

SEEK YHWH

ZEPHANIAH 2:1 – 3:20

¹Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, ²before the decree comes into effect, and the day comes and goes like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of YHWH, before there comes upon you the day of YHWH's wrath.

³Seek YHWH, all you humble of the land, who carry out his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of YHWH's wrath.

⁴For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon desolate; Ashdod's people shall be driven out at noon, and Ekron shall be uprooted.

Having declared that the Day of YHWH is imminent, and that it will be a day when 'those who have turned back from following YHWH'(1:6) will be punished, Zephaniah now exhorts the people to repent before it is too late.

The word translated 'gather' in verse 1 (qāšaš) is used for gathering straw (qaš), or sticks for a fire (see 1Kings 17:10). Is Zephaniah, once again, alluding to the sacrificial fire in which animals are burned as victims (see 1:7)? 'Shameless'(ksp) has the same root as 'silver'(see 1:11). Shamelessly they are relying on their acquired wealth and not on YHWH (see 1:18).

Verse 2 stresses the urgency of the situation, and, by stressing YHWH's anger, defines the day as one of divine punishment that cannot be evaded. In verse 3 Zephaniah appeals to the 'humble of the land, who carry out his commands'. Will there be enough of them to draw the 'shameless nation' with them? Or is Zephaniah limiting himself to the hope that they, at least, will be spared?

The threatened Day of YHWH is directed at the nation which 'has not sought YHWH or inquired of him'(1:6). Zephaniah calls on anyone who would listen to reverse this process and 'seek YHWH'. According to 2Chronicles 34:3, King Josiah began to seek YHWH in his youth in 632. In 628 he was emboldened to purge the cult of foreign elements when Assyria had to concentrate its resources on defending itself against the revolt spearheaded by Babylon. Then in 622 he set in motion a complete program of reform (see 1Kings 22:3; 2Chronicles 34:8). Zephaniah's appeal fits well into this context.

To seek YHWH is to 'seek righteousness'. To be righteous is to be wise as to what is right. What is right is declared by God in the Torah, and it is obedience to the Torah that is the purpose of Josiah's reform (compare Amos 5:24). Zephaniah asks them to 'seek humility', for only when they recognise their need and their total dependence on YHWH will they listen attentively and with awe to YHWH as he reveals his will through his anointed king.

Verse 4 offers a further reason to 'seek YHWH'. Egypt's action in Philistia was proof of Assyria's weakness. The imminent collapse of the four city states there (see map page 32) could be seen as a sign of what Judah should expect if YHWH does not protect it. Gaza is likened to a 'forsaken' wife. Did Zephaniah's link with Cush influence his awareness of the universal reign of YHWH? What is in process of happening in Philistia could be a warning to Judah, or be seen as a sign of Assyria's weakening position, and so support Josiah's attempt to rid Judah of its religious subservience to Assyria.

This is the first of a series of oracles that speak of the fate of Judah's neighbours. That Philistia is named first provides a link with verse 4.

Zephaniah shows no interest in explaining what it was in the behaviour of the Philistines that merited divine punishment. He is telling his Judean audience that YHWH is moving against Philistia. As in verse 4 the significance for Judah is ambiguous. On the one hand it shows what YHWH could do to Judah if Judah does not repent. On the other hand this could be seen as a reversal of Assyria's policy in the region. Philistia would no longer be encroaching upon Judah's territory. Its destruction could provide a vacuum into which Judah could expand. It is this second possibility that Zephaniah underlines in order to encourage Judah to repent and to get behind Josiah's expansionist policies.

The word translated 'seacoast' in verse 5 (*ḥekel*) is unusual. It can mean a narrow strip of land. It can also mean 'destruction'. Zephaniah seems to be using it to play with both meanings. A similar play on words seems to be present in Zephaniah's speaking of the Philistines as 'Kerethites'. The root *krt* can also mean 'destroy'. While considering words with double meanings, we should note that 'Canaan' can also mean 'trader' (see 1:11). The Philistine cities played an important role in Assyrian trade.

The unusual word translated in verse 6 as 'wells' has the same consonants (*krt*) as Kerethites, and appears to be another example of Zephaniah's penchant for punning on words.

The expression 'remnant of the house of Judah' in verse 7 underlines the fact that the Day of YHWH will affect Judah. Only 'the humble of the land who carry out YHWH's commands' will survive. They will do more than survive. YHWH will bless them, for they will expand into the vacant Philistia and enjoy the possession of its pasture and wells.

The ambiguity prevalent in earlier verses, which makes it difficult to see whether the punishment of the Philistines is to be read negatively as a threat or positively as a sign that YHWH is intervening to restore Judah, is partly resolved in the final words of verse 7. The behaviour of the 'shameless nation' does not augur well for Judah. However, as a genuine prophet, Zephaniah's primary focus is on YHWH, not on human sin, and so he promises hope – but only for the obedient. He is reinforcing his call to 'seek YHWH' (2:3) and be blessed.

⁵Woe! O you inhabitants of the seacoast, you nation of the Kerethites! The word of YHWH is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines; and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left.

⁶The seacoast will become pasture, wells for shepherds and folds for flocks.

⁷The seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall pasture, and in the houses of Ashkelon they shall lie down at evening. For YHWH their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes.



YHWH is moving not only against Philistia, Judah's western neighbour, but also against Moab and Ammon to the east (see map page 32). This time Zephaniah names their crime: their arrogance in daring to annex territory given to his people by YHWH. Fighting over the territory to the east of the Jordan has its origins in its occupation by the tribes of Reuben and Gad before Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan to occupy Canaan (see Numbers 21:10 - 24:25). A century prior to Josiah's time (in 734-732), the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III, with the support of Moab and Ammon, invaded and annexed the area (see Isaiah 15-16). It is to this that Zephaniah is referring in verse 8.

YHWH of hosts, the warrior God who sees to the defeat of Israel's enemies, will bring about the annihilation of Moab and Ammon. In speaking of YHWH as 'the God of Israel', Zephaniah is echoing the propaganda of King Josiah whose determination was to gain control of the whole of the territory promised by God to Israel, including the land east of the Jordan. As we have seen (page 31), Zephaniah was encouraged to see in Egypt's invasion of Philistia the will of YHWH to support Josiah. The Arab incursions into Moab and Ammon also supported this hope.

The salt lands bordering the Dead Sea made Sodom and Gomorrah perfect examples of what God would do to people who refused to follow his way (see Genesis 18-19). As in verse 7, it is 'the remnant of my people' (verse 9) who will benefit from the destruction of Moab and Ammon. Zephaniah wants his audience to choose. They will suffer a similar fate if they do not repent. If they do, they ('the survivors of my people') will be part of the restoration of Israel.

In verse 11 the focus widens. Zephaniah zooms out from Philistia, Moab and Ammon, to 'all the gods of the earth'. Ultimately all the gods will bow down in worship of YHWH. This will be seen by the defeat of all Israel's enemies. Jerusalem will be restored as the centre of the earth, the holy place from which YHWH's glory will radiate out to 'all the coasts and islands of the nations'. Verse 11 prepares us for the following verses (2:12-15).

⁸I have heard the taunts of Moab and the revilings of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made inroads into their territory. ⁹Therefore, as I live, says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them.

¹⁰This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of YHWH of hosts.

¹¹YHWH will be terrible against them; he will bring down all the gods of the earth, and to him shall bow down, each in its place, all the coasts and islands of the nations.

¹²You also, O Cush, are slain by my sword.

¹³And he will extend his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and he will make Nineveh a desolation, an arid wasteland like the desert.

¹⁴Herds shall lie down in it, every wild animal; pelican and porcupine will lodge on its capitals; the owl shall hoot at the window, the raven croak on the threshold; for cedar will be stripped.

¹⁵Is this the exultant city that lived secure, that said to itself, "I am, and there is no one else"? What a desolation it has become, a lair for wild animals! Everyone who passes by it hisses and shakes the fist.

Zephaniah illustrates his point about the eventual submission of all the earth to YHWH (and therefore to faithful Israel) by referring to the people of 'Cush', commonly identified with Ethiopia, but generally referring to the scarcely known lands to the south of Judah beyond Egypt (perhaps Zephaniah's land of origin?, see 1:1).

From 747 to 664, the pharaohs of Egypt were from Cush. This ended with the destruction of Thebes in 663 by the Assyrians, supported by Psamtek I, who became pharaoh (663-610) and remained an ally of Assyria. It was the Egyptian army under Psamtek that was moving against Philistia (and it was his son and successor, Necho, who killed Josiah in the battle of Megiddo in 609). Zephaniah seems to be referring to the defeat of the Cushite dynasty as another example of YHWH's action in history. He sees the strengthening of Egypt as a sign of the weakening of Assyria.

If Josiah is to realise his goal it is Assyria that must be destroyed. Zephaniah moves from the extreme south (Cush) to the north, and focuses on Assyria, with its capital Nineveh, as his oracles against the nations reach their climax. Zephaniah read the signs well, for the Assyrian Empire was crushed with the destruction of its ancient capital, Ashur, in 614 by the combined forces of Babylon and the Medes. The destruction of Nineveh followed in 612.

The well-watered cities of Mesopotamia will be reduced to ruins inhabited by wild animals, and surrounded by a wilderness. The beautiful adorned buildings of this once splendid city are in ruins, stripped of their cedar, and ravaged by the elements.

YHWH will bring about the destruction of this proud city and Empire that boasted that it had no equal in power and beauty.

Though the city in verse 1 is not named, verse 2 which speaks of YHWH as ‘her God’ points to it being Jerusalem. Zephaniah is returning to his main theme. Jerusalem is in serious need of reform.

Once again we find Zephaniah using terminology that is ambiguous. The word translated ‘rebellious’ (mōr’â) resembles the word ‘awesome’. The word translated ‘defiled’ derives from the Hebrew root g’l, which is also the root for ‘redeemed’. The word translated ‘oppressing’ (yōnâ) is clear enough, but it has the same sound as the word for ‘dove’, which is associated with the end of divine punishment (see the Primeval Flood, Genesis 8:8ff). Zephaniah is choosing words that offer a sharp critique, but also point to more positive alternatives.

Verse 2 is a powerful and pointed criticism of the sins of Jerusalem. The people must act now to support Josiah’s reforms if they want to be part of the ‘remnant’ already mentioned in 2:4 and 2:7.

In verses 3-4 the officials, who are responsible for administration (see 1:8), are compared to roaring lions. Rather than caring for the well-being of the people (see Deuteronomy 16:18-20), they are preying on them. The judges, officials who are responsible for administering justice (see Deuteronomy 16:18-20), are compared to wolves. They devour what they can under cover of darkness so that crime (especially their crime) never sees the light of day.

The prophets, whose role is to speak to the people for God (see Deuteronomy 18:9-22), have no regard for truth and cannot be trusted. The priests, whose role is to protect what is sacred and teach the Torah, are profaning the sacred, and doing violence to the Torah.

It is important to note that there is no criticism of the king. Most prophets speak out against the reigning king – and for good reason. In Zephaniah’s case, however, the king is Josiah, whose agenda Zephaniah is supporting. Reform will not happen while corrupt officials are kept in place; unless these officials change their ways, and do so immediately.

¹Woe, O rebellious, defiled, oppressing city!

²She has listened to no voice; she has accepted no instruction. She has not trusted in YHWH. She has not drawn near to her God.

³The officials in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.

⁴Her prophets are reckless, faithless; her priests profane what is sacred, they do violence to the Torah.

⁵YHWH in her midst is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail. He knows no wrong, no shame.

⁶I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without people, without inhabitants. ⁷I said, "Surely the city will fear me, and accept correction; she will not lose sight of all that I have brought upon her." But they were the more eager to corrupt everything they did.

⁸Therefore wait for me, says YHWH, for the day when I arise for prey. For my decision is to harvest nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my passion all the earth will be consumed.

⁹At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of YHWH and serve him with one accord.

¹⁰From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my cereal offering.

In verse 5 Zephaniah asserts the justice of YHWH. This is in stark contrast to the lack of justice (the 'wrong', the 'shame') in those responsible for the life of the city (see 3:1-4). Whatever the darkness, the light of YHWH's justice is as certain and reliable as the dawn. It is good to read Psalm 19 in this context. It, too, praises YHWH as creator with the same emphasis on light. It goes on to praise YHWH for the Torah.

A century of subjection to Assyria could tempt people to doubt YHWH's power or justice, Zephaniah argues that YHWH has demonstrated his fidelity to Jerusalem by the way in which he has 'cut off nations' (verse 6; see 2:5-15). The rise of Babylon supports Zephaniah's argument. If 'nations' includes Israel and Judah, Zephaniah is attributing their suffering to YHWH's power, not weakness.

Verse 7 argues that the suffering experienced by the city is because of the corruption found in it, not because of any failure on God's part. While God had to punish Jerusalem, he saw that it was not destroyed. This is part of what God 'has brought upon' the city.

This adds urgency to the call to 'wait for' YHWH (verse 8). Jerusalem will see God's justice. They will witness the punishment of their enemies (verse 8). For a commentary on YHWH's decision to 'harvest nations' see 1:2-3. He is harvesting the nations by stripping them bare. Later he will use the same verb to describe God's stripping from Jerusalem those who are a reproach (see 3:18).

In verses 9-10 Zephaniah envisages the time when the nations will experience a conversion to YHWH (see 2:11) and come, from the ends of the earth, to offer sacrifice to YHWH in Jerusalem. The change of speech appears to be a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:1-9). The picture of people from the ends of the earth, 'beyond the rivers of Cush', bringing cereal offerings to YHWH points to Zephaniah's ministry being before Judah's relations with Egypt soured later in Josiah's reign.

The focus moves from what YHWH will do among the nations (verses 8-10) to what he will do to Jerusalem. The rebels (see 3:1-4) will be removed (verse 11), but the city will survive (see verse 8). The removal of 'the proud exultant ones' who refuse to repent will leave a 'remnant' (verse 13, see 2:7,9) who are 'humble and lowly' (verse 12). They 'will pasture and lie down, and no one will make them afraid' (verse 13). Zephaniah sees the fulfilment of Isaiah 2:6-21 in the reform of Josiah. If the people get behind the reform 'they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain' (Isaiah 11:9).

Since the temple and the feast of Sukkôt is the likely context for Zephaniah's oracles, it is not surprising that the qualities of the 'remnant of Israel' described in verse 13 are the qualities required of a person who wishes to enter the temple (see Psalm 15:1-3 and Psalm 24:3-4).

Like YHWH (verse 5), this purified remnant will 'do no wrong' (verse 13)

¹¹On that day you will not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proud exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.

¹²I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They will seek refuge in the name of YHWH.

¹³The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one will make them afraid.

YHWH will restore Jerusalem

¹⁴Sing aloud, O Daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵YHWH has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, YHWH, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷YHWH, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will dance over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival.

¹⁸Those who have suffered when I harvested you were a burden upon her, a reproach.

¹⁹I am dealing with all who oppress you at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

²⁰At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says YHWH.

‘Zion’ is Jerusalem, not as a physical city, but rather as the dwelling of YHWH and of the Davidic king. It is used at times to represent YHWH’s people. Having presented the reasons for Jerusalem’s punishment (3:1-4), and YHWH’s intention that the nations of the world will recognise his city, Jerusalem (3:5-13), Zephaniah concludes by assuring Jerusalem that she will be restored as YHWH’s bride. YHWH will be king in her midst, and she will be the centre from which YHWH’s holiness will spread throughout the world. Assyria’s century of oppression is about to come to an end. If people want to be part of the restoration they must get behind Josiah’s reform.

Jerusalem is urged to rejoice, as is the whole of Israel (verse 14), for Josiah’s ambitious project is to recover the whole of the land ruled over by his ancestor, David.

Jerusalem is guilty. Sentence has been passed and carried out. But the city can rejoice because punishment is complete. YHWH is reigning in the midst of the city. The people need fear no more (verse 15).

This is repeated in verses 16-17, with the addition of words that express the delight YHWH has in the renewed love-relationship between himself and his people. The translation ‘he will renew you in his love’ follows the Septuagint. The Hebrew has ‘plough’ (hāraš), not renew, using a daring euphemism (compare Judges 14:18) for the renewed communion between God and his estranged wife, Jerusalem.

The suffering Jerusalem has undergone from Assyria was YHWH’s doing. He was ‘harvesting’ the city (see 1:2,3; 3:8), stripping her of those who were polluting her. This was his way of purifying Jerusalem and bringing about repentance (verse 18).

But the city can rejoice now because YHWH is dealing with her oppressors (verse 19). Among the remnant will be those described here as ‘lame’ and ‘outcasts’. YHWH will save them and gather them to himself (compare Micah 4:6-7).

Verse 20 sums up the wonderful prospect that Zephaniah is proclaiming as YHWH’s plan for Jerusalem.