

Zephaniah

Introduction

Because his ancestry is traced back four generations to Hezekiah, Zephaniah must be a member of the royal family.

Hezekiah---Manasseh---Amon---Josiah

He must have had access to the royal court and could identify and decry the sins of the wealthy princes (1:8, 13) rulers, officials, prophets, and priests (3:3-4).

The time period is the days of Josiah, king of Judah (640-609 B.C.) who was killed at Megiddo trying to stop the Egyptians from helping the Assyrians under attack from the Babylonians at Haran (on a northern tributary of the Euphrates) in 609 B.C. Recall that Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C. and the Assyrian army was fatally defeated at Haran in 609 B.C.

Babylon is only beginning its resurgence at this time when the prophet spoke (from 640 to 609 B.C.). But Zephaniah foretells a day of wrath and battle that will bring distress because of sin on Judah (1:7-17) as well as on Assyria (2:13; "he will stretch out his hand and destroy Assyria"; focus 612 & 609). This must be a reference to Babylon, God's instrument of judgment on many nations (2:4-3:8).

These texts speak to Judah and her contemporaries but they reach a larger international scope ("the whole world" and "all who live in the earth; 2:11; 3:20). This indicates prophetic telescoping.

1A. Outline

Oracles of Judgment, 1:1-3:8

(against the nations including Judah; with glimmers of hope)

Oracles of Salvation, 3:9-20

2A. Theme

The great day of the Lord will bring remnant Israel (2:7) home (3:20) through punishment of the nation for sin because God is with her as King (3:15) and will efficaciously (3:9) quiet her with his love (3:17).

3A. Message

The message of the book can be summarized in the imagery of the Day of the Lord which includes both judgment and restoration.

This day is a day of unparalleled wrath (1:15) from the Lord who does no wrong (3:5; who dispenses justice everyday, and will do so on that day in fierce anger). It will be sweeping like Noah's Flood (1:2). It will be a banquet with the guests as victims (1:7-9). Jerusalem will be searched with lamps and punished (1:12). The complacent are like stagnant wine (1:12) and they say the Lord will do nothing as they persevere in their impurity (like bad wine that thinks nothing will be done about it; an irrational posture).

Judgment will bring such distress that the people will stagger about like blind men (1:17).

The fire of God's wrath will purify and lead people to call on the name of the Lord (3:9).

Then Israel will be brought home (3:20) with punishment accomplished because God is with her (3:15, 17; this is covenant language).

1) Thus it connotes severe divine judgment on both Israel and the nations. Israel will be like a blind man walking around in distress (1:15-17), and the nations will be assembled for the day of God's fierce anger (3:8).

2) But it includes a restored remnant from Israel (2:7; 3:13). Dillard defines the remnant as those who survive judgment against sin to become the nucleus for the continuation of the people of God (IOT 419). Thus, "God's purposes in choosing Israel will not be frustrated by the imminent outbreak of judgment, but will be realized in an elect remnant" (IOT 419).

3) This remnant will come also from the nations by God's universal sovereignty. He who assembles the nations to experience his judgment (3:8) will also bestow his grace (3:9, I will change the speech of the peoples). The Day of the Lord was imminent for Zephaniah but he looked with prophetic foreshortening to the coming of Christ and the end of sin and thus of fear (3:9, 13, 16) for God is with you and will quiet you with his love (3:17).

Then the remnant will be made up of both Jew and Gentile. This is present reality for the Church (IOT 420) the new Israel (Gal. 3:8-29).

Finally will come ultimate fulfillment when Christ will stand as judge (Rom. 2:16; Rev. 19:11-20:3).

4A. Message for us

1) We are to be sobered by the righteousness of God (3:5) and his search light which exposes our sins. We stand naked and shameful before the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

So we must seek righteousness and humility to find shelter (2:3). Instead of being like Judah, we are to trust and draw near to God (3:2).

2) God however has His remnant. God purifies in order that his remnant people may call and all who call will be saved (Jn. 6:37). He will not fail to accomplish his purposes in history.

3) We are part of the prophetically telecoped promise.

There is gospel good news here. He is with us (3:17). So sing, rejoice, and delight in the Lord and in his law because he delights in you (3:17; cf. Rom 15.9; the Lord God, Jesus, in our midst saves us and rejoices over us with gladness and with loud singing; so we ought to sing with heartily).

Thus he covers our nakedness, makes us pure (3:9) and we will not be put to shame (3:11).

We are on our way home; he has a place prepared for us and he will see us through the journey with its rough roads (Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:2); perhaps through chastening but the end is sure (3:20).