

Zephaniah Speaks Again - Part 2 (Conclusion)

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Remember from our last installment that Zephaniah wrote just before the time of the Babylonian captivity. In chapter 2 he opens with prophecies concerning the nations around Israel that would also be conquered by Babylon. The Lord was about to give Nebuchadnezzar the entire Middle East. Jeremiah also prophesied that this would happen.

This is what the LORD said to me: “Make a yoke out of straps and crossbars and put it on your neck. Then send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon through the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah.

Give them a message for their masters and say, “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

“If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I destroy it by his hand.” (Jeremiah 27:2-8)

The choice was clear. Surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and live, or fight and die. Zedekiah was one of Josiah’s sons and reigned from 597-586 BC. He was not a legitimate king (God had cursed the royal line of succession by then) but was installed by Nebuchadnezzar as a vassal. He too was given the option of surrendering, but like the heads of the other nations he refused. Had he not done so, Jerusalem and the Temple

would have been spared and the Jews would have avoided the bloodshed and destruction that followed. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's begin our study in chapter 2.

Zephaniah 2

Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you. Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger. (Zeph 2:1-3)

Chapter 2 was prophecy when Zephaniah wrote it but it's history to us. As we'll see all the neighboring nations joined Judah in refusing the Lord's offer to surrender and live. These three verses are a plea for the people of Judah to seek the Lord and follow His command. While the Lord didn't guarantee their safety, He did offer some hope that they would be kept from the worst.

Against Philistia

Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At midday Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. Woe to you who live by the sea, O Kerethite people; the word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines. "I will destroy you, and none will be left."

The land by the sea, where the Kerethites dwell, will be a place for shepherds and sheep pens. It will belong to the remnant of the house of Judah; there they will find pasture. In the evening they will lie down in the houses of Ashkelon. The LORD their God will care for them; he will restore their fortunes. (Zeph. 2:4-7)

The Philistines had originally come from the Island of Crete and had settled along the southern Mediterranean coast following a failed invasion of Egypt close to the time that Joshua and the Israelites were coming into the Promised Land from the East. In Genesis 10:14 they're called Casluhites. According to Strong's concordance, the word Kerethites means assassins and refers to the Philistine guard King David employed to protect him. The reason we know this portion is history is that the Philistine cities mentioned are part of Israel today, as Zephaniah promised they would be. In fact Israel's nuclear reactor is in Ashkelon, a frequent target of Hamas rockets. Nebuchadnezzar utterly destroyed the Philistines in 604BC leaving no survivors, as prophesied in detail by Jeremiah (Jere. 47).

Against Moab and Ammon

“I have heard the insults of Moab and the taunts of the Ammonites, who insulted my people and made threats against their land. Therefore, as surely as I live,” declares the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, “surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah - a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever. The remnant of my people will plunder them; the survivors of my nation will inherit their land.”

This is what they will get in return for their pride, for insulting and mocking the people of the LORD Almighty. The LORD will be awesome to them when he destroys all the gods of the land. The nations on every shore will worship him, every one in its own land. (Zech 2:8-11)

Moab and Ammon settled the area east and south of the Dead sea. Ezekiel 25:6 says they were openly jubilant when it became clear that Israel was going to be punished. Jeremiah 48 is devoted exclusively to Moab's destruction and Jeremiah 49:1-6 describes a similar fate for Ammon. Unlike the Philistines, the Lord promised to restore both Moab and Ammon later (Jeremiah 48:47 & 49:6) This promise has been kept in the

appearance of Jordan. In fact Daniel 11:41 tells us that they will escape the clutches of the anti-Christ at the end of the age, perhaps in return for harboring the Jewish remnant in Petra, a city in southern Jordan.

Against Cush

“You too, O Cushites, will be slain by my sword.” (Zeph 2:12)

The Cushites were the ancestors of the Black Africans of today and have been specifically identified with Ethiopia and Sudan. They fought with Egypt against Assyria and Babylon and were defeated.

Against Assyria

He will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert. Flocks and herds will lie down there, creatures of every kind. The desert owl and the screech owl will roost on her columns. Their calls will echo through the windows, rubble will be in the doorways, the beams of cedar will be exposed.

This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, “I am, and there is none besides me.” What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts! All who pass by her scoff and shake their fists. (Zeph. 2:13-15)

Assyria was also conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. It happened at the famous Battle of Carchemish in 606 BC and ended not only Assyria’s reign as a powerful Middle Eastern empire, but its existence as a nation.

Assyria’s capitol Nineveh had been destroyed earlier (612 BC) and for several hundred years disappeared altogether. Today the city of Nineveh is called Mosul by most and is part of Northern Iraq. Mosul was originally built across the Tigris River from Nineveh,

but has since expanded to cover both sides of the river and is now Iraq's 2nd largest city after Baghdad. A significant Assyrian population lives among its 2 million residents, many of them Christian. Their ancestors converted in the 2nd century, and today more Christians live in Nineveh, as they still call it, than any other place in Iraq. Old Testament prophets Jonah and Nahum both wrote about Nineveh and are buried there as well.

In the Millennium, Assyria will once again be present on the world stage just as God promised. In Isaiah 19:25, Assyria is mentioned along with Israel and Egypt, all three being blessed of God.

Zephaniah 3, The Future of Jerusalem

Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!

She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.

The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.

(Zeph. 3:1-5)

Even though King Josiah had brought a nationwide revival to Judah, within a few years of his death in 609BC the nation was deep in idolatry again. Ezekiel recorded the astonishing fact that priests in the Temple actually kept idols in their closets and worshiped them there each day before going on duty. (Ezekiel 8)

“I have cut off nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are destroyed; no one will be left - no one at all.

I said to the city, ‘Surely you will fear me and accept correction!’ Then her dwelling would not be cut off, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.

Therefore wait for me,” declares the LORD, “for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them - all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger. (Zeph. 3:6-8)

Judah was not totally destroyed until after all the other nations had been dealt with. At the last minute Jeremiah came in to Zedekiah and again offered him the chance to surrender and live. Above we see the Lord saying through Zephaniah, “Surely after they see what I’ve done to all the nations around them they’ll come to their senses and surrender.”

But Zedekiah refused, admitting he was more afraid of what people would think of him than he was of the Lord. (Jeremiah 38:17-28) So in 586 BC after waiting 19 years for the people to repent, the city and Temple were destroyed and the people were taken captive or killed.

But this prophecy was not completely fulfilled in Zedekiah’s time, nor has it been to this day. Soon the Lord will gather all the nations for judgment, and the whole world will be consumed by his anger. Just as Nebuchadnezzar was given temporary control of the Middle East for the purpose of judgment, the anti-Christ will be given temporary control of the whole world for the same purpose.

“Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.

On that day you will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from this city those who rejoice in their pride. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.”(Zeph. 3:9-13)

Like a refiner uses fire to purify his gold and silver, the Lord will use the Great Tribulation to rid His people of their impurities. Their pride and self sufficiency will be removed, leaving them meek and humble, ready to receive the forgiveness He’s been waiting to dispense to those who trust Him. Their sins will be forgiven, and the righteousness they could never acquire by their works will be imputed to them by faith. In God’s eyes they’ll become as perfect as He is, and peace will be their reward. The new covenant will have finally come to Israel. (Jer. 31:31-34)

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zeph. 3:14-17)

Just as Isaiah had done so eloquently over 100 years earlier, Zephaniah now confirms that there will come a day when Israel's warfare will cease, when her enemies will be defeated for good. There will come a time when peace is the order of the day, peace with the Lord and peace with the world.

“The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame.

At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the LORD. (Zeph. 3:18-20)

Some of Israel's feasts commemorate happy events, others times of sadness. In the Millennium, Israel will celebrate only Passover (but without a lamb) Unleavened bread, and Tabernacles, all times of joy.

The nations will be gathered in the valley of judgment (Joel 3). And the re-gathering of the nation, officially begun in 1948 will finally be complete. Israel will again be the world's pre-eminent nation, the joy of the whole Earth.

The promise of Israel's latter day reinstatement was confirmed by almost all of Israel's prophets. And while a few didn't mention it, none contradicted it. Those who would have you think that God abandoned Israel after the cross have misunderstood some of the Bible's clearest and strongest prophecies.

And to say that God responded to Israel's rejection of the Messiah by transferring these promises to the church adds insult to injury. To accept that, you have to believe either God can't see the future and had to change His plans in response to Israel's actions, or

that He can't be trusted to keep His Word.

The passion with which God made this promise was perhaps captured best by Jeremiah. This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar - the LORD Almighty is his name:

“Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the LORD, “will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.” (Jer. 31:35-36)
As long as the Sun the Moon and the stars shine in the sky, as long as the wind blows and the waves roar, Israel will be a nation on Earth. The rest of us better get used to it. If you listen carefully you can almost hear the footsteps of the Messiah.