

## THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

### Lesson 1, Introduction and Chapter 1

It goes without saying that the Book of Zephaniah ... a small book of only 3 chapters... is one of the least known, least studied, of all the 12 Minor Prophets. Once read, it leaves one wondering why as it is packed with information, easier to read in some ways than the ultra-complex books of prophecy written in Hebrew poetry like Nahum, and that it perhaps spends more time addressing matters directly related to the End Times than any other of the Minor Prophets. We'll attempt to remedy that lack of knowledge on this brief, but important, book.

Walter Kaiser, Jr. aptly points out that it was Zephaniah that broke a long pause in Prophetic oracle that occurred after such 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. prophets like when Micah, Amos, and Isaiah spoke. He prophesied *after* the tremendously terrible time in Israel's history, which had begun in 697 B.C., when the more than 50-year reign of King Manasseh who so corrupted the biblical faith and brought many pagan elements of worship into it; and *during* the time of the reform-king of Judah: Josiah.

**CJB 2 Kings 21:16 *Moreover, M'nasheh shed so much innocent blood that he flooded Yerushalayim from one end to the other- this in addition to his sin through which he caused Y'hudah to sin by doing what is evil from Yehoveh's perspective.***

2Kings 21 and 2Chronicles 33 explains that King Manasseh incorporated many evil things into Judah and did so by dismantling his father Hezekiah's efforts of a much earlier reformation. Manasseh adopted pagan sorceries, child sacrifice, and was a mass murderer of those who protested his wrecking of the Torah-oriented Hebrew faith. He rebuilt the high places of Ashtoreth worship that had been torn down by his father; he erected altars for Baal; he set up worship of the sun, moon and stars. He even had an image of the pagan fertility goddess place inside the holy Temple sanctuary.

As unimaginable as it might seem, Manasseh was so given over to evil that he burnt up his own sons as offerings in the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem. Jewish

tradition is that he also had the Prophet Isaiah murdered. Equally as unimaginable, 2Chronicles 33 claims that when he was captured by the Assyrians and taken to Babylon, where he repented.

**CJB 2 Chronicles 33:11-15** ***<sup>11</sup> Therefore Yehoveh brought against them the commanders of the king of Ashur's army. They took M'nasheh captive with hooks, bound him in chains and carried him off to Bavel. <sup>12</sup> Then, when he was in distress, he began to appease the anger of Yehoveh, abjectly humbling himself before the God of his ancestors. <sup>13</sup> He prayed to him; and God was moved by his plea, paid attention to his entreaty and brought him back to Yerushalayim, to his kingly office. Then M'nasheh understood that Yehoveh really is God. <sup>14</sup> After this he built an outer wall for the City of David on the west side of Gichon, in the valley, extending as far as the entrance at the Fish Gate; it encompassed the 'Ofel, and he built it very high. He stationed army commanders in all the fortified cities of Y'hudah. <sup>15</sup> He removed the foreign gods and the idol from the house of Yehoveh and all the altars he had built on the hill of the house of Yehoveh and in Yerushalayim, and threw them out of the city.***

One wonders how such a corrupt and lawless man could ever sincerely repent and undo many of the terrible things he had instituted; at the same time obviously not ever bringing back to life the countless hundreds, if not thousands, that he had murdered. But is that not (hopefully in not such severe ways) the wickedness so many of us had done that miraculously changed direction and found our way to the Messiah? That is, we had wittingly or unwittingly done pretty awful things in our lives, hurt many people beyond any fixing we could ever attempt, practiced evil things or even worshipped them, until God moved and then we realized what we had done and who God really is. We repented, changed direction, and made our lives into something else entirely. It certainly appears that Manasseh received mercy and forgiveness from Yehoveh, which only ought to show us that nothing we've ever done can be enough to condemn us to eternal death PROVIDED we confess our sins, renounce our old ways and accept God's truth. That is, we repent... meaning not to only to be sorry, but to completely turn and change our behaviors and beliefs... but, to do it within our lifetime. If we don't do that prior to our

physical death, then we will indeed receive the merited consequence of eternal death.

While Manasseh began some reforms, the need for which was caused by his own apostasy, the king to follow him was his son Amon, who the Bible describes as an evil king. Even naming his son Amon demonstrates the lengths of Manasseh's depravity since he did it in honor of one of the chief Egyptian gods, Amon. He only ruled for a couple of years after his father's death, but he followed the dark side of his father and not the rather newly enlightened side. He began undoing the reforms his father had begun, but he was soon murdered, and his father's grandson, Josiah, then became king... at the age of 8. Obviously, this child-king didn't start out as a reformer but as a mid-teen he did become one.

Josiah is spoken about primarily in 2Kings 22 and is framed as a good king. Yet, as with us all, his life was also a journey and discovery.

**CJB 2 Kings 22:8-13** ***<sup>8</sup> Hilkiyahu the cohen hagadol said to Shafan the secretary, "I have found the scroll of the Torah in the house of Yehoveh." Hilkiyah gave the scroll to Shafan, who read it. <sup>9</sup> Then Shafan the secretary went back to the king and gave the king this report: "Your servants have poured out the money found in the house and handed it over to the people supervising the work in the house of Yehoveh." <sup>10</sup> Shafan the secretary also told the king, "Hilkiyah the cohen hagadol gave me a scroll." Then Shafan read it aloud before the king. <sup>11</sup> After the king had heard what was written in the scroll of the Torah, he tore his clothes. <sup>12</sup> Then the king issued this order to Hilkiyah the cohen, Achikam the son of Shafan, 'Akhbor the son of Mikhayah, Shafan the secretary and 'Asayah the king's servant: <sup>13</sup> "Go; and consult Yehoveh for me, for the people and for all Y'hudah in regard to what is written in this scroll which has been found. For Yehoveh must be furious at us, since our ancestors did not listen to the words written in this scroll and didn't do everything written there that concerns us."***

This is what Zephaniah witnessed as he was born during Manasseh's reign, then lived under Amon, but only began to prophesy during Josiah's time as king of Judah. I told you all this so that you can visualize the context of Zephaniah's life, which surely had much to do with how he thought and wrote.

Zephaniah's name means "God has hidden". Or more literally: "He whom Yehoveh has hidden". It was a somewhat common name in those ancient times. It is highly unusual that in the first verse of his book (the superscription) we find his generational history that goes back 4 full generations, which seems to connect him... ironically... to King Hezekiah (Manasseh's father). Through which of Hezekiah's wives he was born we don't know, so whatever line of Hezekiah he belonged to it was apparently not the royal one.

Interestingly, Zephaniah's father's name was Cushi. Cushi, comes from the word Cush, and in his day, Cush was known as Ethiopia. So, it certainly appears that his father was a foreigner from Ethiopia, and it must have been through his mother that he was connected to Hezekiah. Now, some Bible scholars point out that although Hezekiah's name is mentioned, it doesn't outright say "King Hezekiah". However, if it was another Hezekiah, it makes no sense why he would have gone to such lengths to pronounce his heritage, that only could have been meant to establish his credentials.

We know from the superscription that he prophesied during the reign of Josiah, but which part of that reign is the question, since Josiah reigned for 31 years. The one marker of Josiah's life that might be the key to determining this is when the Torah scrolls were discovered in the walls of the Temple that was being refurbished, and it was read to him. That is when his reforms went into overdrive. The favored date then, is about 630 B.C.

So, let's set this time in the context of Israel's history. In 630 B.C., the northern kingdom of Ephraim/Israel had been conquered by Assyria, and the Israelites scattered around 90 years earlier. For the residents of Judah, they were all that remained of Israel. Thus, the kings we read about, and have been reading about since King Hosea, have been kings ONLY over Judah. The

northern kingdom was but a memory, and to the generation Zephaniah was speaking to, it was a distant one.

To Judah's south, Egypt was in the midst of a cultural and political resurgence, and operating again as a sovereign nation, after throwing off the oppression and rule of the Assyrians. At the same time, greater Asia was in political upheaval because of the rapidly declining power of the Assyrians to hold together their Empire. New allegiances were being formed, and the rise of the Medes and the Scythians was underway. It wouldn't be long before the Medes and Babylonians would ally to conquer Nineveh and bring to a permanent end the influence and existence of Assyria. But that did not seem to happen, yet, during the time Zephaniah was writing down his prophecy.

During this same time, Europe was in the midst of much change and transition. The areas along the Mediterranean Sea coast were experiencing the rise and expansion of the Greek system of establishing city-states. Rome was well over 100 years old by now, and the Romans were developing an infrastructure that would eventually lead to their domination over large parts of Europe and Asia. The nature of militaries was evolving such that horses were being used for more than pulling chariots. Entire military units of cavalry were being formed, which would change the very nature of warfare.

The Israelites living in Judah were completely aware of all this, as were these other nations aware of Judah and what was going on there. Nothing happened in a vacuum. A significant event in one nation could have a geopolitical effect in others. So, not surprisingly, Zephaniah's prophecy had much to do with the nations, and not just Judah.

The main outside threat Judah faced at this time was the Scythians, a growing power that had some grand aspirations. The Scythians were nomadic people who operated mainly in what we today would call eastern Iran. Although we don't hear as much about them as we probably ought to, they were a formidable power that emerged as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. They absolutely dominated the region from what is modern day Ukraine, all the way to what we call Siberia and even into Mongolia. They were most skilled and ferocious in the art of warfare, and their leaders were determined to expand

their territories with little attention paid to the cost. In fact, they were among the most feared foes of both the Greeks and the Romans.

So, there was lots going on in the world during Zephaniah's time, even though the Bible deals very little with anything outside of Judah. Why? Probably because it was common knowledge for people and there was little point to taking up space to write about it.

Later on, as we get into the study of the chapters and verses of Zephaniah, it will become clear just how quickly, easily, and thoroughly pagan worship practices had regularly slipped into Israel's Hebrew faith. No matter how often Israel might institute reforms, just as quickly they would fall right back into their idolatrous ways. As we go on soon to read about matters in Zephaniah's time, it will be unavoidable for us to compare that to where the bulk of Christianity is today due to the startling similarities. And, just as demonstrated by the famous proverb of the frog-in-the-kettle, as syncretism is happening and the religious practices bend towards including more and more pagan and/or secular elements, it tends to go unnoticed. Finally, when the worship practices and beliefs have become so thoroughly corrupted, and for long enough, no one dares to challenge it; it has become the new norm. Those mainstream adherents always represent the majority, and because there is safety in numbers, those in the majority assume they must be right, and those who question them must be heretics or lunatics. Therefore, it usually takes some kind of calamity or extremely harsh act of God to get the people's and their leaders' attention sufficiently to come to their senses, search for the truth, and to destroy that which had lured them into their apostacies in the first place. But it is a very painful and long-lasting process.

In modern times, critical scholars have challenged a few different aspects of the Book of Zephaniah, beginning with its structure. That is, many do not see a unified structure, but rather only a collection of some prophetic sayings there were sort of thrown together, and possibly by a number of different authors and later editors. While one cannot just dismiss such thoughts as impossible to one degree or another, the unlikelihood of it is well expressed by Max Margolis's introduction to the Book the Zephaniah. He says this:

**“None of the prophetic books consists of complete speeches arranged chronologically, but rather excerpts from different times in the life of the prophet, arranged according to topics; and, moreover, there no transition between topics. For such is the power of the imaginative spirit of the prophet: to skip from topic to topic as it enters his mind, to put the later early, and the early late, to speak about the nations and Israel together, to chastise the wicked and comfort the Godfearing. But all of them begin with punishment and end with comfort.”**

In other words, the underlying structure of Zephaniah is pretty typical of the way prophets write. Margolis’s introduction is actually pushing back against those modern scholars who question the unity and single authorship of Zephaniah. What all the prophets present revolves around the three-part thought of God’s judgment FIRST against Israel and Judah, then God’s judgment against the nations, and then finally a message of hope and restoration given primarily for Israel and Judah. All the prophets subscribe to the Circle of Sin formula that applies ONLY to God’s covenant people.

Zephaniah indeed incorporates a kind of Hebrew poetry in his writing, noticeable primarily in the form of rhythm, repetition of phrases and words, and parallelism. But some argue that calling it poetry at all is questionable; rather, it is just a kind of high-level prose that prophets often employ. I don’t want to get caught up in fancy or high-minded labels, because whether we call it poetry or prose, our thought processes inherently revolve around Western style poetry, and commonly used prose from our era, and this book reflects nothing Western or modern. Achieving a vividness for the audience is what clearly mattered to Zephaniah as we see in his descriptions of things like idolators and those who mixed the divine with the pagan, and the consequences they will experience as a result. He also at times uses blunt and quite strong rhetoric to make a point. Nonetheless, other than for perhaps noting certain repetitions and shifts of voice, we cannot look to more typically structured Hebrew poetry to help us through it. It is a unique style Zephaniah employs. It is also highly literate. Whoever Zephaniah was, and whatever his background and the role he was operating in, in Judah’s society he was an accomplished writer. This is no farmer or shepherd.

We need to watch for themes from Genesis in all 3 chapters of his little book. I'll wait until we get to them as we do our study to point them out. I only wanted to make you aware. This Genesis influence has to do with the created world as he knew it, and without doubt as we know it, going through kind of a reversal to the extreme point that the most of God's creation is destroyed. Things like the fall from grace and expulsion from Eden for Adam and Eve, as well as Noah's Flood story are among the associated descriptions that Zephaniah uses, fully expecting his listeners and readers to catch those connections.

I've pointed out before that the Minor Prophets make clear links between their prophecies and the Torah. Or, more specifically, between their prophecies and the covenants between God and Israel that we find in the Torah, particularly as it connects to The Law of Moses. Zephaniah does the same and makes specific aspects of God's wrath associated with the specific punishments certain violations of the covenant call for. Sometimes we see this more plainly as connected with the wording we find in the Book of Deuteronomy. We will also find some association between Zephaniah's words and the Psalms (and, perhaps, other wisdom literature, some of which has probably been lost to history). I suspect that some of what we will read is actually intended to be recognized as excerpts from the Psalms but are usually only presented in paraphrase and not a direct quote. So, those instances can sometimes be hard to spot. Even so, these prophets are putting into words things God has said or shown to them. When those God-breathed words are converted to writing, it is natural that it is done in each prophet's style, life experiences, and worldview that becomes the background of each sentence. It is an inspired-of-God human being writing the prophecy, and not God Himself (as though His finger was writing the 10 commandments on 2 slabs of stone). All of the Bible is like that, so there's nothing different in Zephaniah in that regard than we'd find in most other prophetic utterings (I ask you to refer back to what Max Margolis had to say about prophetic writing's form that we just discussed a few minutes ago).

All that I've told you is the context, the background, and the way for Zephaniah to be understood. Outside of that context he will be misunderstood. So, let's move into Zephaniah chapter 1.

Open your Bibles to Zephaniah, chapter 1.

### **READ ZEPHANIAH CHAPTER 1 all**

Although I mentioned this in our Introduction to Zephaniah, I'll repeat that verse 1 is the superscription to this book. This is quite standard form and protocol in many Bible books, but it always needs to be recognized for what it is. It introduces the author, usually there is some reference to the timeframe of when this author wrote it, and sometimes it gives a short genealogy of the author. Occasionally a little bit of context or overview of what the book is about is offered. But it is not until the next verse that the actual information or oracle begins to be presented.

Unfortunately, with Zephaniah many modern Bible scholars have decided that he is a fictitious character with a fictitious name. Why? They say there is no "proof" he was real. "Proof" is a very big and demanding concept; of course, when it comes to history, absolute proof of much of anything from the past is not achievable. Thus, one could ask whether George Washington, or Napoleon, or Nero were real characters. All but the rarest critic agrees all these people existed, that this was their names, and for the most part what is written about them and their exploits is true. But... modern Bible critics seem to want greater proofs than is required for almost any other historical character, knowing that such a standard of proof they demand is entirely unachievable. When that impossible level of proof cannot be produced, they declare the person to be a fiction or a myth.

In the end, going back to centuries prior to the birth of Yeshua, no one questioned the authenticity of Zephaniah. So, we can dismiss such accusations of modern Bible critics as nonsense. There is no proof that he did NOT exist, and it was believed by an entire culture for many centuries that he did exist.

Let's look again at that 1<sup>st</sup> verse.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:1** *This is the word of Yehoveh that came to Tz'fanyah the son of Kushi, the son of G'dalyah, the son of Amaryah, the son of Hizkiyah, during the reign of Yoshiyahu the son of Amon, king of Y'hudah:*

These are the claims this superscription makes: **1)** What is being written down is the “word”, the speech, the oracle, that came from the God of Israel, Yehoveh. **2)** It was given in an inspired way to a man name Zephaniah. **3)** He was the son of a man named Kushi, who was the son of a man named Gedaliah, who was the son of Amaria, who was a son of Hezekiah. **4)** Zephaniah received this word from God sometime during the reign of Josiah. **5)** Josiah was a son of Amon. **6)** Josiah was the king of Judah.

There is no reason at all to challenge this statement. So, we shall go forward with that contextual understanding. I have already given you sufficient historical background, so we can move on to verse 2.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:2** *"I will completely sweep away everything off the face of the land," says Yehoveh.*

That is quite an opening. Startling to say the least. This was designed to be read along with verse 3, in order to form a complete statement. I'll remind you all that when the Bible was written no such things as chapters and verses were incorporated. Only around 1000 A.D. was the Bible divided into the sections as we have them today, and then further divided into numbered verses. While it was meant to be helpful, sometimes it can obscure and confuse. Like here, what is marked as verses 2 & 3 is really just one long connected thought.

**CJB Zephaniah 1:3** *"I will sweep away humans and animals, the birds in the air and the fish in the sea, also the wicked and what makes them stumble; I will wipe humanity off the land," says Yehoveh.*

Notice how verses 2 and 3 both begin with the words “I will sweep away”. Verse 3 then goes on to explain further just what is going to be swept away. This has a whiff of Hebrew poetry in the repetition of a word for “sweep away”

and in its parallelism (2 consecutive sentences saying essentially the same things, just said a bit differently). But it is not pure Hebrew poetry... it is only similar... or at least it reflects Zephaniah's own style of poetry, assuming that was what he was actually trying for.

Zephaniah's statement very much echoes the words of an earlier prophet: Hosea.

**CJB Hosea 4:3** *Therefore the land mourns, and everyone living there languishes, wild animals too, and the birds in the air; even the fish in the sea are removed.*

No doubt, Zephaniah worded his prophecy purposely similar to Hosea's. Both reveal a widespread devastation of all living creatures, whether living in the air, the land, or the seas.

From a grammar and technical syntax perspective, there are problems with these opening words. I won't get into those because they are too esoteric. I usually rationalize these sorts of issues when given in the Minor Prophets as a matter of the mix of Hebrew poetry and prose that is common, where the emotional effect and other factors are more important to the author than precision and exactness of literary constraints and constructions. Interestingly, because of that, the opening words of "I will sweep away" could just as easily been translated as "I will AGAIN sweep away". This possibility is due to the root of the Hebrew words used that inherently indicate destruction or a final ending. I can't be sure which opening statement is the correct one. But I sort of lean towards the addition of the word "again", because we will shortly see that this sweeping away is to be so complete that the only thing it can possibly be compared to from the past is Noah's Flood.

A bit of confusion can happen with verse 2, because it speaks of a wide-ranging destruction "off the face of the land". Since the word "**Ha-eretz**" in Hebrew is often a term that means "the land of Israel", then some want to apply this only to the dwelling place of the Israelites... which at this time was Judah. But, in this case this is referring to the entire world. That is, this is to be a universal "sweeping away" with no place spared.

Notice that this prophecy specifically is about living creatures: humans, domestic animals, wild animals, birds even fish. The idea is ALL living creatures. In verse 3, the meaning of the first half of it is self-evident; but the part that says “also the wicked and what makes them stumble” is a little more challenging. More typically, biblical language concerning stumbling blocks (which are the cause of sinning) is connected with the righteous... not the wicked. That is, stumbling blocks make the righteous stumble. Here, the notion seems to be something like, “what were those stumbling blocks that made people become wicked?”

Here’s the thing: the key Hebrew word in this clause is **hammakselot**. It is used in the feminine gender form, which complicates matters. Feminine objects are usually the items connected with idolatry. So, it hints strongly that these stumbling blocks are idols and images. And, then in light of the creatures mentioned for global extermination, we have Deuteronomy 4, which uses these same named creatures that must not have replicas made of them for worshipping. That is, humans, animals, birds, and fish are representative of all the creatures on the earth, and God orders that these are not to be turned into images of worship.

**CJB Deuteronomy 4:15-18 <sup>15</sup> "Therefore, watch out for yourselves! Since you did not see a shape of any kind on the day ADONAI spoke to you in Horev from the fire, <sup>16</sup> do not become corrupt and make yourselves a carved image having the shape of any figure- not a representation of a human being, male or female, <sup>17</sup> or a representation of any animal on earth, or a representation of any bird that flies in the air, <sup>18</sup> or a representation of anything that creeps along on the ground, or a representation of any fish in the water below the shoreline.**

So, what we see is Zephaniah pointing towards a worldwide extinction event for all living creatures (which from a biblical viewpoint is a reversal of Creation), but also that these objects of worship using various creatures are to be wiped out because they are being used for idolatrous purposes. I’ll say again: the stumbling blocks are kind of an idiom for all objects of worship that

are images or carvings of earthly creatures. The Book of Ezekiel brings across this same thought.

**CJB Ezekiel 14:3-6** <sup>3</sup> *"Human being, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, thus setting in front of themselves the stumbling block that leads to sin. Should I let them consult me at all? <sup>4</sup> Therefore speak to them, and tell them that Yehoveh ELOHIM says, 'Everyone in the house of Isra'el who takes his idols into his heart, thus setting in front of himself the stumbling block that leads to sin, and then comes to the prophet, I myself, Yehoveh, will answer him in a manner suited to his many idols, <sup>5</sup> in order to grab hold of the house of Isra'el in their hearts; since, through their idols, they have all fallen away from me.' <sup>6</sup> "Therefore say to the house of Isra'el that Yehoveh ELOHIM says, 'Repent! Turn yourselves away from your idols, turn your faces away from all your disgusting practices!"*

So, Ezekiel directly makes the connection between stumbling blocks and idols. We should see it the same way in Zephaniah because this had become pretty standard language among the prophets, and very probably any mention in the New Testament of stumbling blocks also inherently means idols and is not meant as something like "anything imaginable that could make a person stumble in their faith".

Here's another important thing to consider: this oracle that God is essentially going to kill every living creature on earth (a catastrophe modeled after Noah's Flood, but this time it will be by a different means), has no boundaries. All nations, all peoples... including God's people... are included. From the viewpoint of Zephaniah's day, this means Judah and all that remains of Israel is included. Just as the flood waters "purified" the earth, so will God's fiery wrath purify what is being transformed into the Kingdom of God. The means of that purification is judgment.

We've spoken before about how purification works. The elements of water and fire can be used to purify, and they can be used to destroy. Fire better fits this End Times purification because God promised to never again destroy the earth using water. Fire, then, in this context (fire as symbolic of God's wrath), is

going to destroy those who are not God's people and yet purify those who are. Both groups, however, will go through the fire. This is part of God's patterns.

Here's where this leads us. Assuming this is speaking about the End Times, and the coming worldwide destruction (which it must be since it certainly has not happened up to now), then we must call to mind that there will be two parts of this End Times destruction. That which comes from tribulation, and that which comes from God's Wrath. The Church has forever made those 2 different things as but one combined thing. That is incorrect. The Church did this by inserting a word in the passages that speak of tribulation, but that word is not there. In Greek it is **ton**; in English it is "the". Thus, tribulation became "The Tribulation" and great tribulation became The Great Tribulation as though these are named events. And, neither are these tribulations God's wrath... that is something wholly separate. Tribulation is always about men's evil done against one another. Wrath is God directly doing something using a cosmic force.

Therefore, as the current world order approaches it's end, there will be rising evil among humans, perpetrating that evil upon other people. At some point, God intervenes and sends down His wrath. The bad news is that everyone... the wicked and the righteous... will suffer tribulation. The good news is that prior to God opening up His fullest wrath on the earth, the righteous will not be around to suffer it. There is a point in acts of tribulation that changes from humans doing the wicked things humans do, to God's wrath that usually begins by God using humans to cause catastrophic things to happen. Then, beginning on the extent of His wrath, it can go entirely cosmic as like what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. This entire scenario includes those who belong to the Kingdom of God. Believers are not immune to the consequences of universal tribulation... only up to the point that God takes control of it as the beginning of His wrath.

Verses 4, 5, and 6 form one long run-on sentence. We'll study it verse by verse. But, not until our next lesson.