

## Zephaniah; or, The Threefold Jerusalem

Ulrike Bail

in: *Feminist Biblical Interpretation. A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Book of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, translated by Lisa E. Dahill e.a., Grand Rapids / Michigan / Cambridge, U.K. 2012, 450-459.

Zephaniah — the prophet with the lantern in the streets of Jerusalem. This is how the prophet Zephaniah is portrayed in medieval Christian iconography (Zeph 1:12). The medieval line *dies irae, dies illa* from the *Requiem for the Dead* of the Roman Missal can be traced back to him. It is a text full of rage and judgment. Both reminiscences, taken together, allow the dark image to emerge of a person crying out in the streets and houses of Jerusalem to announce a martial razzia of God on the day of wrath. Does this image match the content of the prophetic book of Zephaniah? Is Zephaniah 1:12 the key verse for the whole book? Who is the prophet whose name can be translated “YHWH hid/protected”?

The medieval Christian reception of the book reduces its message to the pronouncement of judgment and punishment. But a close reading of the prophetic book shows a wealth of theological statements that cannot be reduced to the *dies irae* message. Zephaniah accuses the Jerusalem upper class of injustice and of oppressing and exploiting the poor. He criticizes accommodation to “alien” customs in the cult practices and everyday life. He speaks in military images of God’s judgment against his own people and against foreign peoples; he demands a humane and just social order in the hope that destruction might perhaps be averted. He speaks of the remnant of Israel that will survive the judgment, of the conversion of the peoples, worldwide peace, and the end of poverty, and he outlines the “project of a society without social distinctions or domination” (Gorgulho 1991, 85).

The message of the prophet is not linear; the threefold prophetic scheme of announcement of doom for Israel, doom for the foreign peoples, and salvation for Israel does not occur in such clear form. The individual parts of the book are constructed concentrically. A long process in the tradition of the text formed the prophetic book, reworked its production and reception, and updated it (Lohfink 1984; Weigl 1994; Zenger 1995). Its origins date presumably from before the exile into the time of the exile. This is reflected in the shifts of emphasis within the book. Threatening words are followed by promising words; future times are a central theme and then — read from the point of view of the book’s conclusion (3:16-20)

— are understood as past times. God speaks alternatively in the first-person singular and then as a prophetic voice from the perspective of an observer. Threatening, satirical (Seybold 1985), comforting, and rejoicing voices can be heard. The prophetic voices speak within differing discourses in order to react to the failure of the Jerusalem elite and the threat of Assyria. These discourses are woven together in the motif of the “day of God” (NRSV 1:14: “The great day of the LORD”), which is expressed in cosmic, topographic, and military as well as sociological terms. At the same time, the day of God cannot be clearly fixed in any particular time frame. Instead, it is a time in which places and groups of people are reevaluated and brought into different relationships with one another; a time in which — metaphorically speaking — the margins move to the center. Jerusalem as center, and the center of Jerusalem, is the main theme of the book. Both in terms of content and topography, this is the focus of the whole book. But the quality of the center can only be determined by defining the relationship between the center and the spaces surrounding it. One must look at how the center relates both to the margins that are closer in and those more distant; how the center relates to the people who act in certain ways at the margins and in the center. Jerusalem as center holds within itself the potential for both violence and justice.

#### Zephaniah, a Prophet of Ethiopian Origin?

The heading of the book locates Zephaniah’s origin four generations back, which is unusual for a prophet. Accordingly, the prophet would have been speaking during the rule of Josiah (641-609 B.C.E.). There is controversy about any more precise dating of his activity (Zenger 1995, 421; Mason 1994, 35ff.; Seybold 1991, 87-88). Mason argues against the attempts to locate the book in a specific historic period by asserting that the principal interest of the prophetic message is theological, not historical, and that there are too few historical references (Mason 1994, 41-42). “It is probably a mistake to attempt to isolate a prophet, and certainly a prophetic book, in a single historical context. Whoever he was and whenever he lived, tradition saw him as a much more universal figure who went on speaking to each successive generation; and the book reflects this belief. The force of his message for their own day was the readers’ concern, not his personal biography of the history of the times in which he lived” (Mason 1994, 43).

Nevertheless, there remains a tension between the first and the last name of the genealogy of the prophet, between his father Cush, possibly a black Ethiopian, and his great-great-grandfather Hezekiah, possibly king of Judah. The research resolves this tension by assigning the name Cush to a Bedouin tribe, by attributing no ethnic relevance to it at all (cf. Rudolph 1975, 258-59), or by not identifying Hezekiah as a king. However, some have considered whether the name Cush is not significant after all. Sanderson sees Cush as a black slave in Jerusalem (Sanderson

1992, 225). Rice sees Zephaniah as a prophet of Israel with Ethiopian and royal ancestry (Rice 1979/80). Feminist exegesis emphasizes that the categories of gender, social position, and ethnic origin of an author relate to his or her literary work. Thus the social and ethnic location of the prophet Zephaniah in Jerusalem society would be of crucial importance. But aside from the observation that Zephaniah is well informed about the topography of Jerusalem and the dominant elite (royal court, officials, priests, prophets, merchants) and has a certain interest in Ethiopia (Zeph 1:1; 2:12; 3:10), nothing can be said about his person.

Whether his Ethiopian origins possibly indicate a marginalized position in society and whether this can be connected substantively with a reevaluation of the poor as a historic force for liberation from imperialistic domination (see Gorgulho 1991) must remain an open question.

**"I Will Cut Off from This Place . . ." (1:4)**

I will gather up everything, yes, everything,  
and remove it from the face of the earth!<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins Zephaniah. While in this opening line we hear an association with "harvest," reading further leads us to understand God's action in reality as destruction, as a taking back of creation (1:2-3). The totality of the animal world (animals on the land, in the air, and in the water), the earth (*ʿādāmā*), and human beings (*ʿādām*) is affected. Also mentioned are those (third-person feminine plural) who "cause the wicked to stumble" (1:3). To avoid the irritation of this feminine ending, editors frequently attempt to conjecture the following reading: "I will make the wicked stumble," or omit it entirely as an act of textual criticism (see examples in Rudolph 1975, 259-60; Weigl 1994, 5-6). Does the participle refer to the animals, "in which case the writer is thinking of images of gods in the form of animals and with heads of animals (as in Egypt)" (Rudolph 1975, 262; Seybold 1991, 92; Weigl 1994, 8), or is the writer thinking of female human beings? If so, which ones, and what are they doing, exactly? It seems that no answer is possible; what remains is the question, the irritation.

Into this cosmic dimension comes the threat to Judah and Jerusalem that begins with verse 4:

I will stretch out my hand against Judah,  
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
and I will cut off from this place

1. NRSV: "I will utterly sweep away everything / from the face of the earth, says the LORD." Our more literal translation includes the reference to the harvest metaphor.

the priests who change the religious practice (1:4-5), and those who carry on this practice and who, according to the prophet, "have turned back from following the LORD" (1:6); the court society that has taken on alien ways and whose behavior is characterized by fraud and violence (1:9); rich men who misuse God to legitimate uninhibited amassing of capital (1:13), and wealthy homeowners. The list of figures among the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem is continued in chapter 3. There, too, their asocial behavior is criticized. The princes, the judges, the prophets, and the priests are all criticized and their downfall is foretold. They are to be removed from the city of Jerusalem: "For then I will remove the arrogant braggarts from your midst" (3:11).<sup>2</sup>

The day of God is not a generalized day on which the world will come to an end; instead its criterion is justice. Zephaniah does not separate religious and societal behavior; social status and the relationship to God belong together. Recognizing this makes it impossible to avoid seeing that the social and religious elite is characterized by injustice, dishonesty, and violence, and uses an alleged silence of God to legitimize their actions (1:12). The prophet does not find trust in God or observance of his community-building ordinances among the elite of society. Thus he sees a connection between social status and the relationship to God.

On the day of God, justice will enter into the middle of Jerusalem (3:5).<sup>3</sup> The lanterns God uses to search out the exploitative and unjust political and religious elite to call them to account have their counterpart in the light that is associated with God's justice, which he brings every morning (3:5). The day of the Lord does not bring the same thing for every man and woman; it has different outcomes for those who stomp on social justice and community and for those who live at the margins of society, poor and powerless (cf. Ebach 1985).

**"I Will Leave in the Midst of You a People,  
Lowly and Impoverished"<sup>4</sup> (3:12)**

While the rich and powerful are told they will be driven out of the midst of Jerusalem, the poor and lowly remain in the center of Jerusalem (3:12). The words *ānī* and *dal* indicate an economic situation rather than referring to a mental attitude.

The context does not allow the widespread view that the text refers only to humble people, the "poor in spirit" or those "poor in the eyes of God," rather than to truly impoverished people. Such ideas do exist throughout the ancient oriental world, but this context does not indicate their presence here. The narra-

2. NRSV: "for then I will remove from your midst / your proudly exultant ones."

3. NRSV: "The LORD within it [Jerusalem] is righteous; / he does no wrong."

4. NRSV: "humble and lowly."

tive speaks of real rich people and thus also of real poor people, and it is only on condition that this is understood that the connection can be made to the attitudes of pride and humility. This applies to all parts of the book. (Lohfink 1984, 107 n. 6; cf. Gorgulho 1991, 83-84; Weigl 1994, 258ff.; on the other hand see Neef 1996, 154)

The beginning of the section about the poor (2:1) provides further evidence for understanding the poor as socially marginalized groups. The verb *qšš* signifies the "activity of people existing at the margins of society" (Weigl 1994, 269). In Exodus 5:7, 12 as well as in 1 Kings 17:10, 12 *qšš*, meaning "the gathering of stubble and straw," refers to forced labor by exploited people. In Exodus 5, Pharaoh increases the repression and exploitation of the laborers by no longer delivering straw to the Israelites, so that they must gather it themselves in laborious effort. In 1 Kings 17, the verb refers to utmost physical distress and poverty of the widow of Zarephath. The Israelite slaves in Egypt and the poor widow of Zarephath provide concrete examples to illustrate who the poor are in Zephaniah: women and men at the margins of society and surviving at a marginal level (cf. Bird 1996, who, in contrast, believes the prophetic reference to the poor always means the poor man). The place of the poor and those at the margins is juxtaposed to the "midst" of Jerusalem. A life in the midst of excess and power is contrasted with a life at the margins of survival; Jerusalem as a traditional place of the presence of God is juxtaposed with a place outside, in the country, where God is present in the form of his just order.

But it must also be said that being at the margins does not in itself bring salvation. To be sure, the prophet sees God's justice (*mišpāt*) being realized there (Zeph 2:3), but the oppressed people in this place are challenged to turn to God:

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,  
who do his commands;  
seek righteousness, seek humility;  
perhaps you may be hidden  
on the day of the LORD's wrath.

Salvation is preceded by a "perhaps," and the "perhaps" is preceded by the seeking of God. But this means recognizing God's presence "as source of justice on all levels of economic, political and ideological life. . . . Seeking justice means changing the entire social structure of domination" (Gorgulho 1991, 84-85).

The process of transformation that allows the center of the city to become a place of peace and truth (3:13) begins at the margins, where no silversmiths are at work but where, on the contrary, straw is gathered for survival. No longer will the rich and the violent inhabit the center of the city, but justice (3:5), God as king (3:15), and the lowly and humble (3:12). Jerusalem will become the place where there will finally be no more oppression or exploitation, no deceit or lying, no act

of violence or poverty. Even if the prophet hopes for God's presence solely among the poor and lowly, this does not imply a legitimization of poverty. Poverty and closeness to God are not automatically connected with one another. "God does not want the end of his ways with his people to be misery, but wealth and blessing" (Lohfink 1984, 108) — but this orients us toward God's justice and law — "which can be described in the image of a herd of sheep moving across the meadow and lying down in the evening without having to be afraid of being startled out of their sleep (3:13b)" (Lohfink 1984, 108). A radical social and political shift precedes this peace — a change of conditions that Hannah sings about in 1 Samuel 2.

**"And to Him Shall Bow Down, Each in Its Place,  
All the Coasts and Islands of the Nations" (Zephaniah 2:11)**

It is not only nationally defined spaces that Zephaniah organizes around Jerusalem as center; he also includes the neighboring peoples of Israel in his view (2:4-15). He names the peoples in all four directions of the compass, and threatens them with destruction: the Philistines to the west, the Moabites and Ammonites to the east, the Cushites to the south, and Assyria and Nineveh to the north. They will all be laid waste and become uninhabitable, steppe-like landscapes. While the geographical focal point of this listing of place-names is Jerusalem, in terms of textual structure, the actual midpoint of the text is 2:11c. Where the east-west axis and the north-south axis meet, the text mentions the islands of the peoples:

And to him shall bow down,  
each in its place,  
all the coasts and islands of the nations. (2:11)

This creates a tension between the nearby regions, on one hand, and the islands, the "coastal margins of the earth" (Seybold 1991, 107; cf. Lohfink 1984, 104; Weigl 1994, 127ff.), on the other, between the threat of destruction close by and the turning to God in distant places. And these faraway marginal zones are brought to the center of the text, as it were, right next to Jerusalem.

In the midst of the destruction, Zephaniah names places where there is hope for salvation and preservation: "Not in the center, in the metropolis of Jerusalem, and not among the peoples surrounding Judah, but precisely in those places where one would least expect it: among the 'poor of the land'<sup>5</sup> (Zeph 2:1-3) and — literally — at the end of the world (Zeph 2:11)" (Weigl 1994, 134). Both marginal groups become "allies" who have a positive relationship with God. Chapter 3 clearly says these marginal groups will move to the center (3:10, 12). Beginning with the peo-

5. NRSV: "humble of the land."

ples at the greatest distances, the peoples of the world will call upon the name of God, will honor God with one voice (Hebrew: shoulder to shoulder) (3:9), and will bring offerings to God from afar (3:10).

As the margins become the center, the center is changed. Jerusalem is no longer the city characterized by violence, oppression, deceit, and exploitation, but a city in which God and his justice dwell. It is only with the orthopraxis of the marginalized that Jerusalem becomes a place where God's presence is realized as justice and peace.

### Desolate Cities and a Threefold Jerusalem

The threat of destruction of the Philistine cities in the west (2:4) is described with the words:

For Gaza shall be deserted,  
and Ashkelon shall become a desolation;  
Ashdod's people will be driven out at noon,  
and Ekron shall be infertile.<sup>6</sup>

Through literal translation of the text, it becomes clear that the fate of the cities is being described as women's fate (Seybold 1991, 104-5; 1985, 43ff.). The cities are compared to an abandoned (*zb*), and therefore vulnerable, woman, a desolate woman who has been raped (*šmm*) (cf. Bail 1998, 196ff.), one who has been driven out or deported (*grš*), and finally to an infertile (*qr*) woman who has no future any more. In several places in the Hebrew Bible, a conquered and destroyed city is brought into the picture personified as a woman who suffers (sexual) violence (e.g., Lamentations; Nahum; cf. Seifert 1997, 237ff.; Bail 1998, 175ff.). Is this a way of calling attention to the fate of real women when cities are conquered, or is the suffering of these women rendered invisible precisely by the female personification of the city as an abstraction of real women?

Jerusalem, too, is characterized as a city personified as a woman. In Zephaniah 3:14 she is addressed as "daughter" and called upon to rejoice and be glad about her salvation. Seifert (1997, 292) points out that these words of the prophet nevertheless presuppose the androcentric idea that without God, the daughter Jerusalem/Zion remains without protection. The city as woman "appears as a daughter who is completely dependent on the satisfaction and care of her father: She was ashamed of her deeds when YHWH was angered about her behavior and punished

6. The German text has gender-specific feminine forms and images for all three cities where the NRSV uses adjectives: Gaza is *eine Verlassene*, a deserted woman; Ashdod is referred to as *sie* (she); and Ekron is "infertile," where the NRSV has "uprooted."

her. After her successfully completed punishment, she no longer needs to be afraid. Because YHWH is again pleased with her and is once again by her side, all distress has ended (cf. Zeph 3:17).” It is striking, however, that the book of Zephaniah only begins to speak of the personified daughter Jerusalem/Zion when Jerusalem has become a city of justice (3:14). Violence, oppression, and the unlawful amassing of capital and real estate are attributed solely to concrete male groups of the population. Jerusalem “seems to be more than the sum of its evildoers for the prophet” (Weigl 1994, 262). Only when these have been removed from the city can Jerusalem become a city of social justice with open gates. The men and women living there can be compared with the Israelite slave men and women in Egypt and with the widow of Zarephath. They are the marginalized people of that time, the women, men, and children driven to the margins. Zephaniah’s speaking about Jerusalem is not one-dimensional; he seems to speak in several discourses. Jerusalem is not only a daughter, but it is more than the sum of its male evildoers, being described in both urban and rural *topoi*.

The series of cities and peoples listed in Zephaniah 2 finds its culmination in the description of the destroyed and desolate (*šmm!*) city of Nineveh. It has become a desert, a city of ruins uninhabited by human beings. Here, too, there is a hint of personification of Nineveh as a woman when we read in Zephaniah 2:15:

Is this the joyous city  
that sat secure on her throne,  
who said in her heart:  
“I and no one else!”<sup>7</sup>

But she, too, is desolate and abandoned, and calls forth terrified horror. Zephaniah 3:1 then introduces a lamentation over a dead city. Only in reading further does it become clear that the text no longer refers to Nineveh, but to Jerusalem. Between the lines, Jerusalem is put on an equal footing with Nineveh, with radical clarity, rendered even stronger by the cry of lament “Woe” (*hōy*). The narrative creates an “associative bridge” (Lohfink 1984, 104) between Nineveh and a city that is still alive, but full of violence, whose death is being lamented. In this subtle, underhanded way, Jerusalem’s alternatives are announced in drastic terms.

Yet still another image is added. Jerusalem is introduced in Zephaniah 3:1 in a cry of lament for the dead containing three participles. This linguistic usage opens up several semantic possibilities: “Woe! Soiled/glittering and defiled/redeemed, the city of violence/a dove!”<sup>8</sup> “Depending on how they are pronounced, the words used here change their meaning. . . . In this way the saying becomes transparent,

7. NRSV: “Is this the exultant city / that lived secure, / that said to itself, / ‘I am, and there is no one else?’”

8. NRSV: “Ah, soiled, defiled, / oppressing city!”



and two images of the city become visible. One in the foreground is of a dirty, guilt-ridden, violent city in the present; another in the background is a glorious, redeemed and beloved ('dove' as term of affection) city of the past. A third image is suggested in the cry of lament: a dead city of the future. That is the history of Jerusalem in images" (Seybold 1991, 110; cf. Seybold 1985, 55-56; Weigl 1994, 135ff.).

Jerusalem in itself does not possess the qualities of salvation or the presence of God. The city's territory is open in three directions. It will become an uninhabitable desert if it continues to harbor violence and oppression within its walls, or it can become a peaceful and nonthreatening place of grazing if it allows justice and lawfulness to dwell in its midst. A third dimension announces itself between the lines: Zephaniah holds fast to the vision of Jerusalem as the city of God, a vision nourished by his past experiences and pointing to the future. The physical space of the city itself, however, bears no character. It depends on the human beings and what they fill it with — the religious and political elite with violence, exploitation, and wealth on the one hand, or the impoverished at the margins of society with lawfulness, integrity, and social justice on the other. Zephaniah hopes for the presence of God in the city, contrary to all experience; he desperately hopes that God will turn the fate of humankind (Zeph 2:7; 3:20). Reading from the perspective of the beginning of the book, the prophet's writing makes every hope appear unfounded, and the day of God would seem to be the end of life on earth. Reading with the end of the book in mind, however, the day of God proves to be a new beginning that transforms Jerusalem into a city to which it is said:

As king of Israel God is in your midst;  
you need fear/see no more evil.<sup>9</sup> (3:15)

Zephaniah sketches three Jerusalems: a city filled with deeds of violence and injustice whose circles of leadership he radically criticizes; a city in which a universal peace is realized and whose margins — the impoverished women and men bent with shame and the distant islands — become its center; and a Jerusalem where through the interplay of memory and hope is created a place of God's presence and the presence of human beings who make this presence concrete in the form of lawfulness and justice.

#### LITERATURE

- Bail, Ulrike. 1998. *Gegen das Schweigen klagen. Eine intertextuelle Studie zu den Klagepsalmen Ps 6 und Ps 55 und der Erzählung von der Vergewaltigung Tamars*. Gütersloh.
- Bird, Phyllis A. 1996. "Poor Man or Poor Woman? Gendering the Poor in Prophetic Texts." In *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies*, edited by

9. NRSV: "The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; / you shall fear disaster no more."

- Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra, 37-51. Festschrift for Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes. Leiden, New York, and Cologne.
- Dietrich, Walter, and Milton Schwantes, eds. 1996. *Der Tag wird kommen. Ein intertextuelles Gespräch über das Buch des Propheten Zefanja*. Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, vol. 170. Stuttgart.
- Ebach, Jürgen. 1985. "Apokalypse. Zum Ursprung einer Stimmung." *Einwürfe* 2:5-61.
- Gorgulho, Gilberto. 1991. "Zefanja und die historische Bedeutung der Armen." *Evangelische Theologie* 51:81-92.
- Lohfink, Norbert. 1984. "Zefanja und das Israel der Armen." *Bibel und Kirche* 39:100-108.
- Mason, Rex. 1994. *Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Joel*. Old Testament Guides. Sheffield.
- Neef, Heinz-Dieter. 1996. "Glaube als Demut. Zur Theologie des Propheten Zephania." *Theologische Beiträge* 27:145-58.
- Rice, Gene. 1979/80. "The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah." *Journal of Religious Thought* 36:21-31.
- Rudolph, Wilhelm. 1975. *Micha. Nahum. Habakuk. Zephania*. Kommentar zum Alten Testament, vol. 13, 3. Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Sanderson, Judith E. 1992. "Zephaniah." In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 225-27. London and Louisville.
- Seifert, Elke. 1997. *Tochter und Vater im Alten Testament. Eine ideologiekritische Untersuchung zur Verfügungsgewalt von Vätern über ihre Töchter*. Neukirchener Theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen, vol. 9. Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Seybold, Klaus. 1985. *Satirische Prophetie. Studien zum Buch Zefanja*. Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, vol. 120. Stuttgart.
- . 1991. *Nahum. Habakuk. Zefanja*. Zürcher Bibelkommentar, Altes Testament, vol. 24, 2. Zurich.
- Weigl, Michael. 1994. *Zefanja und das "Israel der Armen". Eine Untersuchung zur Theologie des Buches Zefanja*. Österreichische biblische Studien, vol. 13. Klosterneuburg.
- Zenger, Erich, et al. 1995. *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*. Kohlhammer Studienbücher, vol. 1, 1, 418-22. Stuttgart, Berlin, and Cologne.

Translated by Nancy Lukens