

Zephaniah: the Dignity and Humility of the Poor (the Arrogance of the Oppressors and the Pride of the Oppressed)

The title of Zephaniah (1:1) indicates “the time of Josiah” (king of Judah, 640-609 B.C.) as this prophet’s historical context. Given that the prophet does not allude at any time to Josiah’s great reforms, nor to the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.; see 2:13-15), it is common to conclude that he prophesied before the reforms, perhaps between 630 and 625. The canonic edition of the book probably includes certain post-exile additions and it gives evidence of a final Deuteronomist edition, but there is no consensus in pinning down the details (see the commentaries).

Zephaniah is the only prophetic book which presents the prophet’s genealogy up to the fourth generation (“Ezekiel” en 1:1; **see DHHBE, note b**). Many conclude that the purpose is to show that Zephaniah was a descendent of the great king Ezekiel, but that name was very common and the text does not give such a title to “Ezekiel”. Given his concern for the cult (1:4-9; 3:1-5), it is common to conclude that Zephaniah was not marginal (isolated), but a cult prophet, associated with the Temple of Jerusalem¹.

Furthermore, the title shows that Zephaniah was the “son of Cushi” (1:1) and demonstrates an interest in Cush/Ethiopia (2:12; 3:10), more than the other prophets². For many today it is evidence that Zephaniah was black (Jer 36:14), perhaps even a slave in the Temple, and/or a eunuch, like Ebed-Melech, who saved the life of Jeremiah (Jer 38:7-13; 39:15-18; see the bibliography below). Since the other three names are Hebrew, some conclude that if Zephaniah was black or a slave and must have been adopted³. But if one or more of the three ancestors of Cushi named in 1:1 had a black or Ethiopian woman as a wife/slave/concubine (see Moses, Numbers 12:1), it could explain why Zephaniah’s father had a name which, in the Bible, suggests black skin (Jer 36:14, where Cushi is a proper name, it could be an exception, but not necessarily).

The central theme of Zephaniah is the great “day of Yahweh” when God judges the oppressors and frees the oppressed (1:7, 10, and 14: → Amos 5:18-20, DHHBE, note o; also the paradigm of Exodus). This day will shake the indifference of the oppressors of Judah who say “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm” (1:12), an expression of “practical atheism”.

1 The poor. Many have concluded that Zephaniah says nothing about the poor, but uses the traditional vocabulary for the poor and oppressed to denote persons characterized by humility and meekness⁴ (→ Matthew 5:3, “the poor of spirit”):

“Seek the Lord, all you humble (‘anawim) of the land,
who do his commands;
seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you will be hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (2:3, NVI; see DHH).

“For I will leave in the midst of you
a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord (3:12, DHH; see NRSV)

However, as David Pleins insists, even though in Zephaniah (→ Psalms) the classic vocabulary for the poor acquires spiritual and religious shades of humility and trust in Yahweh, we must not create a dichotomy between such shades and the traditional socio-economic meanings of poverty and oppression⁵. Humility in Zephaniah “es el estado del pobre y oprimido..., cuya situación es tal que deben reconocer su total debilidad y completa dependencia en Dios”⁶ (see BJ note Zeph 2:3). According to Pleins, the very same elite who Zephaniah had previously denounced for its idolatry and extravagant and exploitative lifestyle (1:4-18, esp. 8-9, 11, 13, 18) were left poor and humiliated after the exile. In this new situation, the exiled elite appropriated the oracles of Zephaniah in order to strengthen its situation and its faith in Yahweh as the warrior God, liberator of the oppressed (3:16-20; 2:7, 9; Pleins 2001:396).

In addition to the term poor-oppressed (*‘ani*, 3:12; cf. *‘anawim* in 3:3), Zephaniah repeatedly refers to oppression. He denounces Jerusalem as a “city of oppressors” (*‘anah*, 3:1; see “defiled”, 1:3)⁷, but promises to those remaining after the Exile “I will deal with your oppressors” (*‘anah*, 3:19). As for the maximum expression of oppression, Zephaniah proclaims the judgment of God against those who “fill their master’s house with violence (*khamas*) and fraud” (12:9), and against those priests who “have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law” (3:4; see RV and NVI). Yahweh’s great day will be a time when the oppressors will themselves suffer oppression (*tsarah* I, 1:15, 17), and the rich will become the poor (1:13; cf. 2:7 and 3:20 “when I restore your fortunes”).

Confronted with all the violence and oppression in Judah and Jerusalem, Yahweh does not remain passive or indifferent, but his wrath is manifested in the judgment of the Exile (1:15, 18; 2:1-3; see Ex. 22:21-24). But then, God lets loose his wrath on the oppressor nations (3:8). Cuando Sofonías refiere a la ira y la condenación, él evita el vocabulario de justicia y prefiere hablar de “visitar” (*paqad*) para castigar (1:8-9, 12; 3:7). But when Zephaniah addresses who suffer oppression and violence, he assures them that Yahweh manifests his judgments (*mishpat*) of liberating justice (*tsadiq*) each morning (3:5) and exhorts Judah to seek such justice (*tsedeq*) and characteristic humility of the poor (2:3). In addition, utilizing the metaphor of the lame lost sheep, he affirms Yahweh’s solidarity with the exiled and the crippled (3:19; but see, also, the destruction of all the animals in 1:3).

2 Women. As Judith Sanderson demonstrates, Zephaniah “jamás alude a ninguna mujer, nombrado o sin nombre, individualmente o como grupo, en ningún contexto, positivo o negativo”⁸. Furthermore, she suggests that the reference to the astral cult (1:5) could include feminine deities (→ Jer 44).⁹ However, when Yahweh appears as the warrior-king (3:14-20 → Habakkuk), the prophet addresses Jerusalem metaphorically as the “daughter Jerusalem” (3:14; RV and NVI literally, contrary to BJ and DHH). With this city/woman, the warrior Yahweh has sexual relations, and “renews” with his love (3:17; see the peace that the lovers bring to the male after making love in Song of Songs 8:10; → Nahum, where Yahweh sexually violates Nineveh). Moreover, as Ulrike Bail points out, given that “city” is a feminine noun in Hebrew, the Hebrew text of Zephaniah abounds with references to cities as feminine and/or women, and many verbs metaphorically reflect the identities of the cities as women.¹⁰ In this way, The prophet describes the four Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Ekron (Zeph. 2:4) as a woman

“deserted...desolate...driven out at noon...uprooted (sterile). The city/woman Nineveh will also be “desolate” and a dry waste (2:13). The unfaithful “daughter Jerusalem” will also be punished (3:1-8), but at the end liberated of all her oppressors and returned to the bosom of her groom, Yahweh (9:20). → Sexual Minorities below.

3 Sexual Minorities. Zephaniah appears to be another example of the shaman type prophet, sexual minority and unmarried (→ Joel), perhaps a black slave, perhaps a Temple eunuch, and/or of homosexual orientation. As Judith Sanderson points out, Zephaniah’s preaching “no demuestra ningún interés de ningún tipo en mujeres como distintas de la sociedad en general”.¹¹ The tradition of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had moved Zephaniah (2:9), but as an example of divine justice against oppression and violence (→ Genesis 19, where the narrative concerns an effort to sexually violate two visiting angels); it would be anachronistic to suppose that the Bible speaks of the condemnation of persons of “homosexual” orientation. Even though Zephaniah appears to be black and a sexual minority, he demonstrates a strong aversion to the stereotypical characteristics of the “effeminate” male, since he exhorts Jerusalem: “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak (3:16; see the NIV: “do not let your hands hang limp”). In the same context the prophet describes Jerusalem as a woman in sexual relations with the warrior Yahweh, who liberates her (3:17). Zephaniah condemns the princes in the palace who “dress themselves in foreign attire (1:8; see 1 Cor 6:9; Mt 11:8). As the Jerusalem Bible shows, “Estos cortesanos, sometidos a Asiria, ejercen la regencia durante la minoría de Josías” (BJ, note 1:8). Sobre “saltan sobre los umbrales” ver DHHBE nota 1:9

Zephaniah fiercely criticizes the oppressors’ arrogance (1:12; 2:8-11, 15; 3:2, 11) and praises the humility of the poor and the oppressed (2:3; 3:7, 12, 19-20). As Judith Sanderson suggests, in such texts we must avoid the translation “pride”, since the prophet denounces the arrogance of the powerful men who scorn all others, while such a translation would be inappropriate for women and members of minorities.¹² Or rather, such weak and oppressed persons need to here another message from God: that “abandonen su baja auto-estima y dependencia y que aprendan un tipo de orgullo que los evalúe a si mismas tanto como a los demás y que confíen en Dios para recibir poder y tomar responsabilidad por sus propias acciones”.¹³

Therefore, the importance and value of the “Pride” marches of women, gays and persons of color is not as expressions of arrogance and superiority, but as demonstrations and instruments of a healthy recovery of self-esteem, dignity and a sense of value. Though God commands the male Israelites to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), women, sexual minorities and persons of color, a more urgent commandment would be the reverse: that they learn to love themselves as they love their neighbor. In this way also in the New Testament Paul condemns the arrogance of the oppressors, but tries to show the humble people of Rome (mostly slaves, women and sexual minorities) that they “boast” in their new acceptance of God, in the persecution they suffer, and in God Himself (→ Romans 5:2-3, 11).¹⁴

Zephaniah and the Hebrew Bible. As Adele Berlin points out, “The Book of Zephaniah in a study in ‘intertextuality’ (the incorporation and re-reading of other texts).¹⁵

Zeph. 1:2-3 refers to the creation, expulsion from Eden and the flood in Gen. 1-11;
Zeph. 2 refers to the Table of Nations in Gen. 10;
Zeph. 1-3 contains various allusions to Deut.

But above all, Zephaniah utilizes expressions of other prophets: see 1:2-3, 7, 12-13, 15, 18; 2:2-3, 8-9, 14-15; 3:3-4, 10-11, 14, 17, 19 (BJ with the marginal references); also 1:9 with Amos 3:10; 2:10 with Jer 48:29.¹⁶

The use of Zephaniah in the NT focuses on the apocalyptic texts:

Zeph. 1:3 → Mat 13:41
Zeph. 1:14-18 → Apoc 6:17
Zeph. 3:8 → Apoc 16:1
Zeph. 3:13 → Apoc 14:5

The Benedictine hymn from the 12th Century, *Dies irae, dies illa*, revised by the Franciscan Tomás de Celano (13th Century), based on Zephaniah 1:14-16, formed a part of the Missale Romanum for funerals and has been translated into many languages (see Trinity Hymnal 242). Christian painting has many examples of Zephaniah scrutinizing the city of Jerusalem with his lamp (see Zeph. 1:12, where it is God himself who inspects the city, and with lamps, plural).

Charismatic Chorus/Pentacostal (Zephaniah 3:17, RV):

The Lord your God is in your midst – a warrior who gives victory;
He will rejoice over you with gladness – he will renew you in his love;
He will exult over you with loud singing.

Note : Puesto que “Jehová” repite un error medieval en cuanto al nombre sagrado de Dios, es mejor ser fiel al texto Hebreo; “*Yahvéh tu Dios está en medio de ti...*” (O “El Señor”).

As to the rest, it is notable how often Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality, arising from the marginalized circles of society and characterized by great sexual repression, focus on the most erotic texts of the Bible, as in this case. Since the text of Zeph 3:17 celebrates the conjugal union of Yahweh, the Liberating God, with the city (literally “daughter”, 3:14) of Zion/Jerusalem, previously abandoned for being unfaithful (The Exile, provoked by oppression and idolatry), but now reunited again in the Holy Land. Thus, Zephaniah 3:17, like → Song of Songs, shows a very positive activity relative to sexual pleasure in the context of justice, authenticity and mutual love.

Ethiopia/Cush and Zephaniah’s Possible African Origins :

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W. Ahlström. JSOTSup 190, ed. S. W. Holloway and L. K. Handy, 45-70 and 238-251. (For summaries, see Ulrike Bail and Judith Sanderson in the bibliography below)

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End Notes

1. Sanderson 1998:241
2. Sanderson 1998:241; Ulrike Bail 1999:360
3. Sanderson 1998:240
4. Sanderson 1998:241
5. David Pleins 2001:395
6. George E. Mendenhall "Humility". *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. George A. Buttrick, ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1962, III, 659, quoted in Pleins
7. Hanks 1983:31
8. Sanderson 1998:241
9. Sanderson 1998:240
10. Ulrike Bail 1999:363-365
11. Sanderson 1998:241
12. Sanderson 1998:241-242; see also Margarita Pintos "Pride" in Russell and Clarkson, ed. 1996:226-227, with bibliography
13. Sanderson 1998:241
14. Elsa Tamez, 1991ab
15. Adele Berlin 1994:13-17
16. Adele Berlin 1994:15-16