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ZEPHANIAH

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Zephaniah

The scribes who introduce the Zephaniah scroll claim that his ministry took place ‘in the days of King Josiah’ (Zephaniah 1:1). An analysis of the text offers no reason to doubt the accuracy of their claim. Josiah was eight years old when he succeeded to the throne in 640. It was only when King Ashurbanipal of Assyria died in 628 that Josiah was able to set out establishing Judah’s independence. This entailed expansion into the former kingdom of Israel, taken by Assyria a century earlier. Significantly it included religious reform, a reform supported by the Deuteronomic School and also by Zephaniah (see page 13). Zephaniah’s ministry took place in the early days of Josiah’s reform, somewhere between 628 and 620.

Zephaniah was influenced by Amos, a prophet whose ministry took place in the northern kingdom some 130 years earlier. Amos spoke of the ‘Day of YHWH’ as being a day when YHWH would act, not to save his people, as they assumed, but to punish them for their infidelity:

Alas for you who desire the day of YHWH!
Why do you want the day of YHWH? It is darkness, not light;
as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.
Is not the day of YHWH darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

– Amos 5:18-20

Zephaniah urges his contemporaries to turn to YHWH before they are forced to face God’s punishment. He declares that the Day of YHWH is imminent. Like Amos, he knows that YHWH is just. Judah would not be the only nation to face judgment. Amos speaks of the crimes of Israel’s neighbours, Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab, and of the punishment they are to endure (see Amos 1:3 - 2:3). Similarly, we hear Zephaniah speaking out against Philistia, Moab, and Ammon (2:5-11). Though he speaks out against the people’s sin, and is firm in insisting on the need for repentance, that is not his main focus. True prophet that he is, his focus is always on YHWH, whose fidelity transcends human sin. Amos’s scroll ends on this note (see Amos 9:11-15), so does Zephaniah’s (see 3:14-20).

Inspired by Zephaniah?

After a century of subjection to Assyria, at last there was some hope of liberation. Assyria’s power was declining, no other power was yet threatening to take its place, and Judah had a king who listened to the forces who were pushing for religious reform. Most of Zephaniah’s oracles speak of God’s judgment on the sins that he witnessed. The whole of the first chapter is devoted to God’s threat of punishment of Judah. Judah’s enemies, too, will be punished by God (see 2:4-6, 8-15). If the people were ever to enjoy the presence of YHWH in their midst and the blessing consequent upon such a communion, they would have to change their ways, and drastically (see 2:3). Like other prophets he explained God’s punishment as an instrument in bringing about the purifying of the nation, and he bemoans the people’s failure to repent (3:2, 7). As a true prophet his focus is on YHWH, and therefore he speaks of a remnant (3:12-13) and of restoration (2:7; 3:9). He concludes with a remarkable statement of the passionate exuberance of God’s longing for intimate communion with his people, and the sheer delight God will have when this intimacy is restored (3:14-24).

THE DAY OF YHWH

ZEPHANIAH 1:1 -18

¹The word of YHWH 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.

In this opening verse the editor/collector of Zephaniah's oracles introduces us to the prophet. The verse has the same form as that used to introduce the oracles of Hosea and Micah. The emphasis is on the fact that when we listen to Zephaniah's words we are listening to 'the word of YHWH'. Zephaniah's contemporary, Jeremiah, uses the expression 'the word of YHWH came to me' (see Jeremiah 1:4, 1:11, 2:1). We find those responsible for the Deuteronomic History using the same terminology (see 1Samuel 15:10; 1Kings 6:11), which might suggest that the editor was a member of the Deuteronomic School.

The name Zephaniah means 'the one whom YHWH protects/cherishes'. The name 'Cushi' points to his father belonging to the peoples to the south of Egypt. It is unusual to provide a genealogy going back four generations. The editor wants to include Hezekiah among Zephaniah's ancestors - which suggests that he might intend to link Zephaniah with the famous Hezekiah, who was king of Judah during the early years of the seventh century and the great-grandfather of King Josiah. King Hezekiah was in alliance with the pharaohs of the 25th Egyptian Dynasty who ruled Egypt from Cush (see 2Kings 19:9). Under the Cushite leaders, Egypt was able to repulse the Assyrian army at Eltekeh in 701 - which weakened the Assyrian forces and played a role in Jerusalem's survival that year.

Zephaniah's ministry took place 'in the days of King Josiah'. As noted in the Introduction (page 22), Zephaniah's oracles fit best with the early years of Josiah's reform, that is between 728 and 720. Along with the members of the Deuteronomic School, Zephaniah (who may have been a member of that School) is supporting Josiah's determination to get the people of Judah to return to a faithful carrying out of the covenant with YHWH that is the reason for their existence as a nation.

The Hebrew verb translated here as ‘harvest’ (קצף, *qāṣap*) is the root of the noun *qāṣîp* (‘harvesting’) the name given to the season of the harvesting of grapes, olive and figs (see Exodus 34:22). This harvest marked the end of the agricultural year in Judah. Nothing could be done in the fields as the farmers waited for the autumn rains, and so they could make a pilgrimage to the temple and enjoy a week of festive celebrations, thanking God for the harvest and praying for rain. This was the New Year Festival, celebrating creation, kingship, and the temple. It came to be called ‘booths’ (*sukkôt*), probably because of the makeshift tents that covered the hills around Jerusalem during the week of the celebrations.

The Jerusalem temple at the time of this festival may have been the context for Zephaniah’s oracles. Clearly he is not using the word ‘harvest’ in a positive sense. Rather, he is looking at the trees and vines that have been stripped bare. Zephaniah startles them by announcing in God’s name that God is going to ‘harvest’ (strip bare) everything from the face of the earth (verse 1).

Verse 3 reinforces the ‘everything’ of verse 2. God’s creative action is to be reversed. Nothing living will be found on land or sea or in the heavens. We are reminded of the words chosen to describe God’s grieving at sin – a grief that led him to wipe out his creation in the Primeval Flood (see Genesis 6:7; 7:4; 8:8). Verse 3 also echoes Hosea 4:3. See also Deuteronomy 6:15. The words ‘and those who cause the wicked to stumble’ appear to be an early gloss to qualify the following threat: ‘I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth’. This is not intended to mean all humanity, but only those who ‘cause the wicked to stumble’ – which is explained in verses 4-6.

‘This place’ in verse 4 probably refers to the temple in Jerusalem, believed by the people of Judah to be the centre of YHWH’s universe. As the dwelling place of the Holy One it needs to be holy. The ‘remnant of Baal’ refers to what was still remaining of the cult objects outlawed by Josiah, and those who persisted in worshipping them, especially the ‘idolatrous priests’. Those to be ‘harvested’ (stripped bare) are further described in verse 5. Zephaniah includes those whose cult is addressed to the astral deities (see Jeremiah 19:13; Deuteronomy 7:3; 2Kings 23:1-5). They use YHWH’s name and that of their king (Josiah), but they are worshipping false gods. All this is summed up in verse 6. Those who will be stripped bare are those who are unfaithful to YHWH.

²I will utterly harvest everything from the face of the earth, says YHWH.

³I will harvest humans and animals; I will harvest the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, and those who cause the wicked to stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says YHWH.

⁴I 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;

⁵those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens; those who bow down and swear to YHWH, but also swear by their king; ⁶those who have turned back from following YHWH, who have not sought YHWH or inquired of him.

⁷Be silent before the Lord YHWH! For the day of YHWH is at hand; YHWH has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. ⁸And on the day of YHWH's sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire. ⁹On that day I will punish all who cross the threshold, who fill the house of their lord with violence and fraud.

¹⁰On that day, says YHWH, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud tumult from the hills.

¹¹The inhabitants of the Mortar wail, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off.

¹²At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "YHWH will not do good, nor will he do harm." ¹³Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.

Zephaniah calls for silence (listen to the Hebrew שָׁמָּה, has!). He has just delivered an oracle from YHWH declaring that 'those who have turned back from following YHWH, who have not sought YHWH or inquired of him' (verse 6) will be punished. Now he declares that this punishment is imminent. He uses an expression already used by Amos (see page 22), calling this time of punishment the 'day of YHWH' (see also Isaiah 13:6).

The silence called for by the prophet is one of stunned horror. YHWH is there as a priest. He has set aside ('consecrated') guests to attend a sacrifice. Either Judah is invited to see its own sacrifice, or enemies are there to witness it. Those to be sacrificed are named in verses 8-9. 'Those who dress themselves in foreign attire' are those who, in the cult or in foreign affairs, are favouring those who are against YHWH and against Judah's independence. 'Those who cross the threshold' are the priests who are the only ones allowed to cross into the court in which the altar is situated. They are to be punished because they are filling God's house 'with violence and fraud'.

An essential element of the sacrificial system in ancient Israel was the conviction that, by putting an offering aside for the Holy One, people could put things right, and so make it possible for YHWH to remain with his people. The Day of YHWH is portrayed by Zephaniah in sacrificial terms. By putting aside those responsible for polluting the land, and offering them as a holocaust, evil would be destroyed and the land would be purified.

The 'Fish Gate' was part of the outer northern wall of Jerusalem constructed by Manasseh (see 2Chronicles 33:14). The 'Second Quarter' refers to the Western Hill across the Tyropoean Valley west of the Temple Mount. It was fortified by Hezekiah to protect the new settlements needed for the refugees from Samaria. The 'Mortar' seems to refer to a commercial region in the city, probably located in the low-lying Tyropoean Valley. YHWH will put an end to those 'traders' working for Assyrian interests in Jerusalem.

Verses 12-13 give the reason for the wailing. YHWH is punishing them (see pages 16-17 and 18). They are not thinking clearly. They are so caught up in their own affairs that they consider YHWH to be, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant to their lives.

One can forgive the people for looking forward to 'the Day of the Lord'. Surely, it would be a day when YHWH would intervene to bless his people and give them victory over their enemies. After all they were God's chosen people and this was YHWH's land in which they were living.

Like Amos (see Amos 5:18-20) and Isaiah (see Isaiah 13:6) before him, Zephaniah is confronting them. It is useless for them to put their confidence in YHWH's protection and vindication when they are giving no attention to being faithful to the covenant that alone gives them their identity.

After repeating his assertion that the Day of YHWH is imminent (verse 14; see verse 7), Zephaniah goes on to describe that Day. The Latin Vulgate translation of 'that day will be a day of wrath' is 'dies irae, dies illa' – the opening words of the medieval hymn of Thomas of Celano. It will be a 'day of distress and anguish' (verses 15-16; compare Isaiah 37:3; 2Kings 19:3).

The people of Judah will not be the only ones to experience this distress, but those who 'have sinned against YHWH' will not be exempted from it: 'all the land will be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the land' (verse 18).

The final part of verse 17 alludes to the slaying and gutting of the sacrificial animals to prepare them for burning on the altar. This will be the lot of those who have 'sinned against YHWH'.

From the first part of verse 18 it is clear that Zephaniah is focusing on those who have grown rich and who have based their confidence, not on YHWH, but on their wealth. Their wealth 'will not be able to save them'. There are echoes here, once more, of Amos.

The 'land' in the second part of verse 18 is the land of Judah. Those who have 'sinned against YHWH' are placing the whole land in jeopardy.

¹⁴The great day of YHWH is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of YHWH is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. ¹⁵That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against YHWH, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their innards like dung.

¹⁸Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of YHWH's wrath; in the fire of his passion all the land will be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the land.

