

Summer 2013

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**The Future Kingdom in Zephaniah**

The question of the literalness of the prophecies concerning Israel's future is a major theological issue today. That issue is a key distinction between dispensational and Reformed/Covenant views of eschatology. In this article Dr. Ken Rathbun, a graduate of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary and the academic dean of Fairview Baptist Bible College in Jamaica, explores the prophecies related to Israel's future in Zephaniah 3. His careful interpretation provides a paradigm for interpreting other prophetic passages. In his second article he looks at the implications of a dispensational approach to prophecy.

Zephaniah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. He ministered after the spiritually disastrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon and during the attempted revival of godly King Josiah (640–609 B.C.). Unfortunately, Josiah's revival was not enough to stem the tide of wickedness in the kingdom, and God allowed Judah to be captured and enslaved by the Babylonians, beginning with King Nebuchadnezzar's first attack on Jerusalem in 605 B.C. Zephaniah probably penned his prophecy in the mid-620s. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

**Context of the Book**

God spoke through Zephaniah to bring news of impending doom on the nations (Zeph.1:2). In the first part of the book Judah was marked out for punishment for her sin of idolatry (Zeph.1:3–2:3). Zephaniah highlighted various classes of society in Judah who would suffer. His conclusion was that other peoples would enjoy Judah's land and wealth. This section ends with a call for the nation's repentance (2:1–3).

In the next section of the book God's prophet moved to the Gentile nations surrounding Judah who were oppressing her (2:4–15). They would not escape God's complete and total destruction of their land. Of special interest was Zephaniah's prediction of the fall of Assyria and the destruction of one of her famous capitals, Nineveh (2:13–15). The event occurred more than a decade later when this hated empire fell to the upstart Babylonians with the help of the Medes in 612 B.C. Only God's supernatural insight could have led this prophet to predict this surprising turn of events. The Lord through His prophet then shifted the focus back to Judah (3:1–7). God condemned her for not trusting Him and for the deception and wickedness of her prophets and priests.

The book of Zephaniah is noted for the theme of the "Day of the Lord," which is found often throughout the prophetic writings. Zephaniah mentioned it three times in his short book (1:7, 8, 14). This phrase referred either to an impending judgment or to a future one. The prophet also referenced this judgment fourteen other times in a shortened form, "the day" (1:9, 10, 15 [6x], 16, 18; 2:2 [2x], 3; 3:8). All but one of these references to God's day of judgment speak of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of Judah to Babylon (which came in three stages—605, 597,

and 586 B.C.). However, the instance of "the day" in 3:8, I believe, refers to the coming kingdom of God predicted throughout the Old Testament and preached by Christ during His earthly ministry.<sup>1</sup>

## Kingdom Indicators

Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament prophetic books, the scene changed abruptly and unexpectedly. In the midst of a prophet's searing condemnation of the sins of God's people and their corresponding punishments, God also directed His prophets to portray an undeserved, restored future kingdom. That kingdom represented God's mercy and grace to His beloved people. How do we know Zephaniah was writing such a prophecy (3:8–20) concerning this future Jewish kingdom?

I believe several indicators found in the prophetic writings signify when the prophets referred to this future kingdom, based on recognized texts in the New Testament of God's plans for the future.<sup>2</sup> **First**, if a prophecy has been clearly fulfilled in history with historical details matching the prophecy, then it cannot relate to the future.<sup>3</sup> Zephaniah's prophecy concerning the fall of the Assyrian Empire (mentioned by name) in 2:13–15 is an example, as noted earlier. **Second**, occasionally a prophet simply told us that he was writing about the time of the end.<sup>4</sup>

A **third** indicator is a description of a gathering of Israel to the land promised to Abraham, often for protection from her enemies but occasionally for purging (judgment). This indicator is significant because the Hebrew prophets consistently saw God's promises to the people of Israel as fulfilled in the literal land of Israel. Additionally, many of these prophecies were written when Israel was still occupying the land, so their predicted mass return was predicated on their imminent, but unanticipated, exile.<sup>5</sup>

The mention of a gathering of Gentiles is a **fourth** indication of a kingdom prophecy, whether it was for war against God's people, for judgment by God, or for conversion to and worship of the true God of Israel. A **fifth** indicator is the manifestation of massive climatic disturbances in the earth or heavens.

We see several of these indicators in Zephaniah 3:8–20. Zephaniah repeatedly referred to "the day" or "that day" when God will take action on behalf of His beloved people, the Jews, clearly referring to the future (3:8, 11, 16).<sup>6</sup> The prophet also related God's decision to gather the Gentiles for severe judgment (3:8). The next verse indicates the conversion of Gentile nations as they call upon the true God of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Zephaniah alluded to a gathering of God's people from far away (3:10) as well as a purging process (3:11–13). The book ends with another reminder of God's purpose of restoring Israel to a favored position over those who oppressed her when He gathers the Jews to their land (3:19, 20). In my view, these kingdom

indicators establish this passage as a prophecy of God's coming kingdom. What do we learn about this kingdom from this passage?

## Kingdom Prophecies

We must understand that not every kingdom prophecy in the Scripture describes all aspects of God's future kingdom for Israel. Many times we hear statements about the Messiah reigning over all the earth from Jerusalem. Where is that understanding coming from? It comes from this passage, though there are other passages that also teach this truth.<sup>8</sup>

Here in Zephaniah after the destruction of Israel's enemies and their turning to Israel's God (3:8, 9), Israel's believing remnant will be restored to the land and protected (3:10–13). At that moment an amazing celebration breaks out. Israel will praise God for His pardon of her iniquities and for His protection from her enemies (3:14, 15a). Then a clear and precious identification is made: Israel's coming Messiah-King is none other than the Lord Himself. "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall see disaster no more" (3:15b).<sup>9</sup>

Our New Testament perspective may obscure the significance of that pronouncement. Imagine how Zephaniah's original readers in the 620s B.C. would have understood this message as they observed the spiritual decline of the worship of God in their land and had listened to the prophet's devastating prediction of Judah's fall (1:3–2:3; 3:1–7). The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was someday going to come to Jerusalem and rule the world, bringing true peace—a desperately rare commodity in the Middle East even today.<sup>10</sup>

The divine pronouncement is trumpeted again (3:17), this time emphasizing God's loving concern for His people. He could fulfill these predictions because He was capable ("mighty") and because He had determined to do so ("He will save"). This verse further relates an extraordinary time of tender fellowship and joy between God and His people Israel. What a reunion is in store for God's people as they experience a true reconciliation!

God will reverse the devastation of the many intervening years of Israel's sorrow for the persecution suffered at the hands of her enemies (3:18, 19a). This prediction validates the principle that those who harm Israel harm the "apple of His eye"<sup>11</sup> and will not escape punishment. As Bible-believing Christians, we need to love those whom God loves, the Jews, for they remain His people forever.

God's purpose is to restore the prosperity of His people, including those who are helpless and despised (3:19b, 20). The whole world will one day recognize that God has purposed to choose, love, correct, and protect His people. And that is a reason to rejoice. (See the next article, "The Israelite Prophecies: A Cause for Rejoicing.")

## Conclusions

I draw several conclusions from the text based on a consistently literal understanding of these Scriptures. **First and foremost**, Zephaniah's prophecy has not been fulfilled yet. The prophet presents this message as a unified whole. It predicts God ruling upon the earth and significant changes to Israel's fortunes, neither of which has happened. Many Christians will immediately identify God's rule in this passage with the kingdom Christ preached during His earthly ministry. Some would like to see certain aspects of Christ's kingdom fulfilled today, but a warrant for that view comes from a less-than-literal understanding of the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

**Second**, this prophecy will not be fulfilled by the church. We affirm that believing Gentiles and church-age believers will have a place in God's kingdom. However, this and other prophecies show that a literal reading reveals details that are just too specific to be spiritualized or allegorized to mean something other than what the passages tells us.

**Third**, Christians need to love God's people Israel. We should be committed to loving, helping, and protecting the sons and daughters of Jacob. Because they have always lived in accordance with God's commands? Ask yourself: Have you always done so? Is perfect obedience the basis on which a believer can expect to be in a right relationship with God? Our Bibles tell us otherwise (Eph. 2:8, 9), and we would be wise to reflect to others the undeserved grace God has freely given to us.

Though we have looked at only one prophecy in one small book, the Bible contains an overwhelming number of Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's future and her God-given, restored kingdom. These prophetic passages are too weighty to dismiss. Any nonliteral view of God's kingdom is therefore, in my view, not a Biblical view

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> It was also anticipated by His disciples before Christ's ascension (Acts 1:6). The equating of the Old Testament kingdom with the kingdom Christ preached makes a rewarding study. Unfortunately, to do so here would go beyond the confines of this article. To begin

your own study, I suggest you start with the work of 19th century writer George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, originally published in 1884 (Redding, CA: Pleasant Places Press, 2005). See particularly volume 1, propositions 15 and 16, 19–24, 35, 44, 45, 47, and 56, among others. Another classic source is Alva J. McClain's, *Greatness of the Kingdom* (BMH Books, 1959), especially chapter 21, "The Identity of This Announced Kingdom" (274–303). For more recent study, see Stanley D. Toussaint and Jay A. Quine, "No, Not Yet: The Contingency of God's Promised Kingdom," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 164, no. 654 (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 128–147; especially pertinent are pages 138–141.

<sup>2</sup> These indicators correspond well with clearly future New Testament passages such as Matthew 24:29, 30; 25:32–46, and Revelation 19:11–21 and 20:1–15. While I can provide numerous examples from the prophetic books for each of these indicators, I want to keep our focus upon Zephaniah as much as possible.

<sup>3</sup> This approach is different from a preterist approach, which "sees the fulfillment of Revelation's [or any other book's] prophecies as already having occurred in what is now the ancient past, not long after the author's own time. Thus the fulfillment was in the future from the point of view of the inspired author, but it is in the past from our vantage point in history." (Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997], under "Approaches Included—and Excluded" in the Introduction section.) Besides its nonliteral interpretation, the overwhelming problem with the preterist position is that its adherents frequently cannot agree among themselves which historical events are the fulfillment of any given prophecy.

<sup>4</sup> Note Micah's prophecy of the "latter days" (Mic. 4:1).

<sup>5</sup> History records other occurrences of the Jewish people returning to their land after the Babylonian Captivity in 536 B.C. or even in the modern period prior to and after the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948. However, at no time in history has there been the event described by the prophets in which all the Jewish people worldwide have returned to their land (see Mic. 2:12).

<sup>6</sup> Two other verses mention "at that time" when God acts for His people (3:19, 20).

<sup>7</sup> The context of 3:9 shows that the purifying of language refers to the nations and kingdoms of verse 8.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Micah 4 contains a kingdom prophecy with several of the indicators mentioned above. Verse 2 of that passage mentions Jerusalem as the place of God's rule.

<sup>9</sup> The word "Lord" is God's special name as Israel's God. The word is so holy that dedicated Jewish people even today do not speak it aloud in Hebrew.

<sup>10</sup> Identifications of Israel's God as King occur in other parts of the Old Testament. For instance the book of Psalms contains many treasured examples: 2:6, 7; 5:2; 10:16; 24:7–10; 29:10; 47:2, 6, 7; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 89:18; 95:3; 98:6; 99:4; 145:1; and 149:2.

<sup>11</sup> See Deuteronomy 32:9, 10 and especially Zechariah 2:7, 8.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion by H. Wayne House, "The Future of National Israel." *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol. 166, no. 664 (October 1, 2009): 463–481, especially the sections pertinent to (classical) dispensational hermeneutics and the implications to a future, literal reign of Christ, (470–476).

# The Israelite Prophecies: A Cause for Rejoicing

Ken Rathbun

Bible-believers differ in how to interpret prophecy. These differences are not merely academic. They affect a person's view of the end times, the Old Testament, the future of Israel and the church, and even God Himself. The opposing viewpoints are characterized under the theologies of covenant theology and dispensationalism. From my study of the Scripture, I am committed to dispensationalism so far as it reflects a consistently literal interpretation of the Scriptures. I believe dispensationalism offers the best framework in which to understand how God interacts with various people groups throughout His revealed history.

From the premise of consistently literal interpretation comes an important corollary: God will keep the promises He made to Israel as revealed in the Biblical covenants.<sup>1</sup> Since the provisions of these covenants have not all been fulfilled yet, especially those relating to the kingdom, there must be a future for Israel.<sup>2</sup> I see continuity between the kingdom predicted in the Old Testament with the kingdom offered by Christ in the New, but I do not mix the prophecies related to each. I believe the New Testament can add to our understanding of an Old Testament prediction, but it cannot alter it.

Covenant theology takes the promises made to Israel and applies them to the church.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, they have to change the content of those prophecies since many refer to specific details surrounding Israel's possession of the land. Therefore literal Israel has no future in God's program in their view. This view also eliminates a future, literal reign of Christ upon the earth. Many theologians embrace this system of theology.<sup>4</sup> Other theologians embrace some sort of mixture between present and future aspects of a reign of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Replacement theology has serious implications for our understanding of God's plan.

The approach of replacement theology may be similar to a parent telling his son who has been anticipating a present under the Christmas tree for many weeks: "I know your name is on the gift, but it's not really for you. You see, I realize you are going to be disobedient in the future, and therefore you are undeserving of it. I'm going to give it to your sister instead." What kind of parent would do that?

Some would say that Israel is undeserving of God's blessing (either because of her idolatry in the Old Testament or her rejection of the Messiah in the New). Implicit in this assessment often is the implication that the church is deserving of God's blessing. My

study of the last 2,000 years of the history of Christianity teaches me otherwise. Covenant theologians would say, "But God is gracious toward His church." However, the God of grace in the New Testament is the same God of grace in the Old. The truth must be grasped that neither Israel nor the church is deserving of anything. God has blessed Israel with many significant blessings that He will fulfill to them for no other reason than He said He would. Likewise He has blessed the church with other kinds of blessings, and He will fulfill them for the same reason.

The results, or impact, of covenant theology upon kingdom prophecies leave one with

- a God who does not keep His promises to the people to whom He made the promises;
- a Bible that cannot be taken completely literally or understood normally; and
- a Biblical people of promise without a future (Israel).

Let us return to our passage in Zephaniah 3:8–20. What would a dispensationalist do with this passage? If it was not written to believers in the church age, should we just discard it? I believe all the Scriptures contain wondrous truths for us to examine, apply, and rejoice over. I think it is clear in this passage that God's plans for Israel reveal His character to us. Therefore, the following principle becomes apparent: We ought to rejoice in God's plans for Israel. Why?

**First**, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because we are included in those plans (Zeph. 3:9, 10). Zephaniah, as well as many other prophecies, includes Gentiles in God's future plans. The New Testament provides many details for the future of church-age saints who have trusted Christ as their Savior, both Jews and Gentiles. We anticipate the blessed hope of His return (Titus 2:11–14), a hope that keeps us from the future judgment (the tribulation period) that will come upon the entire world (Rev. 3:10). Later, church-age saints will return to assist Christ in His earthly reign (Rev. 19:11ff; cf. 20:1–7).

**Second**, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God is a God of grace (Zeph. 3:11–13). Though Israel is undeserving of a restored kingdom ruled by God Himself, she can still anticipate such a kingdom. Can believers today not also rejoice in the fact that God acts toward us in this same way (Eph. 2:8, 9)?

**Third**, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God has great things in store for those He loves (Zeph. 3:14–17). While the blessings for Israel may be different from those for the church, we can rejoice over the fact that since God keeps His promises, those promises will be fulfilled, no matter how difficult current circumstances are. God loves Israel, just as He does His church.

**Fourth**, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God will reverse the wrongs done to His beloved people (Zeph. 3:18–20). God always sees what happens to His people. Israel has suffered greatly in the past, but she can have hope for her restoration. Some of this oppression has been agonizing throughout history. Christ also told believers to expect persecution (Matt. 5:10–12), but believers today can know that God sees and cares. Believers in the future will likewise experience the same care (Rev. 6:9–11).

Far from being mere academic discussions, the implications of a dispensational approach to prophecy are a source of rich blessings. What a great God we serve!

## End Notes

1 I am referring to covenants revealed in the Bible that have a specific chapter and verse. These covenants include the overarching Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:18–21; 17:1–21 and other passages); the Promised Land Covenant (Deut. 1:6–8; 11:24–32; Josh. 1:4); the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4–17; 1 Chron. 17:10–14); and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 11:19, 20; 36:25–28). These covenants are not to be confused with the theological constructs of covenant theology—the Covenants of Works and Grace (sometimes a Covenant of Redemption is included as well).

2 This conclusion corresponds well with Paul's teaching in Romans 11:1–36.

3 This view is called replacement theology. For an overview of various replacement theologies, see Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (Sun Valley, CA: Master's Seminary, 2009), 57–69.

4 One such representative is Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938).

5 See Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). My view of this book is that the author's preoccupation for finding a consensus among Evangelicals obscures the evangelical position that truth is determined by the Word of God alone.



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