

# Zephaniah

S. Rives, 2008/2009

- I. What is the social construction of reality of the audience?
  - A. Date of the prophecy:
    - Before 621 BC (or, perhaps, ~625, see below).
    - 1:1 During the reign of Josiah (reign: 641/640 to 610/609 BC)
    - 3:4 Before Josiah's temple cleansing in 2 Kings 23:4ff.
      - Note: 2 Chr and 2 Kings tell the story from different angles, making the temple cleansing hard to place in the timeline.
    - 1:4,3:4 People worshiped Baal and the sanctuary was polluted
    - if "remnant of Baal" in 1:4 is taken as NKJV, then a pre-621 date attractive.
    - if "remnant of Baal" is combined with 1:5 housetop worship to mean the temples were gone, then Baal worship is already being purged and this book is dated after 621 BC but before the major reform of 628.
  - B. Audience
    - King of Judah, then Judah via the leadership
  - C. Political views of themselves and others:
    - Of God:
      - 1:12 *Yahweh will not do good.*
    - Others:
      - They thought Moab and Ammon deserved what Sodom and Gomorrah received (2:9)
      - Enemies of Moab and Ammon (2:8,2:10)
        - Deserving of Yahweh's punishment for threatening Judah (2:10)
      - Ethiopia (2:12ff), Assyria (2:13ff) are worthy of desolation
    - Themselves:
      - Likely thought themselves a desirable nation (2:1)
      - A proud nation (2:1)
      - Experiencing some level of material prosperity (1:13,18)
  - D. Social situation:
    - Relative ease of living, "men settled in complacency" (1:12)
      - They had "silver and gold" (1:18), which (as idols or money) will not save them from the coming day. At least some had good houses and vineyards (1:13)
    - Leaders corrupt, oppressed those beneath them (3:3, 1:8-9) – injustice in gvt.
    - Corruption in the courts (3:3)
  - E. Religious Situation:
    - The temple was polluted by the priests (3:4)
    - The law was the object of violence (3:4)
    - Baal worship in place (1:4)

- The worship of other gods permeates the whole case against the people (1:4-6, 9,12, 18; 3:9ff [by implication]).
  - There was a belief that the true God was just another idol (1:12)
- F. Need of the audience:
- The need to view worship as Yahweh viewed it
  - To realize the curse for worshipping other gods (2 Chr 34:25)
  - To know the error of swearing by the Ammonite god Milcom (1:5)
  - To see their need for humility and righteousness (2:3)
  - To know that they were susceptible to judgment, just like their enemies
- II. The world of the prophet:
- A. Background:
- The nation is recovering from Manasseh's terrible rule of idolatry (2 Chr 33)
  - Assyrians were ascendant over Judah in the time of Manasseh (even taking Manasseh captive at one point).
  - The Assyrian's in 627 suffered the loss of their leader, meaning relief/opportunity for Judah during Josiah/Zephaniah.
  - Josiah, a king like David, is on the throne; his reforms have either started or are about to start when Zephaniah writes.
  - Zephaniah himself is of kingly decent from Hezekiah, and possibly a prophet in the king's court.
  - Zephaniah knew the later prophetic traditions (in particular, Amos and Isaiah).
- B. What literary forms of speech did he use?
- Judgment speeches (1:2-6)
  - A summons to repent (2:1-3)
  - Oracles against foreign nations (2:4-15)
  - Woe oracle (3:1-6)
  - Salvation oracles (3:9-20)
- C. What new idea was externalized?
- The visitation of Yahweh upon Judah in judgment (2:12ff.)
  - There is no room for Baal worship alongside Yahweh worship (contra all the views of reality legitimized by Manasseh's rule)
  - An unprecedented glorious future awaits Judah and the nations; all gathered to worship Yahweh in one language (3:9ff); with Zion and Israel exalted (this would surely be a source of hope during Babylonian exile and other periods of decline).
- D. What was his theological purpose?
- Judgment is coming, Judah's worship must be reformed (indeed, it will be in the eschaton—3:9ff).

- Judgment is eminent (1:2-9,14-18). Oddly, repentance is not overtly held out as hope for Judah (cf. Also 2 Ch 34:23-28). Though it does peek through as an option in 2:3 (though his anger still comes).

### III. Methods of communicating the message:

#### A. What theological traditions legitimated his externalizations?

- 3:5 The standard understanding that “The Lord is righteous” legitimizes that “He will do no unrighteousness [he will bring justice and punish Judah/Jerusalem (3:6,7)]”
- Appeals to the known “Day of the Lord” from Amos and Isaiah
- 2:3 “Seek the Lord” from Amos 5:4f. and Isa 55:6.
- 2:15 “The Lord is God and there is no other” from Isa 45:5
- 3:6 Yahweh has cut off other nations (Deuteronomy) and legitimizing that he will do it again.
- 3:9 Sodom and Gomorah
- 1:7-8 The sacrificial system – Judah herself will be put on the altar.
- 1:3 The creation formula “man...beast...birds...fish”
- 1:14,16 The day as a time of noise (“the noise of the day”) recalling the sound of the Lord as he came in the Garden judgment scene in Genesis (which was a day of judgment as the Lord came in the Spirit of the Day). Cf. M. G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, Two Age Press, p128ff.
- 3:9 Perhaps an echo of the Babel incident

#### B. What experiences legitimated his message?

- God had cut off other nations (3:6)
- God had come in “a day” of judgment against the Northern Kingdom (cf. Amos, Hosea).
- Covenant curse follows disobedience (cf. Deut 28 and then the destruction of the Northern Kingdom). Now curse is coming to Judah for their disobedience.

#### C. What use of logic or causation?

- 3:5 Legitimized judgment based on the righteousness of Yahweh
- 3:1-2 Jerusalem has failed on her part, therefore judgment

D. Other methods to bring persuasion:

- 3:9ff The promise of restoration, implying, “God is a God who saves, so serve him and trust him”
- 1:1 Credibility/Authority: Appeal to Zephaniah as descendant of king Hezekiah (Zephaniah was not a nobody, but of royal birth, even of the great reformer); making his charge against the king's court even more credible.
- 3:13 God's shared love of Judah. Judah had a high view of herself, and ultimately God will make her the exalted nation. *Yahweh and Zephaniah are not anti-Judah.*
- 2:10 Yahweh will punish Judah's enemies
- Irony: Judah becomes the sacrificed (1:7-9)
- Fear of destruction: Zephaniah's main message should have provoked obedience if for fear alone (3:7)
- 1:18 Zephaniah delegitimized their current plausibility structures – don't trust your silver and gold (assuming they were made into gods) for they can not deliver you. Note, the word “jealousy” in 1:18 might recall the Ex. 20 usage in relation to other gods.

IV. Response of the audience:

A. Negative:

The nation is finally sent into exile. Zephaniah's judgment oracle against Judah is shortly fulfilled in Babylonian exile, indicating that the nation as a whole did not track with Josiah's reforms (cf. 2 Chr 36 and 2 Chr 34:24).

B. Positive:

There was reform with Zephaniah and Josiah. Though the credit is given most obviously to Josiah in II Chronicles and II Kings, Zephaniah surely had a positive impact at some level.

V. Theological Principles:

Judah's God is not to share his glory with the gods of other nations.

Yahweh will consummate the created order (even producing a reversal of Babel).

Yahweh judges the enemies of his people.

Yahweh is prepared to judge his own house, even sending his name bearers into exile.

God is to be feared (3:7); he executes curses (Deut 28) against his own covenant breaking people.

The people of the true religion are ultimately vindicated.

A glorious day of restoration awaits God's covenant people (hope to hold onto even while they experience exile in a land that is not their own).

The history of the covenant people has an eschatological thrust, moving towards reckoning and glorification.

Judgment is not the end of Judah's story. Though exiled, she will be restored.

Mercy, not judgment, is Zion's ultimate song (3:14).