

Introduction to Zephaniah

Where is it in the Bible?

Zephaniah is the thirty-sixth book in the Christian Old Testament and is found between Habakkuk and Haggai. It is the ninth book of the Minor Prophets; the term “minor” refers to the length of the books, not to their importance. In the Hebrew Bible, the minor prophets follow Ezekiel at the end of the Prophets section and are grouped together in the Book of the Twelve in the same order as found in Christian Bibles

Who wrote it?

The book identifies the author as Zephaniah (1:1) and includes a genealogy that goes back three generations. The prophet is identified as the son of Cushi, which might imply he was of African descent. (Cush, also called Ethiopia, was an area south of Egypt.) The text also says that he was a descendant of Hezekiah. Some have thought that this refers to King Hezekiah and that Zephaniah was a member of the royal house; however, the text does not identify this ancestor as a king. Others have proposed that the genealogy was included to establish that Zephaniah was a Judean, in spite of the fact that his father's name suggests otherwise.

When was it written?

The superscription (1:1) says that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Since the book does not provide any information which would fix the date during this period, there is some debate about exactly when the prophet was active. “Most interpreters read the book against the early period of Josiah's reign and speculate that Zephaniah was one of the voices urging and perhaps supporting Josiah's reform efforts.”¹ Like most prophetic books, Zephaniah shows signs of later editing, particularly in 3:9-20.

What is it about?

Like other prophets, Zephaniah begins with a warning of destruction and ends with a note of hope. He warns that the Day of the Lord will be one of massive devastation for all nations because of their sin. However, following that destruction, God will transform the survivors into a faithful community living in harmony with God.

How is it structured?

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Judgment on Judah (1:2-18)
- III. Judgment on All Nations (2:1-3:8)
- IV. Promise of Salvation for All (3:9-20)

¹Richard W. Nysse at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=54>

What are some things to look for?

- **Day of the Lord:** The concept of the Day of the Lord is the dominant theme of the book and is something that Zephaniah has in common with many other prophets, including Isaiah, Amos, and Joel. Here the prophet describes the day as one of total destruction which reverses creation; compare 1:3 to Genesis 1:20-28.
- **Seeking:** This book could be described as one about the people and God seeking each other. "In Zephaniah "seeking the Lord" (and equivalent expressions) is understood as a constant posture of faith. Not to seek the Lord is understood as rebellion, whether in the form of turning away (1:6) or of indifference (1:12). ... Characteristics of the transformed people that God creates after the judgment will include seeking refuge in the Lord and calling on the name of the Lord. The movement is from failure to seek the Lord to the Lord's seeking out the people in judgment and then to the people seeking the Lord in post-judgment fidelity."²

²*Ibid.*