

**Return of Baal to Israel**  
**Zephaniah 1:4-7**

## **Return of Baal to Israel**

Last week after class, there was a question about heaven and hell and purgatory. It is not an insignificant question. Let me address that question before getting started on today's lesson in Zephaniah.

The question is, "You talk about two eternal destinations: heaven and the Lake of Fire, often called "hell." What about purgatory?"

The short answer is there is no purgatory in the Bible. There is only heaven and the Lake of Fire and Hades/Sheol. The last item is a temporary "waiting room." It is not purgatory.

In order to understand why purgatory is not included in mainstream Protestantism you need a longer story.

Let's start with some generic definitions of what purgatory is supposed to be from those that defend this concept.

First, from Wikipedia

**“Purgatory** (Latin: *purgatorium*, borrowed into English via Anglo-Norman and Old French) is, according to the belief of some Christian denominations, an intermediate state after physical death for expiatory purification. The process of purgatory is the final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. Tradition, by reference to certain texts of scripture, sees the process as involving a cleansing fire. Some forms of Western Christianity, particularly within Protestantism, deny its existence. Other strands of Western Christianity see purgatory as a place, perhaps filled with fire. Some concepts of Gehenna in Judaism resemble those of purgatory.”<sup>1</sup>

Some observations on this definition:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory>

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1. Some, not all “denominations” accept this as doctrine. In particular, some within Protestantism “deny its existence.”
2. Apparently, the concept of purgatory denies the complete efficacy of Christ’s work on the cross for salvation.
3. But it is much more than this. There are associated doctrines that are impacted by the concept of purgatory: eternal security, sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross, the three phases of salvation, a misunderstanding of Hades, difference between punishment for sin and discipline in time, the definition of the canon of Scripture and ultimately the concept of grace. In other words, the doctrine of purgatory is based upon some fundamental differences in doctrine.

Here is a second description of purgatory from a Catholic Church source. Often it is assumed that the Catholic Church is the instigator of this doctrine, but as we will see there are some Protestant denominations that also accept this doctrine. Orthodox Churches (like the Greek Orthodox church) accept this doctrine.

“The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines purgatory as a “purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven,” which is experienced by those “who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified” (CCC 1030). It notes that “this final purification of the elect . . . is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (CCC 1031).”

“The purification is necessary because, as Scripture teaches, nothing unclean will enter the presence of God in heaven (Rev. 21:27) and, while we may die with our mortal sins forgiven, there can still be many impurities in us, specifically venial sins and the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.catholic.com/tract/purgatory>

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As I have read various sources, I came across an insistence, that in its current doctrinal form, purgatory is not a place or time but a process according to the Catholic Church.

### ***Purgatory***

#### **Historical Background**

The idea that sinners who have believed need to be cleansed prior to going to heaven and need to be prayed for has existed by some Jews prior to Jesus and perhaps even by some Greek philosophers. This would suggest that it is in alignment with human viewpoint.

The Catholic Church is a perhaps the main defender of this doctrine. One source defending this doctrine is EWTN. EWTN (Eternal World TV Network) “is an American basic cable television network which presents around-the-clock Catholic-themed programming. It is not only the largest Catholic television network in America, but reportedly "the world's largest religious media network", (and according to the network itself) reaching 250 million people in 140 countries, with 11 networks.”<sup>3</sup>

According to EWTN: “In essence, there are only three points on the matter which the Catholic Church insists: (1) that there is a purification after death, (2) that this purification involves some kind of pain or discomfort, and (3) that God assists those in this purification in response to the actions of the living. Among the things the Church does <not> insist on are the ideas that purgatory is a place or that it takes time, as we shall see below.”<sup>4</sup>

“The idea that purgatory is a late invention is similarly false. In fact, it has been part of the true religion since before the time of Christ. It is witnessed to not only in such as 2 Maccabees, which itself witnesses to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EWTN>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/how-to-explain-purgatory-to-protestants-1037>

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the belief (see below), but in other pre-Christian Jewish books as well, such as <The Life of Adam and Eve>, which speaks of Adam being freed from purgatory on the Last Day. It was also part of the true religion in Jesus' day, as the writings of the New Testament show. And it has been part of the true religion ever since Christ's day, as the writings of the Church Fathers show (see the Catholic Answers pamphlet: "The Fathers Know Best: Purgatory"). Not only Catholics believe in this final purification, but the Eastern Orthodox do as well (though they often do not use the term "purgatory" for it), as do Orthodox Jews. In fact, to this day, when a Jewish person's loved one dies, he prays a prayer known as the Mourner's Qaddish for eleven months after the death for the loved one's purification."<sup>5</sup>

The so-called New Testament support for purgatory is based upon different interpretations of Scripture which are based upon differences in doctrines. It points to the fact that Protestants rely on "Sola Scriptura" for doctrine whereas the Catholic Church blends Tradition and Scripture. In the early days of the Church, tradition and existing Scripture were mostly in agreement. As time has progressed, tradition has changed perceptions of Scripture.

Let's look at this categorically.

### ***Biblical Background***

First, purgatory is not a Biblical term. It is not found in the Bible. That by itself does not invalidate the term. The Trinity is not found in the Bible, but was arrived at after many arguments by early church leaders. But that means any Bible passages that are used to define purgatory must be analyzed carefully. What do they actually say?

Second, the concept of purgatory assumes that a person has committed some sins that left that person in an unclean state at death. As a result, the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/how-to-explain-purgatory-to-protestants-1037>

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person must be cleansed before he or she can arrive at the final joy of heaven. Some of the explanations of why Protestant reject this concept will be taken up under “Doctrinal Background.” Reviewing differences in understanding of Scripture is beyond the scope of this lesson. Certainly it is desirable but perhaps that will be the topic of a future lesson. Here is a list of some of the passages that are understood differently: 1 Peter 3:19, 1 Peter 4:6, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Hebrews 9:27, Hebrews 12:14, Hebrews 12:23, 1 Corinthians 3:13, 1 Corinthians 3:15, 1 Corinthians 15:29, 1 Corinthians 15:52

### **Doctrinal Background**

Let me deal with this is a couple of points. Studying this I realized that there are vast doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants. This portion of the lesson was supposed to be very short.

1. Catholic doctrine says that there are mortal sins and venial sins. For a believer who commits a mortal sin, he goes to hell. Hence, Catholic doctrine does not accept eternal security.

2. Venial sins left unconfessed must be “cleansed” according to Catholic doctrine. Hence, Purgatory, where they are cleansed. This seems to conflate or confuse what Protestants understand as temporary discipline means to encourage believers to stop sinning and go back to fellowship with God and Christ’s work in justification which is the work necessary for entry into heaven. Paul says in Romans 5:1, “Having been justified.” It is a done deal for believers.

3. Catholic doctrine says that the fire in 1 Corinthians 3:15 is purgatory whereas Herman has taught this is the removal of a pastor’s wood, hay and straw. The pastor does not lose salvation.

4. The Catholic Bible includes the apocrypha. 2 Maccabees 12:41–45, prayers for the dead is used as a partial justification for purgatory. Why

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pray for the dead if they are already in heaven? Protestants reject this book as not inspired.

5. Herman taught about the order of resurrections and the compartments of Hades: <http://springvalleybiblechurch.org/Audio/Matthew/notes/2015-02-22-Sunday.pdf>.

So far covered in Zephaniah study:

1:1 Introduction to Zephaniah

1:2 Global destruction

1:3 Details of global destruction

Now attention is focused on Judah.

**Zephaniah 1:4 “So I will stretch out My hand against Judah And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.**

**I will stretch out my hand.** This is an anthropomorphism. That is, it gives God a human body part with which to do something in an understandable manner to the reader. Here is a good explanation of what is going on here:

“In God’s case, he “stretches out his hand” when he intervenes dramatically, employing means “beyond what is common.” Particularly in the plagues of Egypt, God “stretched out” his hand to accomplish miraculous judgmental interventions (cf. Exod. 7:5; 15:12; note also the “stretching out” of the hand of Moses and Aaron as a means of

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inaugurating the various plagues in Exod. 7:19; 8:1-2, 12-13[Eng 5-6, 16-17]; 9:22; 10:12, 21-22; 14:16, 21, 26-27. In an awe-inspiring manner God liberated Israel with a “mighty hand and a stretched-out arm” (cf. Deut 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8). But now this same power shall operate against Israel, because of a new adversary relationship.”

**Against Judah/Jerusalem.** The curse starts with the nation of Judah becoming more specific in location, Jerusalem the location of the temple and then to the people and reason for the curse.

Judah → Jerusalem → remnant of Baal → idolatrous priests.

**Cut off.** This has covenantal implications. In the ancient world, making a covenant was called “cutting” a covenant because it was often accomplished by cutting a sacrifice in pieces.

**Remnant of Baal.** Assuming this is the future in the Tribulation, then what is Baal doing in Israel and being worshipped by Jews?

Let’s get some background. The Bible says there will be a nation Israel in the Tribulation. It also identifies ancient enemies that will return. Two hundred years ago, most theologians would have said, it is not possible for there to be a nation of Israel. The Jews are spread throughout the world. It would take an act of God to bring them back. Well, that is exactly what is happening. God is gathering the Jews in unbelief. So, should it be such a surprise that there will be a return of Baal worship in Israel? You are probably saying, “No, that is not possible!” But that is already happening, even now!!!

There is an article by Shai Feraro titled The Return of Baal to the Holy Land published in November 2016. I do not have the article, but included here is an abstract.

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"This article focuses on the recent emergence of Canaanite Reconstructionism in Israel—a miniature movement within the country’s small, but growing, Pagan community. The discourse of Israeli adherents of Canaanite Reconstructionism regarding its links to ancient Canaanite culture and the land—indeed the very soil—of modern-day Israel is highlighted. The development of Israeli Canaanite Reconstructionism is examined in relation to the unique nature of Israeli society and identity politics, as well as to Canaanism, a cultural and ideological movement that climaxed during the 1940s in British Mandate Palestine but declined after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.<sup>6</sup>

There is another article also by Shai Feraro titled "Canaanite Reconstructionism Among Contemporary Israeli Pagans” published in December 2016. I do not have a copy of this article but I do have an extract that I will quote here.

“The majority of Israeli Pagans follow some form of eclectic Western Paganism, but an effort is being made to infuse the generic Wiccanate ritual structure with references to the local seasons and elements from the Ugaritic texts, hereby indigenizing the Wiccanate tradition by injecting it with local cultural content. As the local Israeli community matures and gains confidence, there is also a growing tendency to focus on “home-grown” local deities. Set against the unique background of Israeli society and identity politics, Feraro focuses on the recent emergence of Canaanite Reconstructionism in Israel, reports on interviews with its adherents as they build a modern practice and highlights Reconstructionists’ discourse regarding their links to ancient Canaanite culture and the land of modern-day Israel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions Vol. 20, No. 2 (NOVEMBER 2016), pp. 59-81 (23 pages)  
Published By: University of California Press. It is available on-line at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26417828>

<sup>7</sup> Feraro, S. (2017). Canaanite Reconstructionism Among Contemporary Israeli Pagans. In: Rountree, K. (eds) *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism*. Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5_8). Available at [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-56200-5_8)



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There are other conditions that are in the Tribulation that might appear in the transition to it, like some loss of land to the Palestinians. This brings up the subject again of why study the Tribulation. Besides the previously listed reasons, there is something that came to mind. There is nothing in prophecy that must be fulfilled in the Church Age other than the removal of all Christian believers in what is called the rapture. Yet, there appears to be historical trends that are meshing with Biblical prophecies. Israel is being gathered into the land in unbelief. Palestinians who call themselves "Philistines" are starting to repopulate the ancient Philistine lands. Ancient religions once thought abandoned are making a come back. So as we study the Tribulation, we may be seeing the prelude to the Tribulation. More on that when we get to chapter 2.

**And the names of the idolatrous priests along with the priests.** Names in the Bible often go to the essence of a person.

**Idolatrous priests.** This is a single word different from the normal word for priests. Idolatrous priests is not necessarily a bad translation, even if it is more of an interpretation.

The TDOT identifies the "hakkemarim" with the priests of Baal worship. "The personnel of the Baal cult consisted of priests (2 K. 10:19; 11:18; cf. *hakkemarim* in Zeph 1:4) and/or prophets (1 K.18:19ff; 2 K. 10:19), who sacrificed, performed cultic dances, became ecstatic, and "prophesied" (Jer 2:8; 23:13)."

The root word in Hebrew does not appear to be much help in clarifying where this word is derived. The best direction to take is to look at the usage in the Bible.

There are two other passages in the Old Testament that use this word.

**2 Kings 23:5 He did away with the idolatrous  
priests whom the kings of Judah had**

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**appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven.**

**Hosea 10:5 The inhabitants of Samaria will fear For the calf of Beth-aven. Indeed, its people will mourn for it, And its idolatrous priests will cry out over it, Over its glory, since it has departed from it.**

Before moving on to the next verse, please note that in the Hebrew there is a word, mostly not translated, that indicates the direct object. It is as if there is a sign in English that says, “direct object follows.” In verses 4-6 there are six direct objects so identified. Zephaniah is not leaving us in the dark here. He is overtly pointing these out in another list. Remember the first list we encountered? Proclamation of the Lord/Yahweh. It gave us a categorization of following judgments.

Summary of God “speaking/proclamations”:

1. Zephaniah 1:2 Total **world** annihilation on the surface of the earth
2. Zephaniah 1:3 Details of total **world** annihilation on the surface of the earth
3. Zephaniah 1:10 Annihilation of **unbelieving Jews** giving time (Day of Lord) and place (in and around Jerusalem).
4. Zephaniah 2:9 Annihilation of the **unbelieving relatives of the Jews**, Moab and Ammon.

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5. Zephaniah 3:8 Annihilation of **unbelieving gentiles** with a command to wait on the Lord.
6. Zephaniah 3:20 Yahweh speaks, not a declaration of judgment but speaks as in creation, of **blessing for the believing Jews**.

Each of these includes the phrase, “Proclamation of the Lord/Yahweh” in my translation.

So now, the direct object marker is used to generate another list:

1. The remnant of Baal (Verse 4)
2. The name of the Chemarim with the priests (Verse 4)
3. The ones bowing down on the housetops to the host of heaven (Verse 5)
4. The ones bowing down swearing to Yahweh and swearing by their king/Milcom (Verse 5)
5. The ones turned away from Yahweh and (Verse 6)
6. Do not seek the Yahweh and do not inquire of Him (Verse 6)

These all are people who have committed evil against God, the creator of heaven and earth and with whom they have a covenant which God can enforce.

It is apparent that Zephaniah is using different literary techniques to identify categorical lists. Let us be observant to see if there are additional lists that Zephaniah identifies for us using a literary technique.

So far, the text started with global destruction. Then it outlined judgment against, Israel, Israel relatives and unbelieving gentiles. It culminates in future blessings for Israel. The second list outlined the people within Israel that have brought judgment on Israel.

Let's deal with the remainder of the list in verses 5-6 together.

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**Zephaniah 1:5 “And those who bow down on the housetops to the host of heaven, And those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom,**

**Zephaniah 1:6 And those who have turned back from following the Lord, And those who have not sought the Lord or inquired of Him.”**

Bow down.

On the housetops. In some places in the Middle East that have little rain, the housetops are not angled as they are in the USA. This is especially true of high rise apartment buildings, even in the USA. So, for some, this represents the place that worship of the stars is conducted.

To the host of heaven. Worship of stars and other stellar objects is called by some astrotheology (astro + theology). From Wikipedia:

“Astrotheology, astral mysticism, astral religion, astral or stellar theology (also referred to as astral or star worship) is the worship of the stars (individually or together as the night sky), the planets, and other heavenly bodies as deities, or the association of deities with heavenly bodies. In anthropological literature these systems of practice may be referred to as astral cults.”

“The most common instances of this are Sun gods and Moon gods in polytheistic systems worldwide. Also notable is the association of the planets with deities in Sumerian religion, and hence in Babylonian and Greco-Roman religion, viz. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Gods, goddesses, and demons may also be considered personifications of astronomical phenomena such as lunar eclipses, planetary alignments, and apparent interactions of planetary bodies with stars. The Sabians of

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Harran, a poorly understood pagan religion that existed in Harran during the early Islamic period (7th–10th century), were known for their astrotheology ('the astral cult').”

**Deuteronomy 4:19** And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

The penalty for worshipping other gods is death.

**Deuteronomy 17:2** “If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the Lord your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, by transgressing His covenant,

**Deuteronomy 17:3** and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded,

**Deuteronomy 17:4** and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel,

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**Deuteronomy 17:5 then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death.**

This is perhaps a good place to highlight that there is a peculiar affinity of Zephaniah for the book of Deuteronomy. Certainly, Deuteronomy was either the book or part of the book of the law that was discovered in the Temple in 622 B.C.

**Bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom.** Mixing true worship with false worship is still false worship. It is like a lie that contains an element of truth. It is still a lie. There are people who go to church to have the appearance of being godly but in reality worship something or someone other than the Living God.

Turned back from following the Lord

Those who have not sought the Lord Or inquired of Him.

Here is a summary of “seeking” from the commentary on Zephaniah by Kenneth Barker and Waylon Bailey.

- 1) In sum, seeking God requires turning from one’s wicked ways and worshiping him in humility.
- 2) In prophetic thought, to seek God means to be in constant fellowship with God, to observe his commandments, and to practice love and justice.
- 3) Sacrifices, no matter how lavish, cannot guarantee access to God for those who do not turn from evil ways and repent.
- 4) Even though the arrogant and sinful seek God, they never find him.

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- 5) According to the Old Testament writers, ultimately it is God who chooses and seeks the lost to reveal himself to them, but the one who sincerely seeks him can hope to find him.

Included here is a slide from the first time I taught Zephaniah. It shows the progression of judgments from general to specific, and from those who actively oppose God to those who just don't care.

• **Zephaniah 1:4-6 New American Standard Bible (NASB)**

General  
to  
Specific

– 4 “So I will stretch out My hand against Judah  
And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.  
And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this  
place,  
*And* the names of the idolatrous priests along with  
the priests.

5 “And those who bow down on the housetops to  
the host of heaven,  
And those who bow down *and* swear to the LORD  
and *yet* swear by Milcom,

6 And those who have turned back from following  
the LORD,  
And those who have not sought the LORD or  
inquired of Him.”

Most Hostile  
to those who  
just don't care

Deception

Deceived

Disregard

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