

Zephaniah

1. Introduction – Zephaniah speaks to the rebellious people of Judah about the coming day of the Lord, a day of judgment against Judah and the nations, and a day in which mercy is also shown to a remnant of the people.
2. Author, date, historical setting – The book describes the prophetic ministry of Zephaniah, who is shown to be a descendant of the godly King Hezekiah (1:1). Because of his family line, he probably had connections within the royal court so that he could observe first-hand and condemn the sins of those in leadership in Judah. Zephaniah ministered during the reign of Josiah. Josiah had instituted sweeping reforms in Judah, particularly in the worship of God, and had cleansed the nation of idol worship. However, the flagrant idolatry of King Manasseh over a period of 50 years before Josiah had done severe damage to the nation, and apparently Josiah's reforms had not changed the general heart attitude of the people. Zephaniah anticipates the day in which a powerful foe would come against Judah. Since even Assyria was to be a victim of this foe (2:13-15), it appears that the anticipated foe must have been Babylon. Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah.
3. Structure (Hill and Walton):
 - a. Judgment (1:1-3:8)
 - i. warning of universal judgment (1:1-3)
 - ii. judgment against Judah and Jerusalem (1:4-13)
 - iii. the Day of the Lord (1:14-2:3)
 - (1) judgment against Philistia (2:4-7)
 - (2) judgment against Cush (2:12)
 - (3) judgment against Assyria (2:13-15)
 - iv. indictment against Judah and Jerusalem (3:1-7)
 - v. warning of universal judgment (3:8)
 - b. Restoration (3:9-20)
4. Themes:
 - a. The Day of the Lord is a concept used by previous prophets (e.g., Isaiah 2:6-22 and Amos 5:18-20, 8:3-13) to describe a day in which God will set things right, judging the wicked and delivering the righteous. This is a day in which God will vindicate his righteousness by showing the need for judgment against the wicked and executing it upon them according to his justice. The day of the Lord foretold by Zephaniah prefigures *the* Day of the Lord at the end of the present age, described in the New Testament both by Peter (Acts 2:20, 2 Pet. 3:10) and Paul (1 Cor. 5:5, 1 Thes. 5:2, 2 Thes. 2:2). The Day of the Lord is the final judgment that will purge away all wickedness (2 Pet. 3:10) and allow the righteous to pass through by God's mercy (1 Cor. 5:5).
 - b. God will demonstrate his mercy toward a remnant that produces the fruit of faith. The remnant concept is found in a number of the prophets and is carried through to the New Testament (Acts 15:17, Rom. 9:27; 11:5).
 - c. The God of the people of Israel is the God of all the nations. He is not merely a tribal god concerned only with the loyalty of a local tribe. He calls the nations to account and brings judgment on the peoples. He will both judge (3:8) and show mercy (3:9) to the nations. All of us must confront this universal God in the day of judgment.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.
A Survey of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton, Zondervan, 2000.