

Zephaniah 1:1

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The LORD gives a message to the prophet Zephaniah during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah

The book of Zephaniah begins by affirming the credibility and source of the prophecy. It tells the reader that the following message is *the word of the LORD* (vs 1). The Hebrew term for *LORD* is Yahweh, the covenant name of God. The name speaks of God's relationship with His people, and means "The existent One" (Exodus 3:14). The phrase *word of the LORD* refers to Yahweh's revelation to His people (1 Kings 6:11; 16:1). God spoke the words of this prophecy to a man, disclosing an important message for His covenant people.

In biblical times, God often revealed His will to some individuals who, in turn, were to relay the divine message to others. For instance, He spoke to Hosea, the son of Beeri (Hosea 1:1), Joel, the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1). He spoke to Micah of Moresheth (Micah 1:1), He spoke to Jonah, the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1).

In our context, the person to whom *the word of the LORD came* was *Zephaniah* (vs 1). Who was he? When did he prophesy? Who was his ancestor?

The name *Zephaniah* means "The LORD has hidden." The meaning of the name suggests that the LORD hid the prophet at the time of his birth to protect him from persecution during the reign of Judah's evil King Manasseh. Indeed, the book of 2 Kings tells us that Manasseh was exceedingly evil—he "shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another" (2 Kings 21:16). But God protected *Zephaniah*, as He did for many others who survived Manasseh's persecution.

The title verse contains the lineage of the prophet. It tells us that *Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, and son of Hezekiah* (vs.1) It traces *Zephaniah's* genealogy to the fourth generation, the longest one for prophets in the entire Bible. The writer likely wanted to prove *Zephaniah's* royal lineage. That means that *Zephaniah* was the great grandson of *Hezekiah*, a godly king who ruled in Judah from 716 BC to 686 BC.

The title verse also tells the reader that *Zephaniah prophesied in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah* (vs 1). King Josiah (640 to 609 BC) was a cousin of *Zephaniah*, who also traced his line back to *Hezekiah*, through Manasseh and Amon.

When *Hezekiah* ruled as co-regent with his father Ahaz in 729 BC, Judah was already a vassal state to Assyria, paying tribute and living in subservience to their mighty empire. During that time, Judah did not experience much spiritual progress. But when *Hezekiah* began to rule independently of his father in 715 BC, he initiated a religious reform in which he "removed the high places and broke down the *sacred* pillars and cut down the Asherah" (2 Kings 18:4).

When *Hezekiah* died in 686 BC, his son and successor, Manasseh, reversed the spiritual progress of Judah. He “rebuilt the high places which *Hezekiah* his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them” (2 Kings 21:3). He even practiced the wicked ritual of child sacrifice, as he:

“made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists.”
(2 Kings 21:6)

Part of Manasseh’s wickedness could have been due to him bowing under the influence of Assyria. When Manasseh died in 642 BC, his son Amon succeeded him. Amon followed the footsteps of his father and “did evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 21:20). He ruled for two years and was assassinated by his servants (2 Kings 21:23).

Thus, when *Josiah*, Amon’s son, acceded to the throne in 640 BC, hope reappeared in Judah. That hope became evident in 627 BC, when the last strong Assyrian leader (Ashurbanipal) died, causing a rapid decline of the Assyrian Empire. Using Assyria’s decline as an opportunity, *Josiah* renounced Assyria as a vassal king.

Then *Josiah* initiated a religious reform in which he purged all the altars of Baal along with the molten images (2 Chronicles 34:3–7). *Zephaniah*, who began prophesying around 627 BC, might have influenced *Josiah* in this godly decision because he was denouncing the exact situation that King *Josiah* addressed: Judah’s moral and spiritual decay (*Zephaniah* 1:4–9; 3:3–4).

Around 621 BC, King *Josiah* decreed that the temple be refurbished, leading to the discovery of the Book of the Law (2 Chronicles 34:14). God’s covenant with Israel was to be read and taught by the Levites, and read to the people in full every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:9). But apparently under the wicked kings that preceded *Josiah*, the best the Levites could do was to hide the Law, to preserve it from being destroyed.

When *Josiah* heard the words of the Law, he tore his clothes in mourning, recognizing the extent of sin in his kingdom (2 Chronicles 34:19). He further recognized that Judah had violated their covenant with God, and inquired of God’s prophet on Judah’s behalf. *Josiah* recognized and stated that “great is the wrath of the LORD which is poured out on us because our fathers have not observed the word of the LORD, to do according to all that is written in this book” (2 Chronicles 34:21).

Josiah’s discovery and reading of the Law led to a revival in Judah. God spoke to *Josiah* through the prophetess *Huldah* and told him that He would delay judgment on Judah because *Josiah* had humbled his heart. It is said of *Josiah* that:

“Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.”
(2 Kings 23:25)

However, the Lord did not relent from judging Judah due to the evils done under Manasseh, He only delayed them (2 Kings 23:26-27). However, throughout Josiah's lifetime the people kept their covenant and followed their God, staving off judgment (2 Chronicles 34:31).

It is during this time of Josiah's reign that Zephaniah prophesied. The message of Zephaniah complements that of the prophet Jeremiah. Both seek to encourage Judah to repent and return to their Suzerain (Ruler) God, and honor their covenant with Him, thus delaying or avoiding His day of wrath.

Josiah reigned in Judah from 640 to 609 BC. Josiah's son Jehoiakim did evil after him (2 Chronicles 36:5). Egypt placed Judah under its servitude shortly after Josiah's death, in 605 BC. Then Egypt's political rival Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, imposed himself upon Israel, and captured Jehoiakim and exiled him to Babylon. Judah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, against the prophetic advice of Jeremiah, and finally Jerusalem was destroyed and all but the poorest of the people exiled in 586 BC (2 Kings 24:14).

Biblical Text

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