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Proper 28 • Zephaniah 1:7–16 • November 16, 2014

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With the end of the church year near and coming quickly, Zephaniah deepens the darkness of the “great and terrible day of Yahweh.” The pericope includes the famous Dies Irae passage of the ancient hymn by that name (*TLH* 607). But this is only chapter 1, which is focused against Judah (1:4). Zephaniah 2 continues this somewhat typical prophetic outline with judgment against all nations and all creation, anticipated at the outset in 1:2–3. But this is not the end of the matter. Such total and cosmic destruction is then followed by restoration, renewal, and new creation (3:9ff), centered in a faithful, confident Zion defined by the presence of Yahweh (3:16–18).

In sum, this is the basic biblical narrative in a nutshell, with the new creation brought about in the presence of King Yahweh incarnate in Jesus, who establishes the new Zion wherever he is present, no longer in the “land” of Judah.

But first the judgment; before resurrection, death; before Easter, Good Friday; before gospel, law. One cannot be raised from death to new life until and unless one is first dead.

This is the challenge of preaching law in all its severity in a culture that is antinomian in every aspect except for whatever ideology that culture wants enforced. This is also the problem with all therapeutic Christianity that hopes to salve, to heal, to solve rather than absolve, and that fails to understand that the patient cannot be saved. God's *opus alienum* actually must kill in order to make alive.

So we must do better than to blast away at a decadent culture and the preacher's list of pet sins. The issue is greater than that; it is the fate of a fallen creation, groaning in travail even now. There is something wholesome about finally getting to the judgment: only then can we get on with the new life.

This is very much the message of Zephaniah and his contemporaries Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It remains a mystery why they are so silent about Josiah's reform. Whether their message pre-dates it or, more likely, follows it, it is clear that whatever short-term good came of this last attempt to salvage the Davidic line and temple, the fact that its effects did not last actually helped seal the fate of God's people and impress upon the prophets of Yahweh that the end was inevitable now also for Judah.

Exegetical Notes

The text is rich in poetic style, with word repetitions and synonyms piled high, especially in vv. 14ff. Space allows only a few highlights:

"I will "visit" (פְּקֹדֵי) in vv. 8B, 9A, 12Bb

"Near is the Day of Yahweh" in v. 7 and v. 14. Note that the emphatic fronting of "near" (קרוב יום יהוה) "near is the Day of YHWH") is lost in most translations.

The staircase parallelism, e.g. in v. 14Aa, where the ominous "near" (קרוב) is picked up from v. 7, but now with the addition of "great" to "the day." The "near" is then repeated in the next colon (14Ab), but the tension is extended, "near and coming quickly" (קרוב וְגִמְהָרָה בָּאוֹר).

The pounding drumbeat of the "day" (יום) in vv. 14–16 (9x).

Explanation of Idioms and References

The strange "hush" (הֶסֶם) in v. 7 implies a shock and awe of silence in the presence of God (Hab 2:20). In the presence of this judge, there is nothing to say!

The sacrifice (v. 7) likely suggests that Judah now will be offered as a sacrifice, with the nations watching. This may be a reference to a covenant sacrifice (some commentators suggest a distant reference to the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15, with the cutting of an animal). A reference to Abraham would complement the echo of the Mosaic covenant in Deuteronomy in v. 13 (cf. Dt 6:10–11), and the judgment on the royal house in v. 8 (though the king himself is not mentioned), so that the whole of Israel's history stands judged.

The "foreign attire" in v. 8 may refer to pagan cultic dress, not simply expensive "imports," though the general abuses of the wealthy are often in view.

The "leaping over the threshold" in v. 9 may refer to the pagan practice of the Philistines (1 Sm 5:5).

The various references to local parts of the city of Jerusalem (vv. 10–13, likely

known to the hearers of old if lost to us today) notes the very specific and real nature of this destruction and may be defining the boundaries of the city. No one can escape the searchlights; more profound and penetrating than Diogenes’s quest it would be! (v. 12).

No one escapes the judgment, from the priests and participants in false worship (v. 4), to the royal house (v. 8), to the merchants (v. 11), and to the general atheists and agnostics who say, “God is irrelevant” (v. 12).

Homiletical Application

Biblical theology takes sin and judgment seriously, because it also understands grace and new life so profoundly. The final days of the church year bring this to culmination and then lead round once more to the advent solution: Christ has come, died, risen, and will come again.

This is not a cry to “shape up” or even “repent,” but to recognize the inevitability of the great day of Yahweh against all fallen creation, focused on his special creature, humanity, represented by his chosen people, Israel and now only Judah. There is no escape.

But, if Judah becomes central, even as a sacrifice for the nations, central to is the goal that a renewed Judah, embodied in the Son of Abraham and Son of David, “reduced to One,” will rise from the death of judgment to establish the new creation and resurrection life that is ours in Christ, who has taken this cosmic and personal judgment onto himself.

To take Jesus’s sacrifice seriously and completely, we first take God’s judgment fully and completely, which he has done for us.