

THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH
Lesson 5, Chapter 2 Continued

Last time, we paused at Zephaniah chapter 2 verse 8, which began a prophecy of God's wrath upon Amon and Moab... that area today known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan... which lay immediately to Israel's eastern border.

It is interesting that the population of that area is actually related to Judah through Lot's descendants. Therefore, they were Semites just as the Hebrews are Semites. One might think that nations of people directly related in such a way would be a friend to Israel; and yet, that is usually not the case. Edom, for instance, which represents the descendants of Esau (Jacob's twin brother) are an enemy to Israel. Interestingly, this is not only a geopolitical reality, it is also a spiritual reality. In the Bible, God tells us that Edom will be Israel's permanent enemy, just as will Amon and Moab, and that He is against them.

As a rather close-to-home application, what this says is that families ought not be surprised when close relatives become enemies. Just because we are blood related... as with our sons and daughters, or our brothers and sisters... there are no guarantees that we'll wind up on the same side of the spiritual tracks (so to speak). And, when we're not, a family break is nearly certain to happen. While it is indeed heartbreaking and can be pretty ugly at times, there's more likelihood that this break will happen rather than family agreement and harmony over spiritual matters. Yeshua warned His followers about this, that really (in so many ways) was also a proverbial understanding among humans beginning from Adam and Eve's family and forward.

CJB Luke 14:26 ***"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid (disciples).***

Let's read from Zephaniah 2:8 to the end of the chapter.

RE-READ ZEPHANIAH 2:8 to end

I want to begin by saying that what was prophesied in verse 8 has already happened to some degree; and it will happen again to its fullest extent in our future... probably our rather near future. Just another reason to take what Zephaniah says (as well as all the other Minor Prophets) to heart. The odds are pretty high that many of us living today will witness this and experience the fallout from it. So, be forewarned.

The issue that is being addressed is how Moab and Amon reproached and reviled Israel. They boasted about taking Israel's land away from them. In their hearts, Moab and Amon could have probably survived if they had been wise enough to go ahead and not wish to have much to do with Israel but leave it there. They didn't. They had to constantly pester Israel; threaten them; make known they're intent to make Israel's land their own; and to find reason from time to time to make military incursions into Israel. This crossed a red line for God. Why? Because what people then, as now, can't seem to understand is that Israel doesn't own the Holy Land; God does. And, God has separated Israel out from all other nations of people as His own property. Therefore, to try to take that land, or to harm God's people, is a direct attack on Him. That is always a losing proposition.

I realize that people of the 21st century (and long before, truth be known), including the Church, don't see it that way. Rather, to take someone's territory away from them is merely empire building or power grabbing because it is the natural propensity of all tyrants to do so. We tend to see the matter as mostly political; God sees it as mostly spiritual. Thus, especially for Believers, it is so wrong-minded for us ever to think that land-for-peace compromises between Israel and they're enemies, or fairness in our eyes to give the Palestinians land that God calls Israel's, or to argue over fairly modern and shifting boundaries as being the basis for a re-distribution of the Holy Land as the good and loving thing to do. All of this is the wrong criteria, and when we try to force that, we have nothing but God's ire to look forward to. So, with that in mind, then God continues with this threat in verse 9:

CJB Zephaniah 2:9 Therefore, as I live," says Yehoveh-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, "Mo'av will become like S'dom and the people of 'Amon like 'Amora, a land covered with nettles and salt pits, desolate forever. The

remnant of my people will plunder them, the survivors in my nation will inherit them."

There is little more dire warning than for God to tell Amon and Moab that their fate is going to be that of Sodom and Gomorrah. And, let me remind you: as many millennia ago that those 2 cities were supernaturally destroyed... and that we know where they were and that they existed (this is not some ancient fairy tale) ...never have they been rebuilt. What this forecasts for those 2 nations (now combined as one nation, Jordan) is not merely catastrophic damage but rather being completely wiped out and never again to exist.

Being covered with nettles and mineral salt pits is precisely what those 2 former towns are to this very day. What this also means is that the land will become infertile due to those minerals in the soil called "salt pits".

Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated as nettles is ***charul***, and that is a species of nettle called "stinging nettle" that only flourishes on waste lands. Anyone that has been to Israel and the Dead Sea knows this is the case, because you can see it with your own eyes. Where the bulk of the few survivors of Sodom and Gomorrah all went, we don't know; but we do know that one of the survivors...Lot... and his 2 daughters migrated to what became Amon and Moab. So, ironically, even though Lot was rescued by an angel from being collateral damage in Sodom, the disasters that befell Sodom and Gomorrah followed Lot to his new address, and in time his offspring suffered much of that same fate, and in our future, they will suffer the fullness of that fate.

To a degree, even the prophetic part about Israel (My people) plundering Amon and Moab, has happened as Israel controls the bulk of the mineral extraction that comes from the areas that Sodom and Gomorrah once inhabited, and so the southern part of what was once Moab has fallen into Israel's hands (Eilat on the Red Sea). This area was known back in Moses' day as the Trans-Jordan; the eastern side of the Jordan River where 3 Israelite tribes settled rather than enter into the Land of Canaan. So, God also reckoned that land as belonging to Israel, and thus whatever nation or nations claims it (other than Israel) has no lasting future... and history has already been proven that to be true.

CJB Zephaniah 2:10 *This is what they will earn for their pride, for having reviled and boasted against the people of Yehoveh Tzva'ot.*

This verse is more or a less a repeat, or perhaps it is a summation, of verses 8 and 9. Once again, God sees the arrogance and troubles from Amon and Moab that were aimed at His people, as also being directly aimed against Him. So, it is God who will retaliate.

I want to pause for a moment to demonstrate to you another instance of bad doctrine that invaded Christianity in general, and how it played out in actual history regarding these various biblical prophecies about Israel. Most of these prophetic actions (the parts that involved blessings) were misappropriated by Church institutions and taken away from Israel. Here is a quote from Kiel and Delitzsch, made in the middle part of the 1800's concerning Israel's land, and how this prophesied fulfillment would occur, that is quite different from what the Bible literally and clearly says. Here is what to know, first: this was written long before Israel returned as a nation in 1948. Centuries ago, the Church had abandoned God's Word concerning any thought that Israel would ever physically return to their former homeland.

Directly as concerning Zephaniah 2:8, 9 and 10 we read this from Keil and Delitzsch's commentary:

Judah is not to enter such possession (of Amon and Moab) till the Lord turns the captivity of Judah; that is to say, not immediately to return from the Babylonish captivity, but when the dispersion of Israel among the Gentiles, which lasts till this day, shall come to an end, and Israel, through its conversion to Christ, be reinstated in the privileges of the people of God. It follows from this, that the fulfillment is still in the future, and that will be accomplished NOT LITERALLY, but SPIRITUALLY...

Despite all that has happened since then... and since Israel *did* return as a nation of Jews that had yet to turn to Yeshua...and this happened nearly 80 years ago, nonetheless what we just read here continues to represent the false

beliefs and doctrines of the bulk of the modern 21st century Church. Everything involving Israel for now and in the future is spiritualized away, and whatever part of it that is good and profitable is taken over by the gentile Church... Jews excluded. This is why we all need to turn our backs on false doctrines of humans and the institutions that created these doctrines, and which base their faith and their beliefs on them and return to the Holy Scriptures. Otherwise, we put ourselves in direct confrontation with God, no matter what we claim. God's Word never fails. When we attempt to veer off of it and go our own way... sometimes the result of impatience, other times wanting to create our own favorable religion... the result is heresy and rebellion. Therefore, **believe** what we are learning here. Your lives... physical and eternal... just might depend upon it.

CJB Zephaniah 2:11 ***Yehoveh will be fearsome against them, for he will make all the earth's gods waste away. Then all the coasts and islands of the nations will worship him, each from its place.***

Some scholars see this verse as but a continuation of the 3 previous ones concerning Moab and Amon; I don't. Clearly the words themselves explain that God is addressing the world universally. The only part that might, arguably, refer directly to Amon and Moab are the beginning ones that say "Yehoveh will be fearsome against them". Or, better translated "fearsome OVER them". So, the words that come next "for he will make all the earth's gods..." certainly includes Amon and Moab's gods but it is now extending the scope to our entire planet and to all nations and all gods.

There is some awkward wording in this verse; and remember we're dealing with poetic elements that tend to do that in order make the author's thought work within the structure of Hebrew poetry (that can be quite complex and vary from writer to writer). The Hebrew word that the CJB is translating to "fearsome", and the majority of Bible translations make it "terrible", is **yare**. I understand why different translators might pick different words because this word in Hebrew includes a mix of the ideas of awe-inspiring, awful, terrible, fearful, even reverence, and it would be way too much to write all these various words down. Nonetheless, as a matter of studying the passage, this mix is how we are to understand it. What is reverence to some can be

fearsome to others. What some welcome (Israel for the most part) will be terrible for others (mostly the gentile nations).

By making all the earth's gods waste away, it carries the sense of God taking away the lands over which the other gods have laid claim, and over which they then have dominion. If that happened, these people's gods would starve to death (waste away), because according to their god systems, these gods need to be regularly fed by their followers. In fact, in the KJV and others, the word we find is "famish". God is, therefore, constricting and restricting their control, at least partly by starving them. However, it is that we might think about these false gods... whether they are non-existent or as spiritual beings that have urged humans to accept them as gods... their judgment day has come. These gods will be revealed for what they are: false. Impotent.

When the people of Amon and Moab, and then for all the nations of all the earth, realize they have placed their faith and hopes on nonsense, then they will turn to Yehoveh. They will finally get it that there is no other legitimate God... Creator, ruler of the earth and the Universe... to serve than Him. We're told that all the coasts and islands of the nations (gentile nations) will worship Him. The phrase "islands of the nations" is a pretty standard one that simply means the very far-flung and remote places (that is, far-flung from Israel's perspective) ...places that may not even have been known in that era but were thought to probably exist there. This had to have been a startling statement for all those Israelites that heard it from Zephaniah, because to their way of thinking true worship could only occur in Jerusalem. The reality of the entire world worshipping Yehoveh was also reflected in the writings of the Prophet Malachi.

CJB Malachi 1:11 *For from farthest east to farthest west my name is great among the nations. Offerings are presented to my name everywhere, pure gifts; for my name is great among the nations," says Yehoveh-Tzva'ot.*

I really enjoy the way the YLT Bible version puts this Malachi passage:

YLT Malachi 1:11 *For, from the rising of the sun to its going in, Great is My name among nations, And in every place perfume is brought nigh to My name, and a pure present, For great is My name among nations, Said Jehovah of Hosts.*

It is clear, and had always been clear, that worship could be directed towards Yehoveh from anywhere... but not sacrifice. Here, the larger issue is that lands in which worship had been directed to other gods, is now directed towards the God of Israel. That is, it is explaining a universal acceptance of Yehoveh. Even so, there is a sticky issue raised. And in a certain sense it seems to be saying burning incense and giving grain offerings can now occur anywhere and everywhere. Part of the issue is that the terms used in Hebrew have broad enough meaning to not necessarily mean "sacrificial" burnt offerings, but rather simply gifts. And in Zephaniah's day, gifts were primarily things like agricultural products, precious stones, silver and gold, jewelry and the like. Objects of value; not money per se.

Moving back to Zephaniah 2:11, there's a few scholars that think that where the final words are "each from his own place" (and this is pretty much adopted by all Bible versions) it should be rendered "each from his own temple". This is because for them, they think the Hebrew word **maqom** (which translates as "standing place" or just "place") ought to be connected to the Arabic word **maqam**, which means "temple". So, the rendering according to these few scholars would then be "each from his own temple". That's pretty far-fetched and against every known Torah command and Bible passage in general.

Even more, I see verse 11 including this notion: in addition to worshipping God all over the earth, (which is already allowed, now, and always has been), that the point is that people will depart from their own place to bring offerings and gifts to God (perhaps mostly sacrifices), no matter how far away they might live. So, I would reword the English to something like this:

Then all the farthest-flung nations will worship Him, each coming from its place.

That is, the leaders of these nations will go to Jerusalem with their gifts, and this now fits with all other End Times prophecies of the gentile nations coming to Jerusalem, bringing their offerings to God in His Holy Temple there. So, I'm pretty confident that this is what is being intended.

For the sake of poetic structure, verse 12 is very short.

CJB Zephaniah 2:12 ***"You too, Ethiopians, will be put to death by my sword."***

What is happening here, is that after directing death and destruction threats to nations to the west of the Holy Land, then next to the east, now the compass points to the south, represented by the nation of Ethiopia. The Hebrew word actually used here is ***Cushim***, meaning the people of Cush, the most archaic of all the known names for that region of the world. Although it isn't wrong to replace Cush with Ethiopia, likely the use of the word Cush was chosen because Cush was less pointing towards a single nation and more towards a region where the descendants of Cush had migrated, spread out, and populated (the term Canaan is used in much the same way in the Bible). To be a bit more specific, Cush more generally indicated Ethiopia, Nubia, and parts of Arabia that bordered on the Red Sea.

So, just as Philistia (Gaza), along with Amon and Moab (Jordan) will be killed off by God's sword (that is, a direct warlike action of God in vengeance), so will the region of Cush. I will warn you that it has become popular in a few popular commentaries to say that we need to disregard the word "Cush" and replace it with Egypt. I can't agree with that at all. While it is true that in several places in the Bible, we see the words Cush and Egypt used together, never is Egypt equated with Cush... they are never interchangeable terms. And some scholars say that in order to finish out the thought of the writer's intent of this passage pointing to all 4 compass directions, that we need to go way back into history and see Cush as the father of Nimrod, the builder of Assyria (to the north of Israel). That is much too obscure for me to accept, and I doubt very much that is what is meant. No one in the 600's B.C. would think of Cush as Egypt, nor would they think of Assyria as having a connection to

Cush. Consequently, neither should we. Why this insistence I don't know, especially because of what happens in verse 13.

CJB Zephaniah 2:13 *He will stretch out his hand against the north; he will destroy Ashur; he will make Ninveh desolate, as dry as the desert.*

Here in a most natural (as opposed to a very contrived) way, this passage pivots to the nations to the north of the Holy Land, in order to complete the compass cycle. Just as naturally, the direct referral of that nation to the north is to the historical bully of that region: Assyria. So, in the end, the idea is that *all* nations outside of Israel... from every direction... will be destroyed by God for their rebellion against Him and their hatred of His people. While the known world of the people of the Middle East in those ancient days stretched no further than to Europe (at most), by using the number 4 (as in the 4 compass directions) it simply continues to highlight the idea of this coming wrath of death and destruction as being on a planet-wide scale.

Interestingly, Assyria had (by Zephaniah's time) moved past the peak of its power and was in serious decline, finding itself under rebellions and stress in several of its provinces. Their capital city of Nineveh would soon crumble, and so Babylon would take over Assyria's empire. Even so, God would "stretch out His hand" (that is, exert His authority) over Assyria while it still held control. That it is said that God will destroy Ashur is in line with the earlier verse (verse 11) that said: "He will make all the earth's gods waste away". That is, nations in those days usually went by two identities: their formal ancestral names and the names of their chief gods. Assyria's chief god was Ashur. So, to attack Ashur is to attack Assyria and vice-versa. Therefore, to defeat or destroy Assyria was to defeat or destroy their god Ashur.

The last half of verse 13 deals with the capital of Assyria, which is Nineveh. And, typically, a nation's capital represents the nation as a whole. Nahum chapter 3 especially deals with what is to happen with Assyria, and it centers on its capital city. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God, never again to be restored, so (as prophesied here) Nineveh is to become a permanent wasteland, suited for nothing but desert dwelling creatures and plants. And that is what happened and it remains so to this day. I'll say again:

believe what we are reading. It did happen, and it will happen again in the future. There is no avoiding it.

CJB Zephaniah 2:14 *Herds will lie down in it, and all kinds of wild animals too- jackdaws and owls will roost on her columns, voices screeching in the windows, desolation on the doorsteps, for its cedarwork is stripped bare.*

Clearly this verse never should have been separated from verse 13, as it is but one continuous subject and thought. It's about what happens to Assyria and Nineveh. As with so many newer commentaries, there is a push to reinterpret this verse to say something like "Every nation's beasts". In other words, to say this is NOT about Nineveh but rather about the whole world. That's just poor interpretation that has to virtually rework the Masoretic Text to arrive as such a meaning. Here is a very literal translation, even though it sounds a little awkward.

YLT Zephaniah 2:14 *And crouched in her midst have droves, Every beast of the nation, Both pelican and hedge-hog in her knobs lodge, A voice doth sing at the window, 'Destruction is at the threshold, For the cedar-work is exposed.'*

The idea here is that the flocks and herds that people would cultivate and use for food, wool, hair, and other byproducts... goats and sheep... would go away to be replaced with herds of another kind. That other kind is wild beasts, which provide nothing for people but danger and problems. Even more, the notion is that these herds of beasts will operate inside of what was once the great city of Nineveh, living upon its rubble and the sparse vegetation that will grow on top of it. Popular apocalyptic movies and films regularly use this kind of scenario where once thriving and large cities are now just uninhabitable wastelands, with vegetation overgrowing even tall buildings, and wild animals roaming around. That's probably about as good of a depiction of what we're reading here about Nineveh that we need to get the gist of it.

Where we read of jackdaws and owls occupying areas of the city in the CJB, it is often read as vultures and porcupines in other versions, as well as pelicans

and hedgehogs, too. So, precisely what these animals were is unclear. The columns that held up the grand structures that characterized Nineveh will be nothing but roosts for birds. This voice that sings the dirge of “destruction is at the threshold, for the cedar-work is exposed” is the mocking voice of birds. It’s like Poe’s raven that hauntingly sings “nevermore, nevermore”. It’s an anthropomorphism, and not literal. It’s a literary technique regularly found in poetry to have an animal take on a human trait (not unlike Balaam’s donkey).

As for the cedar-wood stripped bare; cedar-wood was a prized indoor paneling to adorn fancy buildings and homes of the wealthy. It was quite expensive to be used in such a way. So, it is just one more description of how Nineveh’s wonderful architecture and grand buildings were ripped open and the cedar wood interior paneling that was so prized became exposed to the elements, so that it would soon rot and decay. Verse 15 rounds-off this overall picture of the devastation God is going to be visiting on Nineveh.

CJB Zephaniah 2:15 ***This is the city, once so joyful, whose people felt themselves secure, who used to say to herself, "I am [the greatest]! I have no rival." What a ruin she has become- a place for wild animals to lie down! Everyone passing by her hisses and shakes his fist!***

At the top of the list for Nineveh (Assyria’s) demise, is arrogance and a false security. A thorough study of history reveals that in nearly every last cast of a great nation collapsing into irrelevance and often then disappearing as a national sovereign entity, it is for exactly the same reason: arrogance and false security. Joy and happiness over their wealth, privileged position on the world stage, advanced technology, and a strong military soon leads to decadence and an over-estimation of self. It is a cycle and pattern that never ceases because humans are the same since Adam and Eve.

Verse 15 doesn’t need much explanation; it’s pretty clear that such an unaware and shallow estimate of one’s self and one’s nation will lead to destruction. While it may not be a law of the Universe, it is a proverb that never seems to fail. I’m unaware, historically, of any nation that has been able to avoid it in the passing of time.

As we stand back and think about what we heard from Zephaniah in chapter 2, it seems that the devastation heaped upon the nations is an aftereffect of the destruction of Judah. This all falls under the event called The Day of Yehoveh, or the Day of Judgment, or the few other names it goes by. So, for Judah, this day is a 2-sided coin. There is both blessing and curse that comes from it. First comes curse when Judah (which since 1948 will, to the end, go by the name "Israel") suffers God's righteous wrath hurled upon it by the nations attacking her. And, yet, at some point God will interrupt the attack, turn what looked like sure victory into devastation, and then Israel will come out the victor. However, the nations will have no such future. Restoration is promised only to Israel... not to the nations.

What we have been studying revolves around several simultaneous things happening in the world. At the same time that Josiah was the incoming king of Judah at the tender age of 8, Assyria had entered its decline. Egypt was expanding its influence, and Babylon was a rising power with the help of their ally, the Medes. This is the approximate time Zephaniah was prophesying, and so this was the context of his thinking and life experience.

The Philistines, a continuing enemy of Judah, were in transition from being under the power of Assyria, to that of Egypt. Moab and Amon were still vassals of Assyria. Make no mistake: King Josiah indeed had territorial expansion in mind for Judah, because that was expected, and normal, in order to be considered a successful king. We don't read much about it, because he was boxed in due to the conditions I just spoke about. So, when God spoke through Zephaniah about Him attacking the nations, it had nothing to do with territorial expansion. Although, it wouldn't be surprising if Josiah and later kings thought the purpose of God's defeat of their gentile rivals was to create a greater Israel through God making a way for Judah to take over those nations.

A good question as we take this prophecy in its geopolitical context is why there is no mention of Edom. When one researches that period of time, what we learn is that Zephaniah's era was a generally peaceful one between Edom and Judah. And, likely, this stemmed from those 2 countries having trade agreements that benefited both. In fact, their commercial relationship was

such that it is hard to come up with any distinct national boundaries and borders to defend between Edom and Israel. But there is one larger more compelling reason for overlooking the matter of Edom: Zephaniah's prophecy was concerned mostly with the sons of Ham. Edom, on the other hand, came from Shem, as did Israel and Judah.

Egypt isn't dealt with a great deal either. During Zephaniah's time Egypt had returned to being a great world power, but it was not an empire like Assyria. Interestingly, Egypt is also of the line of Ham. Thus, other than in the most general way, we also don't hear about the nations that come from Japheth. The closest to their mention would have to be in the statement about "the islands of the nations". And, at this point in history, Japheth's offspring represented no geopolitical importance that affected Judah. Let me put it this way: Japheth's descendants were not enemies of Judah; but many of Ham's descendants were. So, remembering that Canaan was an offspring of Ham, then we see how by Zephaniah's day the Genesis 9 prophetic pronouncement of God over the descendants of Noah's 3 sons had already begun to come to fruition.

CJB Genesis 9:24-29 ***24 When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him. 25 He said, "Cursed be Kena'an; he will be a servant of servants to his brothers." 26 Then he said, "Blessed be Yehoveh, the God of Shem; Kena'an will be their servant. 27 May God enlarge Yefet (Japheth); he will live in the tents of Shem, but Kena'an will be their servant." 28 After the flood Noah lived 350 years. 29 In all, Noah lived 950 years; then he died.***

I wonder if Israel and Judah remembered any of this? Could they see how amazing God's pronouncement from more than 13 centuries earlier had actually become reality? What a great object lesson for us, God's worshippers and Yeshua's followers. God's Word always comes true, though in ways that might be hard to detect at first. But even more, we always need to keep one eye on the distant past, and another on the future. It's that distant past of the Torah and the Prophets that tells us about what the future is for us. But, if we know nothing but what begins with the Book of Matthew, then our ability to

Lesson 5 – Zephaniah Chapter 2 Continued

understand the world around us as history progresses will be much more of a mystery than it need be.

We'll take up the final chapter of Zephaniah... chapter 3... next time.