

Zephaniah 2:4-7

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Zephaniah pronounces judgment against Philistia. The LORD will destroy the Philistines and give their land as pasture to the Judahites. The destruction upon Philistia should serve as a warning to Judah, for them to repent and return to their LORD.

Having urged the people of Judah to repent in order to avoid judgement (vv. 1-3). The prophet Zephaniah next predicted the destruction of Judah's neighboring nations. His point might be to encourage the Judahites to return to the LORD and escape the coming devastation that will engulf the entire area.

In his indictment against Philistia, Zephaniah declared, *For Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon a desolation* (vs 4). The city named *Gaza* was the Philistine coastal capital within the tribal allotment of Judah (Joshua 15:47). It was about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem. The city of *Ashkelon* was a significant seaport located on the Mediterranean coast 20 km north of Gaza and 50 km south of Tel Aviv (Judges 1:18). According to Zephaniah, both *Gaza* and *Ashkelon* would be in a state of complete emptiness. In addition, *Ashdod will be driven out at noon* (vs 4).

The city of *Ashdod* was located midway between Joppa and *Gaza*, about three miles from the coast ([See Map](#)). Today, scholars identify it with modern Tel Ashdod, 15 km north of Ashkelon and approximately 4 km inland from the Mediterranean Sea. The prophet stated that the city of *Ashdod* would *be driven out at noon*. Why would the destruction of the city occur *at noon*? What is the significance of the daytime?

In the ancient world, people usually rested *at noon* since it was the hottest time of the day. During that break, they would eat and relax without worrying about any enemy attack. Therefore, the statement that *Ashdod* would *be driven out at noon* likely means that the invasion of the city would catch the people of *Ashdod* by surprise. The people of *Ashdod* would fall under attack and be unprepared to defend themselves.

In a similar vein, *Ekron will be uprooted* (vs 4). The city of *Ekron* was the most northerly of the major cities of the Philistines. During Israel's conquest, Joshua did not conquer *Ekron* (Joshua 13:3). When the land was divided among the 12 tribes, *Ekron* was given first to Judah and then to Dan (Joshua 15:11, 45, 46; 19:43). Eventually, Judah took *Ekron* (Judges 1:18), but it subsequently fell back to the Philistines. Zephaniah utilized the name of the city of *Ekron* to refer to its inhabitants. He told his audience that the people of *Ekron* would leave their city by force.

Considering this judgment, the prophet cried out, *Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast!* The term translated as *woe* is "hōy" in Hebrew (Amos 6:1). Sometimes, it is translated as "Alas!" (Amos 5:18). Ancient Israelites often used the term as a mourning shout at funerals. For instance, Jeremiah told King Zedekiah of Judah that people would cry at his funeral, "Alas, lord!"

(Jeremiah 34:5; 1 Kings 13:30). In our passage, Zephaniah used it to predict the destruction of *the inhabitants of the seacoast* and described them as *the nation of the Cherethites* (vs 5).

The *Cherethites* were members of a tribal group living in southern Judah near Hebron (1 Samuel 30:14). They were associated with the Philistines, according to the book of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 25:15-17). In our passage, the *Cherethites* appear to stand for the entire nation of the Philistines. God would judge them for their offense against His covenant people. As the prophet further declared, *The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines* (vs 5).

The phrase *word of the LORD* refers to the prophecy directed against Philistia. The *LORD* had issued a verdict to punish the Philistines, and it would surely come to pass. The name *Canaan* refers to the seacoast areas occupied by the Philistines. According to the book of Joshua, Philistia is within the land of Canaan (Joshua 13:2-3). The *LORD* addressed the Philistines directly through Zephaniah and said, *I will destroy you so that there will be no inhabitant* (vs 5). That is, the *LORD* would leave the Philistine region uninhabited.

As Zephaniah predicted, the Philistine cities fell under the judgment of God. King Nebuchadnezzar conquered *Ashkelon*, *Ashdod*, and *Ekron* in 604 BC. ([See Map](#)) They became a Babylonian province. Then, Alexander the Great conquered *Gaza* in 332 BC, killed the men, and sold the women and children into slavery. Later, Judas Maccabeus captured the cities for Israel during the Maccabean period (168–134 BC). The prophecy came to pass because the *Lord GOD* had spoken it.

While *the LORD* was about to destroy the Philistine cities, He used His prophet to announce the coming disaster to the people of Judah. The purpose of the announcement was likely to warn the Judahites that the same fate could happen to them if they refused to return to the *LORD*. Conversely, if the people of Judah repented, they would not only escape the coming destruction but would perhaps have the opportunity to possess the Philistine cities that would soon be deserted (v. 7).

The Philistine region would be emptied of its population. Rather than bustling cities and seaports, *the seacoast will be pastures* (vs 6). The term *pasture* is a rural image. It speaks of a sparse human population. Where there once were thriving cities with seaports and traders, now the region will be *with caves for shepherds and folds for flocks*. Both *shepherds* and *flocks* are for sparsely populated areas.

Judah met a similar fate when they were invaded and conquered. The Babylonians emptied Judah of its human population, except for the poorest of the people, who were left to serve as laborers (2 Kings 24:14).

Once the Philistine cities became open fields, the remnant of the Judahites would become *shepherds* to care for their sheep and *flocks* there. Indeed, *the coast will be for the remnant of the house of Judah* (vs 7). The influence of the Philistines will be completely removed from the area.

On the day of the *LORD*'s judgment, He would not destroy every Judahite. There would be a *remnant* of Judah, possibly those who sought Yahweh with humility (v. 3). The Judahites who

escaped the coming destruction would occupy the Philistine region: *They will pasture* their flocks of sheep and goats *on it. In the houses of Ashkelon, they will lie down at evening* (vs 7). That means the Judahites would sleep in the deserted *houses of Ashkelon* without interruption. Thus *the LORD their God will care for them* by eliminating their long-standing enemy from the region.

The LORD is the Suzerain (ruler) God of Judah. He would chastise them when they broke their covenant vow to obey His commands (which were given for their good, Deuteronomy 10:13). God would discipline His people because He loved them, and because it was spelled out in the covenant for Him to do so (Deuteronomy 28:15-68; Hebrews 12:6).

Because of God's covenant relationship with Judah, He will never reject or abandon them (Romans 11:28-29). His judgment was only to discipline them and restore His fellowship with them. Therefore, after chastising His covenant people, the LORD would care for them, providing them with what they needed to ensure they lacked nothing. He would also *restore their fortune* (vs 7).

To *restore the fortunes* literally translates as "turn the turning," that is, to restore one to well-being. It implies a reversal of misfortune. That means that the LORD would compensate the people of Judah for any loss they had incurred. He would do so because He is their loving husband (Hosea 2:16). He is the "faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Therefore, the *remnant of the house of Judah* would benefit from God's faithfulness and love because they were the "humble" of the land (v. 3).

Biblical Text

⁴ For Gaza will be abandoned

And Ashkelon a desolation;

Ashdod will be driven out at noon

And Ekron will be uprooted.

⁵ Woe to the inhabitants of the seacoast,

The nation of the Cherethites!

The word of the LORD is against you,

O Canaan, land of the Philistines;

And I will destroy you

So that there will be no inhabitant.

⁶ So the seacoast will be pastures,

With caves for shepherds and folds for flocks.

⁷ And the coast will be

For the remnant of the house of Judah,

They will pasture on it.

In the houses of Ashkelon they will lie down at evening;

**For the LORD their God will care for them
And restore their fortune.**