

When will they lie down in Ashkelon?

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Zephaniah speaks of how Ashkelon would become a desolation, but would one day be inhabited by the Jews. The recent events in the Gaza Strip and the rocket attacks on Ashkelon can be seen in their true perspective in the light of Zephaniah.

IN ZEPHANIAH 2:3 it is written, “Seek ye the LORD [Yahweh], all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought His judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’S [Yahweh’s] anger”. The day of anger referred to the invasions of the Babylonians which would later take place. The Jews living during the reign of Josiah, when the prophecy was written, were being exhorted to repent from their wickedness while they had opportunity.

Zephaniah goes on to show that, when Babylon invaded, the nations around Judah would also suffer. The first to be addressed are the cities of the Philistines:

“For Gaza shall be forsaken, and Ashkelon a desolation: they shall drive out Ashdod at the noon day, and Ekron shall be rooted up. Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea coast, the nation of the Cherethites! the word of the LORD [Yahweh] is against you; O Canaan, the land of the Philistines, I will even destroy thee, that there shall be no inhabitant. And the sea coast shall be dwellings and cottages for shepherds, and folds for flocks” (vv. 4-6).

This prophecy was fulfilled as a consequence of not only the Babylonian invasions, but also other invasions that took place over the succeeding centuries. This area of ancient Philistia is the area which mostly corresponds to the Gaza Strip today. Given the attacks by Israel against the Palestinians which have been taking place in the Gaza Strip in recent weeks, this prophecy is of particular interest at the present time. However, not all the territory in this prophecy is currently held by the Palestinians. The city of Ashkelon is currently part of Israel. In this article we will consider the prophecy of Zephaniah with regard to Ashkelon.

Destruction

David Schloen, Associate Professor of Syro-Palestinian Archaeology at the University of Chicago, has written of the archaeological evidence relating to the destruction of Ashkelon by the Babylonians.¹ He writes that, of

the finds relating to the Babylonian destruction, “the most poignant is the complete skeleton of one of Nebuchadnezzar’s victims. Analysis has shown that it is the skeleton of a middle-aged woman whose skull had been crushed by a blunt instrument. Lying on her back, legs and arms akimbo, this woman was buried by the falling walls and roof of the building in which she had taken refuge”. He also writes of the evidence of burned and collapsed buildings, “indicating that the Babylonian destruction was widespread and total”. Schloen also tells how, many centuries later, “Saladin ordered the systematic destruction” of Ashkelon in 1191 to prevent it from being used by Richard the Lion-heart. So on more than one occasion Ashkelon has become “a desolation”.

In the evening

Zephaniah goes on to write that Ashkelon would one day be inhabited by the Jews: “And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed thereupon: in the houses of Ashkelon shall they lie down in the evening: for the LORD [Yahweh] their God shall visit them, and turn away their captivity” (v. 7). In an article written in 1979 in the *Testimony*, Brother Shinton wrote the following about this verse: “In Ashkelon’s public square there is an inscription on stone quoting words from the prophecy of Zephaniah, which prophesies the desolation of the Philistine cities, followed by the revival of the area under the Jews”.² Brother Shinton implies that the occupation of Ashkelon by the Jews is indeed a fulfilment of this verse.

1. http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/nn/spr95_ash.html.
2. “‘Let Jerusalem come into your mind’ (Jer. 51:50)”, Jun. 1979, pp. 213-5.



Modern housing at Ashkelon, only ten miles from the Gaza Strip.

Picture: Tony Benson

Brother H. P. Mansfield also implies this. He focused particularly on the phrase “in the evening”, and made the following comment: “As the Jewish day commenced at evening-tide, this time period can well point to the present epoch just prior to the millennium. At such a time, the prophet declared, ‘Yahweh their Elohim shall visit them, and turn away their captivity.’ We see evidence of that today”.³

Has Zephaniah 2:7 been fulfilled? It is often the case that verses that speak about the restoration of the Jews to the Land actually relate to the Kingdom. I would suggest that this verse is a case in point. It may be that the habitation of Ashkelon by the Jews today is a sign that this verse is soon to be fulfilled. However, it is only when Christ is King in Jerusalem that Judah will truly be able to “lie down” in Ashkelon.

In a report by the BBC journalist Heather Sharp, an Israeli woman described how her grandchildren were “really scared” living in Ashkelon.⁴ Sharp describes Ashkelon as “a coastal city repeatedly targeted as Hamas’s rocket range has increased”. The Jews will one day “lie down” in Ashkelon, but at the present time such a state of repose is not the experience of Jews in this city.

Of course, the fear felt by the Israelis living within range of Hamas rockets has been more than matched by the experience of the Palestinians in Gaza. The overwhelming onslaught by Israel has caused massive suffering. From a prophetic standpoint, one of the significant outcomes of the Israeli attacks has been an increase in anti-Israeli sentiment throughout the world.

God said through Zephaniah, “Therefore wait ye upon Me, saith the LORD [Yahweh], 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” (3:8). Circumstances which lead to an increase in anti-Jewish and anti-Israel feelings are playing a role in preparing the motivation for the nations to gather against Jerusalem.

In addition to the mass demonstrations around the world, an example of a more formal protest has been seen by the European Union, which, as the *Financial Times* reported, “called a halt to plans to upgrade diplomatic and economic ties with Israel”.⁵ This was described by the *Financial Times* as “the latest sign of the international backlash against Israel’s offensive in the Gaza Strip”. Whatever the outcome of the current fighting, there is no doubt that there has been an increase in anti-Israeli sentiment across the world in recent weeks. This in itself is a sign that the return of Christ is near.

Seek righteousness

What should we do as we see these signs in the earth? As we have seen, one of the things which God commanded the people, through Zephaniah, during the reign of Josiah, was that they should “seek righteousness” (2:3). This phrase was

3. Mansfield, H. P., *Consider Your Ways*, West Beach, Logos, p. 34.
4. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7830405.stm.
5. Buck, T. et al. (2009), “EU ‘time-out on closer Israeli ties’”, *Financial Times*, 15 Jan., p. 7.

quoted and expanded by the Lord Jesus Christ: "But *seek* ye first the kingdom of God, and His *righteousness*; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt. 6:33). The things that would be "added" included things they would "eat" (v. 31). Zephaniah spoke of this when he wrote that those who seek righteousness "shall feed thereupon" (2:7) in the coasts of Philistia.

There is another link between the end of Matthew 6 and the reign of Josiah. The Lord Jesus went on to say, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the *evil* thereof" (v. 34). The Greek word translated "evil" occurs in 1 Corinthians 5:8, where it is translated "malice" and concerns the leaven: "therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of *malice* and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth". We must strive to put away from our lives the evil and malice that was symbolised by the leaven. There is enough potential malice to deal with in one day without worrying about other days.

During the reign of Josiah, one of the great Passovers was held: "Surely there was not holden

such a passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah" (2 Kgs. 23:22). The spirit of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was manifest by Josiah in the way he sought to put away wickedness from Judah: "Moreover to put away wickedness from Judah: "Moreover the workers with familiar spirits, and the wizards, and the images, and the idols, and all the abominations that were spied in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, did Josiah put away, that he might perform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the LORD" (v. 24).⁶

Conclusion

As we see events unfolding in and around the Gaza Strip we can take comfort with the sure knowledge that one day God's people will "lie down" without fear in Ashkelon. In the meantime, we must follow the instruction of Zephaniah to "seek righteousness", knowing that, if we do, all things we need will be added unto us.

6. See Palmer, S., "Lessons for the last generation", *Christadelphian*, May 1995, pp. 179-82.