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THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE JOY OF THE LORD
IN ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

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Introduction

Zephaniah is unparalleled in its prophetic treatment of the day of the Lord, but its descriptions of the wrath and love of God seems on the surface to be incongruous:

One of the most awesome descriptions of the wrath of God in judgment found anywhere in Scripture appears in the opening verses of Zephaniah. The totality of the cosmos shall be consumed in his burning anger. The very order of creation shall be overturned.

One of the most moving descriptions of the love of God for his people found anywhere in Scripture appears in the closing verses of Zephaniah. God and his people attain heights in the ecstasy of love that are hard to comprehend.¹

In order to show how these two descriptions can exist in the same book with integrity, this paper will give a brief overview of Zephaniah and the day of the Lord in light of scholarly debates, followed by a closer look at Zephaniah 3:14-17, one of the most debated texts of Zephaniah which also happens to be the most magnificent text in the book and possibly also in the Old Testament (perhaps even in the entire Bible). The meaning of this text in its Old Testament context will be followed by its meaning in light of the coming of Christ. The conclusion will offer present day pastoral application of the unimaginable joy evoked by God's inexpressible love connected with the day of the Lord.

Zephaniah and the Day of the Lord

The book of Zephaniah is dated in the 7th century B.C.² Compared to the call of Abraham, the 7th century was a complex development in God's redemptive purposes centered

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990) 334.

² Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 10; contra the critical view of a tripartite organization and diachronic interpretation which divides prophetic books such as Zephaniah into pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic sections. For a helpful summary, see Marvin A. Sweeney, "Zephaniah: A Paradigm for the Study of the Prophetic Books" *CR:BS* 7 (1999) 119-45, as well as his earlier assessment and argument for a 7th century dating: Marvin A. Sweeney, "A Form-Critical Reassessment of the Book of Zephaniah" *CBQ* (1991) 388-408; For an example of a tripartite view of Zephaniah, see Tchavdar Hadjiev, "The Theological Transformation of Zephaniah's Proclamation of Doom" *ZAW* 126 (2014) 506-20: "Zephaniah began its written existence as a call to repentance in pre-exilic Judah (1,2-2,3), then served as an explanation for the disaster of 587 BC (1,2-3,8) and, in its final form, as a promise of redemption to the post-exilic community" (519).

on the nation of Judah, her kings, and international conflicts with Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon.³ Zephaniah, a prophet with royal connections,⁴ prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (1:1), a reign marked by reformation.⁵ Josiah's early reform began in 628 B.C., a year before the death of Ashurbanipal and the subsequent decline of Assyria;⁶ Josiah's major reform began when the “book of the Law” was discovered in 622 B.C.,⁷ the point at which Zephaniah also began his ministry.⁸ Robertson summarizes the significance of Zephaniah's message in its historical context:

³ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 1-17: “God’s purposes of redemption focused originally on a single individual. But now an entire nation manifesting a diversified response to the challenges of faith became the center of redemptive acts of judgment and salvation. . . . The struggle of the life of faith originally demonstrated by a single wandering patriarch had become international in scope. . . . Particularly when the struggle climaxes as it does in the 7th century B.C., the faith of the kings of Judah in the covenant promises of God determines the course of individuals and nations” (1-2); Robertson provides a good summary of Judah’s kings (and international conflicts) in the 7th century (2-17): A. The Triumphs of faith in the Days of Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.), B. The Dark Days of Unbelief under Manasseh (687-642 B.C.) and Amon (642-640 B.C.), C. Reformation under Josiah (640-609 B.C.), D. Final Destruction under the Sons and Grandson of Josiah (609-587 B.C.).

⁴ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 253: including four generations in Zephaniah’s genealogy focuses attention on the last name of Hezekiah which recalls “the most recent of Judah’s monarchs to manifest the covenant fidelity essential for the well-being of the nation” as well as explaining Zephaniah’s “access to the royal court” and the “additional weight” his prophecy could lend to “the radical reforms promoted by young King Josiah;” See also Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999) 383-385; contra positions which also see significance in the first name “Cushi” as evidence of Ethiopian ancestry: Gene Rice, “The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah” *JRT* (1979) 21-31; contra positions which see no connection to King Hezekiah: Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986) 61.

⁵ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 253: “Josiah was the last good king of Israel, with a reign dating approximately from 640 to 609 B.C. His radical reform of religious and social practices of Judah are described in 2 K. 22-2 and 2 Chr. 34-35.”

⁶ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 8-9; 2 Chr. 34:3-7.

⁷ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 10; 622 B.C. is also significant as the 100 year anniversary of the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria: “the rediscovery of the law book must have forced [Judah] to ask whether they might expect continued survival” (257); Josiah’s reforms as recorded in 2 Kings 22:3-23:27 (cf. 2 Chr. 34:8-35:19) reversed the gross idolatry of his father and grandfather (Manasseh: 21:1-18; Amon: 21:19-26; 2 Kgs. 22:4-14) as well as idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel which traced back to Jeroboam I (2 Kgs. 22:15-20); nevertheless, Huldah, the prophetess, confirmed God’s impending judgement on the sin of Judah and Jerusalem would inevitably come after the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:14-20; cf. 21:11-15); this prophecy of “disaster” was fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon in 587 B.C.

⁸ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 10, 254-57: Most commentators date Zephaniah before 622 B.C. because of the mention of idolatrous practices in 1:4-5, but parallel phraseology with Deuteronomy (as well as the difficulty of reform and quick relapse after Josiah’s death) support a date immediately after the discovery of the book of the Law in 622 B.C., Zephaniah providing prophetic support to Josiah’s reforms; contra other views of dating and provenance, Anselm C. Hagedorn, “When Did Zephaniah Become a Supporter of Josiah’s Reform?” *JTS* 62 (2011) 453-75; Donald L. Williams, “Date of Zephaniah” *JBL* (1963) 77-88; Duane L. Christensen, “Zephaniah 2:4-15: A Theological Basis for Josiah’s Program of Political Expansion” *CBQ* 46 (1984) 669-82;

[Josiah] found just the support he needed in the ministry of the prophet Zephaniah. With language steeped in the covenantal formulations of the book of Deuteronomy, Zephaniah presents a picture of covenantal judgement without rival anywhere in Scripture for its stark depiction of the terrors of the coming consummation. At the same time, his penetration into the love of God reaches dimensions that stagger the imagination. Even in the context of coming devastation because of sin, the redeeming love of God for his people shall prevail.

Zephaniah's message of God's judgement and love is represented by the central concept which unifies the book of Zephaniah:⁹ the day of the Lord.

The day of the Lord is the center of Zephaniah both structurally and theologically, exhibiting a singular devotion to this theme unlike any prophet which precedes or follows.¹⁰ Nevertheless, יוֹם יְהוָה (“the day of Yahweh,” or “the day/Day of the Lord/LORD”) is also a “central theme in prophetic thought,” although scholars disagree about the exact development, nature, and timing of this concept.¹¹ Keys to understanding Zephaniah's

William L. Holladay, “Reading Zephaniah with a Concordance: Suggestions for a Redaction History” *JBL* 120 (2001) 671-84; For another good summary of arguments for dating Zephaniah either prior to or right after the discovery of the book of the Law in 622 B.C., see Larry L. Walker, *Zephaniah in The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; 12 vols; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 7:538.

⁹ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 257.

¹⁰ David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 84; Greg A. King, “The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah” *BSac* 152 (1995) 17: “Though the exact expression “the day of the Lord” (יְהוָה יוֹם) appears only three times in Zephaniah (once in 1:7 and twice in 1:14), a careful analysis of the context of the many other verses where the word “day” is used leaves little doubt that they refer to the same concept. . . . In fact the Hebrew word “day” (יֹם) appears in the singular 20 times in the three chapters of Zephaniah, and every appearance is connection with Zephaniah's proclamation of the day of the Lord. Also the prophet used other temporal references, such as “at that time” (1:12), to refer to this concept. In summary every major section of the book and even every unit should be linked to Zephaniah's teaching on the day of the Lord.”

¹¹ Joseph A. Everson, “Days of Yahweh” *JBL* 93 (1974) 329-30: “Sigmund Mowinckel maintains that the Day of Yahweh is to be understood primarily from within the history of Israel's cult. Within the world of myth and ritual, the Day of Yahweh was originally the event of the enthronement of Yahweh, the time when Yahweh comes to guarantee victory over enemies, the time when Yahweh brings deliverance from distress and the realization of peace, good fortune, and favorable conditions. The cultic Day of Yahweh is the time when these realities are reaffirmed for successive generations of people. . . . Gerhard von Rad contends that the Day of Yahweh should be understood . . . from the perspective of the historical traditions of holy war. The Day of Yahweh . . . is a pure event of war, an event involving the appearance of Yahweh to annihilate his enemies. . . . F. Charles Fensham . . . maintains that the Day of Yahweh should most properly be viewed against the background of covenant traditions as the event of the execution of treaty curses. And Meir Weiss has proposed yet another pre-prophetic perspective with his suggestion that the day of Yahweh has roots in the ancient motif-complex of the theophany description;” Everson argues that “the Day of Yahweh was not viewed in pre-exilic and exilic eras of Israel's history as a singular, universal, or exclusively future event of world judgment. Rather, the Day of Yahweh was a powerful concept available to the prophets for their use in interpreting various

development of the day of the Lord are “his rehearsal of the features of the successive covenants”¹² and seeing that “the day of the Lord for Zephaniah had two horizons:” imminent and ultimate.¹³ Baker summarizes the main contribution of Zephaniah:

The fact that this day is like a two-sided coin, comprising two separate yet related facets, is more fully developed here than in other prophets, where usually one element is stressed to the deprivation or exclusion of the other. The two facets of the same Day of the Lord are judgment and blessing.¹⁴

Zephaniah’s prophecy opens with and spends the most time proclaiming the judgment of the day of the Lord: judgment on the cosmos and Judah in chapter 1, on Judah’s enemy neighbors in chapter 2, and on Jerusalem and the nations at the beginning of chapter 3 before the salvation oracle which ends the book.¹⁵ Nevertheless, salvation is inseparable from the

momentous events—past, future or imminent” (335); contra Yair Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and Term in the Prophetic Literature” *ZAW* 93 (1981) 37-50: the general concept of the “Day of Yahweh” at the time of Amos became a definite term with eschatological significance through the prophecy of Zephaniah and “was never used to describe days and events in the past” (50); Stuart adds to the discussion that the ANE “tradition of a great sovereign’s power of conquest in a single day” could also provide “part of the background for the developed biblical understanding of the Day of Yahweh” (Douglas K. Stuart, “Sovereign’s Day of Conquest” *BASOR* 221 [1976] 164).

¹² Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 22-24: “[The Day of the Lord is] the Day in which God shall enforce his covenant both in its creative and redemptive expressions . . . [bringing] to bear on all transgressors the sentence assigned by the covenant,” with “no hint of restoration” in the final destruction of the wicked.

¹³ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 397: Zephaniah blends near and far events in a “unified picture of the future;” Christensen, “Zephaniah 2:4-15,” 682: “For Amos the day of Yhwh’s wrath is more firmly rooted in contemporary history. . . . For Zephaniah, on the other hand, the day of Yhwh is trans-historical. . . . Zephaniah has moved beyond the events of history, in the sense of the here and now, to eschatology.”

¹⁴ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 84. For a full discussion of aspects of the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah, see King, “Day of the Lord,” 16-32: King organizes these as “Yahweh’s intervention,” “Yahweh’s universal sovereignty and superiority,” “Yahweh’s judgment,” “covenant implementation,” and “salvation.”

¹⁵ Walker, “Zephaniah,” 539; for a good outline of Zephaniah, see Baker, *Zephaniah*, 89; his main division are I. Heading (1:1), II. Judgment (1:2-6), III. The Day of Yahweh (1:7-3:20); within III., 1:7-13 and 2:4-3:8 deal with judgement, while 2:1-3 deals with the required response and only 3:9-20 deals with hope; Hadjiev offers a critical explanation of Zephaniah’s structure (“Theological Transformations,” 506-20): “the book exhibits thematic and structural tensions which suggest that his final form is only the end result of a longer process of development. For example, the widely recognized tripartite structure of Zephaniah (i) judgement on Judah (12-18), (ii) judgement on the nations (2,4-3,8), (iii) salvation for Judah (3,9-20) is clearly superimposed on a text which was originally shaped along different lines” (508).

judgment of the day of the Lord,¹⁶ and resounds at the climactic crescendo,¹⁷ especially in Zephaniah 3:14-17.

Zephaniah 3:14-17

14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;

Shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter of Jerusalem!

15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;

he has cleared away your enemies.

The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall never again fear evil.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Fear not, O Zion;

let not your hands grow weak.

17 The LORD your God is in your midst,

a mighty one who will save;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will quiet you by his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing.

Exposition of Zephaniah 3:14-17

The exuberant joy of 3:14-17 must first be understood in the context of chapter 3 which opens unexpectedly with judgement on Jerusalem (3:1-8).¹⁸ By leaving the “city” of 3:1 unnamed, Zephaniah leads his audience to realize that the judgment on the city of Nineveh in 2:12-15 (and other enemies in 2:4-11) is the same judgment which Jerusalem

¹⁶ King, “Day of the Lord,” 29: “Another aspect of the day of the Lord expressed in Zephaniah is that it results in salvation for some groups of people. In other words it is not only a time of cataclysmic, destructive, overwhelming judgment as already described. It is also a time of salvation so thrilling and wonderful that Yahweh Himself will burst into songs of rejoicing (3:17). At first glance this salvific aspect of the day of the Lord may seem incongruous with Zephaniah’s emphasis on judgment in that day. However, analysis reveals the close nexus between these two aspects and that neither is complete without the other.”

¹⁷ King, “Day of the Lord,” 30: “Perhaps the foremost indicator of the salvific aspect of the day of the Lord is the structure of the Book of Zephaniah. The book is arranged so that the climax, the concluding note trumpets the message of salvation. The book builds to a crescendo with the proclamation of salvation in the final verses.”

¹⁸ Hadjiev, “Theological Transformations,” 508: “The final oracle of judgment on Jerusalem in 3:1-8 does not fit [the typical tripartite] structure because after the judgment on the nations it returns to the topic of judgment of Judah, instead of moving to depict her salvation.”

deserves.¹⁹ Zephaniah 3:8 connects the judgment on Jerusalem to the day of Lord as well as the salvation inseparable from this judgment:

This coming judgment on the rebellious city of Jerusalem shall occur in association with the arrival of *the Day* (3:8). The Day of Yahweh will bring not only destruction for the unrepentant, but purification of the remnant (vv. 9-13). This glad occurrence will occasion mutual rejoicing among God and his people (vv. 14-20).²⁰

Zephaniah 3:14-17 is a “call to praise and a psalm of praise” surrounded by “salvation oracles” (3:9-13 and 3:18-20) which include the conversion of the nations (3:9-10), the purification of the remnant in Israel (3:11-13), and God’s promised blessings (3:18-20).²¹

Rather than being a post-exilic epilogue of restoration,²² 3:14-17 occurs in a climactic crescendo which is integral to the central theme of the day of the Lord.²³

¹⁹ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 90-91: “As a rhetorical device, the prophet would gradually get to the heart of his message of judgment by first dealing with the neighboring peoples. The audience would agree that they deserved what God was giving them, so they would not be prepared for the recitation of their own faults as well (*cf.* Am. 1:3-2:16). Now the time is rhetorically ripe to confront God’s own people, Judah, and their capital, Jerusalem, with their sin (vv. 1-4), shamelessness (v.5) and lack of repentance (vv.6-7). . . . [Regarding the identity of the city in 3:1, the] preceding context would suggest that Nineveh is still being referred to, so Israel would have continued in agreement with God’s oracles of judgment against this city. This type of rhetorical device brings the message home by having the audience identifying with it by agreeing with its content. It is rhetorically powerful because the hearers soon realize that it is *not* after all Nineveh which is being condemned, but rather Jerusalem, their own capital, and that not their enemy but they themselves are being judged by God;” Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 314-16.

²⁰ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 314.

²¹ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 87, 115-16, 119-20; Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 487.

²² Hadjiev, “Theological Transformations,” 508; Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, “Survival, Conversion and Restoration: Reflections on the Redaction History of the Book of Zephaniah” *VT* 61 (2011) 578.

²³ King, “Day of the Lord,” 29-31. Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 327: “If the Day would bring cosmic destruction, what is the meaning of the reference to a fresh start for humanity? To deny the authenticity of these words of the prophet on the basis of this tension is to ignore the close similarity of ideas found in this very section when compared with earlier portions of the prophecy. Zephaniah simply does not resolve explicitly the tension that might be felt among various aspects of his message. He saw a destruction in judgment beyond any proportions that the world had experienced previously. He saw also a wondrous conversion among the nations of the world as well as among the scattered people of Israel. He does not explain how cosmic judgment and far-reaching salvation coordinate, but he faithfully proclaims both elements.”

The structure of Zephaniah 3:14-17 underscores the “mutual rejoicing among God and his people.”²⁴ Baker’s suggested chiastic outline highlights this feature of the text as well as the central emphasis of hope:²⁵

- A Zion singing (3:14a)
- B Israel’s shouts (3:14b)
- C Jerusalem’s joy (3:14c)
- D Yahweh’s deliverance (3:15a, b)
- E Presence of Yahweh the king (3:15c)
- F No more fear (3:15d)
- G Jerusalem’s future message (3:16a)
- F¹ No more fear (3:16b, c)
- E¹ Presence of Yahweh the God (3:17a)
- D¹ The mighty deliverer (3:17b)
- C¹ God’s joy (3:17c)
- B¹ Yahweh’s silence (3:17d)
- A¹ Yahweh singing (3:17e)

At the end of this “psalm of joy,”²⁶ is a “poem of personal love” (3:17c-e) which parallels the opening response of the people in 3:14a-c:

Three parallel lines each containing three phrases express the deepest inner joy and satisfaction of God himself in his love for his people. Delight, joy, and singing on God’s part underscore the mutuality of emotional experience felt by God and the redeemed. . . .

The mutuality of the loving response of Redeemer and redeemed is seen in the fact that some of the same terms used in the admonition to his people now describe the response of God himself to his people (cf. vv. 14 and 17). Zion is exhorted to sing (*rānnî*); he rejoices with singing (*rinnâ*). Jerusalem shall rejoice (*simhî*); he delights over Jerusalem with joy (*śimhâ*).²⁷

²⁴ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 314.

²⁵ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 87: “Its literary structure is that of concentric parallelism, in which the first element corresponds to the last, the second to the next-to-last, and so on, with the climax, ‘no more fear’, in the centre. Here the rejoicing of the people on account of God’s love, at the beginning of the psalm, corresponds to Yahweh’s joy over their return to him at the psalm’s conclusion. God, the mighty actor, and his presence so surround the climactic message of hope to Jerusalem, the city of God, that they are not to fear.”

²⁶ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 87.

²⁷ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 339-40. Robertson depicts the poetic triads of verses 14 and 17 as follows:

- 14 a Sing,
b daughter of Zion;
a shout,
b Israel:
a rejoice and be jubilant with all your heart,
b daughter of Jerusalem
- 17 a He will delight

Based on this structure and vocabulary, Robertson provides an excellent summary of Zephaniah 3:14-17: “The whole scene depicts a grand oratorio as God and his people mutually rejoice in their love for one another.”²⁸

God and his people are depicted poetically in Zephaniah 3:14-17 with significant terms. The people of God are predominantly addressed as the city of Jerusalem using different names.²⁹ The significance of this image is that Jerusalem was the “center of God’s work,”³⁰ while “each name would recall to the hearers a period of significant activity on the part of Yahweh in the life of his people,”³¹ as well as Josiah’s present reforms,³² and the future reversal of the city’s impending destruction promised earlier in the prophecy.³³ Regarding God, most commentators recognize the “threefold portrayal of the LORD as King (3:15), Warrior (3:17a) and Bridegroom (3:17b),”³⁴ or at least an expression of love for the

b over you
c with joy;
a he will be quiet
b (over you)
c in his love;
a he will rejoice
b over you
c with singing.

²⁸ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 340: Zephaniah’s language of God rejoicing over his people reflects Deuteronomy 28:63 and 30:9; “Other passages that speak vividly of God’s rejoicing in the love of his people include Isa. 62:4-5; 65:19; Jer. 32:40-41” (342-43).

²⁹ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 493-95: in 3:14, “three vocatives that refer to the people of Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular (‘O Daughter of Zion,’ ‘O Israel,’ ‘O Daughter of Jerusalem’), and in 3:15, ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘Zion, a synonym for Jerusalem which specifically referred to the temple mount.’”

³⁰ Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, 83; Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 337: “The maintenance of the Davidic city was as central to God’s covenant with David as was the continuance of his royal line.”

³¹ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 117-18: from the Patriarchs to David.

³² Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 198: “In that Josiah’s reform was intended to lead to the purification and restoration of Jerusalem as a prelude to the restoration of Davidic rule over all Israel, the reference to the masculine Israel together with the feminine ‘Daughter Zion’ and ‘Daughter Jerusalem’ appears to make eminent sense;” Sweeney also gives a detailed overview of the use of city imagery in the Old Testament and ANE.

³³ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 335-36.

³⁴ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (FOBC; Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1998) 399; Baker, *Zephaniah*, 118-19; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 198-203; John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Zephaniah* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software) 33-34; John Calvin,

third image.³⁵ The overall picture of God as a Divine Warrior (3:17a; cf. 1:14), whose saving presence among his people as King (3:15-16) is also characterized by love (3:17b), is packed with significance.³⁶ The greatest significance of King and Warrior is seen in the 7th century prophetic tension regarding the impending historical judgment on the theologically inviolable Jerusalem and eternal Davidic line:

So these prophets of the time of deterioration return to the original scheme of things. . . . The Lord himself is “the King of Israel in your midst” (Zeph. 3:5), a “Mighty Hero who saves” (Zeph. 3:17). Those very functions that once had been assigned to the scion of the line of David now revert to the person of God the Lord himself.³⁷

The most significant image, however, is the “rapturous description of the love of God for his people”³⁸ in verse 17.

The description of God’s love in verse 17 is problematic linguistically and theologically. Linguistically, *חִרִישׁ בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ* (3:17d MT; cf. NASB: “He will be quiet in his love”) has been explained, emended, and translated in multiple ways:³⁹ “he will quiet you by

Zephaniah in *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (ed. John Owen; 5 vols; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010) 4:301-306: the exception in Calvin is his view of *גבור* merely as a description of strength.

³⁵ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 337-43; Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 494-97; Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, 84-85; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 461-62.

³⁶ Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, 84-85. See commentaries mentioned in footnotes 33 and 34.

³⁷ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 18-19: “In a sense it may be said that these seventh-century prophets were throwbacks to the times of Samuel [cf. the description of Josiah’s celebration of the Passover in 2 Chronicles 34:18]. They fully recognized that Israel needed a king, a messiah, a savior. But they could see none other than God himself fulfilling that role. Who but God alone could provide a propitiatory sacrifice worthy of removing the deep, dark stain of Israel’s sin? Who but God alone had the force at his disposal to repulse his people’s mighty enemies? Who but God alone had the wisdom essential for governing a people such as Israel?”

³⁸ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 339.

³⁹ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 496, fn. 127: “Patterson (*Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 383) lists six options for interpretation: (1) God will keep silent about or cover up people’s sins; (2) God’s silence due to the overwhelming depths of his love; (3) God’s preoccupation with planning good for Israel; (4) God’s resting in his love; (5) God’s giving peace and silence to the believer; and (6) God’s singing out of the joy of his concern. The difficulty of the phrase has led to several suggestions concerning alternate readings. BHS suggests *שׁׁחַתָּי* ‘he will renew,’ which requires only minor adjustments to the Heb.;” Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 340, fn. 6: “The LXX reads *kai kainiei se*, ‘and he shall renew you’ (apparently reflecting Heb. *yehaddēš*);” Theodor H. Gaster, “Two Textual Emendations: Numbers 24:8; Zephaniah 3:17” *ExpTim* 78 (1967) 267: “this is usually amended to *שׁׁחַתָּי*, after LXX. I would suggest, however, that this spoils the point, which lies in the contrast between *keeping silent* and *bursting into song*. All that is needed to bring out the sense is simply to take *חִרִישׁ בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ* as a concessive clause, and to render: *Though now He be keeping silent about His love, He will then joy over thee in a burst of song*;” Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984) 143:

his love" (ESV), "he will renew you in his love" (NRSV), "in his love he will no longer rebuke you" (NIV), and "He will rest in his love" (KJV). Several commentators support the MT without emendation, arguing for a "straightforward reading" which maintains the flow of the text, the meaning of the word, and the parallelism of the verse.⁴⁰ Robertson highlights how "the only essential difficulty with this rendering [*he will be quiet (over you) in his love*]" is found in the vividness of the phraseology" which raises the theological difficulty of how a holy God could express such excessive love to sinful creatures.⁴¹ This difficulty is resolved, however, by considering the nature of God, the doctrine of election, the limits of the human

"שְׁמִירֵי" is a very difficult form to understand here. שְׁמִירֵי normally means 'to plough,' or 'engrave.' A second meaning seems to be 'to be silent.' Neither of these meanings seems to fit the context. . . . Perhaps the best interpretation is to take the second meaning of 'silent' in the sense of 'rest' in his love;" Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 202-203: "the overall image is based in a marriage metaphor that depicts the reunion of husband, YHWH, and wife, Jerusalem, after a period of separation. . . . Given the metaphorical dimensions of the verb שְׁמִירֵי, especially in relation to the interaction between the Philistine men and Samson's wife, and the general scenario of rejoicing and the renewal of the relationship between the 'warrior' YHWH and the clearly female 'Daughter of Zion' of 3:14-20, it seems reasonable to conclude that the expression, 'he plows with his love,' expresses the renewal of that relationship;" Greg A. King, "The Remnant in Zephaniah" *BSac* 151 (1994) 414-427: "One suggestion, following Rashi and other Jewish commentators, is that Yahweh's silence signifies that He is forbearing from judging His people and the only reason given is His great love for them. This is possible, since the Hiphil of שְׁמִירֵי is used in several passages to 'indicate a silence which means a refraining from executing judgment' (Gen. 34:5; Ps. 50:21; Isa. 42:14);" John N. Oswalt, "שְׁמִירֵי (hārēš II)," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; 5 vols; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 2:296-97: "God responds that although he may seem to have been silent (Ps 50:21; Isa 42:12), that will not always be the case (Ps 50:3). Indeed, if the people will be 'still' and trust him, God will fight for them (Exod 14:14) and 'quiet [them] with his love' (Zeph 3:17)."

⁴⁰ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 340-41: "this understanding is supported by the regular usage of the word employed (*hārēš* in the Hiphil) as well as the poetic structure of the verse. . . . The Hebrew verb *hārēš*, "to be quiet," is intransitive in meaning, with the possible exception of Job 11:3. It describes the inward condition of the subject of the verb rather than depicting a quietness which is conveyed to another. Here God is the subject of the verb, and he is said to *be quiet in his love*. The parallelism of the verse also suggests this intransitive sense. The first and last lines of the stanza contain the middle member *over you* (*ālayik*). Since it is quite common in Hebrew parallelism to omit a corresponding phrase in one line that appears in another line, this same *over you* may be regarded as belonging also to the middle line of the stanza;" Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 496-97: "Without changing the MT as do some, the best alternative seems to be to follow the flow of the verse: God delights, he quiets, bursts into song over you;" Baker, *Zephaniah*, 118-19: "The battle cry on the day of judgment (1:14) will be replaced by the poignant hush of the reuniting of two lovers;" Keil, and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 461-62: "Silence in His love is an expression used to denote love deeply felt, which is absorbed in its object with thoughtfulness and admiration, and forms the correlate to rejoicing with exultation, i.e., to the loud demonstration of one's love;" See also Calvin, *Zephaniah*, 303-304.

⁴¹ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 340: "To consider Almighty God sinking in contemplations of love over a once-wretched human being can hardly be absorbed by the human mind."

mind, and Calvin's doctrine of accommodation.⁴² Unpacking the perplexities of God's love in 3:17 releases the fountainhead of joy which gushes forth in 3:14.

The Meaning of Zephaniah 3:14-17 in its Old Testament Context

Zephaniah's prophecy was written for Jerusalem and Judah in support of Josiah's major reform in 622 B.C., but also pointed forward to the future "establishment of Yahweh's kingdom on the earth."⁴³ Nevertheless, Judah's progress in reform and relief at Nineveh's fall was cut short when Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo in 609 B.C. followed by a quick succession of bad kings ending with Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon in 587 B.C.⁴⁴ Given this depressing turn of events, the climactic crescendo of Zephaniah's song of joy seems like a post-exilic import with purely cultic or eschatological significance.⁴⁵

⁴² Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 341-42: "God in his very essence is love (cf. 1 John 4:8). As the direct source of all true love, he not only is capable of achieving every depth of salutary love experienced by his creation. He by his very nature may excel every human emotion of true love. . . . [T]he elect of God are the objects of such all-consuming love. Them he loves because he loves them (Deut. 7:6-8). Not in them or for anything in them is to be found the reason for his love. In the nature of God himself may be discovered the only explanation of this love. . . . [T]he prophet describes a love of God exceeding all human imaginations;" Calvin, *Zephaniah*, 304-305: "These hyperbolic terms seem indeed to set forth something inconsistent; for what can be more alien to God's glory than to exult like man when influenced by joy arising from love? It seems then that the very nature of God repudiates these modes of speaking . . . God indeed represents himself here as a husband, who burns with the greatest love towards his wife; and this does not seem, as we have said, to be suitable to his glory; but whatever tends to this end—to convince us of God's ineffable love toward us, so that we may rest in it, and being weaned as it were from the world, may seek this one thing only, that he may confer on us his favour—whatever tends to this, doubtless illustrates the glory of God, and derogates nothing from his nature. We at the same time see that God, as it were, humbles himself; for if it be asked whether these things are suitable to the nature of God, we must say, that nothing is more alien to it. It may then appear by no means congruous, that God should be described by us as a husband who burns with love to his wife: but we hence more fully learn, as I have already said, how great is God's favour towards us, who thus humbles himself for our sake, and in a manner transforms himself, while he puts on the character of another."

⁴³ King, "Day of the Lord," 32: "The present goal was simply to motivate the people of Israel to engage in wholehearted worship of Yahweh and to carry out righteous ethical practices."

⁴⁴ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 10-13.

⁴⁵ Hadjiev, "Theological Transformations," 508, 517: "There is widespread agreement among scholars that the concluding oracles of salvation, and hence the final form of the book as we have it, date to the late-exilic or the post-exilic era. . . . [T]he fall of Jerusalem and the canonization of the book helped transform Zephaniah's message of judgment from an implicit call to repentance (pre-exilic Judah), to an explanation for the disaster (the exilic period), and finally into an eschatological expectation (the canon);," Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 143-44: "[Zephaniah 3:14-17] is not an enthronement song but is has the structure and vocabulary similar to the enthronement Psalms (47; 95; 97). It is an oracle of salvation probably delivered during the New Year festival, on the enthronement day. . . . Some consider the passage late because they consider the enthronement festival to be a post-exilic festival."

Nevertheless, the exhortation to rejoice in 3:14 is not only original to Zephaniah,⁴⁶ but also had immediate pre-exilic application to Zephaniah's original audience:

The prophet does not merely anticipate a day in which the people who have been blessed by restoration will rejoice. He is not satisfied to announce to his contemporaries a joy that belongs to future generations. He exhorts his own contemporaries. Rejoice! Be jubilant! Despite the unavoidability of the coming Day of Yahweh, they must rejoice!⁴⁷

Regarding the ground of this joy, God's love is limited to the elect (3:14-16; particularly the faithful remnant in Israel,⁴⁸ cf. 3:12-13) but is also extended as an open invitation to worshippers from all nations (3:9-10).⁴⁹

Although Zephaniah's prophecy of joy in 3:14-17 is pre-exilic, it also played an important role in the exilic and post-exilic periods. This is seen in its placement in the Book of the Twelve:

It is a "pivotal book," confirming all the horrible expectations of judgment in Hosea-Micah and completing the carnage begun in Nahum and Habakkuk. "But from 3:8-20 Zephaniah introduces the reader to the possibilities of restoration outlined in Haggai-Malachi. ... The importance of Zephaniah as a plot-shaper in the Twelve can hardly be over-estimated."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Sweeney, "A Form-Critical Reassessment," 388-408.

⁴⁷ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 336. See 334-335 for further discussion of the pre-exilic authenticity of the salvation oracles of 3:9-20 as well as the importance of their contemporary application."

⁴⁸ King, "The Remnant in Zephaniah," 414-415: "When a certain portion or segment of the people of God is being addressed or spoken of in the Book of Zephaniah—a portion that is faithful to Yahweh and either has the possibility of surviving or has survived judgment—then the remnant is in view."

⁴⁹ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 341; contra Hadjev, "Survival, Conversion, and Restoration," 580: "the circle responsible for the final stage of the evolution of the text is the one which stands behind 3:14-20. It must have been more nationalistic and particularistic in outlook and did not like so much the idea that all the nations will turn to Yahweh. Consequently it sought to reinterpret the promise of 3:10 along the lines of a more nationalistic theology. . . . [T]here are four major stages of the evolution of the text of Zephaniah. First, there was the initial composition of 1:1-3:8, followed by three redactional reworkings: one addressed to the remnant of Judah (2:17, 9b, 10; 3:11-13); a second, focusing on the conversion of the nations (2:11 and 3:9-10); and a third proclaiming the restoration of Judah (3:14-20)."

⁵⁰ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 388; For a summary of critical scholarship on "Zephaniah as Part of the Book of the Twelve Prophets," see Sweeney, "Zephaniah," 138-40.

Yet even the “cosmic and universal extent”⁵¹ of the day of the Lord prophesied in Zephaniah was not fully fulfilled in either the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. or the return from exile in 538 B.C. or the rebuilding of the temple in 515 B.C., pointing beyond to an ultimate eschatological day of final fulfillment. In the context of the Old Testament, “it is best to see [the day of the Lord] as both historical and eschatological, as occurring in history and also as part of the final drama of history;”⁵² thus, Zephaniah 3:14-17 is tied to Israel’s past and also points to the future.⁵³

The Meaning of Zephaniah 3:14-17 in Light of the Coming of Christ

In one sense, nothing in the New Testament rises higher than the expressions of God’s love and joy in Zephaniah 3:14-17: “Not even in the glorious revelations of the new covenant can be found a fuller word of comfort.”⁵⁴ Another distinctive feature of Zephaniah is “the absence of virtually a trace of messianism,”⁵⁵ although a closer study reveals a “vital contribution to the ongoing revelation of the God-man who would be Savior and king” since “God’s distinctive role as savior in the vacuum created by the absence of a viable Davidic option . . . points to the necessity of a divine messiah.”⁵⁶ It should not be surprising, then, that

⁵¹ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 397.

⁵² King, “Day of the Lord,” 31; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Kindle; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), loc. 3329: “Though the Lord’s acts of judgment take place throughout the history of redemption, each act foreshadowing the final judgment when all doers of evil, corruption, and sin will be absolutely and radically judged and removed from the earth (1:3). Each judgment in history is an intrusion of the eschatological judgment, whether on Israel, Judah, or the nations.”

⁵³ Baker, *Zephaniah*, 118: “The reason for this fearless confidence is the presence of Yahweh, now described as Israel’s God as well as her king (v. 15). He acts mightily as a heroic savior (1:14; 3:19 cf. Ex. 14:30; Is. 9:6). As the Divine Warrior led Israel out of bondage and through the conquest of the promised land (cf. Dt. 4:34; Jos. 4:24; Jdg. 6:12), so his same power is still available to Israel in its need, as it is to the church (cf. Ps. 24:8; Is. 9:6; 10:21; Mk. 9:1; 2 Cor. 10:4). Yahweh also reacts as an abandoned parent or a jilted lover to whom the beloved has returned. He responds in joy (cf. Is. 62:5; 65:19; Lk. 15:11-32).”

⁵⁴ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 22.

⁵⁵ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 17.

⁵⁶ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 19-20.

allusions to the joy of Zephaniah 3:14-17 first occur at the first advent of Jesus Christ.⁵⁷ This is especially true in the Gospel of Luke, who “draws on the OT traditions in which the arrival of the era of salvation will be characterized by that of rejoicing” (for example, 1:41; 2:10).⁵⁸ This intrusion of eschatological joy continues to be a present reality for Christians throughout the inter-advent period.⁵⁹

This joy, however, is centered not merely on the initial intrusion of Christ’s first advent nor in the final consummation of Christ’s second coming, but ultimately on the display of God’s love on the cross: “Zephaniah thus sings the prelude to the cross kind of love Jesus reveals, a love that ‘surpasses knowledge’ (Eph 3:19).”⁶⁰ Jesus is able to display this love of God because he is the divine King and Davidic king, the warrior hero who is “God-with-us.”⁶¹ It is not surprising, then, that the Gospel of John “employed the common NT quotation methodology of conflating OT sources” by adding “do not be afraid” from Zephaniah 3:15-16 to Zechariah 9:9 in his account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.⁶²

⁵⁷ Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, 87: “It is appropriate therefore that Zephaniah 3:14-20 is a stated Old Testament reading for Advent (coupled with Phil. 4:4-9, a call to rejoice, and with Luke 3:7-18 the Baptist’s preaching of the good news) in some lectionaries, and that Roman Catholics and Episcopalians also use 3:14-18 to celebrate the Feast of the Visitation [Luke 1:39-55].” For a more detailed advent reading based on Zephaniah 3:14-18s, see Warren E. Messmann, “The Third Sunday in Advent: Zephaniah 3:14-18a” *CTQ* (1982) 303-304; Lauren F. Winner, “Living by the Word: Reflections on the lectionary [Dec 13, 2015]” *Christian Century* 132 (2015) 20.

⁵⁸ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 296; See also Luke 15:7, 10 for examples of “God’s rejoicing in the love of his people” (Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 343).

⁵⁹ Beale, and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 492: See John 15:11: “In keeping with John’s focus on believers’ present experience of salvation blessings, he grounds their joy in OT prophetic notions of end-time rejoicing” (cf. Zeph. 3:14-17).

⁶⁰ Barker, and Bailey, *Zephaniah*, 497.

⁶¹ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 338; VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, loc. 1360: “Jesus is the love of God and the Divine Warrior incarnate.”

⁶² Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 338: John 12:15; Zephaniah’s “call to jubilation” in 3:14-15 is similar to Zechariah 9:9; James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Kindle; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), loc. 10319-10321: in John 12:13, “even the King of Israel” is an addition to the quote from Psalm 118:25-26 as a conflation with Zephaniah 3:15 which “celebrates the king’s presence when Israel is redeemed, and the king seems to be identified with the Lord.”

In light of Christ's work on the cross, Robertson rightly calls Zephaniah 3:17 "the John 3:16 of the OT."⁶³

Conclusion

Even though the "interpenetration of the historical and the eschatological in Zephaniah's presentation of the day of the Lord seems confusing, it should not be surprising," nor should its two-sided nature of judgment and salvation: "the phrases 'on that day' (3:16) and 'at that time' (3:19-20) certify that these verses announcing salvation speak of the same epoch earlier portrayed as a time of devastating judgment,"⁶⁴ which will ultimately occur when Christ returns. What does this mean for the church today? Jeremy Treat recognizes a common problem among Christians which Zephaniah 3:14-17 is meant to remedy:

For many of us, even though we know intellectually that God loves us, we believe in our hearts that God is disappointed, angry, or even indifferent to us. Others of us know that we are forgiven but think of our standing before God only in negative terms: He's not mad at me. I'm not guilty.

Many Christians carry this perception of God because we overemphasize what we are saved from and overlook what we are saved for.⁶⁵

To remedy this problem, Jeremy Treat offers a summary of Zephaniah 3:14-17 and the book of Zephaniah as a whole: "According to Zephaniah 3, not only are we saved from judgment, we are also saved for joy—God's joy."⁶⁶ This is a joy Christians can experience now, and a joy which all of God's people will spend eternity singing.

⁶³ Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 339.

⁶⁴ King, "Day of the Lord," 30-31.

⁶⁵ Jeremy R. Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You: Listening to the Father who delights in and sings over us" *Christianity Today* 60 (2016) 64-67

⁶⁶ Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You," 66; see also Treat's exposition of the text in light of redemptive history as well as corollary applications of his main point: "First, God's delight in us is the source of our delight in him. . . . Second, God's love turns our duty into delight. . . . Third, God's rejoicing in us today gives us hope for tomorrow" (67); For another example of pastoral application, see Cecelia Bernhardt, "More Than a Proof Text: 'What is the deepest truth about who you are? God delights in you.' (Zephaniah 3:17)" *JBC* 32 (2018) 99-105.

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