

Volume Three

THE MINOR PROPHETS

A Commentary on Zephaniah, Haggai,
Zechariah, Malachi

Edited by
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Abbreviations

Bibliographical

ANEP	James B. Pritchard, ed. <i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 2d ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
BDB	Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1907; corrected printing in 1953.
BHS	Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds. <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977.
GKC	Emil Kautzsch, ed. <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Trans. A. E. Cowley. 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
IBHS	Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
ISBE	Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., eds. <i>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> . 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88.
KB	Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. <i>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti</i> . Leiden: Brill/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953.

TDOT	G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Translated by David E. Green, et al. 8 vols. to date. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–.
TWOT	R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . 2 vols. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

Bible Versions

AV	Authorized (King James) Version
JB	Jerusalem Bible
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version

General

LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text

Hebrew Transliteration Scheme

Consonants	Vowels	
א '	אָ	ā <i>qāmeṣ</i>
ב b	בַּ	a <i>pataḥ</i>
ג g	בֶּ	e <i>sěgôl</i>
ד d	בֶּ֫	ē <i>šērê</i>
ה h	בִּ	i short <i>ḥîreq</i>
ו w	בִּ֫	ī long <i>ḥîreq</i> written defectively
ז z	בֹּ	o <i>qāmeṣ ḥātûp</i>
ח ḥ	בּוֹ	ô <i>hôlem</i> written fully
ט ṭ	בֻּ	ō <i>hôlem</i> written defectively
י y	בּוֹ	û <i>šûreq</i>
כּ k	בֵּ	u short <i>quibbûṣ</i>
ל l	בֵּ֫	ū long <i>quibbûṣ</i> written defectively
מ m	בֶּ֫	a furtive <i>pataḥ</i>
נ n	בֶּה	â final <i>qāmeṣ hē'</i>
ס s	בֵּי	ê <i>sěgôl yôd</i> (בֵּי = êy)
ע ʿ	בִּי	ê <i>šērê yôd</i> (בִּי = êy)
פּ p	בִּי	î <i>ḥîreq yôd</i> (בִּי = îy)
צ ṣ	בִּיּוֹ	āyw
ק q	בֶּ֫	ă <i>ḥātēp pataḥ</i>
ר r	בֶּ֫֫	ě <i>ḥātēp sěgôl</i>
ש ś	בֶּ֫֫	ô <i>ḥātēp qāmeṣ</i>
שׁ š	בֶּ֫֫֫	ě vocal <i>šěwā'</i>
ת t	בֶּ֫֫֫֫	– silent <i>šěwā'</i>

Introduction

The corpus of biblical books we call the Minor Prophets has not enjoyed great prominence in the history of biblical interpretation. It is not difficult to understand why this is so. Where is the edification for a modern Christian in a dirge celebrating the downfall of an ancient city? How can the gloomy forecasts of captivity for Israel and Judah lift the heart today? The Minor Prophets seem to have been preoccupied with nations and events that have little relevance to today's world. How unlike the New Testament they are!

A careful study of these prophets, however, reveals that many of the themes they expound transit the Testaments. They speak of the love of God as well as his justice. Their prophecies are not all doom, but are often rich with hope. Hosea based his hope on God's compassion, while Joel envisioned a new era for the people of God. Amos spoke of the restoration of David's collapsing monarchy, and Micah foresaw the coming Ruler whose birthplace would be the insignificant town of Bethlehem. The fact that these prophets often expressed themselves in culturally and historically conditioned forms that seem foreign to us should not diminish the force of their messages. This fact should challenge us to discover how the prophets faced

the foreboding circumstances of their times, and how their words illumined the dark night of human rebellion and divine justice. Anyone who turns from reading the Minor Prophets hearing only words of recrimination and judgment has not read them fairly. Within the dismal events these prophets describe lurks the hand of God, and beyond these events is the bright prospect of a kingdom inaugurated by One whom Zechariah portrays as suffering betrayal, piercing, and eventual death. The Minor Prophets are not as time-bound as we may think.

The purpose of this commentary is to clarify the messages of these spokesmen for God by bringing the reader into the structures of language in which these messages found expression. While readers who do not know Hebrew may find the Exegesis section imposing, the authors have translated the constructions so that these readers may comprehend the discussion and have access to the Hebrew text. The readers may thus observe more deeply how the author has grappled with the problems of the text. Readers of English commentaries do not always have access to this level of interpretation.

The translations in parentheses following each Hebrew construction are keyed to the Author's Translation. This translation, which appears in the left column of

each translation page, is a literal rendition of the section that follows. The column on the right contains the translation of the New Revised Standard Version. The reader thus has at hand two perspectives on the sense of the text.

The Exposition section is designed to amplify the conclusions reached in the Exegesis section. The authors frequently discuss related theological and hermeneutical issues in the Exposition. The Hebrew appears in transliteration here. This alerts the reader who knows Hebrew to the constructions the author discusses without encumbering the reader who does not know Hebrew with unfamiliar Hebrew characters. It also aids the reader by facilitating pronunciation of the Hebrew constructions. The preacher will find in this section observations on the text that will stimulate ideas for using the Minor Prophets in contemporary preaching.

The Hebrew scholar, as well as the student of Hebrew, will appreciate the depth of interaction with the Hebrew text that characterizes the Exegesis section. The authors have made every effort to

utilize the highest standards of scholarly exegesis, and to interact with the current literature throughout their commentaries. The helpful introductions to the commentaries cover issues that touch on various aspects of the prophecy on which each author has written.

The editor and authors present this work to the world of biblical scholarship with the hope that it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the messages of the Minor Prophets and their relevance for us today. If this commentary causes the voices of these ancient men of God to ring with greater clarity in a world that sorely needs spiritual and moral strength, the effort will have been worthwhile.

I wish to express my appreciation to the authors for their scholarly contributions, their cooperation, and patience throughout the years in which this work has been in preparation. I owe a debt of gratitude to Allan Fisher of Baker Book House for his encouragement.

Thomas Edward McComiskey
Hawthorn Woods, Illinois
1991

Zephaniah

Introduction

There is a compelling simplicity about Zephaniah's message: he has only one topic, and he never digresses from it. His book opens with a vision of world disaster, embracing both the outside world (1:2–3) and the professing people of God (1:4–6). He identifies this disaster as “the day of the LORD” (1:7–18) and calls for preparation (2:1–3). His next concern is to show this day in action, shattering the nations (2:4–15) but merited equally by Jerusalem (3:1–5). Unexpectedly—as if forcing itself into the prophet's consciousness—the day also has a spark of hope (2:6–7, 9d, 11), and the remainder of the prophecy (2:8–3:20) is concerned with how this comes about. Zephaniah has handed down this message of doom and hope in a shapely, stylish form. It is a coherent, compelling eschatological vision.

*To my dear daughter,
Catherine, to com-
memorate
her graduation
and qualification,
Cambridge
University, 1991*

Theology

Theologically, Zephaniah is not innovative, standing for mainstream Yahwism. Remarkably, many commentators find him to be without a “gospel” of the mercy of God and with only the most meager of hopes that anything can be done to escape the rigors of that day. Some even refuse him any message of hope at all, deferring passages of hope to a later date and another hand. This dubious approach arises from two main causes: first, from an inadequate grasp of how the Lord defined his name at the time of the exodus. It is a two-sided name, including both salvation (for Israel) and judgment (for Egypt). He is by nature the God of holy wrath and the God of holy hope—inseparable components of his deity. Second, a gospel of mercy is denied to Zephaniah through a failure to contextualize what he actually said (see the Exegesis and Exposition of 2:3). There was no need for him to

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spell out a gospel message to those who already knew that the Lord had provided the way whereby they might return to him in penitence and faith.

Author

Nothing is known about Zephaniah save what little his book reveals. Alone of the prophets he traces his ancestry back four generations, but he gives no sure explanation why. Craigie (*Twelve Prophets*, p. 106) may be correct in observing that it simply reflects his appreciation of his family roots, but why stop at four generations? It seems more persuasive to surmise that the Hezekiah whom he names as his great-great-grandfather was none other than King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18–20; 2 Chron. 29–32; Isa. 36–39; J. Smith, *Zephaniah*, pp. 182–83; G. Smith, *Twelve Prophets*, p. 46; Baker, *Zephaniah*, p. 91). The absence of the title *king* with Hezekiah's name can be explained by Zephaniah's contemporaries knowing that he was of royal blood. Zephaniah's awareness of the royal lifestyle (1:8) may be a small straw in the wind. More significant is that he concerns himself only with the upper echelons of society—princes, judges, prophets, priests (1:8–9; 3:3–4)—and not directly with the average Israelite. In this regard he is a “city prophet,” like Isaiah and Micah. Unlike them he does not allude to the lot of the poor, only to the misconduct of the religious and civil leaders. His book does not include a call-narrative or an indication of how he came to be a prophet. It does reveal, however, a man with impeccable prophetic credentials (see the Exegesis and Exposition of 1:1).

Date

The date given for Zephaniah's ministry, the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chron. 34–35), suits the contents of the book. Josiah came to the throne of Judah following the religiously disastrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon (2 Kings 21; 2 Chron. 33). The land was in desperate need of religious reform and spiritual awakening, and in the purposes of God, Josiah was the reformer. The narrative in 2 Kings leaps to Josiah's eighteenth year, when he initiated the repair of the house of the Lord (22:3–7). Second Chronicles reveals some background to this by recording that “in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of his ancestor David” (34:3). It is interesting to speculate (see the Exposition of 1:1) that Zephaniah may have been the godly influence within the palace, turning the young king's mind to the Lord. This, of course, would account for his tracing his pedigree back to Hezekiah, the earlier reforming king.

Circumstances were favorable to Josiah's acting with a free hand in Judah (and Israel—see 2 Kings 23:15–20), for he came to the throne in 640 B.C. when the Assyrian Empire, within which Judah was a vassal state, was in terminal decline. In the east, Babylon was rising in importance; in the west, there was no effective imperial rule. Under Psamtik I (664–610 B.C.), Egypt withheld tribute from 655 onward. “As Assyria lost her grip on her empire, Judah found herself . . . by default . . . a free country” (Bright, *History of Israel*, p. 316).

The part played by the Scythians in this period is somewhat uncertain. A nomadic people from southern Russia, they penetrated the ancient Near East in the early eighth century, lived in an uneasy alliance with Assyria, and (according to Herodotus 1.103–5) ran wild over the whole region, reaching as far as Egypt. It used to be assumed that Zephaniah discerned in this Scythian threat the onset of the day of the Lord. All this must be viewed with caution, although Oppenheim (“Scythians”) believes Scythians raided along the Palestine coast, were bought off by Psamtik, and sacked Ashdod and Ashkelon. Rice (*Scythians*, p. 45) dates a Scythian invasion as late as 611 B.C., but discerns no particular menace to Judah.

It has to be asked at what point in Josiah's reign Zephaniah ministered, though little hangs on reaching a firm conclusion. As is pointed out in the Exegesis of 1:4, the reference to a “remnant” of Baal does not necessarily require a date after the reforms of Josiah had swept the main Baal shrines out of the land. The reference to Baalism, the astral cults, and the worship of Molech (1:4–5) sounds like an evil inheritance from Manasseh and Amon, and the reference to the compromising behavior of princes and priests (1:8–9) suggests a time in the king's earlier days before he began to implement reform. Since Josiah reigned 640–609 B.C. (Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, p. 180), Zephaniah's ministry may be placed in the second half of the seventh century.

In a sense, the history of the times has nothing to say about Zephaniah's message. Throughout the book there is a sense of distance from historical events. For example, the predictions regarding the day of the Lord are full of military motifs—but without reference to any particular enemy and thus resistant to any attempt to define the enemy. Zephaniah, says G. Smith (*Twelve Prophets*, p. 48), “tears himself loose from history altogether. . . . The Day of the Lord assumes what we call ‘the supernatural.’ ” Zephaniah is rooted in the flow of history (see the Exposition of 2:4–15), but his concern is only with the goal—the eschaton—the day when calamitous human efforts to run the world will coincide in an awesome climax with the Lord's purposes of judgment and hope.

Unity

Since J. G. Eichhorn's commentary in 1824, the Book of Zephaniah has experienced much the same specialist treatment as the rest of the prophets, ranging from F. Schwally (see G. Smith, *Twelve Prophets*, pp. 41, 43), who denied all of chapters 2–3 to Zephaniah, save for 2:12–15, to P. R. House (*Zephaniah*), who sees the whole book as a dramatic unity. One cannot but be impressed alike by the self-assurance and the subjectivism of those early literary commentators, much of whose approach sadly remains in BHS.

Many have sought to give objectivity to their literary judgments by searching for a metrical arrangement in Zephaniah and then passing judgment on lines and passages that seem not to conform. J. Smith (*Zephaniah*, p. 175) urges that “the science of Hebrew metre is as yet [in 1911] in an inchoate state. . . . Conclusions as to the integrity of a text which are based solely or primarily upon metrical considerations are inevitably open to grave suspicion.” Unfortunately, Smith did not remember his own caveat! More recently, literary criticism has taken a more hopeful line in searching not for a linear metrical schema but for poetic patterns and shapes to whole poems. In the case of Zephaniah, as the present commentary seeks to show, this approach calls into question allegations of intrusive or disruptive passages and later insertions. Not only the book as a whole but each separate item within it displays a remarkable and often beautiful cohesion, setting at a discount also the tendency to devalue the literary quality and competence of Zephaniah and revealing him as a literary master on the pattern of Isaiah.

The book consists of carefully honed oracles accurately built into a coherent message. While a date long after the time of Zephaniah is sometimes suggested (Smith and Lacheman, “Authorship of the Book of Zephaniah,” p. 137; see House, *Zephaniah*, p. 13), the contents of the book suit the date it proposes for itself. It would presuppose a curious mentality to think that Zephaniah should be certain that he is the vehicle of the very words of God and then leave these words to the uncertain chances of an indefinite transmission process and the editorial hands of some future unknown. There is no difficulty in assuming that the prophet was also the poet and the editor.

Text

It is often alleged that the Masoretic Text of Zephaniah is in a sorry state of preservation. Close examination, however, reveals that this opinion may have arisen through failure to recognize the special needs of poetic diction, especially the way poetry delights in brevity, aphorism, and allusion. When judged accord-

ing to Hebrew prose, some verses that might otherwise be dismissed as impossible, even grammatically monstrous, are rather found to conform to poetic norms—and usually to exemplify usages known elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Verhoef (*Haggai and Malachi*, p. 18) observes that “my fifteen year experience in Bible translation has strengthened my conviction that the majority of the proposed alterations to the text [of the Old Testament] . . . are really unnecessary.” This is very true of Zephaniah.

The Septuagint is uniformly unhelpful. One soon comes to realize that every least obscurity in the Hebrew text baffled the Septuagint translator(s) and led them to produce a piece of Greek often without clear meaning of its own and shedding no light on its Hebrew original.

Analysis

It is usually presumed that all the prophets originally delivered their messages by preaching. This may indeed be the case, provided we note that in every case the “books” of the prophets contain the carefully crafted essence of that preaching, the essential word of the Lord preserved for posterity and maybe also publicized at the time along the lines of Isaiah 8:1 and 30:8. We actually see this recording work in progress in Jeremiah 36. If all this is true of Zephaniah, it is also true that, as he has bequeathed his work to us, the original preaching (if there was such) has disappeared into a coherent book presentation, a structured treatise on the theme of “the day of the Lord.” As the following outline of contents shows, following the superscription, the book falls into three parts:

Superscription (1:1)

I. The End of the World: Is There Any Hope? (1:2–2:3)

- A. The End Announced—for the World (1:2–3a) and for Judah (1:3b–6)
- B. The End Described—for Judah (1:7–14a) and for the World (1:14b–18)
- C. An Appeal to Readiness—to Judah (2:1–2) and to the World (2:3)

II. Judgment and Hope: An Enigma (2:4–3:8)

- A. World Overthrow, Hope for Israel (2:4–15)
- B. The Failure of Judah (3:1–5)
- C. Hope in a Day of Wrath (3:6–8)

III. The End of the World: Hope in All Its Glory (3:9–20)

- A. The Enigma Solved (3:9–13)
- B. Oneness of Joy (3:14–17)
- C. The Lord’s People, the Praise of All the Earth (3:18–20)

Further exploration shows how carefully this book has been crafted. The entire book represents a complex chiastic format:

I. The End of the World: Is There Any Hope? (1:2–2:3)

- A the end (1:2–6)
 - a¹ the world (1:2–3a)
 - b¹ Judah (1:3b–6)
- B the day (1:7–18)
 - b² Judah: the imminent day (1:7–14a)
 - a² the world: the bitter day (1:14b–18)
- A' the end: a probation time (2:1–3)
 - b³ Judah (2:1)
 - c¹ the critical time (2:2)
 - a³ the world (2:3)

II. Judgment and Hope: An Enigma (2:4–3:8)

- A the surrounding world: its overthrow, Israel's possession (2:4–15)
 - west: Philistia—its disappearance (2:4–6) and Judah's possession (2:7)
 - east: Moab/Ammon—judgment by the God of Israel (2:8–9c), Israel's possession (2:9d–10), and the world's worship (2:11)
 - south: Cush—slain by the Lord's sword (2:12)
 - north: Assyria—its disappearance (2:13–15)
- B the failure of Judah (3:1–5)
- C hopeful waiting for the day of wrath! (3:6–8)
 - a⁴ the world (3:6)
 - b⁴ Judah (3:7–8a)
 - a⁵ the world (3:8b)

III. The End of the World: Hope in All Its Glory (3:9–20)

- A the enigma solved (3:9–13)
 - a⁶ the uniting of the world: Babel reversed (3:9–10)
 - b⁵ the purging of the people: Jerusalem purified (3:11–13c)
 - c² the time of peace: Eden restored (3:13d)
- B oneness of joy: the people and the Lord (3:14–17)
- C the Lord's people, the praise of all the earth (3:18–20)
 - b⁶ the perfected people (3:18–19)
 - a⁷ the attracted world (3:20)

Section I is demarcated by an *inclusio*: the opening poem (1:2–6) climaxes on the charge of failure to seek (*biqqēš*) the Lord; the concluding poem three times commands to put this fault right (2:3). This is the major section on the day of the Lord: *yôm* (day) occurs at 1:7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15 (five times), 16, 18; 2:3. The parallel *ʿet* (time) occurs at 1:12. Both words recur near the end of the book: *yôm* in 3:8, 11, 16, and *ʿet* in 3:19, 20 (twice).

Section II opens with *kî* (for), introducing an explanation of the foregoing proclamation of judgment. It also includes the enigmas that amid judgment on the world (2:4–6, 8–9c, 12, 13–15; 3:6, 8b)

there is also hope (2:11b) and that Judah is promised an inheritance (2:7, 9d) while at the same time meriting judgment with the world (3:6–8). The section is bracketed by an *inclusio* involving *mēʾên yôšēb* (without inhabitant; 2:5; 3:6) and—typical of Zephaniah—the same word, *pāqad* (2:7; 3:7), with two shades of meaning.

Sections I and II belong together thematically with their concentration on judgment and wrath. The Lord's "cutting" (*kārat*) of humankind and Judah (1:3–4) and of the world and Judah (3:6–7) forms an *inclusio*. The "outstretched hand" of God, portending judgment, overshadows both Judah (1:4) and Assyria (2:13). Common to both sections are the following terms and phrases: "in the fire of his jealousy all the earth will be eaten up" (1:18; 3:8), *pinâ* (corner tower; 1:16; 3:6), *šāpak* (to pour out; 1:17; 3:8), *šāmam* and cognate words (to be desolate or ruined; 1:13; 2:4, 9, 13, 15; 3:6), and *nēʾum* (this is the word of . . . ; which acts as a further *inclusio* in 1:2, 3, 10; 3:8). The balance between the two concluding poems of each section, 2:1–3 and 3:6–8, creates a rounded formation:

- a Judah (2:1–2)
- b the world with Judah (2:3)
- b' the world (3:6)
- a' Judah with the world (3:7–8)

Section III moves between the reference to world devotion to the name of the Lord (3:9) and world acknowledgment of the name of Israel (3:19–20). Like section II, it opens with *kî*, introducing an explanation of the preceding enigma of a judgment into which the note of hope intrudes: the same Lord who justly judges also plans a glorious reversal whereby the divisiveness of sin will be canceled worldwide (3:9–10), Jerusalem will be renewed (3:11–13c), and Eden will be restored (3:13d). Following this the book ends on a rhapsodic note with the Lord and his people wrapped in mutual joy (3:14–17), with the Lord's people restored and central to the whole world (3:18–20).

Sections II and III are bound together by an *inclusio* formed by the words *šāb šēbūt* (restore captivity; 2:7; 3:20). Note also the words *šēʾērît* (remnant; 2:7, 9; 3:13), *rāʾâ* (to pasture; 2:7; 3:13), *yā-rāʾ* (to fear; 3:7, 15, 16), and *ʿālaz* (to exult; 3:14) or *ʿallîz* (exultant; 2:15; 3:11). The effect of these links is to bind the messages of judgment and hope together: the latter is not alien to the former but intrinsic and inseparable.

Sections I and III contain matching expressions of universality that form an *inclusio* for the whole book: *pēnē hāʾādāmâ* (the face of the earth; 1:2–3) and *kol-hāʾāreṣ* (all the earth; 3:19–20).

Note also “the word of the LORD” (1:2) and “says the LORD” (3:20). Significant contrasts include the false king (*malcām*; 1:5) and the true king (*melek yiśrāʾēl yhw̄h*; 3:15), the baffled warrior and the saving warrior (*gibbôr*; 1:14; 3:17), the name to be obliterated (1:4) and the admired name (3:19–20), Jerusalem under judgment (1:4, 12) and Jerusalem restored to divine favor (3:14, 16), the call to humility (*ʿānāwâ*; 2:3) and the humble people (*ʿānî*; 3:12), the prevalence of deceit (*mirmâ*; 1:9) and the city free of deceit (*tarmît*; 3:13). The book also begins and ends with oracles based on the formulas *in that day* and *at that time*:

- a visitation upon those who act with deceit (1:8)
- b voices of terror (1:10)
- c the complacent assumption of an inactive God (1:12)
- a' past rebellious doings and no more deceit (3:11)
- b' voices of joy; no more fear (3:16)
- c' the active Lord restoring his people (3:19–20)

Thus the divine justice that must be expressed in wrath (section I) is exactly balanced by divine love (section III; 3:17), which works renewal and brings restoration for the Lord's people and for the whole world.

All three sections begin and end with oracles combining the world and the people of God. The opening oracles of each section (1:2–6; 2:4–7; 3:9–13) reflect the theme of the book: unrelieved judgment becomes judgment mingled with hope and then total hope. The concluding oracles of the first two sections (2:1–3; 3:6–8) are thematically linked (note the same thematic linkage of 3:18–20). The people whose shame was in all the earth (3:19) become the people whose praise is in all the earth (3:20).

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Superscription (1:1)

MOTYER

1 The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah.

NRSV

1 The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah.

1:1. הָיָה . . . דְּבַר־יְהוָה (the word of the LORD . . . came): In translation, this formula requires a verb of motion, but Hebrew uses the verb הָיָה (to be). The sense of this formula is that the word of the Lord became a living reality to Zephaniah. The verb הָיָה goes beyond “being or existing” to include the sense of active presence (Hag. 1:1). The translation “came” usefully expresses one side of the truth by pointing to the origin of this revelation in the Lord, while its sense of becom-

ing an active, present reality emphasizes another side: that is, Zephaniah was inspired to receive, understand, and then express the divine word without tarnishing its divine reality and truth. The first words of Zephaniah’s book thus express the reception of the divine word; the last words, אָמַר יְהוָה (says the LORD; 3:20), complete the picture. What came from God has been spoken on earth by a man without ceasing to be what the Lord says.

1:1. Part I of the Book of Zephaniah contains three sections: 1:2–6 announces judgment on the world, 1:7–18 relates the day of the Lord to the themes of nearness and bitterness, and 2:1–3 urges preparation while there is time. The first section may be subdivided into 1:2–3b and 1:3c–6, with each subsection beginning with the phrases *this is the word of* and *from the face of the earth*. The movement is from the general (earth, human, beast; 1:2–3) to the specific (Judah, priests, those who bow; 1:4–6). The thought is expressed in the following symmetrical arrangement:

- A the world under judgment (2–3b)
 - a comprehensive: everything (2)
 - b specific: the human and animal creation (3a)
 - c the moral factor (3b)
- B humankind under judgment (3c–6)
 - a’ comprehensive: humankind (3c)
 - b’ specific: Judah (4a)
 - c’ the religious factor (4b–6)

Beginning the record of his ministry with the wonder of coming to possess “the word of the LORD,” Zephaniah brings the record to a conclusion in 3:20 with the affirmation “says the LORD.” He was a faithful steward of the divine word (compare Acts 6:2, 4; 20:20, 27; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:15; 3:14–17; 4:2; Titus 1:9). As in all the prophets, we find in Zephaniah, first, the objective fact of divine revelation: “The word of the LORD came” (see the Exegesis). This “coming” (*hāyā*) of the word is, more literally, its *becoming a reality* in the mind of the prophet. We know nothing of the processes involved. This is a work of God. We do know, however, that it was the experience of specially prepared people (Jer. 1:4) who were brought into divine fellowship (Isa. 6:5–8; Ezek. 1:28–2:2) and within that fellowship made privy to divine secrets (Jer. 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7). There was no crushing of human personality or overriding of human mental processes; rather,

the prophetic state lifted the individual into the presence of God. This experience made the prophets more truly human than they were before, so that they were enabled to receive his revelation. Second, there was a sense of the authority of the words of God. Five times (1:2, 3, 10; 2:9; 3:8) Zephaniah asserts, “This is the word of the LORD [*nēʾum yhw̄h*].” This formula stamps the seal of divine authority on what has been proclaimed. Could people accept a message of total world destruction (1:2–3)? Was the destruction of Jerusalem believable (1:10)? Will the destruction represented by Sodom be repeated (2:9)? Is there a straw of hope in the flood tide of judgment (3:8)? The prophet’s response to each of these questions is buttressed by the affirmation: “This is the word of the LORD.” If the prophet is to say something that appalls (1:2–3), shocks (1:10), horrifies (2:9), or seems too good to be true (3:8), he needs to be sure of his ground; he needs the authority of the divine word. Third, Zephaniah believed that his words were God’s words (3:20). The word that “came” (*hāyā*) to him from the Lord and was then passed on from him in human speech did not cease in any way to be the very speech of God himself. This was true both fully and in detail, in substance as well as in the words that conveyed it. All this constitutes the uniqueness of the ministry of the prophets, as well as of the apostles (1 Cor. 2:10–13). The values of revelation, authority, and verbal inspiration reside, however, in the whole Bible as God’s word. The word that came pure from God was received, without detriment to it, by chosen individuals, and it was then transmitted and inscribed in unsullied purity (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). It is to this word that we are called to be faithful stewards, and it is the acknowledged authority of this word that activates an authoritative ministry.

There may be another facet of Zephaniah’s stewardship in the superscription. That he traced his pedigree back four generations is best explained if he was a descendant of King Hezekiah

(see the Introduction). If so, he himself was the bearer of the godly tradition exemplified in Hezekiah, which was about to flower again in Josiah. Was Zephaniah the hidden influence within the palace from which the reform movement sprang? To link the best of the past with the needs of the present is the essence of stewardship (2 Tim. 2:2).

I. The End of the World: Is There Any Hope? (1:2–2:3)

A. The End Announced—for the World (1:2–3a) and for Judah (1:3b–6)

MOTYER

- ² I will put an end to everything, taking it away
from the face of the earth.
This is the word of the LORD.
- ³ I will put an end to human and beast,
I will put an end to birds from the sky
and fish from the sea,
and to the ruins along with the wicked.
Yes, I will cut humankind
from the face of the earth.
This is the word of the LORD.
- ⁴ And I will stretch out my hand against
Judah
and against all those who live in Jerusalem,
and I will cut from this place whatever remains of Baalism:
the name of the incense burners along
with the priests,
- ⁵ and those who bow in worship on the
rooftops to the host of heaven,
and those who bow in worship—who
swear loyalty to the LORD but who
swear by their “king,”
- ⁶ and those who backslide from following
the LORD,
who have ceased to seek the LORD or
look to him.

NRSV

- ² I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth, says the
LORD.
- ³ I will sweep away humans and animals;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will make the wicked stumble.
I will cut off humanity
from the face of the earth, says the
LORD.
- ⁴ I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place every
remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests;
- ⁵ those who bow down on the roofs to the
host of the heavens;
those who bow down and swear to the
LORD,
but who also swear by Milcom;
- ⁶ those who have turned back from following
the LORD,
who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him.

2. The construction **אֶפְסֵה אֶפְסֵה** (I will put an end to) involves several linguistic problems. The first term (**אֶפְסֵה**), the infinitive absolute of **אָפַס** (to gather [up], take away), emphasizes the following verb, which is usually the indicative of the same root (but see Isa. 28:28; Jer. 8:13). The second term (**אֶפְסֵה**) in this construction is the apocopated first-person singular imperfect hiphil of **אָפַס** (to come to an end; hiphil: to bring to an end). This use of a shortened (or jussive) form cannot be explained, but the occurrence of the same form twice in 1:3 suggests that it is a Hebrew idiom that we do not currently understand. This should caution against BHS's alteration of **אֶפְסֵה** to **אָפַס** (I will take away), the first-person singular imperfect qal of **אָפַס**. The Septuagint offers little help, but it does confirm the infinitive-absolute construction. A similar construction in Jeremiah 8:13 involves the same two verbs, suggesting that this construction may be a colloquial usage involving anomalies similar to the familiar **אָפַס אֶפְסֵה** (bring back captivity), arising perhaps from assonance (2:7; 3:20). As far as we can make a literal rendering (though it ignores the apocopation) the construction states, "By taking away I will put an end to." **אֶפְסֵה אֶפְסֵה** (this is the word of the LORD; lit., the word of the LORD) often appears abruptly and even intrusively, as if it were a seal suddenly stamped down to validate the divine authenticity of what is being said (see the Exegesis of Hag. 1:1).

3. **אֶפְסֵה** (I will put an end to) occurs twice in this verse, both times being the same jussive form as

in 1:2. The Septuagint reflects this form in its use of **ἐκλείπτω** (let be cut off). **אָדָם וּבְהֵמָה** (human and beast) and **עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְדִגְי הַיָּם** (birds from the sky and fish from the sea) amplify and extend the meaning of **כָּל** in 1:2. The contrast of terrestrial groups (human and beast) and nonterrestrial creatures (birds and fish) expresses totality. **וְהַמְּשָׁלוֹת** (and to the ruins): The only other instance of **מְשָׁלָה** is in Isaiah 3:6, where it occurs in a context having to do with the collapse of society due to sin. So also here: Zephaniah traces judgment to its root cause and forecasts that the works of the wicked, as well as the wicked themselves, will be swept away. **אֶפְסֵה** cannot function here as the sign of the direct object since no verbal idea, either explicit or implicit, occurs in connection with it. When used as a preposition, a suitable translation is "together with" (BDB, p. 85; Gen. 6:13; 11:31), which fits the context by associating the ruins with the wicked. J. Smith (*Zephaniah*, p. 186), BHS, and the New Revised Standard Version suspect that this final line is a later addition; Smith argues that a reference to the wicked is premature (but does not say why). The poem as it stands is balanced (see the outline at the Exposition of 1:1), and in both sections the threat of judgment (1:2–3a, 3c–4a) is justified by specifying what it is that merits divine anger (1:3b, 4b–6). House (*Zephaniah*, p. 127) concurs with BHS in emending **וְהַמְּשָׁלוֹת** to **וְהַמְּשָׁלָה** (and I will make [the wicked] to stumble) on the ground that this emendation offers a better parallel to the next phrase,

2. The suggestion that Zephaniah was the force behind the reform movement cannot be proved. What is certain is that Zephaniah lived to see the corrupt kings Manasseh and Amon replaced by a good king, Josiah. Yet he knew that things had already gone beyond the point where a change of government would change the destiny of the world. And even though he lived to see Josiah's reform sweep the country, he did not revise his message. Hindsight tells us that divine mercy continued to postpone the end that Zephaniah forecast, and we still face the certainty of it. Human nature remains impervious to the beneficial effects of good rulers and further reformation; it remains unchanged even by additional centuries of divine grace so that life in every aspect (1:3)—and indeed the planet itself (1:18; 3:8)—remains under divine judgment.

3. The reason why everything is under judgment remains constant throughout time: the wicked (*hārēšā'im*). This word, even more com-

monplace in Hebrew than in English, indicates humankind's ordinary "badness," which constitutes the greatest environmental threat of all. Even now the earth is in ruins. Everything of beauty and joy (including the whole animal creation) is diseased by contagion from sinful humans (Gen. 3:16–19). And if we should grumble that the cause is too slight to merit the threatened effect—that the end of the world is too massive a penalty for the pettiness of our sin—we need only recall that sin has also infected our moral perceptions: we are not—nor can we be—trustworthy judges of what is fitting. The Judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25) does right and "this is the word of the LORD" (Zeph. 1:2).

Zephaniah 1:3 indicates that the fifth and sixth days of creation (Gen. 1:20–31) are undone. By including "fish," the coming judgment exceeds even the flood (Gen. 7:21–23). Zephaniah (like Genesis) sees the creation caught up in

וְהִכְרַתִּי (I will cut). This, however, presupposes a rigidity in the use of parallelism unsupported by Old Testament evidence. וְהִכְרַתִּי (yes, I will cut): ו (yes) is used resumptively. כָּרַת (to cut; Lev. 17:10; 20:1–3) is “a strong word indicating annihilation. . . . It is used at times in the technical sense of carrying out the death penalty” (Baker, *Zephaniah*, p. 92). פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה (the face of the earth): Coupled with נִאֻם יְהוָה (this is the word of the LORD), these words give the second movement of the poem a parallelism with the first (1:2). נִאֻם (word): See the Exegesis of 1:2.

4. וְנִשְׂתַּי יָדִי (I will stretch out my hand): The outstretched hand of judgment is one of many linguistic links between Zephaniah and Isaiah (Isa. 5:25; 9:11 [12], 16 [17]; 10:5; 14:26–27), but at its foundation the outstretching of the Lord’s hand is an exodus motif for salvation (Exod. 7:5, 19; 9:22; 14:16, 26). The reversal of a symbol is typical of Zephaniah: the gesture of salvation is now one of judgment. וְהִכְרַתִּי (and I will cut) is the same word (כָּרַת) as in 1:3, where it refers to the judgment of the world. מְקוֹם (place) is a semitechnical term for a sanctuary or shrine (Deut. 12:5; 1 Kings 8:29–30). The reference here could be to Jerusalem or the temple. שְׂאֵר הַבַּעַל (whatever remains of Baalism) may mean all that is left of Baal (after the rest has been destroyed). This would suggest a date for Zephaniah (see the Introduction) after Josiah’s purges had left only pockets of Baalism (2 Chron. 36:13–14; Jer. 9:13 [14]; 19:4–9). But the words do not necessarily involve such a connotation, and it is better to be less specific. The Lord will not be

endlessly patient with usurping gods, and when the time comes he will deal finally with “what-ever remains”—that is, all that is then found (note the same word in Isa. 14:22). הַבַּעַל (Baal) could possibly be the Assyrian Bel, since Zephaniah belongs within the Assyrian period, but it is much more likely to be the Palestinian Baal, a constant snare to the people of God from the time of the conquest. McKay (*Religion in Judah*, p. 67) concludes: “The various deities worshipped in Judah during the period of Assyrian domination lack the definitive aspects of the Assyrian gods and generally exhibit the characteristics of popular Palestinian paganism.” אֶחָדָם (the name): To cut off the name signifies erasing even from memory. There is no certainty about what הַכֹּהֲנִים (the incense-burners; also in 2 Kings 23:5 and Hos. 10:5) refers to. It may be related to the Assyrian *kumru* (priest), supposedly adopted in the Assyrian period, but McKay (p. 37) says that Old Assyrian *kumru* had dropped out of use before the Assyrian domination of Judah. It may be related to כָּמַר (to be hot or excited; Gen. 43:30; 1 Kings 3:26; Lam. 5:10), meaning one practicing a frenzied or ecstatic religion. Burning incense is the only function Scripture assigns to this order (2 Kings 23:5). עִם הַכֹּהֲנִים (along with the priests) distinguishes the כֹּהֲנִים as a distinct order, but more than that we cannot say. The context requires that הַכֹּהֲנִים be those who served Baal (2 Kings 11:18); it is not until 1:5b that Zephaniah alludes to syncretistic worship.

human sin (Gen. 3:14–19; see Rom. 8:19–22) and condemnation.

4. Judgment falls on false religion (“whatever remains of Baalism”), the functionaries of error (“the incense-burners along with the priests”), and the devotees of other gods (“those who bow in worship . . . to the host of heaven”). Judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). Much will be required from those to whom much has been given (Luke 12:48). When the Lord says, “You only have I known” (Amos 3:2), he also says, “Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” The progenitor of the tribe of Judah had a history of privilege and grace: he was not the first-born by right but by appointment (Gen. 29:32–35; 49:8–10); his family became the bearer of kingship (Ps. 78:68–69), but history, privilege, and position offer no security from divine scrutiny. Those who “live in Jerusalem” were in the very presence of the Lord (Deut. 12:5) and within arm’s length of

the means of grace and of the knowledge of God (compare Luke 13:25–27). But their loyalty lay elsewhere (Zeph. 1:4–5) and their heart was cold toward him (1:6).

Baal was the god of productivity: his function in Canaanite religion was to make land, animals, and humans fertile. Baal was another name for the gross national product, and wherever people see bank balances, prosperity, a sound economy, productivity, and mounting exports as the essence of their security, Baal is still worshiped. Baal was also the god of religious excitement (1 Kings 18:26b) and sexual free-for-all (Num. 25:1–3). Human sexual acts were publicly offered to him to prompt him to perform his work of fertilization. No wonder his officiants were called the “frenzied ones” (see the Exegesis). Wherever excitement in religion becomes an end in itself and wherever the cult of “what helps” replaces joy in “what’s true,” Baal is worshiped.

5. וְאֵת (and) continues the sequence of direct objects in 1:4–5, each one relating to the verb וְהִכְרַתִּי (and I will cut). הַמִּשְׁתַּחֲוִּיִּים (those who bow in worship) appears twice in this verse, the second time, immediately before הַנִּשְׁבָּעִים (who swear loyalty). This troubles some textual critics, but R. Smith (*Micah–Malachi*, p. 126) rightly sees it as done for deliberate effect. The contrast here is between positive devotion to the stars and pretended devotion to the Lord: they swear to (לְ) Yahweh and swear by (בְּ) their “king.” In Genesis 21:23, לְ is used of the one to whom an oath is made and בְּ of the basis on which the oath rests. By this neat turn of phrase Zephaniah exposes an expressed loyalty to the Lord, while the actual basis of life is מַלְכָם (their king). One recension of the Septuagint and the Vulgate reads “Milcom,” the Ammonite god (1 Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:13) also known as Molech (Lev. 18:21; 20:5; 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:10). There can be little doubt that the word is based on מֶלֶךְ (king), to which perhaps, in the Old Testament, the vowels of the noun בִּשְׁתָּ (shame) were introduced as a mark of reprobation. Solomon sanctioned the worship of Molech (1 Kings 11:7), which contin-

ued until Josiah destroyed it (2 Kings 23:13–14). Since מֶלֶךְ is one of the titles of the Lord (Isa. 6:1, 5), the point is aptly made that they swear by one king, yet live by another. In deliberate contrast, Zephaniah notes it as a mark of the coming glorious day that “the King of Israel, the LORD, is within you” (3:15).

6. הַנִּסְחָזִים (those who backslide): For נִסָּח with the sense of backslide, see Psalm 44:19 [18] and 53:4 [3] (contrast Isa. 50:5). This slipping away from the Lord is elaborated in the synonymous verbs בָּקַשׁ (to seek) and דָּרַשׁ (to look to). The secular example of בָּקַשׁ, as yearning or active devotion (Song of Sol. 3:1–2; 5:6), captures the heart of both verbs (in the following pairs, the first reference exemplifies בָּקַשׁ and the second דָּרַשׁ): they express a serious turning to the Lord (2 Chron. 11:16; Ps. 119:10), a commitment to devotion (Pss. 27:8; 119:45), praying for help (2 Sam. 12:16; Ps. 34:5 [4]), and seeking guidance in perplexity (Gen. 25:22; 2 Sam. 21:1). So Zephaniah exposes “the apostasy of their hearts” (Kleinert, *Zephaniah*, p. 14), the practical atheism that treats God as an irrelevancy.

5. The prophet now denounces astral cults (compare Deut. 4:19; 17:3; Jer. 7:18; 8:2; 44:17–25), prevalent throughout the period of Manasseh and Amon (2 Kings 21:3, 5, 21) and into the time of Josiah (2 Kings 23:5, 12). These cults may have been stimulated by Assyrian influence, but they were primarily rooted in pre-conquest Canaan (note place-names like Beth-shemesh, “House of the Sun”; Josh. 15:10). The words *on the rooftops* indicate that worship was offered directly to the heavenly bodies without using idols.

Nowadays, not many of the Lord’s professing people bow on the rooftops, but in a world awash with astrologers the reality of astral devotion is still present. Wherever occultism is practiced and children made the victims of satanic rituals, people still worship the king of the underworld to whom, of old, they made their children pass through the fire as living sacrifices (2 Kings 21:6). On these things divine judgment must fall. How the Lord must hurt when such gods are preferred to him and he is marginalized in the lives of his people, whose creed may be impeccable (Zeph. 1:5b) but whose lives rest on other foundations (1:5c).

6. The second half of the poem (1:3c–6) is more specific than the first half. The general accusation of wickedness (3a) becomes the precise accusation

of religious error (4b–5a), disloyalty (5b), apostasy (6a), and practical atheism (6b). Such charges are only justifiable on the basis of divine revelation. This is the difference between the world (2–3a) and the Lord’s people (4), between judgment on the basis of conscience and judgment on the basis of the word of God (note Amos 1:3–2:3 and contrast Amos 2:4–5).

The much briefer allusions to worldwide judgment (Zeph. 1:2–3b) have been leading up to these specific charges against the Lord’s people: by giving a universal context to the specific condemnation of Israel, Zephaniah follows standard prophetic practice. Doctrinally, the point is that Judah and Jerusalem were supposed to be the magnet drawing the world to the Lord (Isa. 2:2–4); instead, they were at one with the world in condemnation. There could be no sharper exposure of their failure to live up to the divine intention. Six groups are singled out: Baalists, false priests, astral devotees (Zeph. 1:4b–5a), syncretists (5b), backsliders (6a), and practical atheists (6b). The first three are actively committed to other gods; the Lord has no place in their religion. The second three pretend a devotion that is actually unreal (5b), have departed from a devotion they once professed (6a), or have now reached the ultimate irre- ligion where the Lord is not a living reality to

them at all (6b). The double reference to “those who bow in worship” (5) forms a domino link between the two triads. The overall movement from external idolatry (4b–5a) to the apostasy of the heart (5b–6) may be expressed symmetrically:

- a** positive: Baal religion (4b)
- b** double description (positive): Baal served (4c)
- c** actual worship: the astral cults (5a)
- c'** pretended worship: ostensibly the Lord, really the “king” (5b)
- a'** negative: the Lord deserted (6a)

- b'** double description (negative): the Lord ignored (6b)

Zephaniah 1:6 adds another dimension to the grief the Lord must feel when his own people marginalize him in their lives. Zephaniah refers here to those who do not follow the Lord, do not seek his fellowship and guidance, and do not look for his help. Deep as the hurt is over public apostasy (4–5), the deeper wound is inflicted when personal devotion and the daily walk with God (6) are abandoned.