

The Addressees in Zephaniah 2:1, 3: Who Should Seek YHWH Together?

ABSTRACT: Zephaniah 2:1 calls “the nation not longing” to bundle together in submission to the Lord, and 2:3 urges “the humble of the land/earth” to seek him increasingly. The identity of these vocatives significantly affects the book’s interpretation, but scholars generally offer one of three views on the proper referent(s): (1) Both 2:1 and 3 address Judah collectively as a rebellious nation. (2) 2:1 confronts rebellious Judah collectively, but 2:3 speaks to the enemy foreign nations. (3) 2:1 addresses rebellious Judah collectively, but 2:3 addresses the nation’s faithful remnant. After overviewing these alternatives and arguing that option three best captures the principal referents, this study argues (4) that Judah and its remnant are the primary but not sole addressees of 2:1 and 3, with the literary context suggesting that the prophet intended that other rebellious nations and their remnants see 2:1 and 3 as applying equally to them by extension.

KEYWORDS: Zephaniah, addressees, audience, Minor Prophets, the Book of the Twelve, Judah, nations, remnant, repentance

Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the LORD’s wrath. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD’s wrath. For Gaza shall be deserted, and Ashkelon shall become a desolation; Ashdod’s people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted. (Zeph 2:1–4, NRSV)

The exhortations in Zeph 2:1, 3 supply the book’s first vocative address and by this identify the main audience(s) of Zephaniah’s message. In 2:1, the prophet speaks to “the nation not longing [for God]” (הַגּוֹי לֹא נִכְסָרָהּ = “O shameless nation,” NRSV), whereas in 2:3 he addresses “all the humble of

the land/earth” (כְּלִי-עֲנִי הָאָרֶץ), the latter of whom he then describes as those “who have carried out his judgment/decision” (אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁפָּטוֹ פָּעְלוּ = “who do his commands,” NRSV). Do these adjacent designations represent the same group, perhaps from different perspectives, or do they point to different audiences—the first rebellious and the second submissive? Furthermore, are these peoples from Judah alone, or do they include some from other nations of the world? One’s answers to these questions significantly influences the interpretation of the book’s body, and there is no consensus among scholars.¹

Initial Reflections on the Vocative Address

The Nation Not Longing in Zephaniah 2:1

The prophet uses the book’s first vocative address to tag his audience “the nation not longing” (הַגּוֹי לֹא נִכְסָף; Zeph 2:1). To this point in the book, Zephaniah has only referred explicitly to “Judah” (1:4a) with its capital “Jerusalem” (1:4a, 12b), though there has been a passing reference to “the people of Canaan” (1:11b = “the merchants,” NRSV), a likely designation for the Philistines in light of the later mention of “Canaan, the land of the Philistines” in 2:5b.² The most natural referent of “the nation” in 2:1, therefore,

1. Author’s note: I thank my research and teaching assistant Josh Bremerman for his careful copy and content editing of this study.

For overviews of some of the issues involved, see especially A. Vanlier Hunter, “Seek the Lord! A Study of the Meaning and Function of the Exhortations in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Zephaniah” (Th.D. diss., St. Mary’s Seminary and University, 1982), 264–70; Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, BZAW 198 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 144–50; Daniel Hojoon Ryou, *Zephaniah’s Oracles against the Nations: A Synchronic and Diachronic Study of Zephaniah 2:1–3:8*, BibInt 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 25–26, 326–28; Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2*, FOTL 22 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 215–16. Cf. Johannes Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 115–16; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 118.

2. Regularly, the term “Canaan” (כְּנָעַן) or “Canaanite” (כְּנָעִי) stands as a general noun meaning “merchant” or “trader” (Job 41:6[40:30]; Prov 31:24; Isa 23:8; Ezek 16:29; 17:4; Hos 12:7[8]; Zech 14:21), and many translations follow this rendering in Zeph 1:11b (e.g., NRSV, ESV, NET Bible, NIV, CEB, CSB), likely due to the fact that the appositional statement that follows speaks of “those laden with silver” (וְנִכְרְתוּ כְּלִי-כֶסֶף)—those associated with trade who are making money off goods they sell. Nevertheless, because Zephaniah speaks of “the people of Canaan” (עַם כְּנָעַן)—a phrase that makes little sense as “a people of a trader”—and because he applies the same term, “Canaan” (כְּנָעַן), to the Philistines in 2:5, Zeph 1:11 probably refers to a negative Philistine influence comparable to what Isaiah spoke of a century earlier: “They are full of things from the east and of fortune-tellers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners. Their land is filled with silver and gold . . . with horses . . . with idols” (Isa 2:6–8;

seems to be Zephaniah's Judah, which he identifies with a highly-influential remnant of wickedness (Zeph 1:4–6, 8–9; cf. 3:2–3) and which he destines for punishment (1:4, 7, 10–13). The evil in Jerusalem is like that of the broader world (1:3, 17) and will receive the same fate as objects of YHWH's wrath (1:2–3, 14–18).³

In contrast, Wendland and Clark identify “the nation not longing” as Philistia, believing this kingdom is “retrospectively identified” through the Philistine city designations in 2:4 and through their being confronted directly in 2:5–7.⁴ Smith had earlier argued comparably, tagging all of 2:1–7 “a day of doom upon Philistia,” but unlike Wendland and Clark, he arrived here only after omitting as secondary large portions of 2:2–3, 7.⁵ In contrast, the subordinate unit in 2:4 (signaled by כִּי) most likely grounds only 2:3 and not also 2:1–2 (1) because the imperative “seek!” (בִּקְשׁוּ) at the beginning of 2:3 lacks explicit connection with what precedes and (2) because the subordinate conjunction כִּי (“for”) is usually an inner-sentential connector that does not ground material beyond the borders of a sentence.⁶ As such, we should not allow the mention of the Philistine cities in 2:4 to directly inform our reading of 2:1–2.

Zephaniah's address in 2:1 targets Judah, and without any hint of a possible faithful remnant within the greater community, he simply characterizes the nation as “not longing” (לֹא נִכְסָף). The *niph'al* of the verb כִּסַּף in its two other scriptural occurrences is followed by the preposition לְ (“to, for”), which together mean to “be in a state of longing for” something (Gen 31:30;

cf. Hos 12:7[8]; so too Ernst R. Wendland and David J. Clark, “Zephaniah: Anatomy and Physiology of a Dramatic Prophetic Text,” *JOTT* 16 [2003]: 9). Recognizably, the Philistines' location on the Mediterranean coast made them important merchants, so a focus on foreign trade would still be evident (see H. J. Katzenstein and Trude Dothan, “Philistines,” *ABD* 5:326–33).

3. Following his exhortation in Zeph 2:1–4, the prophet will again join Jerusalem (3:1–7) with the other nations (2:5–15), bemoaning both their state and coming negative fate.

4. Wendland and Clark, “Zephaniah,” 8–9.

5. John Merlin Powis Smith, “A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Zephaniah,” in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, by John Merlin Powis Smith, William Hayes Ward, and Julius A. Brewer, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911), 211–21. While viewing it as a later editorial addition, Smith saw Zeph 2:3 as addressing “the pious community of Israelites the world over” (*ibid.*, 214).

6. Contra Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2*, 216; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 112; Wendland and Clark, “Zephaniah,” 8.

Ps 84:3[4]; cf. Ps 17:12; Job 14:15).⁷ In the present context, “YHWH” is the missing center in the majority’s existence (see Zeph 1:17; 2:3), so he is most likely the implied object.⁸ In contrast, because the preposition לְ with object is not explicit, Calvin, Kapelrud, and Roberts treat the verb as passive rather than active, meaning “not desired [by YHWH]”—that is, under his wrath.⁹ While possible, the active rendering is more likely for several reasons: (1) We have no examples of the passive meaning in Scripture, and we must infer the prepositional phrase “by YHWH” (בַּיהוָה) or “for YHWH” (לַיהוָה) either way. (2) After assessing similar derogatory vocatives in explicit and implicit calls to repentance, Ben Zvi notes that “they tend to refer to the people’s attitude and not to the (real or deserved) attitude of others toward the people.”¹⁰ (3) The very context of Zephaniah 2 reveals a God passionate for people’s allegiance, which suggests the focus is not on the Lord’s lack of longing for the nation but the nation’s lack of desire for him.

7. Some English translations render the phrase הַגּוֹי לֹא נִכְסָף in Zeph 2:1 as “shameless nation” (NRSV, ESV) or “shameful nation” (NIV), following an Aramaic cognate that means “to be ashamed.” (Cf. Akkadian *kuspu* [“shame”] and Arabic *kasafa* [“to be dark, gloomy, pale”]; see also נֶסֶף, “silver” = “pale money.”) However, this interpretive move is questionable for at least three reasons: (1) no other scriptural occurrences of כִּסַּף employ this meaning; (2) the Aramaic Targum reads כִּסַּף as “desire” (Aramaic = *peal* participle תְּמַיֵּד); and (3) the other ancient versions supply no clear support (so Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 141).

8. So Hunter, “Seek the Lord!” 261–62; Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 142. This seems much more likely than Tg. Neb.’s treating the missing object as “to return to the law/instruction” of God (אֲוֹרֵי תֹא = Hebrew הַתּוֹרָה). In contrast, Sabbotka unpersuasively stretches the meaning of the negative לֹא to mean “nothing” and views it as object of the verb כִּסַּף, thus referring to the people’s idols (= “the nation longing for nothing”; cf. 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5, 11–13; Liudger Sabottka, *Zephaniah*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 25 [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1972], 62–63).

9. John Calvin, “Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,” in *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries 15 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 230; Arvid S. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah: Morphology and Ideas* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), 105; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 187, 189; cf. NKJV, NET Bible, CSB = “undesirable nation.” In contrast, both Irsigler and Motyer treat the verb in an absolute sense, the former proposing “no aspirations, indifference” and the latter suggesting “insensitive, devoid of feeling” (Hubert Irsigler, *Gottesgericht und Jahwetag: Die Komposition Zef 1,1–2,3, untersucht auf der Grundlage der Literarkritik des Zefanjabuches*, Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament 3 [St. Ottilien: Eos, 1977], 62; J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 926). Nevertheless, Motyer still summarizes the meaning as “unresponsive to the Lord.”

10. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 142. For example, we read, “Return, O apostasy—Israel” (Jer 3:12), and “Return, O apostate sons” (3:14, 22).

The reference to Judah's "not longing" likely echoes 1:12c–e, which describes the complacency and functional atheism of the bulk of Jerusalem's inhabitants, who lived without yearning or dread, unconvinced that God would do them either good or ill. Furthermore, the relationship of the verb כָּסַף ("to long") to the noun for "silver" (כֶּסֶף) also ironically links the verse to both 1:11 and 1:18, where God identifies the fleetingness of wealth and its insufficiency to save.¹¹ While the majority in Judah have misdirected their longings, YHWH still longs for their surrender and now mercifully calls them to turn to him while there is still hope.

The Humble in Zephaniah 2:3

In Zeph 2:3, the group the prophet calls to "seek YHWH" are the "humble" (עֲנָוִים). The term עֲנָוִי speaks of one broken in spirit ("bowed, bent" under life's pressures), and only these are able to recognize their need for earnest dependence on God (Ps 37:11; Isa 11:4).¹² Sabottka, Lohfink, and others restrict the humiliation to what is felt by the economically "poor," in distinction from the "rich" (cf. Ps 10:12, following the *qere*).¹³ However, Scripture usually does not limit the term in this way (e.g., Ps 76:8–9[9–10]), and as is often the case in the Psalms where the "humble" stand in contrast to the wicked and oppressive (e.g., Pss 9:17–18[18–19]; 10:12–13; 22:26, 29[27, 30]; 37:10–11[11–12]),¹⁴ the context of Zephaniah clarifies that the prophet's focus is less economic and more dispositional.¹⁵ While his concerns reach to the financially vulnerable, he especially targets his message against the powerful who act cruelly and corruptly, exploiting the weak (Zeph 1:9, 11, 18; 3:1, 3). That God uses his prophet to warn the wealthy suggests that they too had hope, if they would but humble themselves and repent. At the end of the book, God contrasts the "afflicted (עֲנָוִי) and poor," whom he will preserve, with the arrogant, whom he will remove from Jerusalem (3:11–12). The "humble" in 2:3, therefore, are most likely all the poor *and* rich who feel

11. Cf. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 115.

12. Cf. Pss 10:12; 76:8–9[9–10]; Job 24:4; Amos 8:4: The adjective עֲנָוִי in Zeph 2:3 means "humble," whereas the adjective עֲנָוִי in 3:12 means "afflicted, needy." Dumbrell distinguishes the terms as follows: "עֲנָוִי means to have been humbled, afflicted by necessity or circumstances, stressing difficulty of the condition and implying . . . some kind of disability present. . . . עֲנָוִי means, basically, bent over (under the pressure of circumstances) and consequently, as affliction does its proper work, humble" (William J. Dumbrell, "עֲנָוִי, עֲנָוִי [‘ānāw; ‘ānī],” *NIDOTTE* 3:451–52).

13. Sabottka, *Zephanja*, 65–66; Norbert Lohfink, "Zephaniah and the Church of the Poor," *TD* 32.2 (1985): 113–18. Cf. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah*, 32–33.

14. Cf. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 149 n. 423.

15. Cf. Hunter, "Seek the Lord!" 268–69.

appropriately about their sin (1:17) and the coming judgment (1:7) and who are willing to seek the Lord (2:3).

Different Views of the Identity of the Addressees

Significantly, all major views regarding the addressees in 2:1, 3 recognize “the nation not longing” in 2:1 to be Zephaniah’s general designation for his Judah. The main question, therefore, has to do with how this audience relates to “the humble” in 2:3. With these factors in view, we will now consider more directly the identity of Zephaniah’s addressees. Most interpreters hold one of three views: (1) Both Zeph 2:1 and 3 address Judah collectively as a rebellious nation. (2) Zephaniah 2:1 addresses Judah collectively as a rebellious nation, but 2:3 addresses the rebellious foreign nations. (3) Zephaniah 2:1 addresses Judah collectively as a rebellious nation, but 2:3 addresses Judah’s faithful remnant. After overviewing these perspectives and arguing for the likelihood of option three as capturing the principal referents, the study will then argue for a fourth alternative that some have proposed—(4) that Judah and its remnant are the primary but not sole addressees of Zeph 2:1 and 3, with the greater context of the book suggesting that the prophet intentionally desires other rebellious nations and their remnants to see 2:1 and 3 as also applying to them by extension.

Both Zephaniah 2:1 and 2:3 Address Judah Collectively as a Rebellious Nation

I will overview here the approaches of Rudolph, Irsigler, and Sweeney, each of whom maintains in a different way that the audiences of the exhortations in 2:1 and 3 are one and the same group—the nation of Judah that needs to repent.

WILHELM RUDOLPH AND HUBERT IRSIGLER

Assuming that both sets of imperatives in 2:1 and 3 address the single rebellious nation of Judah (“the nation not longing”), Rudolph has proposed that in 2:3 an original preposition כְּ (“like, as”) dropped out by haplography before the vocative phrase and that the original reading was “Seek YHWH *like* all the humble of the land who have carried out his judgment.”¹⁶ In

16. Haplography is the scribal error of writing a word or letter once where it should have been written twice. In this instance, Rudolph is proposing that the כ of כָּל (“all”) should have been preceded by the preposition כְּ (“like, as”), but that the preposition was dropped by mistake. See Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micha, Nahum, Habakuk, Zephaniah*, KAT 13/3 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975), 273–74.

this way, Rudolph allows Zephaniah to address a single group of wicked while identifying that there are others (like himself) who stand as models of faithfulness. It also keeps the prophet from calling “all the humble of the land” (כָּל-עֲנִי הָאָרֶץ; 2:3a) to pursue even greater humility (בִּקְשׁוּ עֲנִיָּה, “seek humility,” 2:3c), a charge that the Hebrew MT requires and that many interpreters find strange.¹⁷

Irsigler also affirms that Zeph 2:1 and 3 address the same group, but he arrives here by treating all of Zeph 2:3a as a later addition.¹⁸ As the text presently stands, he asserts that “the nation not longing” in 2:1b cannot be identical with “the humble of the land” in 2:3a, as the former phrase testifies to great sinfulness and the latter highlights some who were truly loyal to YHWH.¹⁹ Nevertheless, when we recognize 2:3a as secondary and allow 2:1–2 to move directly into 2:3b–d, we see that the prophet believed he may be able to arouse “the nation not longing” by a great enough warning to “seek righteousness and humility.” Zephaniah referred to them as sinners in order to awaken them out of their slumber and to shock them into action.²⁰ “The appeals of 2:1–3 are to be regarded as a ‘last warning and reminder,’ but also as pointing to the prospect of possible preservation.”²¹

17. The LXX does not require this reading, but its differences are likely secondary and do not support a different Vorlage: ζητήσατε τὸν κύριον, πάντες ταπεινοὶ γῆς· κρίμα ἐργάζεσθε καὶ δικαιοσύνην ζητήσατε καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθε αὐτά (“Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth; work justice, and seek righteousness, and answer them”). The LXX translator appears to have read the pausal *qatal* form פָּעְלוּ (usually פָּעַלוּ, “they have carried out”) as the imperative פִּיעְלוּ (“carry out/work!”). With this, he dropped both the relative אֲשֶׁר (“who”) and the pronominal suffix הַ (his) in order to make the reading work. He also dropped the first imperative “seek!” (בִּקְשׁוּ) and read the second with בִּקְשׁוּ that precedes instead of עֲנִיָּה that follows. Finally, he added a connector before עֲנִיָּה, reread the noun עֲנִיָּה (“humility”) as the imperative “answer it” (עֲנִיָּה), as in court (“to testify/act as witness; cf. Gen 30:33; 1 Sam 12:3; 2 Sam 21:16; Isa 3:9; Mic 6:3; Job 15:6), and then used a plural direct object instead of singular to account for the two antecedents—“bear witness to both justice and righteousness.” See Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 119–20.

18. Irsigler, *Gottesgericht und Jahwetag*, 113–17, 452; Hubert Irsigler, *Zefanja*, HThKAT (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2002), 198–99, 202–3. Both Ryou and Vlaardingerbroek follow this same general pattern, omitting “all the humble of the land who have carried out his judgment” (Ryou, *Zephaniah’s Oracles against the Nations*, 328; cf. pp. 294–95; Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 115–16), but Ryou admits the telling statement, “It is difficult to delineate precisely what motivated the redactor to add this line” (Ryou, *Zephaniah’s Oracles against the Nations*, 328). Such approaches fail to wrestle deeply enough with the text as we have it, too quickly treating difficult phrases as later additions rather than as original.

19. Irsigler, *Zefanja*, 202.

20. Idem, *Gottesgericht und Jahwetag*, 452.

21. Idem, *Zefanja*, 203.

Both Rudolph and Irsigler's views suffer from a common challenge—there are *no* extant texts or versions that support their emended readings, and conjectural emendations should always be a last resort when attempting to establish and understand the original text.²² Furthermore, while both Rudolph and Irsigler recognize that Zephaniah had genuine hope that some in Judah could experience protection from the fires of YHWH's wrath, contra Rudolph the text is also clear that the nation would perish, with only a remnant being saved (Zeph 2:7a, 9c–d; 3:11–20). YHWH declares in no uncertain terms, “I will surely gather everything. . . . And 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” (1:2a, 4). In the past, the prophet's contemporaries had a chance not to experience this storm of fury, but their failure to heed YHWH's discipline made their punishment unavoidable. “I said, ‘Surely you will fear me; you will receive correction’ with the result that her habitation would not be cut off—all that I have appointed against her. However, they arose early; they corrupted their deeds” (3:7). Thus, God's judgment “is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, in order to pour out on them my indignation” (3:8b). From a historical perspective, such conviction in encroaching punishment accords with the record of how King Manasseh's wickedness secured the certainty of the nation's disaster (2 Kgs 21:11–15), so that King Josiah's reform could not revoke but only delay Judah's doom (23:24–27). Zephaniah's contemporary Jeremiah stressed that true corporate repentance always awakens divine mercy (Jer 18:7–8), as was evident in God's relenting of his destruction of Judah after they repented in response to the prophet Micah's preaching (26:18; cf. Mic 3:12). Nevertheless, Jeremiah also addressed the nation's future hopes only through the framework of a remnant—“Return, O faithless children, declares the LORD, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion” (Jer 3:14; cf. 2 Chr 30:6). A final potential inconsistency in Rudolph's approach is that his reading of Zeph 2:3 has God saving those who become *like* the humble, whereas 3:11–12 emphasizes that it is the afflicted themselves whom he delivers. Similarly, the two other texts

22. Tov notes that a conjectural emendation of the biblical text is “the suggestion of new readings that are not transmitted in the witnesses of the biblical text.” He then adds, “The procedure of emending the biblical text is one of the most subjective aspects of textual criticism in particular, and of biblical research in general. . . . Most scholars agree that emending the biblical text should be a last resort when solving textual problems” (Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012], 328, 330; cf. Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017], 147–48).

that mention “humble ones of earth” (עַנְיֵי-אֲרֶץ; though without the definite article on “earth”: אֲרֶץ) are explicit that YHWH saves humble people, not those who are simply “like” them (Ps 76:9[10]; Isa 11:4).

MARVIN A. SWEENEY. With some parallels to Irsigler’s interpretation but without omitting any text, Sweeney asserts that Zephaniah’s rhetorical context clarifies why he characterized the same group in different ways. The prophet needed “to convince his audience to adopt his viewpoint and carry out the actions that he recommends,” and he believed that to do this he needed to “appeal to its self-identity.”²³ Likely unaware of how many in his audience were sympathetic to his pleas, Zephaniah sought both to warn and to affirm, not speaking to different groups but instead cautioning and coaxing all. For Sweeney, the prophet’s negative characterization of Judah as “the nation not longing” in 2:1b highlights for them that they are “subject to YHWH’s threat” and therefore need to hear and heed his appeal to turn to God.²⁴ In contrast, Zephaniah’s positive characterization of the same group as “the humble of the land who have carried out his judgment” in 2:3a treats them in accordance with their self-perception that they are indeed God-followers who have “already adopted his viewpoint” and who will therefore “carry out his recommendation to seek YHWH.”²⁵

Sweeney’s approach aligns with Ben Zvi’s conviction that, “Theoretically, at least, the simplest approach is to propose that there is only one group of addressees, that this is the group who is called for repentance, and that it is called by two different vocatives.”²⁶ Interpretation is fine to begin here, but the fact remains that most scholars, Rudolph and Irsigler included, believe that the text as it stands requires that we see a shift in focus between 2:1–2 and 3–4 and that we understand the addressees in 2:1b and 3a as distinct (though perhaps overlapping) groups.²⁷ With this, in light of Zephaniah’s earlier harsh words regarding Jerusalem’s “remnant of Baal” (1:4b), violent and deceitful religious leaders (1:9a; cf. 3:3–4), and complacent populous (1:12cd), it seems highly unlikely that he could ever honestly tag all those in “the nation not longing” (2:1b) as “the humble of the land who carry

23. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 118.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 145. Elsewhere, Ben Zvi states forthrightly, “The addressees in Zeph 2:1–3 are the condemned people, who are referred to in the third person in vv. 1 and 3 but in second person in v. 2” (p. 296).

27. Sweeney himself notes that the descriptions of Zephaniah’s addresses in 2:1 and 3 appear to “clash,” but he then says the tension is only caused “by some rather wooden readings of these verses” (Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 118).

out his judgment” (2:3a). Perhaps Zephaniah is here engaging in prophetic sarcasm or satire, exposing through ridicule or rebuke the human folly of his audience (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:27; 22:15–16; Isa 44:14–15; Amos 6:4–6; Obad 3–4; Mic 3:1–3).²⁸ Thus, his address to “the humble of the land who have carried out his judgment” would actually be mocking those who in point of fact have not obeyed the Lord at all. However, there is nothing in the context that would suggest we are to read the statement in this way. And this is not Sweeney’s approach anyway. Indeed, he treats 2:3 less as irony and more as smooth speech, ear-tickling, propagandistic flattery. Such speaking techniques characterized the false prophets of Zephaniah’s day (e.g., Isa 30:9–11; Jer 6:13–14),²⁹ but YHWH’s prophets were different (see 1 Kgs 22:6–8; cf. 2 Cor 2:17; 4:2). They spoke straight, stressing the need for self-denial and surrender, confronting sin, and urging the populace to repent from their rebellion and to follow the Lord. It is very unlikely that Zephaniah, in order to persuade his listeners to heed his voice, would have treated any group that had in fact not surrendered themselves to YHWH as though they had.³⁰ Thus, we must consider other possible interpretations.

Zephaniah 2:1 Addresses Judah Collectively as a Rebellious Nation, but 2:3 Addresses the Rebellious Foreign Nations

Ehrlich is the single major voice that argues for two non-overlapping, distinct groups addressed in 2:1a and 2:3a. While his overall proposal is unconvincing, he makes many significant observations for which the interpreter must account.

ARNOLD B. EHRLICH. Certain that Zephaniah would not have commanded the humble in Judah to pursue even more humility (2:3ac), Ehrlich long ago proposed that, like the phrase in 3:20b, the vocative in 2:3a should read “all the *peoples* of the earth” (כָּל-עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ), i.e., the rebellious nations) rather than “all the *humble* of the land” (כָּל-עַנְוֵי הָאָרֶץ) in Judah.³¹ As to the unlikelihood of the MT’s reading, he notes that there are only two other instances in Scripture where we read “humble ones of earth” (עַנְוֵי-אָרֶץ), and neither

28. See Richard D. Patterson, “Prophetic Satire as a Vehicle for Ethical Instruction,” *JETS* 50 (2007): 47–69.

29. Cf. Jer 8:11; 14:13–14; 23:17; Ezek 13:10–16; Mic 2:6–11; 3:5, 11; 2 Tim 4:3–4.

30. Cf. Stuart Lasine, “Fiction, Falsehood, and Reality in Hebrew Scriptures,” *HS* 25 (1984): 24–40.

31. Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches—Fünfter Band, Ezechiel und die kleinen Propheten*, vol. 5 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968, orig., 1901 [Hebrew]), 311–12.

include the definite article on “earth” (\neq הָאָרֶץ, Isa 11:4; Ps 76:9[10]; cf. Amos 8:4). He also suggested that, because מִשְׁפֵּט (“judgment/verdict/just decree”) stands as the object of the verb פָּעַל (“to do, carry out”) only here in the OT, we should not read it like the more common compound of the verb עָשָׂה (“to do, make”) with singular object מִשְׁפֵּט, which in most of its nearly 30 occurrences points to living in accordance with God’s rule of justice,³² often in association with “righteousness” (צִדְקָה).³³ Instead, Ehrlich believed the descriptive phrase “who have carried out his judgment” refers to those foreign nations that have served as YHWH’s agents of destruction (potentially as “the invited ones” of Zeph 1:7d) but who will now themselves be destroyed if they do not “seek righteousness and humility” (cf. Hos 1:4 with 2 Kgs 10:10–11).

In response, when considering an unpointed Hebrew text³⁴ in the Aramaic script, one can easily see how a scribe’s failure to connect every part of a מ (in עֲמִי) could result in a reading of נו (thus, עֲנִי). Furthermore, though Ehrlich never raises the issue, elsewhere in Zephaniah the noun אֶרֶץ (“earth/land”) most commonly bears a global (“earth”) rather than local (“land”) reference (1:18bc; 2:11b; 3:8c, 19d, 20b), the only exception being the single instance where the term occurs in construct with a people group (כְּנָעַן אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים, “O, Canaan, the land of the Philistines,” 2:5b). This aligns with the significantly global perspective the prophet maintains through his book—with respect to both punishment (1:2–3, 14–18; 2:4, 5–15; 3:6, 8, 15, 19) and salvation (2:11; 3:9–10). Finally, Ehrlich is correct that, because the construction “to carry out/perform” (פָּעַל) + “judgment” (מִשְׁפֵּט) occurs only here in the OT, the “judgment” at this point likely refers to something other than the keeping of a moral precept associated with the Mosaic covenant³⁵—which appears to be an understood association when the verb “to

32. E.g., Gen 18:19, 25; Deut 10:18; 1 Kgs 3:28; 10:9; Jer 5:1; 7:5; Ezek 18:8; Mic 6:8; Ps 149:9; Prov 21:7, 15. For texts with YHWH acting this way, see 1 Kgs 8:45, 49, 59; 2 Chr 6:35, 39; Ezek 39:21; Mic 7:9; Pss 9:4, 16[5, 17], 140:12[13]; 146:7. Cf. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 148. The singular מִשְׁפֵּט stands as the understood object of the verb “to keep” (שָׁמַר) only in the construct phrase “keepers of justice” (שֹׁמְרֵי מִשְׁפָּט) in Ps 106:3.

33. E.g., 2 Sam 8:15; Jer 22:3, 15; 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 18:5, 19, 21, 27; 33:14, 16, 19; 45:9; Pss 99:4; 119:121; Prov 21:3; 2 Chr 9:8. For texts with YHWH acting this way, see Jer 9:24[23]; Ps 103:6; 1 Chr 18:14.

34. Originally, the ancient Hebrews copied the biblical text with only consonants and no vowel points; the vowels were retained orally and then added into the text by the Jewish Masoretes between AD 500 and AD 1000.

35. Contrast, e.g., Calvin, “Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,” 236; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “Zephaniah,” in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 of *Commentary on the Old*

do” (עֲשֵׂה) has singular “judgment” (מִשְׁפֵּט) as its object. Significantly, the singular form of מִשְׁפֵּט occurs two other times in Zephaniah, both of which appear to refer to God’s just decision to punish worldwide human rebellion (3:5c, 8b), so reading “judgment” in 2:3 as a reference to the same act of destruction would make sense here. The plural form “judgments” (מִשְׁפָּטִים) also occurs in 3:15a with respect to God’s covenant curses, which in context may have come in the form of proud enemy invaders (see the use of *hiphil* of סָרַר “remove” in both 3:12 and 15), but the fact that the form in 3:15 is plural cautions one from connecting it with the singular in 2:3.

Ehrlich’s proposal has many strengths for which the interpreter must account. Nevertheless, as with Rudolph and Irsigler’s view, we have no extant texts or versions that support Ehrlich’s emended text, so if another interpretive option avails itself that accounts for the various factors in the text, we should prefer it. Furthermore, Ehrlich’s approach draws attention to the agents of YHWH’s destruction in a way that the rest of the book does not. While God’s “invited ones” in 1:7d may refer to the humans whom he will use to destroy Judah, the fact that Zephaniah never mentions Babylon in the book downplays the human agency and heightens the fact that YHWH and no other is the one Jerusalem should fear (cf. 3:7).³⁶ He is the one who “will bring distress to humanity, and they will walk as the blind, for against YHWH they have sinned” (1:17a–c). Even more, whereas Ehrlich, building off the *qatal* form פָּעֵלָה (“have carried out”) in 2:3a, characterizes those Zephaniah is calling to “seek YHWH” as having *already* carried out God’s “judgment,” the rest of the book speaks of Judah’s punishment as a *future* reality. While God *has* already determined Judah’s destruction (see מִשְׁפָּטִי “my judgment” in 3:8), Jerusalem’s doom has not yet come! YHWH “will stretch out his hand against Judah” (1:4a). While he has “prepared a sacrifice” (1:7c), he “will bring punishment” on Jerusalem’s leaders (1:8b, 9a) and on all the

Testament (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 139; David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 27 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988), 102; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 294; Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 98; Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 927; Waylon Bailey, “Zephaniah,” in *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, by Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, NAC 20 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 449; Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 122; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 118; Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Exegetical Commentary*, Minor Prophets Exegetical Commentary (Dallas: Biblical Studies, 2003), 295.

36. With this, we could add that elsewhere God declares war against the very agents he uses for Judah’s destruction, whether Assyria (Isa 10:5–12, 24–25) or Babylon (Hab 1:12–13 with 2:6–20; cf. Luke 22:22; Acts 2:22–23), but here he would be calling them to repent.

city's complacent ones (1:12c). Had the Judeans heeded the Lord's warnings, "her habitation *would* not be cut off—all that I [YHWH] have appointed against her" (3:7d), but her lack of repentance ensured the certainty of her *coming* disaster. Thus God declares, "My judgment [נִפְשָׁמָה] is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out on them my indignation" (3:8b). In light of the above, we must align with a different reading of the vocative address 2:1 and 3.³⁷

Zephaniah 2:1 Addresses Judah Collectively as a Rebellious Nation, but 2:3 Addresses Judah's Faithful Remnant

Reaching back to the Protestant Reformation and beyond, most scholars in the modern era have recognized that the wording of the vocative statements in 2:1 and 3 demand that the audiences be distinct yet overlapping, the second group being a minority of faithful within "the nation," which the prophet collectively tags rebellious. This is generally the best approach to the prophet's surface meaning, though the next section will identify some extended implications drawn from Zephaniah's greater context.

MARTIN LUTHER, JOHN CALVIN, AND THE MAJORITY VIEW. Both Luther and Calvin taught that the first set of imperatives in 2:1 addressed the ruthless nation as a whole, whereas the second called out a subset of faithful within it.³⁸ A number of contemporary scholars wisely follow this reading,³⁹

37. Zephaniah regularly uses prophetic perfect *qatal* forms (1:11; 2:2, 11, 14–15; 3:15), but Ehrlich did not argue for this use of the *qatal* in 2:3a, and because the *qatal* is joined with a present-time imperative, the interpreter is hard-pressed to read a prophetic perfect in this instance. Calling the peoples who *would certainly* bring punishment on Judah to seek YHWH renders this reading unlikely (unlike the pattern in 3:14–15, where the imperatives in 3:14 + the *qatal* in 3:15 work together as an intrusive rhetorical appeal, calling the remnant to celebrate in the *present* in light of the certainty of *future* deliverance (see Jason S. DeRouchie, *Zephaniah*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming], s.v. Zeph 3:14–15; cf. Christopher S. Tachick, "King of Israel" and "Do Not Fear, Daughter of Zion": *The Use of Zephaniah 3 in John 12*, Reformed Academic Dissertations 11 [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018], 101–7).

38. 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* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1975), 338–39; Calvin, "Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai," 229, 233. Luther's comments were less direct, whereas Calvin was explicit, writing on Zeph 2:3, "Here the Prophet turns his discourse to a small number, for he saw that he could produce no effect on the promiscuous multitude."

39. E.g., Keil and Delitzsch, "Zephaniah," 137–39; Gillis Gerleman, *Zephania: Text-kritisch und Literarisch Untersucht* (Lund: Gleerup, 1942), 27–28; Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah*, 32, 65; Hunter, "Seek the Lord!," 267–70; Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve*

Others such as Ben Zvi, however, think this approach would require that the prophet turn from the prophetic pattern of calling for repentance and instead condemn the first audience (“the nation not longing”), leave them aside for God’s judgment “without asking them to do anything,” and then “turn to a selected and praised group in order to ask this group to keep their ways, so perhaps they will be saved.”⁴⁰ I will respond to Ben Zvi and then offer my particular reading of the vocative address in 2:1 and 3.

Ben Zvi is certainly correct that the prophets regularly called the members of the nation to repent (e.g., Isa 1:16–17; 55:6–7; Jer 3:12–14, 22; 4:1; 18:11; Ezek 18:30–32; Joel 2:12–13; Amos 5:4–6, 14–15; Zech 1:2–3; Mal 3:7). But in each of Ben Zvi’s proposed examples, as here in Zeph 2:1 and 3, the imperatives are *plural*, suggesting that the prophets were actually appealing to the individual members of the nation and not to the corporate entity itself, though Zephaniah addresses the singular “nation” in his vocative speech. As such, even when the nation’s end was certain, God held out the potential for distinct persons to experience his protection from his storm of fury. Zephaniah recognized that all members in the community had a choice and that only those with ears to hear would heed. Far from not “asking them to do anything,” Zephaniah urged all those in Judah, the whole of which was characterized by no desire for God, to “hush” before the Lord (1:7) and to turn from their idolatry, self-rule, oppression, and complacency (1:4–6, 8–9, 12), and he commanded them to unite with others in submission to the Lord—to “bundle” themselves (2:1). The latter was not an ironic command to prepare for their own burning⁴¹ but rather a charge truly to humble themselves together under God’s sovereignty “before the passing

Prophets, vol. 2: *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 116–17; Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 102–3; Ivan Jay Ball Jr., *A Rhetorical Study of Zephaniah* (Berkeley, CA: BIBAL, 1988), 116–18; Paul R. House, *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*, JSOTSup 69 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 64; Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 291–94; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 189–90; Bailey, “Zephaniah,” 445, 449; Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 294–95; James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 304–6.

40. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 145. Similarly, Ryou states that the distinct audience view does not clarify “why the first audience (‘undesirable nation’) was not given an adequate exhortation” (Ryou, *Zephaniah’s Oracles against the Nations*, 328).

41. Hunter thinks that Zephaniah’s charge in 2:1–2 was mere ridicule and irony, calling the rebellious nation to become “nothing but worthless stubble,” ready for their coming burning under God’s wrath (Hunter, “Seek the Lord!” 267–70). In contrast, Calvin was right that here the prophet is actually showing “the remedy” for removing God’s

of the decree” (2:1–2a).⁴² Zephaniah then addressed these “humble”—those whose ears were open to his call and whose heart dispositions would in time identify them as the true people of God among the nation, and he called them to “seek YHWH!” with sustained fervor (2:3a–c).

My interpretation suggests that the vocative phrase in 2:3a—“all the humble of the land who have heeded his judgment”—refers principally to the individuals in Judah who, upon hearing Zephaniah’s “decree” (קִרְיָה) of fury (2:2) unpacked in the declarations of ch. 1, were already in the process of responding rightly.⁴³ A number of arguments support this conclusion.

First, as noted above, the verb “to carry out, perform” (פָּעַל) + the object “judgment” (מִשְׁפָּט) in 2:3a probably does *not* refer to the performing of specific acts of justice associated with the Mosaic covenant. Instead, the placing of the object מִשְׁפָּט (“judgment”) in focus before the verb⁴⁴ likely highlights its direct relationship to the immediate context, which is all about YHWH’s just “decree” (קִרְיָה, 2:2) to punish the world’s rebellion. Second, both of the other singular forms of מִשְׁפָּט appear to refer to God’s ultimate judicial decision to eradicate human rebellion (3:5c, 8b). Thus, Zeph 3:5c speaks of YHWH’s daily giving “his judgment” (מִשְׁפָּטֵי), which likely describes repeated and various declarations of his final verdict against sin.⁴⁵ Then YHWH summarizes in 3:8b his judicial ruling: “My judgment [מִשְׁפָּטֵי] is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, in order to pour out upon them my indignation, all the burning of my anger.” In light of YHWH’s strong pronouncements of retribution in ch. 1, the most natural “judgment” associated with the Lord in 2:3 is his “decree” to punish sinners.⁴⁶ Third, outside Zephaniah,

punishment (Calvin, “Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,” 229; so too Gerleman, *Zephania*, 27–28; Ball, *A Rhetorical Study of Zephaniah*, 116–17).

42. House correctly notes that Zeph “2:1–2 attempts to shock and insult Judahites into joining the remnant” (House, *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*, 64; cf. Irsigler, *Gottesgericht und Jahwetag*, 452).

43. Robertson proposes that “the humble of the land” (כָּל-עַנְיֵי הָאָרֶץ) may be “the people of the land” (עַמ־הָאָרֶץ), who set up young Josiah as king in Judah (2 Kgs 21:24; Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 294). In my mind, Zephaniah’s words reach deeper and broader than this select group.

44. So too Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 98.

45. For example, through the prophetic condemnation of sin (Hos 6:5), his destruction of neighboring nations (Zeph 3:6–7), the rare just verdicts of the judges (Jer 21:12; Zeph 3:3), and the priestly morning sacrifices (Exod 29:38–46; Num 28:1–8).

46. Floyd holds that the sign of the remnant’s “humility” and the specific “judgment” they have “heeded” was that they obeyed the initial call in 2:1 to gather together in submission to the Lord (Floyd, *Minor Prophets*, 216; cf. Michael Weigl, *Zephania und das “Israel der Armen”*: Eine Untersuchung zur Theologie des Buches Zephania, ÖBS 13 [Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1994], 103–4). While possible, this approach

the actions expressed through the verb **פעל** can include the “doing” of deeds (Num 23:23; Deut 32:27; Isa 26:12; Hab 1:5; Pss 11:3; 44:1[2]; Job 7:20; 11:8; 22:17; 33:29; 35:6), the “executing” of “all that [YHWH] commands” (Job 37:12) or “what is right” (Ps 15:2), and the “engaging” in “iniquity, wrong” (Job 36:23; Pss 58:3; 119:3), “wrong” (Job 34:32), “evil” (Prov 30:20), and “falsehood” (Hos 7:1). Such a breadth of usage makes it possible that the “performing” or “executing” of the “judgment” captured in the clause **אָשֶׁר מִשְׁפָּטוֹ פְּעָלוֹ** could refer to “heeding” or “rightly responding to” God’s judicial decree to punish sin.

A common feature in directive discourse is to have two syntactically disconnected imperatives standing side-by-side (here, groups of imperatives in 2:1 and 3), the first expressing a preliminary command of physical motion and the second stating the main charge.⁴⁷ Just as God’s people needed first to “go” to the wilderness in order to “sacrifice” to YHWH (Exod 8:25[21]), and just as the priests in Josiah’s day needed first to “go” away from him in order then to “inquire” of YHWH on behalf of the nation (2 Kgs 22:13), so too Zephaniah charged his Judean contemporaries first to “bundle” themselves together so that they could in turn “seek” the Lord together (Zeph 2:1, 3).⁴⁸ The pattern is not unlike how Jer 50:4 and Zech 8:21–22 anticipate

requires an unlikely time lapse between Zeph 2:1 and 2:3 where none is suggested. In contrast, my interpretation allows Zephaniah to have made the commands in 2:1 and 3 within the same message, it keeps all the book’s singular uses of “judgment” (**מִשְׁפָּט**) referring to the same reality, and it allows for a disposition of surrender following the interjection “Hush!” in 1:7 and the whole depiction of coming punishment in ch. 1 to suffice for the “humility” and “heeding” already accomplished in 2:3.

47. Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), §177ef; Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Call to Covenant Love: Text Grammar and Literary Structure in Deuteronomy 5–11*, Gorgias Dissertations 30 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007), 123. Cf. the structure in Gen 44:25; Exod 10:8, 24; 12:31; 17:9; 19:21, 24; Lev 10:4; Deut 2:24; 10:11; Josh 2:1; 10:24; 1 Sam 9:10; 1 Kgs 1:12; 19:7; 18:41; 2 Kgs 1:2; 22:13; Isa 21:5; 48:16, 20; 55:1; Jer 12:9; 48:6; Ezek 20:39; Ruth 4:1.

48. One should parse the exhortations in 2:1 as an asyndetic *hithpolel* imperative followed by a conjoined *polel* imperative, both from the root **שק** (so too, e.g., Ball, *A Rhetorical Study of Zephaniah*, 97; Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 137 n. 386; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 186–87; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 114; for an overview of the debate, see Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 137–39). The verb derives from the noun for “straw, stubble” (**שק**) and likely means something like “bundle” or “heap,” resulting in a translation such as “Bundle yourself, and make a bundle!” (see *HALOT* 1154–55; *DCH* 7:338). The prophet first tells us what the hearers are to do to themselves, and then he clarifies their lasting condition (so Hunter, “Seek the Lord!” 267; cf. *GKC* §110f). Elsewhere, the *polel* form of this verb is associated with collecting straw (Exod 5:7, 12) or sticks (Num 15:32–33; 1 Kgs 17:10, 12), and the noun often appears in judgment context against rebellious Israel (Isa 5:24;

a day when diverse groups of meek people will come together and journey to a restored Jerusalem in order that they can there “seek” YHWH and entreat his favor together.⁴⁹

That Zephaniah would call those who have manifested a level of humility (עָנָו) to “seek humility” (בְּקִשׁוֹ-עֲדָרָק) even further is in perfect accord with Scripture’s sustained stress on the dangers of hardening one’s heart and on the need to persevere in faith. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps 95:7–8; cf. Exod 9:34; 1 Sam 6:6; Prov 28:142; 2 Chr 36:13).⁵⁰ Writing from this perspective, Calvin noted that divine discipline rouses even the most loyal of saints “to seek true religion with greater ardour than they had before done. . . . When calamities arise and God appears as judge, we ought to be stimulated to greater care and diligence.”⁵¹

Joel 2:5) or their neighbors (Exod 15:7; Isa 47:14; Obad 18), highlighting how quickly enemies are burned (cf. Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 96). “[God’s enemies] are consumed *like straw* fully dried” (Nah 1:10; cf. Mal 4:1). Sweeney sees in Zeph 2:1 echoes of 1:7 and believes that the prophet is “portraying the gathering of the people as the gathering of the very sticks that are to be burned up as part of the sacrifice on the Day of YHWH” (Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 115; cf. Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 290, 292). Similarly, Ben Zvi notes that ingathering regularly happens on the eve of punishment (e.g., Lev 26:25; Jer 4:5; 8:14; Joel 1:14; 2:16; Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 138). In divergence from this approach, Zephaniah’s imagery is more positive, for he is urging the people to act in a way that would *preserve* them from the coming inferno. In short, they are to be straw, *not* chaff, bundling themselves in unity and by this separating themselves from all that is destined for the fires of God’s just wrath (Cf. Calvin, “Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,” 229; Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 294, 296). In Judah’s history, both kings and prophets called for God’s people to gather as an expression of repentance (2 Chr 20:4; Joel 1:14–15), and the NT includes comparable expressions (cf. Heb 3:13; 10:24–25).

49. Another possible parallel relates to Hezekiah’s reforms, though the text uses different word groups for “to be humble” (Niphal of כָּנַע instead of the adjective עָנָו) and “to seek” (שָׁדַר instead of בְּקִשׁוֹ; cf. Zeph 1:6). During these days, those from the Northern Kingdom first “humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem” (2 Chr 30:11), and only then did they “seek God, the LORD” (30:19) through the Passover feast. It is only those who have humbled themselves, leaving behind their worldly ways, that can in turn passionately pursue their Savior.

50. Paul would stress to the Thessalonians, “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you. . . . But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more” (1 Thess 4:9–10). Similarly, to Timothy he asserted, “If we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim 2:12; cf. Rom 5:3–5; Gal 6:9; 2 Thess 1:4–5). The writer of Hebrews also emphasized that “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence *firm to the end*” (Heb 3:14; cf. 10:36; 12:1–2; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 1:5–11).

51. Calvin, “Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,” 235.

Judah and Its Remnant Are the Primary but Not Sole Addressees of Zeph 2:1 and 3, Respectively

Recognizably, the prophet does not explicitly designate the inhabitants of Judah and its remnant of faithful as the addressees of the imperatives in 2:1 and 3, respectively. Instead, he uses more vague language that adds stress to the unsettled nature of those awaiting the ominous day of God's wrath. As already seen, the noun אֶרֶץ ("earth/land") usually bears a global ("earth") rather than a local ("land") referent in the book (1:18bc; 2:11b; 3:8c, 19d, 20b; contrast 2:5b), whereas an interpretation that sees "the nation not desiring" as Judah and "the humble of the land" as its remnant restricts the referent to Jerusalem and its environs.

Already in the book we have seen dynamic shifts of focus from the world at large (1:2–3) to Judah (1:4–6, 7–13) and back to the world (1:14–18). In 2:1–3:7, we see comparable variation, with stress given first to Judah (2:1–4) then its neighbors (2:5–15) and then back to Jerusalem (3:1–7). Within this framework, even though the uses of אֶרֶץ in 1:18bc likely refer to the broader "earth," the mention of "the nation" in 2:1b allows for a more restrictive, localized reading of אֶרֶץ as "the land" of Judah in 2:3a (cf. something comparable with Philistia in 2:5). Such fluctuations of meaning in close proximity are not without parallel in the OT. For example, in three adjoining night visions, Zechariah begins by focusing on YHWH's sovereignty over the whole "earth" (Zech 4:10, 14) and then ends by identifying how the iniquity of the "land" (of Judah?) is removed and taken to the "land" of Shinar (5:6, 11). Between these references, the prophet mentions how God's curse goes out over the face of the whole "land/earth" (5:3), which could either echo the global affliction of Isa 24:4–6 or which could be more restrictive and focused only on Judah.⁵²

While Judah and her faithful remnant are probably the primary referents of the vocative speech in Zeph 2:1 and 3, respectively, part of Zephaniah's purpose in making the vocative addresses lack specificity was likely to raise the possibility in the minds of some from both Judah and other nations that foreigners too could experience protection from the punishing hand of God. In Floyd's words:

The primary emphasis [in 2:3] is thus on those from Judah who demonstrate their humility by their responsiveness to the prophetic

52. For more on these texts in Zechariah, see Bryan Blazosky, "The Law's Universal Condemning and Enslaving Power: A Study of the Relationship of Gentiles to the Law in Paul, the Old Testament, and the Second Temple Jewish Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Ridley College, 2016), 79–81.

directives spoken in YHWH's name. As this section progresses this responsive group is urged to see their repentance as part of a worldwide process in which people from other nations also discover and turn to the God of Israel. The commands in 2:3 thus look forward to what is prophesied concerning the nations in 2:11 and 3:9, and those who respond to these commands are also in this sense among "the humble of the earth."⁵³

Timmer notes that "the book of Zephaniah may present the fates of Israel/Judah and the nations as more closely interrelated than any other book in the Twelve, since the nations (or part of them) appear in connection with both Judah and its remnant in past, present, and future settings."⁵⁴ Here Timmer refers to how the prophet associates Judah and the other nations together as having sinned (Judah: 1:4b–6, 8–9, 12; 3:2–4, 6; the whole world: 1:17; 2:8, 10), as being bound for YHWH's day of wrath (Judah: 1:4ab; the whole world: 1:2–3, 17–18; 2:4, 5–15; 3:8), and as having a remnant that would survive through the day of fiery judgment (Judah: 2:7, 9; Judah and the broader world: 2:9, 11, 3:9–20).⁵⁵ Timmer adds, "Zephaniah makes a separation between two groups in Judah *and* between two groups among the nations. It is this distinction that lets us affirm . . . that . . . *some* Judeans will survive the judgment to become the remnant."⁵⁶ At least three factors support viewing the book's main exhortations as applying primarily to Judah but by extension to the those from the broader nations.

First, Zephaniah has a strong interest in the place of both Judah and the rest of the nations in God's salvation-historical purposes regarding

53. Floyd, *Minor Prophets*, 216.

54. Daniel C. Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve: Thematic Coherence and the Diachronic-Synchronic Relationship in the Minor Prophets*, Biblical Interpretation 135 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 151.

55. Timmer further asserts that in Zephaniah "a lexical distinction is consistently present between Judah and its remnant on the one hand, and the nations (transformed or not) in the past, present, and future on the other. Only pandemic or globally inclusive language (e.g., earth, whole earth) occasionally pushes aside the clear distinction," and "those contexts each make clear that the collective is constituted of Israelite and non-Israelite parts" (Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve*, 166; cf. p. 158). In contrast, the prophet more often portrays Judah and Jerusalem as a subset of "all the earth" (e.g., Zeph 1:2–3, 14–18). Judah retains one of "all the coastlands of the nations" that will bow before YHWH (2:11c); they are one "nation" (2:11a; cf. 3:1–5) among a host of others "nations" (3:6a; cf. 2:5–15).

56. Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve*, 166. Timmer focuses this distinction on the *future*, but the future remnant is already becoming defined in Zephaniah's *present*, a fact that Timmer himself seems to affirm (p. 167).

punishment. Likely due both to his noble position in the Davidic line as a descendant of King Hezekiah and to his prophetic calling as mouthpiece of “YHWH of hosts—the God of Israel” (1:1; cf. 2:9a), Zephaniah is clearly aware of and attentive to the inner workings of the royal court (1:8; 3:3–4) and international affairs (cf. 2:4–15), and this knowledge informs his declarations of YHWH’s coming wrath.⁵⁷ Specifically, with respect to the punishment side of the day of YHWH, the prophet foresees God’s just curse against sin (Zeph 1:17) taking the form of both local destruction against Judah (1:4–13; 3:1–7) and global destruction against her neighbors (2:5–15; 3:6) and the broader world (1:2–3, 14–18; 2:11).⁵⁸ For example, before highlighting Jerusalem’s im-

57. Among the prophetic superscriptions, Zephaniah alone bears a five-member genealogy, which draws attention to the last member, Hezekiah, who is likely the godly reformer and 13th king of Judah who reigned 729–686 BC (see 2 Kgs 18–20; Isa 36–39). That Hezekiah is not designated “king” is likely explained by the fact that “Josiah” was now “the king of Judah.” Furthermore, were a different “Hezekiah” intended, one is hard pressed to explain why the author includes him in the genealogy at all and why the author does not explicitly distinguish him from King Hezekiah. Finally, that four generations could actually pass between Hezekiah (age 25 in 729, 2 Kgs 18:1) and Zephaniah (likely 20–30 around 622 BC) does seem possible when one considers the early fatherhood characterizing Judah’s royal house: Amon at age 16 (2 Kgs 21:19; 22:1), Josiah at age 14 (22:1; 23:36), and Jehoiakim at age 18 (24:8). Even if we make each man 25 years old when he fathers his son, Zephaniah would be 32 in 622 BC. For arguments that “Hezekiah” in Zeph 1:1 is indeed King Hezekiah of Judah, see, e.g., Smith, “A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Zephaniah,” 182–83; Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 898; Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 91; Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 253. Both Berlin and Sweeney overview the question but make no conclusions (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 65–66; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 48). Roberts and Sweeney question the plausibility (Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 166; Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 47).

58. Zephaniah is one of many of YHWH’s prophets who apply the title “the day of YHWH” (יְהוָה יוֹם) both to the ultimate day of global recreation/restoration and to the periodic penultimate days that anticipate it. For Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is the climactic future event when God will finally establish his sovereignty, eradicate all evil, and bring lasting peace in the world, but it is also YHWH’s various typological intrusions into space and time to punish wickedness—whether that of Israel (Joel 2:1–11, 31; cf. Ezek 13:5; Joel 1:15; Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1; Mal 4:5[3:23]) or the nations (Isa 13; cf. Isa 2:6–19; Jer 46:10–12; Ezek 30:1–9; Joel 3:9–16; Obad 15). Over the last century, scholars have defined the core of Israel’s “day of YHWH” tradition in various ways—e.g., a vision of YHWH’s enthronement (Mowinckel), anticipations of YHWH’s future work on behalf of Israel (Černý), holy war and conquest (von Rad), treaty curses (Fensham), theophany (Hoffman), or various blendings of these options (Cross, Weiss, Everson). From my perspective, we must take a more eclectic approach to the day of the Lord. For example, Motyer writes, on the one hand, “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 YHWH is] the climax alike of history, sin, and the purposes of God” (Motyer, “Zephaniah,” 3:917–18).

pending punishment (3:1–7), the prophet systematically describes how God would overcome Philistia to the west, Moab and Bene-Ammon to the east, and Cush and Assyria to the south and north. He even addresses Philistia (2:5) and Cush (2:12) directly, using second-plural pronouns (“you”). As such, this “compass” of divine fury not only emphasizes that Judah cannot escape but also highlights how Judah is but one of the “nations” and “kingdoms” that the Lord will gather in order to pour out upon them his indignation (3:8).⁵⁹ And if the warnings of the book are not only for Judah, then it seems possible that the call for repentance is also broader.

Second, building on the previous point, Zephaniah also stresses the place of the nations in the new creational restoration, which arrives on the day of the Lord. Very specifically, relative to the size and makeup of the book, Zephaniah expresses a high interest in the region and people of Cush (כּוּשׁ). Cush was center of ancient black Africa (rendered in Egyptian as “Nubia” and in Greek and English as “Ethiopia” but located in the region of modern Sudan; cf. Jer 13:23). It was also one of the most southern and western

On the other hand, he indicates that “in some sense the prophets saw significant historical events as the day of the Lord. Isaiah (13:1–6) looked forward to the fall of Babylon; Amos (5:18–27) thought of the captivity of northern Israel. In each case, however, neither in prospect nor in retrospect was the day of the Lord fully realized. 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” (ibid., 3:918). Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson, Biblical Resource Series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956); L. Černý, *The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* (Prague: University of Karlova Press, 1948); Gerhard von Rad, “The Origin of the Concept of the Day of Yahweh,” *JSS* 4 (1958): 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 (Stellenbosch: Potchefstroom Herald, 1966), 90–97; Yair Hoffman, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in Prophetic Literature,” *ZAW* 93 (1981): 37–50; Frank Moore Cross, “The Divine Warrior in Israel’s Early Cult,” in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 11–30; Meir Weiss, “The Origin of the Day of the Lord Reconsidered,” *HUCA* 37 (1966): 29–63; A. Joseph Everson, “The Days of Yahweh,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 329–37. For some recent surveys of the issue, see Richard H. Hiers, “Day of the Lord,” *ABD* 2:82–83; Mark A. LaRocca-Pitts, “The Day of Yahweh as a Rhetorical Strategy among Hebrew Prophets” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000); J. D. Barker, “Day of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boddy and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 132–43.

59. For more on this great eschatological ingathering, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “YHWH’S Future Ingathering in Zephaniah 1:2: Interpreting יְהוָה יִגְדָּל,” *HS* 59 (2018): 173–91.

kingdoms of the OT age (see Esth 1:1).⁶⁰ Because Zephaniah's father's name was "Cushi" (כּוּשִׁי), it is very possible that the prophet bore a biracial heritage, having both Judean and black African ancestry (1:1).⁶¹ This fact would clarify the prophet's focus on Cush's punishment rather than Egypt's (2:12) and his use of Cush as the *sole* region exemplifying God's global restoration (3:9–10).⁶²

60. 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*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 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 Press, 1995], 60).

61. 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" (Gene Rice, "The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah," *JRT* 36 [1979]: 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.

62. English translations commonly render the verbless clause in Zeph 2:12 as future (e.g., NRSV, NASB, NETB, ESV, NIV, CSB), likely anticipating the campaign of Saite Egyptian Pharaoh Psammetichus II against the Cushites in 593/592 BC, the invasions of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon into the south in 568/67 BC (see Jer 43:10–13; Ezek 29:19; 30:25; 32:11), or the defeat of both Cush and Egypt by Cambyses II of Persia around 525 BC. In contrast, both the disjunctive nature of 2:12 (brought about by the וְ, "also") and its lack of verbal specificity suggests the verse may instead function transitionally and refer "to a present condition or even to a status that originated in the past" (Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, 179, 304). On this reading, the slaying of the Cushites would have *already* happened, most likely when the Cushite Twenty-fifth Dynasty of Egypt fell in 663 BC, one generation *prior* to Zephaniah's preaching (see Isa 20:3–6). The Cushites controlled Egypt ca. 715–663 BC, but the Assyrians under the rule of Assurbanipal overthrew them. For several further observations that support reading the reference to Cush in Zeph 2:12 as pointing to the Cushite Twenty-fifth Dynasty of Egypt, see DeRouchie, *Zephaniah*, s.v. 2:12.

For more on Zephaniah's African roots and his use of Cush in his oracle, see Rice, "The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah." Cf. 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 Press, 1995), 45–70;

In support of “Cushi” in 1:1 identifying Zephaniah with the black African empire Cush, we know that a colony of Cushite mercenaries was located in Gerar of the northern Negeb between the 10th and 8th centuries BC (see 1 Chr 4:39–41; 2 Chr 12:3; 14:9–15; 21:16).⁶³ We also know that Jerusalem’s leadership was closely associated with Cushites (2 Sam 18:21; Jer 38:7; 39:16)⁶⁴ and that Judah had a number of political alliances with the nation of Cush, including one in the period just prior to the birth of Zephaniah’s father (Isa 18:1–2; 20:5–6; 37:9 [// 2 Kgs 19:9]).⁶⁵ It is very possible, therefore, that Zephaniah could have been biracial⁶⁶ and that this personal backdrop guided him to focus on Cush.

Zephaniah recognizes the seriousness of his people’s sin (2:12). Nevertheless, he also believes that if God’s day of punishment has begun with Cush it also implies that the restoration will begin with them as well, and this naturally necessitates that they seek the Lord.⁶⁷

Third, the two sections (each beginning with “Woe!”) that lament the state and fate of the rebels from the foreign nations (2:5–15) and Jerusalem (3:1–7) likely supply an unmarked logical ground or reason those serious about YHWH should “bundle together” and “seek” the Lord (2:1, 3), even as they also supply the marked ground for the inference drawn in 3:8

Robert A. Bennett, “The Book of Zephaniah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:659, 670–72; J. Daniel Hays, “The Cushites: A Black Nation in Ancient History,” *BSac* 153 (1996): 270–80.

63. 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 Press, 1995), 238–51.

64. 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 (*Zephaniah*, 67), I see no reason “Cush, the Benjamite” in Ps 7:1 could not be both a personal name given by his father and also a hint to a biracial heritage.

65. Rice, “The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” 25–27. Cf. Isa 30:1–7; 31:1–3 (where “Egypt” likely refers to the Cushite Twenty-fifth Dynasty of Egypt); Ezek 29:16; 30:5.

66. So Rice, “The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah,” 21–31; cf. Anderson, “Zephaniah Ben Cushi and Cush of Benjamin,” 45–70; Bennett, “The Book of Zephaniah,” 7:659, 670–72; J. Daniel Hays, “The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible,” *BSac* 153 (1996): 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 source data for shaping a proper understanding a Cushite presence within the Levant in the days of Zephaniah.

67. For more on this, see Floyd, *Minor Prophets*, 211–13.

לִכְן “therefore”).⁶⁸ As such, as already noted, we must account for the fact that in these sections YHWH directly addresses “Canaan, the land of the Philistines” in 2:5a (using a second-feminine-singular pronominal suffix “you” in 2:5c), the “Cushites” in 2:12 (using a second-masculine-plural pronoun), and the “rebelling and defiled one—the oppressing city” of Jerusalem in 3:1. The logic would be, “Because I will destroy ‘you’ (Philistia and city of Jerusalem) or have already destroyed ‘you’ (Cush), ‘bundle’ yourselves and ‘seek’ YHWH.” As stated, the primary referents of Zephaniah’s exhortations in 2:1 and 3 are associated with Judah, but the vocative speech that targets the land of Canaan in 2:5 and the Cushites in 2:12 points to a broader application.

Many scholars do not believe God ever intended his prophets to confront the foreign peoples with their words.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there is high likelihood that at least some of Judah’s neighbors could have heard Zephaniah’s message. We know, for example, that there was probably strong Philistine influence within Zephaniah’s Jerusalem, which could have allowed some of them to hear his words (see 1:11 with 2:5; cf. Isa 2:6). Furthermore, as noted above, we are aware that Jerusalem had strong ties with a number of Cushites, and if Zephaniah himself had a near Cushite biological relative, his own family could have carried his influence outward. Finally, we also know that, at times, YHWH’s covenant enforcers directly engaged foreign peoples on their turf (e.g., 2 Kgs 8:7–15; Jer 27:3; 51:61–64; Jonah 3:4–5; cf. Jer 1:5). Accordingly, when the above features are matched with the second-person speech in Zeph 2:5 and 12, it seems very possible that Zephaniah could have proclaimed elements of his message to the foreign peoples themselves. At the very least, the NT authors recognized the Book of the Twelve in general (Acts 7:42) and Zephaniah in particular as Christian Scripture (John 12:13, 15; Acts 2, 8) written with a message for the multiethnic church (Rom 15:4; 1 Pet 1:12).⁷⁰

68. Due to the return to second-masculine-plural address in Zeph 3:8 (cf. 2:1, 3), which stands in contrast to third-feminine-singular address in 3:1–7, the inference marker לִכְן (“therefore”) in 3:8 likely marks a conclusion drawn from all of 2:5–3:7 and not just 3:1–7.

69. E.g., John H. Hayes, “The Usage of Oracles against Foreign Nations in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 81–92, esp. p. 81; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, WBC 32 (Dallas: Word, 1984), 136; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 197; Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 117; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 213; Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 126; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 126, 146.

70. For two studies that detail how the NT appropriates Zephaniah, see Jerry Dale Butcher, “The Significance of Zephaniah 3:8–13 for Narrative Composition in the Early Chapters of the Book of Acts” (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1972); Tachick, “*King of Israel*”.

Conclusion

In Zeph 2:1, 3, the prophet addresses first “the nation not longing” and next “the humble of the land.” How should we identify these audiences? The most likely immediate referent of the initial vocative phrase in 2:1 is Zephaniah’s rebellious Judah, whom he characterizes collectively as lacking desire for God. He identifies the majority with “the remnant of Baal” (Zeph 1:4) and points to the nobility and religious elite as leading the rebellion (1:3, 8–9; cf. 3:2–3) but portrays the complacency as reaching down to the masses (1:5–6, 12). This self-reliant failure to follow God and lack of hunger for God identifies the nation of Judah at large with the other sinful peoples of the world (1:17), all of whom are equal objects of YHWH’s just wrath (1:18; 2:2; 3:8; cf. 2:5–15 with 3:1–7). And within this framework, the lack of specificity of “the nation not longing” allows the phrase to apply more broadly to all those in heartless nations—like the Cherithites (2:5) and Cushites (2:12) whom the prophet also directly addresses and against whom God’s word is or has been.

As for the referent of “the humble of the land” in 2:3, the phrase most immediately concerns the remnant of faithful within Judah “who have heeded his [i.e., YHWH’s] judgment,” which principally refers to the individuals in Judah who were already responding with hearts of surrender and God-dependence to his declaration of the coming day of punishment. But as with “the nation” in 2:1, those “humble” from Judah in 2:3 also anticipate a broader remnant from “the peoples” that Zephaniah himself foresees (2:9, 11; 3:9–10). As such, while the charge to “seek YHWH” in 2:3 finds its immediate referent in those faithful from Judah who were humble before God, the command more broadly affects *all* among the nations who would repent and join the community of faithful in looking and longing, heeding and hoping, entreating and trusting—patiently pursuing the Lord together (2:3; 3:8) in light of the freedom and joy that awaits (3:11–20). As Christian Scripture, Zephaniah’s plea continues today.