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Zephaniah

Scripture: Zephaniah

Code: MSB36

Title

As with each of the 12 Minor Prophets, the prophecy bears the name of its author, which is generally thought to mean “the LORD hides” (cf. 2:3).

Author and Date

Little is known about the author, Zephaniah. Three other OT individuals share his name. He traces his genealogy back 4 generations to King Hezekiah (ca. 715–686 B.C.), standing alone among the prophets descended from royal blood (1:1). Royal genealogy would have given him the ear of Judah’s king, Josiah, during whose reign he preached. The prophet himself dates his message during the reign of Josiah (640–609 B.C.). The moral and spiritual conditions detailed in the book (cf. 1:4–6; 3:1–7) seem to place the prophecy prior to Josiah’s reforms, when Judah was still languishing in idolatry and wickedness. It was in 628 B.C. that Josiah tore down all the altars to Baal, burned the bones of false prophets, and broke the carved idols (2 Chr. 34:3–7); and in 622 B.C. the Book of the Law was found (2 Chr. 34:8–35:19). Consequently, Zephaniah most likely prophesied from 635–625 B.C., and was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Background and Setting

Politically, the imminent transfer of Assyrian world power to the Babylonians weakened Nineveh’s hold on Judah, bringing an element of independence to Judah for the first time in 50 years. King Josiah’s desire to retain this newfound freedom from taxation and subservience undoubtedly led him to interfere later with Egypt’s attempt to interdict the fleeing king of Nineveh in 609 B.C. (cf. 2 Chr. 35:20–27). Spiritually, the reigns of Hezekiah’s son Manasseh (ca. 695–642 B.C.), extending over 4 decades, and his grandson Amon (ca. 642–640 B.C.), lasting only two years, were marked by wickedness and apostasy (2 Kin. 21; 2 Chr. 33). The early years of Josiah’s reign were also characterized by the evil from his fathers (2 Kin. 23:4). In 622 B.C., however, while repairing the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the High-Priest found the Book of the Law (2 Kin. 22:8). Upon reading it, Josiah initiated extensive reforms (2 Kin. 23). It was during the early years of Josiah’s reign, prior to the great revival, that this 11th hour prophet, Zephaniah, prophesied and no doubt had an influence on the sweeping reforms Josiah brought to the nation. But the evil kings before Josiah (55 years) had had such an effect on Judah that it never recovered. Josiah’s reforms were too late and didn’t outlast

his life.

Historical and Theological Themes

Zephaniah's message on the Day of the Lord warned Judah that the final days were near, through divine judgment at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, ca. 605–586 B.C. (1:4–13). Yet, it also looks beyond to the far fulfillment in the judgments of Daniel's 70th week (1:18; 3:8). The expression "Day of the Lord" is employed by the author more often than by any other OT writer, and is described as a day that is near (1:7), and as a day of wrath, trouble, distress, devastation, desolation, darkness, gloominess, clouds, thick darkness, trumpet, and alarm (1:15,16,18). Yet even within these oracles of divine wrath, the prophet exhorted the people to seek the Lord, offering a shelter in the midst of judgment (2:3), and proclaiming the promise of eventual salvation for His believing remnant (2:7; 3:9–20).

Interpretive Challenges

The book presents an unambiguous denunciation of sin and warning of imminent judgment on Judah. Some have referred the phrase "I will restore to the peoples a pure language" (3:9) to the restoration of a universal language, similar to the days prior to confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). They point out that the word "language" is also used in Gen. 11:7. It is better, however, to understand the passage as pointing to a purification of heart and life. This is confirmed by the context (cf. 3:13) and corroborated by the fact that the word "language" is most commonly translated "lip." When combined with "pure," the reference to speech speaks of inward cleansing from sin (Is. 6:5) manifested in speech (cf. Matt. 12:34), including the removal of the names of false gods from their lips (Hos. 2:17). It does not imply a one world language.

Outline

I. Superscription (1:1)

II. The Lord's Judgment (1:2–3:8)

A. On the Whole Earth (1:2, 3)

B. On Judah (1:4–2:3)

C. On the Surrounding Nations (2:4–15)

1. Philistia (2:4–7)

2. Moab/Ammon (2:8–11)

3. Ethiopia (2:12)

4. Assyria (2:13–15)

D. On Jerusalem (3:1–7)

E. On All Nations (3:8)

III. The Lord's Blessing (3:9–20)

A. For the Nations (3:9, 10)

B. For Judah (3:11–20)

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