I. INTRODUCTION–AUTHOR:¹

A. A Judahite prophet active during the reign of Josiah, 640-609 BCE
   1. Probably was active prior to the Josianic reforms
   2. Attempts to date Zephaniah during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah have been largely unsuccessful

B. 1:1 traces the prophet’s genealogy back four generations to Hezekiah, which indicates that this represented a call for reform “from within the political and religious establishment.”²

C. Evidently this was an individual of considerable social standing, probably of the royal line.
   1. Zephaniah’s statements indicate a familiarity with court circles and current political issues.
   2. He was probably familiar with such prophets as Isaiah and Amos, and his young contemporary, Jeremiah.

II. DATE AND BACKGROUND:

A. Date: 1:1 dates Zephaniah during the reign of Josiah, 640-609.
   1. This made him a contemporary of both Jeremiah and Habakkuk.
   2. His prophecy is generally dated early in Josiah’s reign, probably before the king’s reform.
      a. The reform began in Josiah’s 18th year (2 Kgs 22:3-7), or 622.


b. Thus Zephaniah may be dated between 640 and 622.

B. Background:

1. Josiah came to the throne in 640, at a time when Assyria was in decline:
   a. Babylon was rising in importance
   b. Egypt, Under Psamtik I (664-610), withheld tribute from 655 onwards.
   c. Judah, by default, found herself virtually free.

2. Beyond these general descriptions, and the accommodating moral, spiritual, and political situation they produced, there must have been a sense of flux in the world, not unlike recent events with the end of WWII, and later the fall of the Soviet Empire.
   a. Who will fill the vacuum?
   b. Who will fall heir to the empire?

3. Interestingly, “Through out the book there is a sense of distance from historical events. For example, the predictions regarding the day of the Lord are full of military motifs—but without reference to any particular enemy and thus resistant to any attempt to define the enemy.”

III. LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

A. The shares affinities with many other prophetic books:


2. Zeph 3:1-3 and Isaiah 1:21-23:
   a. NRS Zephaniah 3:1  Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! 2 It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted

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3J. Alect Motyer, 899.
in the LORD; it has not drawn near to its God. 3 The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.

b. \textit{NRS Isaiah 1:21} How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her-- but now murderers! 22 Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.

3. \textit{Zeph 3:3-5 and Micah 3:1-12:}

a. \textit{NRS Zephaniah 3:3} The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. 4 Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law. 5 The LORD within it is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame.

b. \textit{NRS Micah 3:1} And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?-- 2 you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; 3 who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron. 4 Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly. 5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. 6 Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; 7 the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. 8 But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. 9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, 10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem
with wrong! 11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us." 12 Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

IV. UNITY AND AUTHENTICITY

A. Older scholars postulated a core text (chapter 1 and 2:12-15) which was thought to come from the prophet; the rest of the book was assigned to exilic and postexilic editors.

B. Present scholarship assigns the greater part of the material to Zephaniah, arguing that only such passages as 2:8-11 and 3:14-20 are exilic or postexilic.

C. Many of the theories were based on the supposed metrics of certain passages—certain metrical arrangements were seen as either conforming or nonconforming to others.

D. The book’s unity is attested by its “carefully honed oracles accurately built into a coherent message.”

V. THE TEXT

A. The MT contains few difficulties

1. 1:2, 14; 2:1-2; 3:17-19 do contain some obscurities.

2. Dead Sea Scrolls (1QpZeph 1:18-2:2; 4QpZeph 1:12-13) and a scroll from Muraba’at, dating from 100 CE (Zeph 1:1; 1:11-3:6; 3:8-20.

B. LXX: Gerleman’s studies indicated that the Vorlage of Zephaniah, while not identical with the MT is very close to it.

VI. “THE DAY OF YHWH”: ANYONE STUDYING ZEPHANIAH WILL HAVE TO

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4 Motyer, 900.

5 G. Gerleman, Zephana textkritisch und literarisch untersucht (Lund: 1942).
DEAL WITH THIS PHRASE USED BY SEVERAL PROPHETS.⁶

A. The expression יְהֹם יְהֹוָה (yôm yhwh), “the day of Yhwh (the Lord)” is attested 16 times in the Hebrew Bible, which break down as follows:

2. Against Israel–Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; Amos 5:18a, 18b, 20; Zech 1:7, 14a, 14b; Mal 3:23, Ezek 13:5)
3. Against Edom Ob 15

B. “In this construct expression ‘day’ . . . does not mean a definite extent of time, rather a definite event in time whose nature is determined by the associated personal name.”⁷

1. “Yhwh” is not the one to whom something happens, but the one who appears and acts in complete control of the temporal event.

2. This is evident from the related passages: “day for Yhwh” (Ezek 30:3); “day for Yhwh of hosts” (Isa 2:12); “day of tumult for the Lord Yhwh of hosts” (Isa 2:12); “day of wrath of Yhwh” (Zeph. 1:15a, 18; Ezek 7:19); “day of the anger of Yhwh (Zeph 2:2, 3; Lam 2:22; 2:1, 21); “day of his burning anger” (Lam 1:12); “day of Yhwh’s vengeance” (Isa 61:2; Jer 46:10); “day of Yhwh’s sacrifice” (Zeph 1:8); “day of clouds and thick darkness” (Zeph 1:5b; Ezek 34:12; Joel 2:2); “a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom” (Zeph 1:15b); “a day of trumpet blast and battle cry” (Zeph 1:16a); “the day of which I have spoken” (Ezek 39:8); “a day for Yhwh is coming” (Zech 14:1); “a day when he fights on a day of battle” (Zech 14:3).

a. Of these, the Lamentations passages and Ezek 34:12 refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587

b. Of these, eight are threats against Israel: Isa 2:12; Zeph 1:8, 15a, 18b, 20; Mal 3:23, Ezek 13:5)

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⁷Wolff, 33.
18; 2:2, 3; Ezek 7:19

c. Five deal with other nations: Isa 61:2 and Ezek 30:3 (nations in general); Jer 46:10 and Isa 34:8 (Egypt); Edom; Gog (Ezek 39:8)
d. Zech 14:1-3 and Joel are the only passages in which “day of Yhwh” is directed first against Israel and then the nations.

C. Zech 14:1, 3; Joel 2:1-11; 4:9-17; Zeph 1:15ff; Isa 13:34; and Ezek 30 indicate that the concept derives from the holy war tradition.

1. Aspects of theophany were added to these ideas to produce the spiritual concept.

2. The wrath of Yhwh is its most characteristic feature.

3. In the earliest passages the “day of Yhwh” was directed first against the nations (that threatened Israel) and then against Israel.

4. Later passages “day” came to be used against Israel who had deserted God.
   a. Passages such as Isa 28:21 indicate that the prophets began to speak of the “day of Yhwh” as a future day.
   b. There seems to have occurred a shift from “salvation-history” perspective to an eschatological judgment.
   c. Accompanying this eschatological judgment was the shift to the judgement of the nations in the beginnings of apocalypticism in which directed this day of wrath against Israel and the nations: Zech 14; Ezek 38-39; Joel 1-4.

D. This apocalypticism ultimately set the stage for prophecy regarding The Day of Yhwh when Christ makes his final return; Each “day of Yhwh” pointed to “the day of Yhwh.”

1. The prophets applied their “days of Yhwh” natural disasters indicating that during such time there would be both doom and deliverance.

2. These natural calamities and disasters (such as the captivity, destruction of Edom, Jerusalem, and Babylon, etc.) were focused on the enemies of God.
3. Many people of the Old Testament misunderstood the "Day of the Lord."
   a. It grew out of the the messianic hope of Israel and was later used in an eschatological sense.
   b. Its fundamental idea was "the Day of the Lord" was to be the time of God’s manifestation as the savior of Israel, actual or real.
   c. God’s enemies/enemies of his people would be punished and His purposes for His people would be accomplished.
   d. The people talked glibly about "the Day of the Lord" as the day when God would judge his enemies.
   e. They did not realize that iniquity would be punished wherever it was found.
   f. Israel would not be excepted, but would be punished more severely there than the others.
   g. Other nations had not enjoyed the knowledge of Jehovah and His will as Israel had done.8

4. All of these “days of Yhwh” pointed “The day of Yhwh” at the final judgment, when “all those on the side of the Christ will enjoy a day of redemption and all those who are not on the side of Christ will suffer a day of judgment.”9

5. Thus, the “days of Yhwh” in the Old Testament are a type and shadow of the reality set forth in the New, which provides a contrast:
   a. The darkness, death, wrath, punishment, etc., presented in the Old Testament’s “day of Yhwh,” is presented in the New as a day of joy, hope and victory through Jesus Christ.

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8Butler, 84-5.
9Butler, 85.
b. The “day of Yhwh” is still presented as a day of wrath and judgment will come as a thief, but to the believer it is a day of joy and victory: 2 Pet 3:7, 12; Matt 7:22; 1 Thess 5.

VII. STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS

A. Generally follows familiar pattern of oracles of disaster and judgment (1:2-3:8) followed by oracles of salvation (3:9-20).

1. Book begins with an apocalyptic picture of universal judgment (1:2-3) which will fall first on Judah and Jerusalem (1:4-2:3)

2. Series of oracles against the nations, 2:4-15

3. Divine judgement on Jerusalem, 3:1-5

4. Divine judgment on the nations, 3:6-8

5. Promises of salvation to the nations, 3: 9-10

6. Promises of salvation to Zion, 3:11-20

B. 1:1-6: is comprised of a superscription (1:1) and the description of a universal judgment.

1. 1:1: Three others in the OT are named “Zephaniah,” 2 Kgs 25:18; 1 Chr 6:36; Zech 6:10-14.

2. 1:2-3, following the heading, the text gives an apocalyptic picture of universal judgement.

   a. Annihilation will occur to “human and beast, birds of the heaven and fish of the sea.”
b. This is the same grouping as Gen 1:20-26, but is inverted.

c. Further, “humans,” “humanity,” and “earth” are alliterative in Hebrew as they are in Gen 2:7.

d. Thus, this pictures judgement as “anti-creation.”

3. **1:4-6** shifts the picture from world annihilation to divine judgment of Judah and Jerusalem for idolatrous practices (abolished by Josiah, 2 Kgs 23:12-13). This religious syncretism, Zephaniah condemns as the adulteration of pure worship of the pure worship of the Lord with the elements of Canaanite (Baal), Ammonite (Milcom), and Assyrian (host of heaven) religions.

C. **1:7-13**: introduces and describes the “Day of Yhwh,” and its consequences.

1. **CF. Amos 5:18-20**: 18 *Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; 19 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. 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?*

2. In Zephaniah a great sacrificial feast will be prepared in which the officials who have offended God will be slaughtered (7-9).

   a. The merchants and will be cut off and the religiously indifferent will be desolate “on that day.”

   b. The enemy will approach from the North, first through the “Fish Gate.”

   c. The “Second Quarter” that wails is a particular section of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 22:14).

   d. “Resting complacently on their dregs” is a figure drawn from wine-making to portray indolence.

   e. If the wine is not stirred up while it is fermenting, it becomes thick and lacks strength.

1. Other Day of the Lord Texts:

a. NRS Isaiah 13:9 See, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. 10 For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. 11 I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants. 12 I will make mortals more rare than fine gold, and humans than the gold of Ophir. 13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

b. NRS Joel 3:1 For then, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, 2 I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. They have divided my land, 3 and cast lots for my people, and traded boys for prostitutes, and sold girls for wine, and drunk it down. 4 What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily. 5 For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples.

c. NRS Amos 5:18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; 19 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. 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

d. NRS Amos 8:9 On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10
I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. 11 The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. 13 In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "As your god lives, O Dan," and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives"-- they shall fall, and never rise again.

2. **1:14-18:** is a description of the imminence of the “day of the Lord.”

   a. It is a wrath and ruin, distress and devastation.

   b. On that day, neither silver nor gold will save sinners from the fire of God’s zeal.

   c. Thus, as noted above Zephaniah is elaborating the preaching of Amos that the day of the Lord will be darkness and not light, woe and not weal upon Israel and the Gentiles.

3. **2:1-3:** the urging of the humble of the land so that the may be hidden from God’s anger.

E. **2:4-15:** a series of oracles against the nations similar to Amos 1-2, Isaiah 13-23, and Jeremiah 46-51.

1. **2:4:** Gaza shall be deserted

2. **2:5-7:** Cherethites (Cretans) are addressed with traditional curses—without inhabitants, land fit for pasturage only, like Sodom and Gomorrah, dwelling place for animals, an object of horror.


   b. In 2:7 and 9 this remnant takes possession of the land previously
held by Cretans, Moabites, and Ammonites.

c. In 3:12-13 the people are describes as “humble and lowly who take refuge in the name of Yahweh.”

3. **2:8-11:** Ammon and Moab are addressed with curses similar to the Cretans, i.e., like Sodom and Gomorrah. **V. 11:** Yhwh’s superiority over all gods brings about the submission of the nations

4. **2:12-15:** The Ethiopians will be destroyed by the sword of Yhwh and the Assyrians will be turned into a desert waste because of arrogance.

F. **3:1-7:** Oracle of judgement against Jerusalem.

1. Recalls Isa 1:21-26 where similar leaders (princes, judges, counselors) are denounced for dishonesty and corruption.

2. Here they are corrupt and do not fear the Lord.


4. There is a contrast between the “princes in her midst” in 3:3 and “Yhwh in her midst” in 3:5:

   a. **3:3:** The *officials within it* are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.

   b. **3:5:** The *LORD within it* is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame.

5. The “violence” of 3:4 recalls the “violence” of 1:9

6. Only reform could stop judgement, but to do so only made them more corrupt.

G. **3:8-13:** Speak of the conversion of a righteous remnant from the nations and the preservation of a righteous remnant.

1. Verse 8 speaks of Yhwh’s judgment on the whole world; similar to Ezek 22:31
**a. Zeph 3:8** Therefore wait for me, says the LORD, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather 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 shall be consumed.

**b. Ezek 22:31** Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord GOD.

2. **3:9-13:** This judgement results in the nations serving Yhwh (v. 9). The removal of the proud allows them to be replaced by the humble (10-12). This humble remnant will follow Yhwh, doing no wrong (13). The gift of a pure speech symbolizes fidelity (Isa 6:5-7), removes the curse of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), and, for Christians, anticipates Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

**H. 3:14-20:** Two pictures of joy—Joy of Israel in redemption (3:14-16) and Yhwh in their midst (3:17-18).


2. 19-20 contain the major elements of post-exilic eschatology including the destruction of the enemy (Ob 15, 16; Mic 5:9; Zech 12:9), ingathering of the exiles (Mic 4:6-7; Zech 10:8-12), and return to the Holy Land (Isa 62:1-5; Zech 8:7-8).

3. By making Israel renowned and praised among the peoples of the earth, the Lord fulfills the longstanding promise to the patriarchs (Gen 12:2-3)

**VIII. MESSAGE.**

A. The times called for wise and courageous leadership.

1. The preaching and loyalty aroused by Isaiah and the deliverance of

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Jerusalem in 701 had died during the period of distress and humiliation under Manasseh.

2. The people had fallen away into all kinds of idolatry and corruption, which are portrayed very clearly through Zephaniah’s prophecies.

3. He directed his word against the mixing of the worship of Baal, Milcom, and the Hosts of Heaven with the worship of Yhwh.

4. He charged the leaders with a kind of practical scepticism, or atheism.

5. Their indifference, as portrayed in their observations that God did nothing good or bad, was accompanied by a materialism which had no sense of justice.

6. So Zephaniah “denounced the prevalent violence and trickery, the tyranny of the rulers, the perversion of justice by the judges themselves, the prostitution of religion to base ends by the priests and prophets and the aping of foreign life styles by the rich (1:8, 9; 3:1-4).”11

B. The indifference, eclecticism, materialism, and injustice were a natural reaction to the exalted ideas of the previous generation.

1. The expectations and high hopes produced by the defeat of Assyria in 701 had not materialized.

2. People thus turned to other gods seeking to supplement Yhwh’s perceived weakness, or were abandoning him altogether.

3. New conceptions were needed that caused people to have new hope.
   a. Josiah’s work enabled some of this to grow.
   b. Thus there came to be a new confidence as illustrated by Jeremiah’s temple sermon.

4. Into this situation Zephaniah jumped preaching a negative and destructive message.

11Smith, et al, 177.
C. Jeremiah and Zephaniah, as the earlier prophets, interpreted the approaching armies as “the day of Yhwh.”

1. Like Amos, he saw this day as destruction, near at hand, and approaching both nations and covenant people.

2. “Unlike Jeremiah . . . who uttered warnings of coming catastrophe while his heart was breaking, Zephaniah betrays no sympathy, compassion or emotion of any kind over the impending fate of his people. He speaks almost as a disinterested spectator.”¹²

D. The approaching judgement had a moral purpose.

1. It was the condemnation of sin and an expression of the ethical righteousness of God.

2. This ethicism was extended, as in Jeremiah and other prophets, to nations beyond Judah.

3. Ultimately, a remnant would appear out of this catastrophe, which would be characterized by humility, meekness, straightforwardness, trust in Yhwh, and piety similar to what Micah enjoined (6:6-8).

E. This message of Zephaniah’s ultimately prepared the way for Christ and the Kingdom.