

12 Prophets - Zephaniah Part 2

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

Zephaniah 1:1

Last week we took a general overview of the who Zephaniah might be and where he fits into the structure of the prophets and the tribes. We looked specifically at the connection that Zephaniah seems to have with the appointed time of Shavuot, one of the three compulsory pilgrimages for the men to go up to Jerusalem.

The opening verse of Zephaniah is to some degree setting out Zephaniah's qualification in the role that he has been assigned by HaShem. The commentators speak of Zephaniah being contemporary to the time of King Josiah of Judah, and mentor to Jeremiah. He is one of three prophets who prophesied during the time of Josiah.

Jeremiah, who prophesied in the streets, Zephaniah, who prophesied in the synagogues and Huldah, who prophesied to the women.

What is clear from the text is that the period in history when Zephaniah is alive is undergoing a great upheaval as a result of the idolatry of the people even during the time of the reforms of Josiah, which were short lived and ultimately led to the Babylonian exile. We see in the messianic writings how Yeshua refers to these times as a warning to the generation of leaders during his ministry.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Matthew 23:29-36

The word that comes to Zephaniah has similar overtones that are pertinent to the imminent exile to Babylon that is about to take place, but as we see in the gospel of Matthew, are relevant to the 2nd exile. One might comment that they are contemporary to us today and could lead to an exile in preparation for the Messianic throne being re-established.

Judgment on Judah that sets a precedent

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. "I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," declares the LORD. "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."

Zephaniah 1:2-6

Last week we posed the question of whether the opening statement of Zephaniah 1: 2-6 is contradictory to the covenant that is made by HaShem to Noah after the Flood.

Before we look at the text more carefully, let's take a moment to think back on Habakkuk 3:9 which we looked a few weeks ago.

The language of this verse speaks of the removal of the covering that is the "bow" which is the same word used in Genesis 9.

H7198

קשת

qesheth

BDB Definition:

1) bow

1a) bow (for hunting, battle)

1b) bowmen, archers

1c) bow (figuratively of might)

1d) rainbow

Part of Speech: noun feminine

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: from [H7185](#) in the original sense of [H6983](#) of bending

Same Word by TWOT Number: 2093

The words of Genesis 9 are important because they do not promise that a judgment will not take place upon the earth in future, only that the judgment will not take the form of the flood as before. The "bow" in Genesis 9 is not only a reassurance of the fact that judgment will not take this form, but it is also a reminder of the judgment that did come previously and the circumstances that caused the judgment. It is for this reason that we see in the language of Habakkuk the idea that the "bow" has been sheathed. The "nakedness" of the "bow"; it's unsheathing, is the warning of the imminent judgment and that it will be upon the earth as it was before, just not in the form of the flood as this would break the covenant promise made by Hashem regarding the form that the judgement will take place.

So, keeping this in mind we come back to the words of Hashem in Zephaniah.

v.2 contains the following in the Hebrew.

Zephaniah 1:2 אסף אסף כל מעל פני האדמה נאם־יהוה:

Zephaniah 1:2 "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

At the beginning of the verse in the Hebrew you can see the repetition of the word "asaph". The doubling indicates that this is an event, action, or instruction that needs to be taken notice of; "Truly, truly" or "Amen, amen" "I say to you".

אָסַף

'âsaph

aw-saf'

A primitive root; to *gather* for any purpose; hence to *receive, take away*, that is, remove (destroy, leave behind, put up, restore, etc.): - assemble, bring, consume, destroy, fetch, gather (in, together, up again), X generally, get (him), lose, put all together, receive, recover [another from leprosy], (be) rereward, X surely, take (away, into, up), X utterly, withdraw. **Total KJV occurrences: 199**

'âsaph

BDB Definition:

1) to gather, receive, remove, gather in

1a) (Qal)

1a1) to gather, collect

1a2) to gather (an individual into company of others)

1a3) to bring up the rear

1a4) to gather and take away, remove, withdraw

1b) (Niphal)

1b1) to assemble, be gathered

1b2) (passive of Qal 1a2)

1b2a) to be gathered to one's fathers

1b2b) to be brought in or into (association with others)

1b3) (passive of Qal 1a4)

1b3a) to be taken away, removed, perish

1c) (Piel)

1c1) to gather (harvest)

1c2) to take in, receive into

1c3) rearguard, rearward (substantive)

1d) (Pual) to be gathered

1e) (Hithpael) to gather oneself or themselves

Part of Speech: verb**A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number:** a primitive root**Same Word by TWOT Number:** 140

The language of the passage translated in the English is misleading in that although it implies the absolute and definitive nature of the action that will take place, the way that it is conveyed seems to be orientated toward destruction in a negative sense. What is the tone of the voice that is speaking? However, when we look at how the word "asaph" can be defined more broadly, we can see that the emphasis is not toward destructive judgment in an apocalyptic end of the world sense, but rather the language of "harvest" and "gathering".

The destructive sense of this passage is derived from Judges 18:25

And the people of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household."

Judges 18:25

R. Mendel Hirsch (son of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch) concurs with the interpretation that destruction is not the main emphasis, rather, preservation. The dependance on the understanding of the tense of the word is the main issue.

Hirsch puts it in these terms;

"Whereas "asaph" in the hiphil designates destruction, making an end of something, the addition of the word "asaph" gives the additional nuance; it is really a withdrawal, a bringing home to preserve it from going bad or from degenerating."

Hirsch interprets verse 2 in the following manner:

"Shall I then gather in and collectively destroy everything from off the face of man's earth? is the proclamation of God."

This is a far better interpretation as it fits with the idea that if there is a destruction of everything, then where does the inheritance of King Yeshua and Throne of David fit into the picture.

It also fits better with the vision of John as recorded in the Apocalyptic writings.

Going back to the metaphor of the bow being unsheathed, within the pictorial language we see communicated an image of the bundling together of sheaves. The cutting of grain and the sorting of wheat and tares is principally quite brutal in that at the point that the sickle goes in to cut, all further opportunity to ripen and grow is cut off. From then on it is a process of winnowing, beating, grinding and potentially baking/heating in order to be transformed into something acceptable as we see in the open parsha of Vayikra. To become acceptable and a soothing aroma to Hashem is not comfortable for any part of the sacrificial process.

Verse 3 continues in the same vein.

"I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

[Zephaniah 1:3](#)

We have the same problem here as we did in verse 2, so below is the interpretation that Hirsch gives from which we will take our lead.

"Then I would have to destroy man and beast, destroy the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea as stumbling blocks to the wicked. I would have to exterminate the human race from off the face of man's earth; is the proclamation of God"

There is a distinction between destruction and cleansing. What is clear from the Hirsch translation is that the spirit in which the verses are interpreted are a far better reflection of the character of Hashem in the mercy that He shows by not destroying the righteous with the wicked.

But in addition to this, it also shows that His intention is for the Garden and the Earth to remain as a gift and dwelling place where He is able to be in fellowship with Adam (humankind).

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

[Genesis 8:20-22](#)

Once again as we look at the covenant promises made by Hashem to Noah after the Flood, we must come to the conclusion that the verses in Zephaniah as interpreted by many translations cannot mean what they seem to imply. It would also be incorrect to assume that verses 2&3 are purely referring to a local application.

Some have considered that they may apply in a metaphorical sense referring to different classes of society, animals of the field being the lower classes, birds of the heavens being the upper classes and fish of the sea being the people immersed in robbery and adultery and are generally unstructured in their groups, but in order for that to be the case, the scripture would have to be consistent in its metaphor. There may well be merit in this view considering what we see in the gospels and Yeshua's relationship with the fisherman of the galilee.

So having addressed the macro aspect of the issue, we now begin to fine down to the immediate area of the Land itself, specifically Judah and Jerusalem. This is the contaminated Land and the contaminated people in the Land. Just as the Canaanites have been vomited out because of their idolatry, so too the Israelites who have forsaken the Torah, just as Adam and Chava forsook the Tree of Life and reached for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil were vomited out of the Garden, a cleansing must take place to preserve the people and bring them to a point of repentance. The same would happen regarding the Second temple, where the idolatry had become the Temple itself.

"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."

Zephaniah 1:4-6

In these verses we see the intention set out to remove idolatry from Judah and Jerusalem. These are all stated in an active voice which stretches across our concept of time because of the nature of the place that is being spoken. Jerusalem is the City of HaShem and the seat of the Throne of David. Even when we only consider this in the context of Zephaniah's time, we see how Josiah set out to destroy the Baals. But if we fast forward to today, it is clear that those idols that existed then are just as active now.

The three idolatries that are specified in verses 4-6 are just as prevalent today as they were back then.

At the heart of the Jewish people at the time of Josiah, the worship of false and foreign deities had become commonplace. Just as we see in the Exodus account, Hashem will show His Sovereignty over the non-gods worshipped by the people and forsaken His name.

Next week we continue in chapter 1 of Zephaniah and look at the Day of Hashem