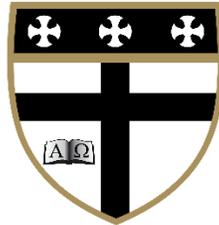


The Whitefield Seminary Papers

“Law & Religion Forum”

Volume 2, Apostolate Paper #17



A HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

“Zephaniah’s Prophecy: A Prologue to the New Testament”¹

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1. Day of Judgment Against Both Judah and the Gentiles.....	5
Chapter 2. Prophecy of the Church and Christ.....	8
Chapter 3. Ethiopia, Cush, and the Son of Cushi.....	11
Conclusion.....	14

² Roderick O. Ford, *The Apostolate Papers* (unpublished research papers, 2015 to 2022). www.roderickford.org.

Introduction

The Prophet Zephaniah, the son of Cushi, was descended from King Hezekiah of Judah. He lived during the 7th century, and he preached primarily in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah (640 - 609 BC).

Internationally, the kingdom of Judah was caught between the geopolitics of the decline and fall of the Assyrian empire (c. 612 – 609 BC) and the rise of the Babylonian (Chaldean) empire (c. 612 - 539 BC).

King Josiah was on the throne of David during this period; and he sought to make a last-ditch effort to reform the southern kingdom of Judah. The Prophet Zephaniah was one of his chief advisors.

However, the Book of Zephaniah leaves us with the impression that Zephaniah had already given up hope in any type of short-term reform and that God had already decided to condemn both Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonian captivity (c. 597 – 538 BC).

During Judah's hectic political and religious history, reform comes from time to time. Zephaniah's forceful prophecy may be a factor in the reform that occurs during Josiah's reign—a 'revival' that produces outward change, but does not fully remove the inward heart of corruption which characterizes the nation. Zephaniah hammers home his message repeatedly that the day of the Lord, Judgment Day, is coming when the malignancy of sin will be dealt with. Israel and her gentile neighbors will soon experience the crushing hand of God's wrath. But after the chastening process is complete, blessing will come in the person of the Messiah, who will be the cause for praise and singing.³

Therefore, Prophet Zephaniah's message is one of hope in a future "restored" Israel (i.e., the "remnant of Israel" and the "remnant of the house of Judah") under the leadership of "[t]he LORD, the King of Israel," who "is with you."⁴ This may easily be interpreted to mean "Immanuel" (i.e., "God with us").

³ The Holy Bible (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 2017), p. 1206.

⁴ Zephaniah 3:15.

See, e.g., Matthew 1:22 (““and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us.’”)

Both Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD) and Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509 – 1564) interpreted the Book of Zephaniah to be a Messianic prophecy of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Chapter One

Day of Judgment Against Both Judah and the Gentiles

The Prophet Zephaniah was a Jewish prophet with a special message and warning for his fellow Jewish brethren. He sought, inter alia, to help reform Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, which he condemned as follows:

Woe to the city of oppressors,
rebellious and defiled!

She obeys no one,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the LORD,
she does not draw near to her God.

Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.

Her prophets are unprincipled;
they are treacherous people.
Her priests profane the sanctuary
and do violence to the law.⁵

But the Book of Zephaniah is not just limited to a condemnation of ancient Judah. Rather, it is also a story of international political affairs. And it is reminiscent of the time of Noah, just before the Great Flood, which God utilized to punish all of humankind, but to save only a remnant (i.e., Noah and his family). See, e.g., Genesis 6:5-7, stating:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

⁵ Zephaniah 3:1-4 [NIV].

And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

Similarly, the Book of Zephaniah opens with a similar decree against the sins of global humanity, stating:

I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD.

I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked: and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD.⁶

The Book of Zephaniah likewise condemns all the nations of the world as well, stating:

I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by: their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant.

I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.

Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: **for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.**

For then will I turn to the people a pure language, **that they may all call upon the name of the LORD,** to serve him with one consent.⁷

⁶ Zephaniah 1:2-3 [KJV].

⁷ Zephaniah 3: 6-9 [KJV].

In the Book of Zephaniah, God's anger and punishment are not just directed against the southern kingdom of Judah,⁸ but they are also directed against Philistia,⁹ Moab and Ammon,¹⁰ Ethiopia (Cush),¹¹ and Assyria.¹²

And, just as God saved Noah and his family from the Great Flood, the Book of Zephaniah assures us that God shall save a "remnant" which shall inherit Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Ethiopia (Cush), etc.¹³

Therefore, in Reformed theology, both the "ark" in the story of Noah, and the "remnant" that is mentioned in the Book of Zephaniah, represent the same things: i.e., Christ and the Church. See, e.g., Augustine's *The City of God*, stating "[t]hat the ark which Noah was ordered to make figures in every respect Christ and the church"¹⁴ and "[t]hese are the remnant of that nation who have believed in Christ."¹⁵

⁸ Zephaniah 1:4-18.

⁹ Zephaniah 2:4-7.

¹⁰ Zephaniah 2:8-11.

¹¹ Zephaniah 2:12.

¹² Zephaniah 2:13-15.

¹³ Zephaniah 2:7, 9; 3:13.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 516.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 641.

Chapter Two

Prophecy of the Church and Christ

The Prophet Zephaniah describes the regathering of Israel as being *an assemblage of a sorrowful people, an afflicted people, a poor people, and an oppressed people* who had previously endured through repressive regimes which Christ would ultimately destroy, to wit:

I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden.¹⁶

I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.

The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.

Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.¹⁷

Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame.¹⁸

For this solemn assembly shall be culled out of “the nations,” wherein that assembly had previously been impoverished and afflicted, and upon whom God shall execute divine punishment. “[F]or my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all

¹⁶ Zephaniah 3:18 [KJV].

¹⁷ Zephaniah 3:12-14 [KJV].

¹⁸ Zephaniah 3:19 [KJV].

my fierce anger....”¹⁹ Then God will “turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.”²⁰

Here, the Prophet Zephaniah presents yet another statement against the self-serving perspective of Judaism by suggesting that the restored Israel (i.e., the “remnant of Israel”) shall be universal in scope, and that it shall encompass all the nations of the world.

To this very point, Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509 – 1564) has written, with respect to Zephaniah 3:9, that “Hence he says, But then... I turn to the people a pure lip. God intimates that he would propagate his grace wider, after having cleansed the earth; **for he will be worshipped not only in Judea, but by foreign nations**, and even by the remotest.”²¹

Finally, the Book of Zephaniah does not use the words “anointed” or “anointed one,” but, nevertheless, Augustine of Hippo has written that Zephaniah prophesied Christ at Zephaniah 2:11 and 3:8, which says,

The LORD will be awesome to them
When he destroys all the gods of the land.
The nations on every shore will worship him,
Every one in its own land....²²

‘Therefore wait for me,’ declares
The LORD,
‘For the day I will stand up to
Testify.
I have decided to assemble the
Nations,
To gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—
All my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed

¹⁹ Zephaniah 3:8 [KJV].

²⁰ Zephaniah 3:9 [KJV].

²¹ *Calvin’s Commentaries on the Bible* (Zephaniah 3:9).

²² Zephaniah 2:11 [NIV].

By the fire of my jealous anger.²³

These verses, according to Augustine of Hippo, are two of “those predictions about Christ by the prophet Zephaniah.”²⁴

This Augustinian interpretation of the Book of Zephaniah is a prophecy of Christ’s redemption of God’s people, and it ultimately reflects Christ’s Last Judgment upon the nations.²⁵

²³ Zephaniah 3:8 [NIV].

²⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 641.

²⁵ Matthew 25: 31-46; Revelation 19:11-21.

Chapter Three

“Ethiopia, Cush, and the Son of Cush”

Finally, the Book of Zephaniah contains several references that are of great interest to Pan-African and Afrocentric theologians and scholars. A few of them are worth noting here.

In the Book of Zephaniah, the prophet is described as “son of Cush,” and, therefore, it is likely that he had Ethiopian lineage.

In his remarkable work, *The Cushite, Or The Descendants of Ham*, Rev. Dr. Rufus Lewis Perry associated the name “Cushi”²⁶ in the Bible to denote racial ethnicity, and he concluded that “those ancient Ethiopians and Egyptians were Cushites, or Negroes descended from the race of Ham.”²⁷

Dr. Perry notes that the Benjamite tribe had become most susceptible to taking Cushite wives and that “[h]ence we find Cush the Benjamite, Cush the courier sent by Joab to report the death of Absalom to this father David, (2 Sam. Xviii. 21), Cush the father of Shelamiah, (Jer. Xxxvi 14) and **Cushi the father of the prophet Zehaniah, (Zeph. i. 1).**”²⁸

Furthermore, Dr. Perry explains the genealogical origin of the name “Cushi,” as follows:

Cushi is a patronymic term predicated in the Hebrew scriptures of the Ethiopian, Cush, the son of Ham being regarded as his remote ancestor. **These Ethiopians partook of the Jewish faith and were not gentiles in the strict sense of the Hebrew word *goin***; but still there was an in difference which was indicated by the patronymic term Cushi. They had adopted the Jewish religion and partken of Jewish blood by intermarriage; but they had not changed their skin so

²⁶ Rufus Lewis Perry, *The Cushite, Or The Descendants of Ham* (Columbia, SC: 2020)[originally published in 1893], pp. 89-91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

as not to be identified as Ethiopians. In the twenty-third, thirty-first and thirty-second verses of the eighteenth chapter of 2 Samuel, the word *Cushi* has the article, *ha Cushi*, which clearly signifies, ‘the Ehtioian.’²⁹

Today, we may confirm Dr. Perry’s thesis by simply observing that the King James Version uses the word “Ethiopians” and “Ethiopia,” whereas the New International Version uses the word “Cushites” and “Cush” at Zephaniah 2:12 and 3:10, respectively.

The Prophet Zephaniah writes that the “Ethiopians” or the “Cushites” will be “slain by [God’s] sword.”³⁰ But this same prophet also writes that “[f]rom beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering”;³¹ and (or) “[f]rom beyond the rivers of Cush my worshippers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.”³²

According to Augustine of Hippo, this passage which includes the reference to “Ethiopia” [or “Cush”] is a reference to “those predictions about Christ by the prophet Zephaniah.... [A] little after he says,

Then will I turn to the people a tongue, and to His offspring, that they may call upon the name of the Lord, and serve Him under one yoke. **From the borders of the rivers of Ethiopia shall they bring sacrifices unto me.** In that day thou shalt not be confounded for all thy curious inventions, which thou hast done impiously against me: for then I will take away from thee the naughtiness of thy trespass; and thou shalt no more magnify thyself above thy holy mountain. And I will leave in thee a meek and humble people, and they who shall be left of Israel shall fear the name of the Lord.’³³

²⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁰ Zephaniah 2:12 [KJV, NIV].

³¹ Zephaniah 3:10 [KJV].

³² Zephaniah 3:10 [NIV]. The footnote to the 1984 New International Version says that “the rivers of Cush” mean “the upper Nile region.” The upper Nile region is essentially southern Egypt (i.e., upper Nile valley), the Sudan, and Ethiopia.

³³ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 641. Here, Augustine quotes Zephaniah 3:9-12. [NOTE: Augustine’s Latin translation is slightly different than the texts of the King James Version or the New International Version].

“These are the remnant,” Augustine continues, “of whom the apostle quotes that which is elsewhere prophesied: ‘Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved.’ These are the remnant of that nation who have believed in Christ.”³⁴

Here, in the Book of Zephaniah, the “remnant,” which is described as the restored Israel, and which is believed to be the Christian Church, explicitly includes the Ethiopian-Cushite faithful.³⁵

Thus, the Book of Zephaniah certainly prophesies the rise of an African church emanating upon the borders of the rivers beyond Ethiopia. Thus, in the positive development of Judaism and Christianity, the continent of Africa and Ethiopia loom large.

³⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 641.

³⁵ Calvin's *Commentaries on the Bible* (Zephaniah 3:10) lack a Reformed theological scholarship on the presence of “**Ethiopian Jews**” who existed perhaps since as early as the days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Reformed theologians should further develop this research. See, e.g., “Origins of Ethiopia’s Black Jews,” *CNEWA* <https://cnewa.org/magazine/origins-of-ethiopias-black-jews-30374/> (“Zephaniah 3:10 says, “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my supplicants, the daughters of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.” If this prophecy truly dates from around 630 B.C.E., as most scholars believe, then it would indicate that Zephaniah was aware of the presence of a Jewish community in East Africa long before the fall of the first Temple.”)

Conclusion

The Book of Zephaniah was written shortly before the southern kingdom of Judah went into the Babylonian captivity. Its author, the Prophet Zephaniah, has pronounced God's punishment against not only Judah but also against several Gentile nations as well— demonstrating that, as the Apostle Paul would later write, “there is no respect of persons with God.... What advantage then hath the Jew? ... Is he God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also....”³⁶

Accordingly, Zephaniah's prophecy implicitly affirms the Apostle Paul's theological conclusion in that it pronounces equal judgment and punishment against both Jew and Gentile alike.

Significantly, Zephaniah also describes a “remnant of Judah” and a “remnant of my people” that shall incorporate “all nations” and “all people.” In Reformed theology, these words signify the Christian Church (or churches).

Hence, Augustine of Hippo concluded that the word “remnant” in the Book of Zephaniah is everyone who is of “that nation who have believed in Christ.”³⁷

And John Calvin concluded that the word “remnant” signifies that God himself “will be worshipped not only in Judea, but by foreign nations, and even by the remotest.”³⁸

Therefore, we in the Reformed theological school, conclude that the Book of Zephaniah is a prophecy about the “remnant of Israel” that reflects the restoration of the Christian Church; Christ's redemption of that “remnant”; and, ultimately, Christ's Last Judgment upon the nations.³⁹

THE END

³⁶ Romans 2:11; 3:1, 29.

³⁷ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 641.

³⁸ *Calvin's Commentaries on the Bible* (Zephaniah 3:9).

³⁹ Matthew 25: 31-46; Revelation 19:11-21.

THE END

