

Zephaniah 1:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests;

Analysis

I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem—After announcing universal judgment (verses 2-3), Zephaniah narrows focus to covenant people. The phrase **stretch out mine hand** (natah et-yadi, נָתַח אֶת־יָדִי) consistently signals divine judgment in Scripture (Exodus 7:5; Isaiah 5:25; Jeremiah 6:12; Ezekiel 6:14). God's outstretched hand brings both salvation (Exodus redemption) and judgment (upon covenant-breakers)—the same power that delivered Israel from Egypt now turns against rebellious Judah.

I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place (ve-hikrati et-she'ar ha-Ba'al min ha-maqom ha-zeh, וְהִכַּרְתִּי אֶת־שָׁאֵר הַבָּעֵל מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה)—Remarkably, even after centuries of reform attempts, Baal worship persisted as a "remnant" in Jerusalem. Baal, the Canaanite storm-god, represented agricultural fertility and prosperity. Israelites repeatedly syncretized Yahweh worship with Baal cult practices, violating the first commandment (Exodus 20:3-5). The verb karat (קָרַת) means to cut off, destroy, eliminate—a strong term often used for covenant-breaking or capital punishment.

The name of the Chemarims with the priests—Kemarim (כְּמָרִים) refers to idolatrous priests who officiated at pagan shrines and high places (2 Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5). The legitimate Levitical **priests** (kohanim, כּוֹהֲנִים) had become corrupted, participating in or tolerating syncretistic worship. God promises to

destroy both illegitimate pagan priests and corrupt Levitical priests who violated their sacred trust. Even religious professionals face judgment when they lead God's people into idolatry—a sobering warning for all spiritual leaders throughout history.

Historical Context

This verse specifically addresses Manasseh's legacy of Baal worship. During his 55-year reign (696-642 BC), Manasseh "built altars for Baal" (2 Kings 21:3), erected an Asherah pole in the temple, practiced child sacrifice, and consulted mediums. Though he repented late in life (2 Chronicles 33:12-13), his reforms couldn't undo generations of spiritual corruption. His son Amon (642-640 BC) reverted to paganism during his brief two-year reign before being assassinated.

Josiah (640-609 BC) implemented dramatic reforms after discovering the lost Book of the Law in 622 BC (2 Kings 22-23). He destroyed high places, smashed sacred stones, cut down Asherah poles, desecrated Topheth (where children were sacrificed), removed horses dedicated to the sun god, and executed idolatrous priests. Yet Zephaniah's prophecy suggests these reforms were incomplete or superficial—a "remnant of Baal" persisted even after Josiah's purge. External religious reform without heart transformation couldn't avert covenant judgment.

The phrase "the Chemarims" appears only here and 2 Kings 23:5 (describing priests Josiah removed) and Hosea 10:5. These were black-robed pagan priests who led worship at unauthorized shrines. That legitimate Levitical priests collaborated with them demonstrates how deeply syncretism had penetrated Judah's religious establishment. Similar corruption appears throughout Judah's history—from Jeroboam's golden calves (1 Kings 12:28-31) through the prophetic period, proving that institutional religion without genuine covenant faithfulness becomes worse than useless—it becomes an obstacle to knowing God.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does religious syncretism (mixing true worship with false practices) still threaten the church today?
2. What does God's judgment on corrupt priests teach about the heightened accountability of spiritual leaders?
3. In what ways might external religious reform or institutional changes mask persistent idolatry of the heart?

Interlinear Text

וְשַׁׁלֵּחַ	עַל	יְהוָה	לְ	כָּל	עַל	יְהִי
I will also stretch out	mine hand	H5921	upon Judah	H5921	H3605	
H5186	H3027	H3063				
וַיֵּשֶׁב	בְּרוּשָׁלָם	וְהִכְבַּת	מִן	בְּמִקְדָּשׁ	וּמִן	
and upon all the inhabitants	of Jerusalem	and I will cut off	H4480	from this place	H4725	
H3427	H3389	H3772				
בָּזָה	שְׁאָר	בָּעֵל	שִׁם	בְּכָמָר	יְמִם	עַם
the remnant	of Baal	H853	and the name	of the Chemarims	H5973	
H2088	H7605	H1168	H8034	H3649		
בְּכָבָדִים:						
with the priests						
H3548						

Additional Cross-References

Hosea 10:5 (Parallel theme): The inhabitants of Samaria shall fear because of the calves of Beth-aven: for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and the priests thereof that rejoiced on it, for the glory thereof, because it is departed from it.

Micah 5:13 (Parallel theme): Thy graven images also will I cut off, and thy standing images out of the midst of thee; and thou shalt no more worship the work of thine hands.

