

## The Prophets, Book 14

### Zephaniah

Zephaniah identifies himself as the son of Cushi, and as the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah. In that time it was customary to identify one's self only by identifying his father (e.g. "Zephaniah, the son of Cushi"). Because it was unusual to identify an additional ancestor, the clear implication is that such an ancestor was someone very important. For this reason it is fairly certain that Zephaniah's great-great-grandfather, who was named Hezekiah, was King Hezekiah<sup>1</sup>. He tells us also that he prophesied in the days of King Josiah, who was probably his relative.

He was definitely contemporary with Jeremiah, Huldah the prophetess and, probably, Nahum and Habakkuk. It must have been a wonderful time to be a prophet in Judah. Josiah became king when he was only eight years old. Although he didn't demonstrate a hunger to seek the Lord until he was 15, and he didn't initiate and lead the great reformation until he was 19, it appears that he was a good, benign, king from the start; and he became an exemplary Hebrew King (one of the few) until his untimely death at age at age 30.

After Josiah's death, however, it was all downhill; there followed a quick succession of four wicked, short-term kings, who presided over Judah's rapid and final decline, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the final carrying away of the people into Babylonian captivity.

Since Zephaniah prophesies against foreign pagan cults in Judah (1:4, 8), and against Assyria (2:13), it appears that Zephaniah ministered as a prophet in Jerusalem during the early reign of Josiah, before the great reformation. This further suggests that, unless he began his prophetic ministry at an advanced age, Zephaniah's life was relatively short, only a little over 30 years.

In Zephaniah's time, the Kingdom of Judah was being increasingly encroached upon by the Chaldeans. Judah was only about 20 years away from complete defeat and the destruction of Jerusalem.

In his small book, Zephaniah speaks of very large events; and they are large events that will take place over a very large span of time. He speaks of the immediate destruction coming for Jerusalem and Judah in about 20 years, of the captivity, the restoration to the Promised Land, of the Messiah and the New Covenant, of End-times events, and the ultimate reconciliation between God and

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<sup>1</sup> If, as seems almost certain, Zephaniah was a great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, then he was one of only two canonical prophets of royal lineage; the other was Daniel, who was related to Zedekiah, Judah's last king.

his people. Like Isaiah when he spoke of Cyrus, who would not be born for another 150 years, Zephaniah must have wondered what much of his prophecy could mean.

**A. Author.** The human author was Zephaniah the prophet, son of Cushi, and probable great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah.

**B. Time and Place.** Zephaniah's book was probably written in Jerusalem. He tells us that he prophesied during the reign of good King Josiah (640-609 BC). He probably wrote his book of prophecy about 600 BC.

**C. Theme.** The theme of Zephaniah is judgment to come upon Judah for her relentless sinning against God, judgment also to come on the surrounding pagan nations, and the promise of a future restoration and end-times reconciliation with Christ as King.

**D. Highlights.** Highlights of Zephaniah include the following:

1. Impending Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah. (1:1-2:3)

Certain judgment is to come upon Jerusalem and the fortified cities of Judah around her. Judgment will come because of the adopted paganism of the people, including dressing like pagan priests and adopting their superstitions. They were also lying on their housetops worshiping the Moon, stars and planets; some were mixing the worship of the LORD with paganism. The judgment will also come for their self-satisfied, self-reliant pride and trust in their riches. They feel secure in their wealth, and say that God will play no part in their lives--either for good or for evil; in other words, they believe, He is irrelevant. But there will be no place to hide, and their wealth will not save them. They will soon know how very wrong they are; they will become slaves.

And yet, in the midst of the pronouncement of inescapable destruction, there is a refreshing offer to the people that if they will just repent, seek the Lord and return to righteousness, they might yet be hid, and escape judgment in the day of the Lord's anger.

**NOTES:**

*a. The word "Chemarims" in 1:4 is an interesting word that has had the scholars puzzling over it for centuries. It is a plural, and it appears, in its Hebrew form, nowhere else in the Bible<sup>2</sup>. The Hebrew word appears also in II Kings 23:5 where it is usually rendered "idolatrous priests" in English Bibles, as in the AV/KJV. The words from which it is derived suggest "black" and "ascetic," from which we may infer that it applies here to black-robed, ascetic pagan priests operating in Judah. The black robe inference is strengthened by the fact that, according to the*

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<sup>2</sup> In Hebrew, words that end in "im" are plurals. Here, and elsewhere in the AV/KJV, the translators added the "s" because many plural English words end in "s," and they knew that most English readers would have no knowledge of Hebrew plurals.

*Mishna (oral Jewish laws [the “oral Torah”], first put in writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD), a levitical priest who became disqualified for service put on a black robe and was banished, while priests in good standing wore white robes<sup>3</sup>. So, apparently those “Chemarims” were pagan priests who wore black robes (referred to in v 8 as “strange apparel”) and lived ascetic lives.*

*b. Verse 9 of Chapt 1 has an interesting reference to leaping on (or over) the threshold. This is probably a reference to the threshold of the door to the temple of Dagon. This pagan god of the Philistines, whose image could not stand in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant, fell before the Ark, and his head and hands were broken off on the threshold. Thereafter, the pagan priests were careful not to step on the threshold--they leapt over it as they came in and out of the temple of Dagon<sup>4</sup>.*

*c. “Maktesh” in 1:11 probably refers to the business district of Jerusalem.*

*d. In 2:3 Zephaniah uses the word “seek” three times. Repetition in Hebrew is used for emphasis; thus, here, Zephaniah is emphasizing the point that the choice to live sinfully and be destroyed, or to live righteously and be blessed, is ours. We must decide how we will live.*

## **2. Impending Judgment on the Surrounding Pagan Nations. (2:4-15)**

Judgment is coming on the Philistines and the other pagan nations surrounding Judah, including Ethiopia, for their ongoing paganism. They have had chances to repent and serve the LORD God of Israel, but have refused. Even Assyria, which had been living in righteousness after the revival under Jonah's preaching, has slid back into its former paganism and will soon feel the Lord's anger. Its great capital city will be a desolate ruin, held in derision.

**NOTE:** *The Cherethites of 2:5 (“Cherethim” in Ezek 25:16) were Philistines of coastal southwest Canaan. The ancestors of the Philistines had long ago migrated southward from ancient Phoenicia by sea and possessed coastal Canaan (essentially today's “Gaza Strip”). Thanks to the LXX (Septuagint) and the Syriac manuscripts, however, which render the word “Cretans,” we can know that at least these Philistines had originally migrated from the island of Crete<sup>5</sup>.*

## **4. The Wicked Nations Shall Be Gathered Together for Destruction. (3:1-8)**

Jerusalem's inescapable destruction is described in detail, and the LORD's reasons: the people have not responded to correction; they are zealous in their sinning; and have lost their sense of shame<sup>6</sup>. And then in verse 8, in language that sounds like the final battle of Revelation 19, Zephaniah speaks of a gathering

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<sup>3</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol 1, p 640.

<sup>4</sup> I Samuel 5:1-5.

<sup>5</sup> Unger, Merrill F. :Unger's Bible Dictionary, “Cherithites,” p 191.

<sup>6</sup> A culture is in an advanced state of decay when it has lost its sense of shame.

together of the wicked nations in one place, where the Lord will pour out His anger and wrath upon them in final judgment.

5. A Promise of a Purged and Blessed People. (3:9-20)

The prophet ends his book with a description of future happiness and holiness when God's people will speak and pray with pure language and be in one accord. In the past, the people of Judah have been haughty and presumptuous, thinking that no matter how wicked they were, God would bless and protect them because of His love for Jerusalem and the Temple; however, in the future described here they will be chastened and humble. The promise is that "The LORD thy God" will dwell in the midst of the people and rejoice over the final, ultimate, end-time reconciliation between God and His people. Zephaniah is seeing far into a bright future.

***NOTE:** Verse 9 of Chapt 3 is fascinating. The promise of a future time when the Lord will give to His people "a pure language," and that they will pray and praise Him with one consent and one mind, may be a reference to the New Testament gift of supernatural tongues. Or, it may refer to prayer and praise with "clean lips" in the sense of Isa 6:6-7, meaning that God's people will pray and praise Him sincerely, without vulgarity or pretense, from a pure heart, because He has cleansed their lips with holy fire. I am inclined to believe that it means both.*