

On Zephaniah
May 3, 2020

I must say that our tour through the “minor prophets” this quarter has been most interesting. As has been noted, the 12 prophets represented in the Jewish “Book of the Twelve” are “minor” only in the sense of their writings that we have are not extensive. All of them are collected together into just one scroll in the traditional Hebrew format for the scriptures. The prophets Amos and Hosea are perhaps as important as Isaiah and Jeremiah in their impact, yet because of circumstances, we have much more writing from the latter two. Isaiah’s position at court would have led to more of his message being preserved. Jeremiah had a secretary, named Baruch, whose job it was to record and preserve Jeremiah’s prophesies.

Today we visit Zephaniah. I don’t recall ever having had a Bible Study lesson focused on this prophet, and I knew almost nothing of him prior to preparing for this lesson. I can’t recall a pastor preaching from the book of Zephaniah. His ministry seems to have been during a very “forgettable” period of the Kingdom of Judah. The Kingdom of Judah (with its capital at Jerusalem) was a vassal kingdom of the Assyrian empire under King Manasseh and later the young Josiah. But things were hardly static and unchanging. Momentous events were occurring in the world. In these events, the prophet Zephaniah saw the hand of God.

I always like to look at the historical context. The lesson book provides some of this. The problem is that the events of history were not well documented in that age, and that was especially true when chaotic conditions prevailed in the time of Zephaniah. So, here it is.

Assyria was the dominant empire in the middle east for a couple of centuries, rising to a peak of power under emperors Esarhaddon (681BC-669BC) and Ashurbanipal (669-626 B.C.). This last date is

almost 100 years from the 723 B.C. fall of Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to the Assyrians. That was the era of King Hezekiah of Judah, and approximately the time of Amos, Isaiah, and Micah. Esarhaddon extended the Assyrian empire to as far as Thebes in Egypt. The Kingdom of Judah had to exist, if it was to exist at all, in a world dominated by Assyria. By miracle Jerusalem was spared destruction at the hand of the Assyrians. Even so, King Hezekiah found it necessary to pay tribute. When Hezekiah's son Manasseh became king, he too had to come to terms with Assyrian power. What was that like?

Treaties of the day were agreements between ruling monarchs, and were understood as a "family" affair. They were "Covenants." God's Covenant with the Israelites made the Israelites part of God's family. Marriage is a covenant between two persons, but also two families, in the ancient understanding. Assyrian treaties have helped shed light on the meaning of "covenant" from that day and time. Essentially, the agreement was for the two kings to be joined, and this often included one taking a family member of the other in marriage. (The same dynamic can be seen in Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, or King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, daughter of the King of Sidon.) In the case of a king like Manasseh and the Emperor of Assyria, it wasn't a relationship between equals. The treaty essentially brought Manasseh into the Assyrian emperor's family. It equally bound Manasseh to the Assyrian religion, laws, and customs. Naturally, Manasseh (and all of the other vassal kings) would be expected to honor and worship the Assyrian gods. Manasseh accommodated himself to this reality. It was geopolitically "necessary".

2 Kings, Chapter 16, describes Manasseh's reign. It's not pretty. He essentially reversed all of the good done by Hezekiah's reform. Worse, verse 6 describes, "he made his son to pass through the fire..." This may be a reference to child sacrifice, an awful practice of various Canaanite societies, that is well attested to in archaeology from Canaanite and Phoenician sites. In verse 10 we read:

The Lord said by his servants the prophets, “Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites [Canaanites] did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.”

Manasseh reigned for 55 years. His son Amon was assassinated after two years, and Josiah began to reign as an 8 year old boy in 642 B.C., during this crest of Assyrian power. By 626 B.C. Josiah would have been in his early 20’s, and would likely have continued the policies of Manasseh because that was what had been done. But the year 626 was the beginning of the end for Assyria. Ashurbanipal died, and the Egyptians regained their independence after a series of revolts. That year also the Babylonians revolted. The revolt was put down, at least for the moment. The Kingdom of the Medes was getting stronger. The succession of rulers that followed are not well understood. Ashurbanipal had kept excellent records, and established the world’s first library. All of that fell apart too. Within 10 years Assyria was in its death throes, beset by Babylonians and Medes. Nineveh fell in 612, and a backup Assyrian capital at Harran fell in 610 B.C.

To make matters even more chaotic, about this time there was an invasion of the Scythians, coming from what is now the steppes of the Ukraine and central Russia. They burst across the Caucasus and dominated “Asia” (what we now call Asia Minor) and defeated the Medes. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that the Scythians dominated “Asia” for 28 years until finally defeated by the Medes. They didn’t leave records, just destruction. Herodotus also reported that the Scythians reached Palestine in an effort to invade Egypt, and were only turned back by lavish gifts given by the Pharaoh Psammetichus. On their way back north they paused at Ashkelon (one of the Philistine cities) to plunder the “Temple of the Celestial Venus.”

So, in and around 626 B.C. to about 600 B.C. the world was in chaos. This was very likely the time at which Zephaniah was writing. He was the great, great grandson of King Hezekiah, a second cousin to King Josiah. He was aware of how far Judah has strayed from what God expected of His chosen people. Most of the Book of Zephaniah echoes Amos and Micah: concern for what people are doing, in contrast to what God requires. Chapter 1 concerns the transgressions of Judah. Chapter 2 widens the scope to also describe prophecies concerning neighboring countries. But in Chapter 3, the message suddenly turns to one of restoration, reconciliation, and joy. Very likely the prophet had seen how the Assyrians, as bad as they were, and as compromised as the Judahites had become, were now displaced by an immediate and more horrifying threat: the Scythians. Perhaps he saw them as a tool of God's vengeance, as Habakkuk saw the Chaldeans later. We just don't know. Zephaniah is not as specific about the identity of the threat as Habakkuk.

So, what happened? Why does the prophet's voice change? One theory was that Chapter 3, verses 14 on, our scripture reading, was a post-exile poem appended by a later editor. If such, it is consistent with what we read in Isaiah 40-66, "Isaiah of the Exile." But it may just be that Judah had taken warning, and did something. Indeed, that happened. 2 Kings 22: 3-20 reports how the scroll of the Law, believed to be the Book of Deuteronomy, was discovered in the Temple as it was being refurbished. The book was brought to King Josiah, and the message was heard and acted upon. Josiah's reform cleansed the Temple, outlawed the worship of the heathen deities, and sought to restore Jerusalem to faithfulness to the Covenant. Perhaps Zephaniah, seeing this take place, broke forth in joy with the wonderful words of Zephaniah 3: 14-20.

The fall of Assyrian power can be seen to have made possible this brief period of independence, and freedom to no longer accommodate Assyrian religion. It was brief. In the year 609 B.C., the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco sought to support what little remained of Assyrian power in Mesopotamia. On the way, King Josiah, allied to Babylonia, the other

rival for dominant power, sought to prevent this. Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo, literally Hebrew “Har – Megiddo”, the hill of Megiddo, or as it is often translated, “Armageddon.” With that, things went into terminal decline for the Kingdom of Judah. (The name “Armageddon” still is used to describe utter catastrophe, even to our day.)

It is very interesting to contrast the situation during Manasseh’s time and beyond with Judea and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. A different power controlled most of the known world, Rome. The Romans, like the Assyrians, also demanded that their god, specifically Caesar, also be worshiped by subject peoples. The Jews refused. Even though this, during the time of Augustus and his successors, was the height of Roman power. The Romans did accept that Jews would just not say, “Caesar is Lord”. The Romans did not even insist on this after the revolt in 70 A.D., or the later one in 133 A.D. Yes, they killed massive numbers of Jews during the revolt, but Jews were not killed for continuing to worship their God. Why? They were useful citizens, in all other ways constructive members of society (well, except when they were revolting), and not worth the effort and trouble of having to kill them all. God’s people were faithful in this – they would no longer worship men or idols, regardless. And God was faithful to them.

Christians would ultimately be tested on this same issue, and many martyrs resulted from defiance of the requirement to say, “Caesar is Lord.” Where are the Caesars now? Where is the power of Rome? We, as Christians, can take heart that faithfulness to God, though it may seem unreasonable under the pressures of society, is rewarded by God.