

1. Date of Zephaniah's prophecy.

Falling between Isaiah and Jeremiah, as he does, Zephaniah broke the 50 year silence of prophecy in Judah during Manasseh's reign of violence and corruption. Indeed, his name means "hidden of the Lord" reflecting the suppression of the prophets under Manasseh - perhaps it was only through being hidden that he had survived the purges of the prophets that took place.

The mention of Josiah's reign [Zeph1.1] indicates the limits of his ministry 639-609 BC. However, the graphic images of the idolatrous practices of the times equate to the time just before Josiah's reforms took place. This would coincide with the time of the call of Jeremiah around 626 BC.

George Adam Smith points out [TTP vol2.37] that, in considering the date of Zephaniah we need to recognise that Josiah's reign breaks into three sections.

[a] 639-621 - the early years of Josiah before the enforcement of Deuteronomy and the great reorm of 621 BC.

[b] 621-608 the later years of Josiah

[c] 608 -600 which were the days of reaction to the Josianic reform in the days of Jehoiakim.

Throughout the whole of these periods [a] to [c] Jeremiah states that he had to attack idolatry in Judah for 23 years from 627-604 [Jer 35]; and he especially attacks the impurity of the people before the great reform of Josiah, and after it while Josiah was still alive and then further under Jehoiakim.

Before 621 BC the Scythian invasion was sweeping along Palestine to the north. After 621, and especially before 604, the Baylonians are threatening the land.

2. Situation:

Judah never really recovered from Manasseh's long, 50 year reign; and his son, Amon, repeated his father's actions.

Zephaniah was probably a resident of Jerusalem. The city concerns him greatly as he indicts it religious degradation and social apathy [1.4-13; 3.1-7] and predicts its ultimate welfare [3.14-20].

Two themes dominate his prophecy: the threat of imminent judgment [1.2-3.7] and the hope of ultimate deliverance [3.8-20]. Sandwiched between these two concerns is a brief call to repentance [2.1-3].

Date of Zephaniah 1

Zephaniah 1 reflects an attitude among the people which is idolatrous and skeptical and there is an impending invasion. The worship of the host of heaven was found in Manasseh's reign, but it was put down by Josiah in 621. It was revived again under Jehoiakim [Jer7.18]. But during the latter years of Josiah it could not have been so public as Zephaniah describes in 1.3.

So we would date this first chapter in the early years of Josiah. In which case the southward march of the Scythians between 630-625 accounts for Zephaniah's alarm of general war, including the invasion of Judah. The idolatrous practices he describes would fit the surviving days of Manasseh before those practices were curbed by 621. The skeptical attitude and hopelessness [1.12] may reflect those who hoped greater things at the overthrow of Amon.

This would also fit the title [1.1], where, if the "Hezekiah" means his great-great-grandfather, and if he died about 695, with Manasseh, his eldest son and successor, succeeded him at 12 years of age, then by 630 Zephaniah cannot be more than 20 years old and not more than 25 by the time the Scythian invasion passed away.

So the date of this first chapter would have been about 625BC probably before that year rather than after it, because the Scythian invasion has apparently not yet ebbed.

Date of Zephaniah's prophecy

The situation manifesting over a series of reigns

Zephaniah 1 just before 625 BC

Zephaniah
***Imminent judgment
for Judah and
Jerusalem***

*Date: around 626 BC just before the reforms of Josiah.
The situation prevailing at the time
Zephaniah 1 a little before 625 BC
The outline of the book*

The outline of the book:

Outline of the book

Zp1.1 Title and the tracing of the four generations of Zephaniah

Zp1.2-3 The destruction of the whole face of the earth

Zp1.4-13 The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem.

Zp1.14-18 The day of the Lord

Zp2.1-3 A call for repentance

Zp2.4-15 Series of oracles on foreign nations

This details the world-wide destruction proclaimed.

4-7 - [a] Philistia and sea-coast in path of the Scythian raid.

8-11 - [b] Moab and Ammon

12 - [c] Egypt, which is called Kush [or Ethiopia]

13-15 - [d] Assyria climax of heathen ways [written before 608]

Zp3.1-13 An address to his city

Spares the king, denouncing the teaching and ruling classes

Universal doom

Zp3.14-20 The Day of the Lord