wrath (v. 18; cf. 3:8), who confronts all affronts to his holiness (1:7, 12–13), whose justice shows no prejudice (vv. 8–9), and whose punishment is both terrible and complete (vv. 11, 15–18). Whereas some may minimize certain types of sins, believing them to be insignificant, Zephaniah asserts that any sin demands the full rage of Yahweh's anger.³¹

The words the prophet uses to describe the outbreak of divine anger are breathtaking—a day of wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, clouds, thick darkness, trumpet blast, and battle cry (vv. 15–16). Can the situation be more ominous? Paul asserted that Christ will come “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not heed the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:8–9; cf. 2 Pet 3:10). How dreadful to have the source of all power and the upholder of all life working against you. Heeding the call of Zephaniah 1:7, I urge you: Revere God!

³¹ Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 924.