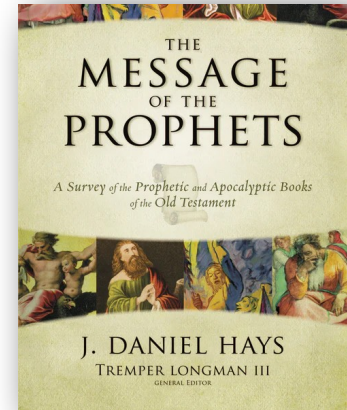


ZEPHANIAH THE SON OF CUSHI, "THE CUSHITE"

(Danny Hays)

For several generations prior to Zephaniah, the geopolitical world of the Ancient Near East was dominated by the struggle between the Assyrians and the Cushites (who ruled Egypt). In light of this historical context, it is perhaps not all that surprising that Zephaniah mentions Cushites three times in his three short chapters. However, it is perhaps unusual to be informed at the beginning of the book that Zephaniah's father is named "Cushi," or "the Cushite." In light of the important role that genealogies usually play throughout the Ancient Near East and certainly in the Old Testament, it is valid to explore the implications of Zephaniah being the son of a man named Cushi. The Hebrew term Cushi (lit. "Cushite") clearly refers to the kingdom of Cush, an African kingdom located on the Nile to the south of Egypt. It is logical to suppose that the owner of the name Cushi would be related to Cush in some manner. This is even more pertinent when a date for the birth of Zephaniah's father is estimated (perhaps around 685 BC). At that time, Cush was one of the two major world powers.



Recall that in 701 BC Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, drove the Cushites out of Israel and down into Egypt. However, the Assyrians did not completely subdue the Cushites at that time, and the African kingdom subsequently quickly reemerged as a significant power in the region, routing the Assyrians in 674 BC and sending the proud army of Esarhaddon back to Assyria in defeat. Soon after, however, the Assyrians returned and, led by Ashurbanipal, marched into Egypt to finally subdue the Cushites. On this campaign, Ashurbanipal took numerous vassal kings with him, including Manasseh, the king of Judah and the grandfather of Josiah.

It was during this tumultuous time, when the Cushites were extremely involved in the commercial, diplomatic and military affairs of Judah, that Zephaniah's father was born and given the name "Cushite." It is interesting to note that Jeremiah 36:14 refers to an official in Jerusalem with a great-grandfather named "Cushi." This individual would probably have lived at about the same time period as Zephaniah's father. Thus we know of two Israelites living in Jerusalem around the turn of the seventh century that have the name "Cushi." Perhaps it was a popular name. Scholars have suggested four plausible reasons why someone might be named Cushi: (1) the person was actually an ethnic Cushite; (2) the person had dark skin and looked like a Cushite; he may even have had a Cushite mother, father, or grandparent; (3) he was born in Cush, even if he had Judahite parents; or (4) he was given the name Cush in honor of the Cushites, recognizing the importance of Cush as an ally against the Assyrians. The historical context suggests that Cushite soldiers, diplomats, and traders would have been in Judah frequently during this time; thus, any of the four scenarios described above would have been possible.¹



¹ J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 121-127.