



# PT Butler

## Bible Study Notebooks

### Study of Zephaniah

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# ZEPHANIAH

## Introduction

The name, Zephaniah means, “Concealed of God” as a hidden treasure. Zephaniah traces his ancestry back four generations to Hezekiah. This good king Hezekiah was the great-great-grandfather of Zephaniah—thus Zephaniah was of royal blood. His reference to Jerusalem as “this place” 1:4 and his acquaintance with the conditions of the city (3:1ff) suggests that Jerusalem was his home. He may very well have lived in the palace of the king of Judah.

Zephaniah lived and prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-608 B.C.), probably about 626 B.C. The ministries of Jeremiah and Zephaniah began in the same year. He would have been somewhat of a contemporary of Nahum and Habakkuk as well as of Jeremiah. His ministry was prompted by the rise of the Chaldean power which God showed him to be the ultimate threat of a general world judgment, and a specific judgment upon the “chosen people”—Judah!

Josiah came to the throne at the age of 8 years and was the last “good” king to reign over Judah. At the age of 16 he began to seek after Jehovah, the god of his fathers; and at the age of 21 he began to purge Judah of idolatry and its attendant wickedness. His reforms were among the most sweeping of any that were attempted by the kings who reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah. Altars and images were alike destroyed, and the bones of priests who had offered sacrifices on the altars of the false gods were gathered and burned. In the process of cleansing the temple a copy of the law of Moses was found and read before the young king. Alarmed at what he heard, he sent to a prophetess, Huldah, for a word from God concerning what he had learned. The young king caused the newly found Word of God to be read in the hearing of the people, great and small. Why he sent to Huldah and not to Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, or Habakkuk, all prophets of the period is unknown. The cleansing of the temple was followed by a Passover such as had not been observed with like enthusiasm in many years (2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34-35). It was during the reign of this king that Zephaniah prophesied.

War clouds, dark and foreboding were hovering over the horizon to the north. In the period from Isaiah/Micah to that of Zephaniah, Assyria had been able to maintain supremacy over the world of that day. Revolts throughout the empire were frequent; however, at the cost of her resources and the shedding of much blood, Assyria’s kings had been able to maintain her place at the head of the world empires. It seems that Josiah remained loyal to the Assyria king. Ashurbanipal, who died ca. 633 B.C., and was the last great king of the empire. Upon his death the Assyrian empire began to disintegrate.

In 625 B.C., about the same time Zephaniah began his ministry, Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, declared the independence of Chaldea from her Assyrian lords, thus establishing an independent kingdom in Babylon. (Twenty years hence in 606 B.C.

the Babylonians would assault Jerusalem and take the first increment of Jews into captivity. God gave Zephaniah a revelation that this was going to happen—this is the “burden” of Zephaniah to his countrymen in Judah). The establishment of a “Babylonian” stronghold led to war between Babylon and Nineveh. In 614 B.C. the Medes captured Ashur, a chief city of Assyria. Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar and general of his army, led an attack against Nineveh. Assisted by the Medes, he was able to take the city and destroyed it completely in 612 B.C. This is an important date in history. The remnant of the Assyrian army fled west where it entrenched itself near Haran. After destroying Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar reorganized his forces and followed the Assyrians to Haran where he attacked and destroyed the remaining forces of Assyrian power in 610 B.C. The last vestige of Assyrian supremacy was now gone. This left the Chaldean nation the undisputed master of the East.

Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt determined to help Assyria at Haran by marching north (right through Palestine) with his army (610 B.C.) Josiah attempted to stop him at Megiddo by throwing his forces in the path of Necho. He succeeded in preventing the Egyptian army from reaching Haran, but he was killed in the battle. For four years Egypt dominated Judah, but in 606 B.C. Necho was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar at Carhemish, west of Haran. Nebuchadnezzar pursued the Egyptians as far south as the land of Judah, whose people he took under his own wing. Here is enacted one of the ironies of history. Judah, led by Josiah, had attempted to aid Chaldea by fighting against Egypt at Megiddo. The kingdom that gave its king in the struggle to aid Chaldea was now a vassal of the nation it had attempted to help. Later Judah was to be destroyed by Chaldea (Babylon). Learning of the death of his father Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar made a rapid return to Babylon to claim the throne. As he returned to Babylon he carried hostages with him, among whom were Daniel and his three friends, chief characters of the Book of Daniel. It was the rise of the Babylonian power and God’s intention to use them to punish Judah (see Isa. ch. 13, etc.) that prompted the Holy Spirit of God to give Zephaniah this prophecy!

While the “boy-king” Josiah was under the influence of the prophets Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk, the prophet Zephaniah appears not to have been impressed with the reforms of Josiah, for he makes no reference to them. And, in spite of Josiah’s reforms and his own good life, the people appear at this time to be cruel, and corrupt. Social injustice and moral corruption appear to be widespread; luxury and extravagance are seen on every hand. The Baalim were still worshiped and what worship was offered to Jehovah was so saturated with idolatry as to be unrecognizable from perspective of the law of Moses.

Like his predecessor Joel, Zephaniah gives an emphasis to the “day of Jehovah” that should have struck terror in the hearts of the wicked, leading them to repentance. The day is “at hand” (1:7), “near” (1:14), a day of darkness and of terror (1:15-16). It comes as a judgment against sin (1:17), accompanied by great convulsions of nature and political order (1:15). It falls upon all creation—man and beast, Jews and the nations alike (1:2,3; 2:1-15; 3:8). The day of Jehovah is a day of doom<sup>1</sup> the prophet sees it as a day of terror, imminent and falling upon all creation as a judgment for sin. Only a remnant will escape, but it is a day of deliverance for the faithful. However, out of this grim picture of destruction would come redemption, which must not be

overlooked nor minimized. This prophet does not indicate who would be the instruments of Jehovah's judgment—but others do.

Jehovah is the God of the universe. The judgment falls upon all. The gods of the nations are non-entities; Jehovah alone is God. As terrors fall upon all alike, so also from among all will some be saved. As he looks beyond the doom and destruction of a world of judgment, the prophet draws a sublime picture of the Messianic age (3:14-20), though he does not mention or describe the Messiah Himself. Whatever is accomplished either in judgment or salvation, Jehovah alone accomplishes it. The other prophets (esp. Jeremiah 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 33:14-18) make clear that this redemptive work of Jehovah would be accomplished through the Messiah'; but to Zephaniah it is Jehovah who will fulfill his purpose.

## ZEPHANIAH 1:1—3:20

It was easy! It didn't come upon Judah all at once like Israel (the 10 northern tribes). "Israel" was founded by Jeroboam in his revolt against Rehoboam and Jeroboam initiated the "golden calf" as an idol to be worshiped immediately upon founding the "northern kingdom." As far back as Joel (830 B.C.—just 100 years after the kingdom was divided) the corruption of the priesthood and false prophets were contaminating the religion of Jehovah in the southern kingdom—Judah. Once pure Biblical religion is adulterated with false doctrines and moral corruption it doesn't take but a generation or two for it to fall into complete idolatry. Judah's idolatry began after the marriage of Athaliah (the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, king and queen of the northern kingdom) to Jehoram, king of Judah. You can read of her shenanigans in 2 Kings 8:18-25; 11:1-20, and in fuller detail in 2 Chron. 22:1-23ff; 24:7). After Athaliah took over the throne, she instituted Baalism (the religion of her mother Jezebel) in Judah and from that time onward, idolatry was never quite completely purged from Judah (even though Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah made great efforts to do so). It only got worse from there until, in the times of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the people of Judah were erecting idolatrous statues right in the courts of the temple of God and worshiping them! Once the first century A.D. church of Christ became infiltrated with Gnosticism and other un-Biblical philosophies, it only took about one generation (see Revelation chs. 2-3) for the despicable, satanic idolatry to creep in and take over and the church of Christ became a "worldly" kingdom with a "pope" and worship of "saints" and all other kinds of idolatry. False doctrine is the cause of wicked living—not vice-versa! False doctrine must not be tolerated within the true church of Jesus Christ today!

The "sacrifice" is Judah! The wicked, idolatrous people of God are going to be slaughtered like animals by the coming hordes of Babylonians! The people of Judah had begun to worship Milcom (a form of Baalism and the worship of Molech) and were "sacrificing" their babies on altars and in the fires of these idols. Jeremiah predicted that the siege of the Babylonians would cause such famine that Jews will kill their own children and eat them (Jer. 19:9). Because the Jews of Judah were offering "sacrifices" to idolatrous gods, they, themselves would be "sacrificed." The Hebrew word zevackh means "to consecrate, to offer, to dedicate unto." The idolatrous Jews would be "consecrated or offered" in a "feast of the wrath" of God upon idolatry. The "guests" were the Babylonians! They were to be "invited" by the Divine providence of God allowing them to conquer the earth (see Jer. 27:5-10). The Babylonians would "gobble up" all of the Middle-East and part of Egypt. But only at the "invitation" (permission) of Almighty God. When God was through with them—they would become "sacrifices" to the wrath of God to the Persian empire (see Dan. chs. 2 & 7). The book of Revelation represents the ancient Roman empire (A.D. 100-450) cannibalizing itself (Rev. 17:15-19). It may seem strange to some to think of God "feasting in wrath" upon "the wicked who have been sacrificed"—but it is no more strange than God "feasting in gladness and love" upon the righteousness of his "saints." The righteousness of the "saints of God" is often portrayed in figurative language in the Bible as a "sweet fragrance" of sacrifice to God (2 Cor. 2:14-17; Phil. 4:18). Christians are to offer their bodies as "living sacrifices" to God (Rom. 12:1-2).

Praise and doing good are “sacrifices” to God from Christians (Heb. 13:15-16). But read what Christ threatened to do to the idolatrous and wicked churches of Asia Minor (Rev. Chs. 2-3).

Zephaniah is not predicting the end of time—the end of the world at the 2nd coming of Christ! He is predicting the end of Judah’s “world” as she knew it in her own homeland. He is predicting the “end of the ancient Middle-East world” as it was known under the Assyrian empire. Zephaniah is simply using the “license” of prophetic-hyperbole to try to get the attention of a people saturated with idolatry and false doctrines that taught God would never bring down his wrath upon his “chosen people”—after all, they had the temple of God in their land and Holy City (see Jer. 7:1-4). THEIR SMUG, WICKED, IDOLATROUS, EXPLOITATIVE-OF-THE-POOR “WORLD” WAS ABOUT TO COME TO AN END. Isaiah uses the same kind of “prophet-hyperbole” to predict the downfall of ancient Babylon (see Isa. chs. 13-14). John the apostle uses the same kind of prophetic-hyperbole to depict the downfall of the ancient Roman empire in the Book of Revelation. After all, if God chooses, because of our wickedness, to bring down the nation we know as the United States of America by an invasion of some “heathen” power would we not think of it and experience it as “the end of our world?” We most certainly would! What we have in Zephaniah, as in all the other prophets, including the book of Revelation in the NT, is apocalyptic language—language for “crisis-times.” Of course, God has predicted (2 Pet. 3:8-13) a final “day of the Lord” at which time he will literally destroy this cosmos—even the very basic “elements” (“building blocks”) that constitute all that is physical-matter—AND EVERY HISTORICAL “DAY OF THE LORD” IN THE OT AND NT IS A HARBINGER (A “PROPHECY”) OF THAT FINAL “DAY OF THE LORD”—including this one in Zephaniah. But Zephaniah was not directly predicting the end of time! Christians can take Zephaniah’s prediction of “the end of Judah’s world” and learn the lesson of repentance and righteousness as a way of salvation from divine wrath!

“Restoring their fortunes” is a Messianic phrase used repeatedly in the OT prophets (just get your concordance and look up “fortunes”) to predict the “fortunes” of the Messianic people being “restored” at the first coming of Christ. It is not speaking to the issue of physical fortunes—it is speaking of SPIRITUAL FORTUNES! The “fortune” or treasure of mankind is in being redeemed and saved from sin for eternal life. And that especially applies in the OT to the future of Israel. Israel’s fortune was to be found in the birth of Immanuel (“God with us”)—Jesus Christ. Just read Luke 1:26-79! As a matter of historical fact, Israel was never restored to the physical “fortunes” she enjoyed under David and Solomon—not ever—not even now in the 21st century! The history of the Jewish nation after its return from exile is that of vassalage under foreign rulers (Persia, Greece, Syria, Rome) with only 100 years of relative “freedom” from such foreign control, until she was “destroyed” by the ancient Roman empire in A.D. 70. Jews never again occupied the land of Palestine with the power and prosperity they enjoyed under David and Solomon—NOT EVEN TODAY! And surely there is no Christian who understands the Bible with proper interpretative principles that believes God has something yet “physically” in store for the Jews just because they are Jews. The NT makes it plain that Jewishness will never count with God after the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (see Rom. 2:28-29; 4:9-25; 9: 6-33; 2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 2:26; 3:10-29; 6:14-16; the entire book of Hebrews). If God has

something “special” for the Jews apart from their repentance and conversion to Christ then the New Testament is a hoax! And if a Jew is converted to Christ, he, along with all the Gentiles converted to Christ, simply for the kingdom of God on earth now—the church of Christ. Neither Jew nor Gentile Christian will ever need a “millennial rule of Christ literally on earth” to be saved at the final judgment of the world! CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH IS ALL THERE IS GOING TO BE FROM GOD UNTIL THE CONSUMMATION OF ALL TIME AND HISTORY! GOD IS NOT GOING TO SPEAK TO, OR SAVE, THE WORLD IN ANY OTHER WAY THAN THROUGH THE NT PLAN OF SALVATION!

That God’s people (i.e., the New Testament church) would “plunder and possess” the “wealth of the nations” is also a Messianic prophecy (see Isa. 61:1-11 and compare it with its fulfillment in Christ in Luke 4:16-30; and see Amos 9:11-12 and compare its fulfillment in Acts 15:12-21, for just two examples). Once again, it is prophetic-hyperbole speaking of spiritual things in physical terminology! The prophets had to put their predictions of “spiritual realities” in physical terminology because of the spiritual immaturity of the people of their day. Remember, the law was a “school-master” to teach the OT people about the spiritual realities the Messiah would bring to mankind (Gal. 3:23-29). The law of Moses—with all its ceremonies, rituals, and objects (animal sacrifices, priests, tabernacle, temple, etc. etc.) was a parable (see Heb. 9:9 where the actual word in the original Greek text is *parabole*, translated in RSV as “symbolic”) of the New Testament dispensation! So, the prophets had to speak of Messianic spiritual blessings in terms of physical things to engender faith in God in the hearts of a spiritually-immature people. Can you imagine a Jew trying to make sense of a prophetic message about the Messiah and his kingdom put in the theological terms used by the apostle Paul? Even Jesus had to “come down to the spiritually-immature level” of the people of his day when he preached about the “kingdom of God” (the church) and put it in parables and physical terms. And what is the “treasure of the nations?” It is those who believe and accept Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world! The “treasure” of any nation is not its gold, silver, oil, grain, or other physical products—it is PEOPLE!—especially Christians! And God’s kingdom (the church) is in the “process” (through world-wide evangelism) of “possessing” the treasure out of all the nations right now (see Rev. 7:9-17).

Why didn’t Judah learn repentance from the judgment of God upon other nations? WHY DO NOT ALL NATIONS TODAY LEARN REPENTANCE FROM THE CONSTANT JUDGMENTS OF GOD IN HISTORY UPON DICTATORIAL AGGRESSIVE, OPPRESSIVE REGIMES (i.e., the Nazis, the Communists, etc. in our own time). Why do not individuals learn repentance through the constant judgments of God upon wickedness in “nature.” The answer is found in places like Romans 1:18-32. People just simply “refuse to have God in their knowledge....they deliberately exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.” They become “futile” in their thinking, and “their senseless minds are darkened.” As Jeremiah and other prophets put it, “they refused correction....they said, we will not give heed to God, we will not walk in the way of God.” Isaiah put a terrible indictment upon the “chosen people of God” in his statement: “For they are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers (prophets), See not; and to the prophets,

Prophecy not to us what is right; speak to us smooth things; prophecy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel" (Isa. 30:9-11). See also Jer. 5:1-31—the people loved false prophets! To them the word of the Lord was an object of scorn (Jer. 6:9-21) to which they would not give heed! The Gospel of John analyzes this intransigent, impenitent attitude: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed (for what they really are)" (Jn. 3:19-20). No human being will ever be able to stand before the judgment bar of God and plead ignorance of his existence and his eternal power and deity or his wrath from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men—for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse..." (Rom. 1:18-20).

Once again, this is a Messianic prophecy. In the Hebrew language the "peoples" are the goyim and that stands for "Gentiles." It is not the "people" of the nation of Israel exclusively—it is the peoples out of every nation of the world coming to the Christ (the Messiah) who will give them a new heart and a new spirit, and a new "language" (a speech of grace, salvation, righteousness, goodness—see Eph. 4:25—5:20; Col. 3:12-17; 4:5-6). Notice Zephaniah said these "peoples" would come from "beyond the rivers of Ethiopia" (from among the Gentiles). When that day was to come, God would remove from "his people" the haughty and proud—they would no longer be allowed in his holy mountain, "Zion." Those who have the "new speech" would be humble and lowly, seeking refuge in the name (in the authority) of the Lord—they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue—and none shall make them afraid. How could that ever be said of physical Israel? Israel continued to lie, deceive, and be afraid (see Malachi and the Gospels). One of the most deceitful, despicable, lying eras of Israel's history occurred from the restoration of the commonwealth in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah until the coming of Jesus Christ and the destruction of Israel by the Romans in A.D. 70! Remember how the crowds cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him—we have no king but Caesar!" Do you think modern Israel (of the 21st century) is a people of God with a "changed speech"? Modern Israel persecutes and obstructs the gospel in every way they can! Modern Judaism renounces Jesus Christ as an apostate! "Do no wrong" does not mean that Christians do not occasionally sin (either by commission or omission)—it means they will have a heart that wants to do no wrong (Rom. 7:15-25). It means they have a heart ready to repent when aware of sin—contrary to the recalcitrant and impudent and rebellious Israelite who, even after the Messiah came, cursed him and crucified him. It also means that God has cleansed the repenting Christian's heart of sin by the vicarious death of Christ and has given the Christian a guiltless conscience (1 Pet. 3:21; Heb. 10:1-25).

"Zion" is, of course, Messianic. It is here in Zephaniah in a Messianic context. And it is clearly, according to the apostle Paul in the book of Hebrews, the fulfillment of most of the prophetic, figurative uses of "Zion" (Heb. 12:22-24). Isaiah uses the name "Zion" to speak glowingly (Isa. 2:3ff and chs. 60-66) of the New Testament church;

Joel uses it (Joel 2:30--- 3:17) to speak in a Messianic context of the NT church; Jeremiah uses “Zion” to speak of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:1-40; Jer. 50:1-5); Micah speaks of it in a Messianic context (Micah 4:1-13); and Zechariah clearly uses “Zion” to speak of the Messianic age (Zech. 9:9 compare with Matt. 21:5). Compare Psa. 110:1-4 with Matt. 22:42; Heb. 5:6,10; 6:20; 7:11,15;21). The Hebrew word Zion means “citadel” or “fortress.” And “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.” The “Zion” of which Zephaniah speaks can only be the New Testament church for “the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more.” Furthermore, Zephaniah’s “Zion” would have its “shame changed into praise, and it would be renown and praised in all the earth.” That could never be said of physical Israel—only of the NT church. Physical Israel was provincially for the land of Palestine—not the whole earth—and it certainly is not praised in all the earth—not ever—not today! Zephaniah is once again using “physical” language to try to convey “spiritual” meaning to the Judah of his day concerning the Messianic kingdom that would result from a “remnant of faithful Jews” who would return from the Babylonian captivity and from their lineage would be born into the world, Immanuel, the “King of Israel in the midst” of believers in Christ. **WHAT A BLESSING IT IS TO READ THE OT PROPHETS AND LEARN FROM THEIR “PROPHETIC-HYPERBOLE” WHAT GOD IS TRYING TO CONVEY TO NEW TESTAMENT BELIEVERS ABOUT HIS BLESSINGS ON “ZION”—THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH!**

Introduction to Paul T. Butler Th.D

Paul was born in Springfield Missouri and graduated from Conway High School prior to enlistment in the US Navy. He began serious bible study with correspondence courses from San Jose Bible College. He later enrolled in Ozark Bible College and acquired his Bachelor of Theology degree June of 1961. He received a Master of Biblical Literature degree from Ozark in May of 1973. He received a Doctorate of Theology from The Theological University of America in October of 1990.

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