

THE BACKGROUND OF ZEPHANIAH (Larry L. Walker)

Date

The opening statement of the book notes that Zephaniah prophesied "during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah" (640-609 BC), the famous king who assumed the throne at the age of eight and later died in battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Since Zephaniah predicted the destruction of Nineveh (2:13-15), which took place in 612 BC, the only question open for discussion concerns the time of his ministry within these parameters. Because of references to the pagan elements still found within society (cf. 1:4-5,8-9) as well as the other sinful and unreformed elements still present (3:1, 3, 7), some commentators suppose that Zephaniah wrote at a time prior to any reformation attempted by Josiah. However, others assume that only the predominance of idolatry had been broken by the time of Zephaniah's ministry, which came after the initiation of Josiah's reformation.

The reference to the "remnant of Baal" (1:4) is a key passage for commentators in dating the book. Some assume this statement reflects a time after Baalism had already been generally destroyed and only a "remnant" yet remained. Others respond that this is assuming too much; they believe that the point the prophet is making is only that eventually all Baalism will be exterminated and that this reference has nothing to do with the extent of Baal worship during Zephaniah's ministry.

Another reference that has been used to argue for the later date is 1:12: "those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs." Some believe this comment indicates disappointment in the reformation of Josiah. The people who had endeavored to live up to the demands of the reforms had seen their dream of a reunited state crushed. But this interpretation is by no means certain.

Those who argue for a pre-reformation date point out references to astral worship (from Assyria?) and vestiges of Canaanite worship (1:4-5), foreign dress (1:8), false prophets and priests (3:4), and widespread injustice and violence among the civic leaders (3:2-3). But it is possible that Josiah's reforms were more superficial than we realize, and perhaps much idolatry remained. Moreover, Zephaniah seems to represent the condition of the people as a final one—doomed to judgment.

Another line of reasoning finds frequent allusions to Deuteronomy (Zep 1:13, 15, 17; 2:2, 5, 7, 1; 3:5, 19-20), which, it is argued, could take place only after the rediscovery of the book of the law in 621 BC. This law, since it was violated by the priests, seems to have come already into public use (3:4). Zephaniah apparently makes no explicit reference to Josiah's reforms, and we can only make certain assumptions concerning his relationship to the reforms of Josiah.

Political Background

After the wicked reigns of Manasseh (695-642 BC) and Amon (642-640 BC), the reforming king Josiah (640-609 BC) ascended



the throne. During the reigns of his predecessors, apostate conditions had prevailed for more than half a century. It was during Josiah's reign that Zephaniah began warning the people of impending judgment. The fall of Samaria in 722 BC was a solemn reminder of God's justice and power.

Manasseh and Amon had remained loyal vassals to Assyria, but under Josiah the people experienced independence, for about this time Assyrian policy was changing as at home Assyria faced problems with Babylon and was no longer able to retain effective control in the west. Presumably, Josiah took advantage of the opportunity to launch sweeping reforms and moved to take possession of the provinces into which Assyria had divided the territory of northern Israel.

Although Zephaniah envisions an imminent invasion bringing about the downfall of Jerusalem (1:4, 10-13; 2:1; 3:1-4), the enemy is not identified. The general assumption understands the reference as being to Assyria. However, by the year 627 BC Assyrian ascendancy had been broken and therefore possibly posed little threat to Judah. Another possibility for the reference is the Scythian incursions toward the end of the seventh century BC. Distinctive Scythian-style arrowheads from that era have been found in excavations at sites such as Lachish and Samaria, but the evidence remains indecisive. Although Babylon was only beginning its rise to power at the time of Josiah's death (609 BC), 2 Kings 22:15-20 seems to reflect anticipation of a coming invasion by Babylon.

Religious Background

The message of Zephaniah, along with the early discourses of Jeremiah and the history recorded in 2 Kings 21-23, reflects the social, moral, and religious conditions in Judah at that time. Manasseh and Amon had been godless kings, but Josiah was a God-fearing ruler (2 Kings 2 and 23). But any reform under Josiah does not appear to have influenced Zephaniah's audience much—his condemnation of the people gives the impression that he is addressing the majority of them. He does not mention Josiah's reforms, and the people are ripe for judgment.

The reforms of Josiah involved purging his nation of foreign cults and practices, and, since Assyrian power was slipping, no doubt heading the list for destruction were Assyrian religious practices. Various astral deities and old Canaanite practices were eradicated (2Ki 23:4-25). Cult personnel—including prostitutes of both sexes—were done away with. The shrines of the north and their personnel—especially the rival temple of Bethel—were destroyed. The message of the prophet reveals that all strata of society were involved in these aberrant practices, and the picture depicted is one of pervasive idolatry resulting in an immoral and corrupt society. There were priests, but they were idolatrous and were leading in the worship of false gods (Zep 1:4). Probably Josiah's most noteworthy reform, however, was the centralization of worship in Jerusalem—a move that was to have a great impact on generations to come.

The precise relationship of Zephaniah to the reforms of Josiah has challenged commentators and students of this era. If Zephaniah preached after the reforms of Josiah, it appears that these reforms did not change society completely, for social injustice was widespread (3:1, 3, 7), and the rich enjoyed luxury at the cost of exploiting and oppressing the poor and disadvantaged (1:8-9). Religious remnants of Baalism were still present, and high places continued to flourish (1:4-5). Duplicity and syncretism were reflected in the recognition of both the Lord and Molech (1:5).