

THE *ĀNĀWĪM* IN THE PROPHECY OF ZEPHANIAH VIS-À-VIS THE POOR IN SPIRIT IN THE BEATITUDES (MATT 5:3)

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Abstract

*The book of Zephaniah opens with a vision of disaster, involving both Judah (1:4-6) and the outside world (1:2-3). The prophet identifies this disaster as “the Day of the Lord” (Zeph 1:7-18). He speaks of the Day of the Lord as a day that will shatter the nations (2:4-15) including Jerusalem (3:1-5). The prophet, however, leaves out a prospect of hope to those who repent and return to God. Zephaniah identifies those who will survive the approaching judgment as the “righteous remnant”. They are the pious Jew, the “poor and humble of the Land” (the *ānāwīm*), who place their trust in the Lord. With the prophet Zephaniah, poverty assumes a spiritual meaning. It is not a social state of being; it is a thing of the spirit which is opposed to pride and the attitude of self-sufficiency. Zephaniah’s teaching on the “poverty of the spirit” reflects Jesus’ teaching on the “poor in spirit” in Matt 5:3. This article studies the interface between the “Poor of the Lord” (*ānāwīm*) in the prophecy of Zephaniah and the “Poor in Spirit” in Matt 5:3. The work employs an exegetical method of biblical analysis. The Bible version employed in this work is the New Revised Standard Version.*

Keywords: *ānāwīm*, humility, poor of the Lord, poor in spirit, repentance, salvation

Introduction

The prophecy of Zephaniah follows a flowing style. Although the prophet announced judgment on the people, the ultimate concern of the book is undoubtedly redemption. Redemption is offered to those who repent and turn to Yahweh (2:11; 3:9–10). He calls on the people to “seek the Lord” that they may survive the approaching disaster (Zeph 2:3). He singles out a special group who will experience the promised redemption - the poor, the meek and humble who seek the Lord and trust in him.

In Zephaniah's prophecy, poverty is not a social state of being, rather poverty is opposed to pride and the attitude of self-sufficiency. The poverty of the spirit which is expressed in Zephaniah finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the NT (Matt 5:3). Like Zephaniah, Matthew uses the term, "poor in spirit" to mean an internal dependence on God in the face of external battles. The "poor" both in Zephaniah and in the Matt 5:3 refer to those who are humble and contrite of heart. Did Matthew borrow this idea from Zephaniah? This is part of the question this article sets out to address. This article makes a comparative study of the "Poor of the Lord" (*ānāwîm*) in Zeph 2:3; 3:12f and the "Poor in Spirit" (*hoi ptōchoi tō pneumatī*) in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3).

Author

Zephaniah is the ninth in the order of Minor Prophets. Nothing is known about Zephaniah except the little information revealed in the book that bears his name. The name Zephaniah (*šəphanyāh*) means "Yahweh has concealed" (Zeph 2:3; 3:12). The superscription identifies Zephaniah as the son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah (Zeph 1:1). This suggests that Zephaniah is the great-great-grandson of king Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18-20; 2 Chron. 29-32; Isa. 36-39). This would mean that Zephaniah is the second cousin of king Josiah¹ and thus implies that Zephaniah is of a royal ancestry. The prophet concerns himself only with the upper echelons of society - princes, judges, prophets, priests (1:8- 9; 3:3-4) - and not directly with the average Israelite. This suggests that Zephaniah is a "city prophet," like Isaiah and Micah before him. Unlike them, he does not allude to the lot of the poor, only to the misconduct of the religious and civil leaders.

Date and Historical Context

The ministry of Zephaniah is dated "in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah" (Zeph 1:1; 2 Kgs 22-23; 2 Chron 34-35). Josiah ascended the throne of Judah following the religiously disastrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon (2 Kgs 21; 2 Chron 33). Josiah is considered one of Judah's most admirable kings, famous for the sweeping religious reforms which he carried out in the land of Judah.²

During the reigns of his grandfather, Manasseh (695 - 642 B.C.) and his father, Amon (642 - 640 B.C.), Judah sank into moral and spiritual depths. Josiah's grandfather,

¹ L. Boadt. *Jeremiah 26-52, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Nahum, Old Testament Message*. Vol 10 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982): 209.

² Viv Randles. "13th December: 3rd Advent Narrative Sermon: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18." *Expository Times* 121, num 2 (2009): 79 (79-80).

Manasseh, is considered the worst of Judah's kings. Manasseh introduced infant sacrifice, idol worship, sacred prostitution, sorcery, and divination into Judah (2 Chron 33; 2 Kgs 21). 2 Kgs 21:16 states that "Manasseh shed very much innocent blood until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." When Amon (Josiah's father) took over the reign of Judah in 642 B.C., he continued the idolatrous policies of his father, Manasseh. Amon reigned only for two years. In the year 640 B.C., Amon was assassinated by his servants (2 Kgs 21:23; 2 Chron 33:24), and his 8-year-old son, Josiah, was made king (2 Kgs 21:24 - 22:2; 2 Chron 33:21-25). Josiah reigned between 640-609 B.C. By this time, the land of Judah was in desperate need of religious reform and spiritual awakening, and Josiah fulfilled this need.

2 Chron 34:3 reports that at the age of 16, Josiah began "to seek the God of his father David". In the 18th year of his reign, Josiah initiated the repair of the house of the Lord (2 Kgs 22:3-7). In this process, Hilkiah, the priest, discovered the lost book of the Law of Moses (which had been left on the shelf for so long, and ignored, that no one could remember where it was kept.). When Josiah realized what this was, and its importance, he assembled all the people of his land, and read the Book of the Covenant to them (2 Chron 34:29-30).

Josiah carried out significant religious reforms in Judah. He purged Judah of idolatry (2 Chron 34:3f), cleansed the Temple and revived the Passover celebration (2 Chron 34:3f; 2 Chron 35).³ Josiah's reforms were the most extensive of all the reforms that were attempted by any king who ever reigned over Judah. Zephaniah preached during the early reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Zephaniah's prophecy apparently had an influence upon Josiah and may have been instrumental to the reforms carried out by Josiah.

Literary Style of the Book

The book of Zephaniah is characterized by a distinctive poetic technique. Except for the superscription (Zeph 1:1), the entire collection of oracles is written in poetic form. Assonance and repetition are key poetic devices in this work. For instance, the introductory oracle on universal destruction (Zeph 1:2-6), repeats the word "sweep" (*'āsēph*) four times, twice in the opening verse for emphasis, "I will utterly sweep away" or "cut off humanity (*hā'ādām*) from the face of "the earth" (*hā'ādāmā^h*). The use of *'ādāmā^h* (earth) and "humans" (*'ādām*) in 1:3 is an example of paronomasia (a pun or play on words) or repetition of similar sounding words since the Hebrew for "earth" and "human" (*'ādāmā^h* and *'ādām*) sound very much alike.

³Al Maxey, "Zephaniah, The Minor Prophets, <http://www.zianet.com>.

The author employs much of metaphors and imageries. For instance, the impending doom is portrayed as “sacrifice (*zebah*),” the sinful Judah as “offering”, the invaders are referred to as “the invited guests”, and God, himself, is portrayed as the high priest (Zeph 1:7). The prophet refers to the Day of Yahweh as “Day of Wrath” or a “day of distress”. The corrupt officials and judges are called “roaring lions” (*’ārāyôt šō’āḡîm*) and “wolves” (Zeph 3:3), while God’s sure and righteous presence is likened to the dependability of the sunrise.⁴ God is also portrayed as king and victorious warrior (Zeph 3:17).

Message of Zephaniah

Theologically, Zephaniah is not innovative, rather he stands for mainstream Yahwism. Like Amos, Zephaniah was a prophet of justice. Like Jeremiah (Jer 2), Zephaniah (1:4ff) attacked the idolatry (especially the cult of Baal and the stars) that was prevalent in the reigns of Manasseh and Amon.

Oracles against Judah and Jerusalem (Zeph 1:2–2:4)

The prophet begins with an announcement of Yahweh’s decision to sweep away or cut off humanity from the face of the earth all creation (1:2f): “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth” (*mē’al pānê hā’ādāmā^h*, Zeph 1:2f). But the prophet does not say why God is threatening to wipe out both humans and animals “from the face of the earth”.

After this threat of universal judgment, Zephaniah quickly directs his attack on Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Then, he pronounces judgment on Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (1:4-6): “I will cut off” all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

In v.4b-6, the prophet cites the offenses for which Judah is coming under divine judgment. These include (1) idolatry (Zeph 1:4b), especially the cult of Baal and Milcom and astral cults) that was prevalent in the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. This practice was, at least for a while, eliminated by the Josian reforms of 622 B.C. This same cultic aberration was denounced by Elijah two hundred years earlier (1 Kgs 18). Other cultic infractions include the worship of astral gods and goddesses, a cult very typical of the Babylonian and Assyrian cultures (cf. Jer 8:2; 19:13; 32:29; Ezek 8:16; Deut 4:19).⁵ (2) Syncretism, i.e., mixing the worship of Yahweh with the worship of other gods - namely,

⁴ R. A. Bennett. *The Book of Zephaniah. New Interpreter’s Bible* 7. L. E. Keck (Ed). (Nashville: Abingdon. 1996): 667

⁵ L. Boadt, Jeremiah 26-52, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Nahum, *Old Testament Message* vol 10. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982): 209; R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament, An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991): 235.

“the host of the heavens” and Milcom (Zeph 1:5). These idolatrous acts were rampant during the reign of Manasseh and Amon, who giving in to Assyrian pressure, permitted many foreign religious and social customs to permeate the land (2 Kgs 21). These were the practices that Josiah sought to remove (2 Kgs 23). (3) Indifference to God, i.e., not calling on God or thinking that God does not care (v.6b).

These sins enumerated above, infringed on the Sinai covenant which places on the Israelites an obligation of exclusive loyalty to Yahweh alone. Whereas obedience leads to life in the land of promise, disobedience leads to expulsion from the land, bondage, and death (cf. Deut 28).⁶ For these sins, Zephaniah announced that Yahweh’s judgment will particularly fall on Judah’s elite classes (the leaders, the priests, and the teachers) for failure to lead the people in the path of obedience to God (1:6).

Warnings of the Coming Day of the Lord (Zeph 1:7-18)

The major theme of Zephaniah’s oracles is the dawning of the “day of the Lord” (*yôm-yhwh*) which the prophet says is “near and hastening fast” (Zeph 1:14). In a manner reminiscent of Amos, Zephaniah conceived of the day of the Lord as imminent, a day of terror, a day of darkness and devastation; a day of distress and anguish (Zeph 1:2-18; cf Amos 5:18ff; Isa 2:12ff). The Israelites had believed that the Day of the Lord would be a day in which God will defend Israel against its enemies. Amos, however, announced that the day of the Lord would be a day of judgment for sinful Israel (Amos 5:18-20). According to Zephaniah, the day of the Lord is a day when the righteous God will visit all creation with judgment for sin. This judgment is universal; it encompasses all creation - everything “on the face of the earth” (*kōl mē’al pānê hā’āḏāmā^h*) – humans and animals, birds of the air and fish of the sea (Zeph 1:2-3).

The first of Zephaniah’s alarms centers on Jerusalem. It is a day of destruction for the unfaithful and deliverance for the faithful. The prophet announces the approach of God’s instrument of chastisement from the north (Zech 1:10). The Hebrew prophecy tended to employ the term ‘north’ as a symbol for national catastrophe (cf. Jer 6:22; Ezek 38:15). For instance, Jeremiah signaled the rising of JHWH’s instrument of vengeance on Judah from “the land of the north” ... “armed with bow and spear” cruel and pitiless; riding horses, who “are ready to fight against” Judah, “daughter of Zion” (Jer 6:22-23). Ezek 38:15 also spoke of the imminent approach of a great army of countless troops all mounted” coming from the “remotest parts of the north” to “invade Israel.” Yahweh’s

⁶ R. A. Bennett. *The Book of Zephaniah. New Interpreter’s Bible* 7. 1996): 662.

threatened judgment on Israel/Judah, which consists of attack from foreign invaders, “display” his holiness to them (Ezek 38:15-16). Yahweh does not tolerate sin.

Zephaniah, however, looked forward to the survival of a faithful, humble remnant within that decadent society. He maintains that only the humble and the lowly (*‘ānî wādāl*), the “*anawim*” (the poor of the Lord, (*kol-‘anwê hā’āreṣ*), who seek refuge in God will be saved (Zeph 3:12f). In the face of the imminent day of judgment Zephaniah summoned the people to conversion: “...seek righteousness, seek humility” in order to survive the approaching onslaught (Zeph 2:3; cf Am 5:14f; Isa 2:10ff). This reflects the famous threefold admonition is found in Mic 6:8 on what does the Lord require of them: to “do justice (*‘āsōt mišpāt*),” and “to love kindness (*‘ahābāḥesed*),” and “to walk humbly with your God (*haṣnē^{ac} lekeṭ ‘im-’ēlōhe’kā*)”.

Earlier, Amos had admonished the people to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) so that they might survive the terrible Day of Yahweh. Jeremiah, too, held out the hope of survival to those who trust in the Lord (Jer 39:17a, 18b NRSV). Like Amos, Zephaniah sees a possibility of deliverance if the people repent and turn to God. He calls on the people to “Seek the Lord ... seek righteousness, seek humility” so that they might avert the approaching wrath of the Lord (Zeph 2:3).

Zeph 2:5–3:8 Oracles against the Nations

Zeph 2:5-3:8 is titled, “oracles against the (foreign) nations.”⁷ This passage lists four nations that will come under God’s judgment: the Philistine cities to the west (vv. 5-7); Moab and Ammon to the east (vv. 8-11); Cush/Ethiopia to the south (v. 12); and Assyria to the north (vv. 13-15). These four nations stand for all the nations of the world. They are to be punished because of their pride (*gā’ôn*, Zeph 2:10; cf. Isa 16:6). These oracles open with the exclamatory cry *hōy* which is translated as “ah”, “alas” or “woe” (Zeph 2:5; 3:1).

In the oracle against the Philistines (vv.4-7), Zephaniah names four of the five cities of the Philistine Pentapolis (i.e., the five-city league). All these cities had suffered attack and destruction many times in the past from Assyrian and Egyptian armies. Gaza, the missing city, had been destroyed by the Judean king Uzziah about 760 B.C.⁸ The oracle against Moab and Ammon (vv.8-11) is often considered a post-exilic addition that reflects the animosity of Judah towards its neighbours who began moving into its land or helping its

⁷ The oracle against the nations is a standard part of the prophetic repertoire, occurring in Amos 1–2, Isa 13–23, Jer 46–51, and Ezek 25–32.

⁸ L. Boadt. Jeremiah 26-52, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Nahum, Old Testament Message vol 10 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982): 216.

enemies during the exile.⁹ Moab and Ammon are charged with taunts and threats against God's people and the land of Israel (Zeph 2:8). The punishment on Moab and Ammon is given in 2:9: "Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever." The oracle against Ethiopia (2:12) is fragmentary: "You also, O Ethiopians, shall be killed by my sword." We are not told the specific offence of Ethiopia that merit such a damning judgment.¹⁰

In 2:13-15, the last of the four oracles is directed against Nineveh, capital of Assyria. Assyria is particularly charged with pride. Assyria is denounced for considering herself as divine (Zeph 2:15). Assyria's punishment is spelt out in v.13: God "will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria; and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert" (v. 13). Zephaniah's language is very close to the language of Nahum. Zephaniah, like Nahum, exults over the fall of Assyria's capital, Nineveh (Nah 3:19b; Zeph 2:15c).¹¹ The oracles against the nations affirm God's rule over the nations. As lord of the nations, God holds all peoples responsible for their actions. Earlier, Amos had indicted the nations for specific sins against humanity (Amos 1-2) and Israel for the acts of injustice against its own people. Amos foresaw that the expected day of the Lord would not be festivals of joyful blessing for Israel but of defeat and gloom (Amos 5:18-24). Like Amos before him, Zephaniah proclaimed the day of the Lord is not only a doomsday for the nations indicted, but also for sinful Judah (Zeph 1:7-2:4; 2:5-15).¹² But Zephaniah leaves out a hope of survival for those who repent.

Call to Repentance (Zeph 3:9-13)

Earlier, Zephaniah had spoken of the Day of the Lord as a day of judgment for sinful Judah. In 3:9-13, the tone changes from words of imminent doom to an oracle of hope for Judah. He announced the possibility of redemption for the faithful ones, "a people humble and lowly (*ānî wādāl*)", who trust in the Lord, "seek refuge" in him and obey his commands. Zephaniah promises grace and restoration for those who repent and return to God.¹³

These are a righteous remnant who will survive the devastating onslaught of the Day of the Lord (cf. 2:14-18). It is on account of their righteous living that God will have mercy on the people and bring about the salvation of many. We may see why De Vries refers to

⁹Ibid. p.218.

¹⁰Ibid. p.219.

¹¹ R. A. Bennett, *The Book of Zephaniah. New Interpreter's Bible 7*. L. E. Keck (Ed). (1996): 691.

¹²Ibid. p.688.

¹³ G. Fohrer. *Introduction to the Old Testament*.(Nashville: Abingdon. 1965):457-458.

their repentance as a vicarious repentance (Zeph 3:12-13).¹⁴ The prophet looked forward to the survival of a faithful, humble remnant within that decadent society (3:11-13).¹⁵ These are “the remnant of Israel” in whom there is “no wrong”, who “utter no lies” and in whose mouth there is no “deceitful tongue” (Zeph 3:12-13).

In the face of the imminent day of judgment, Zephaniah summoned the people to conversion. He admonished them to “seek Yahweh” (*baqqəšû ’et-yhwh*), “seek righteousness” (*baqqəšû šedeq*) and “seek humility” (*baqqəšû ’ānāwāh*) so that they may survive the approaching onslaught (Zeph 2:3). Those who seek righteousness are likewise defined as those who keep the law and who seek to do God’s revealed will.¹⁶

Earlier, Amos made similar calls to the people, admonishing them to “Seek good and not evil” (*diršû-tôb wə’al-rā’*) that they may live (Amos 5:14f). Isaiah, too, had told the people what to do to escape the imminent divine wrath: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:16-17a). Zephaniah’s call reflects the famous admonition found in Mic 6:8: “... what does the Lord require of you” only this, that you “do justice” (*’āsôtmišpāṭ*), “love kindness” (*’ahābathesed*), and “walk humbly with your God” (*hašnē^c leket ’im-’ēlōhe^ykā*)? Zephaniah sees a possibility of deliverance from the Lord’s wrath if the people repent (Zeph 2:3). The prophet maintains that the only people who will be saved are the humble and the lowly, the “*’ānāwīm*” i.e., “all the humble of the land” (*kol-’ānwe hā’āres*, Zeph 2:3), who seek refuge in God (Zeph 2:3).¹⁷ Zephaniah inaugurates the long development of the theological meaning of humility, poverty, and lowliness as contained in the Hebrew word ‘anawim’.¹⁸

Promise of Restoration (3:14-20)

The concluding oracle in 3:14-20 is a call on Jerusalem to rejoice: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion” (*ronnī baṭ-Šiyyôn*, Zeph 3:14). The reason for the call to rejoice is made clear in Zeph 3:15: “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned

¹⁴ J. De Viries. *The Book of Zephaniah. The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. C. M. Laymon (Ed). (Nashville: Abingdon.1971): 500.

¹⁵ T. S. Hadjiev, “The Theological Transformations of Zephaniah’s Proclamation of Doom,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 2014; 126(4): 508 (506–520). Also Available at t.hadjiev@qub.ac.uk. Accessed: 19/11/2021.

¹⁶ C. L. Taylor. *The Book of Zephaniah. The Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. 6. G. A. Buttrick (Ed). (New York: Abingdon. 1956): 1022.

¹⁷ J. K. West. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1971): 294.

¹⁸ C. Stuhlmueller. *Amos, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk*. (Bandra: St Pauls. 2001): 102.

away your enemies...you shall fear disaster no more.” Another reason for joy is that “the king of Israel, the Lord” (*melek yisrā’el yhw*) is in their midst. The message of hope reflects the announcement of release from the Babylonian captivity: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid” (Isa 40:2).

The book closes with the promise of restoration for the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast (Zeph 3:19). God promises to ‘deal’ with Israel’s oppressors, and to save the lame and gather the outcast. God will change their shame into praise. These promises reflect the sentiments of a post-exilic editor. This promise of salvation is not only made to Judah; it is universalistic in scope. God promises to bring his people (here referred to as “remnant of Israel” [*šā’erîṭ yisrā’el*]), home from all peoples of the earth and restore their “fortunes before your eyes” (Zeph 3:20). The remnant of Israel constitutes the nucleus of the eschatological Israel.

The “*ānāwîm*” Zeph 2:3; 3:12f

Zephaniah indicates those who will escape the judgment of God: the “humble and the lowly” (*ānî wādāl*, 3:12), the poor of the land (*kol-’anwê hā’āreṣ*), who seek refuge in God. While earlier prophets (Amos, Micah, Isaiah) condemned the evil people and corrupt practices which made poverty a reality in Israel and Judah, Zephaniah borrowed their vocabulary (Zeph 2:3 and 3:12) and reinterpreted it. With Zephaniah, the term “poor” (*ānî*) acquired a new spiritual meaning, and refers to a class of pious Jews - the lowly, the “*ānāwîm*”, the “humble of the land (*kol-’anwê hā’āreṣ*), who keep God’s commands (Zeph 2:3; 3:12f). Understood in this way, poverty in Zephaniah is opposed to pride and the attitude of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, poverty in Zephaniah is synonymous with faith, dependence and trust in the Lord.¹⁹

In Zephaniah, the *ānāwîm* refers to human quality or a social condition. It is a spiritual poverty which implies, as A. Gelin said, “total openness to God, absolute humility” obedience to God’s will.²⁰ According to Gerstenberger, as a quality, humility (*’ānāwāh*) is a value that should be sought like righteousness (*šəḏāqāh*) or wisdom (*hokmah*). Both humility (*’ānāwāh*) and righteousness (*šəḏāqāh*) are values by which one finds life. Thus, Zephaniah would exhort the Judahites to “seek righteousness” (*baqqəšû šedeq*), and “seek humility” (*baqqəšû ’ānāwāh*) that “they may be hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath”, i.e., that they may live (cf. Zeph 2:3). Other prophets before Zephaniah had made similar exhortations, urging the people to seek what is good, to seek Yahweh.

¹⁹ G. Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books. 1988): 169.

²⁰ A. Gelin. *The Poor of Yahweh*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. 1964): 34.

For instance, Amos exhorted the people to “Seek good and not evil (*diršû-tôb wə'al-rā*) that they may live (Amos 5:14-15; cf. Ps 27:8; 105:4). As Gerstenberger said, humility has practical consequences for the conduct of life and the role one plays. It is the wellspring of everything: fear of God, right attitude to riches, honour, and life. The virtue of humility (*ʿānāwāh*) is the acknowledgement of one’s proper status, not hypocritical false modesty. It is the human quality that makes it possible for people to live in harmony with the world.²¹

When Zephaniah talks of poverty or the poor of the land (*kol-ʿanwê hāʿāreš*), he is not talking about material poverty as an evil but about a poverty of spirit as a good. He does not call for the practice of voluntary poverty, rather he is calling on the people of Judah to put their trust in Yahweh (Zeph 1:14-15). However, while it is true that Zephaniah does spiritualize poverty, he does not ignore poverty as a social and economic problem. Zephaniah’s concept of poverty reflects Jesus’ teaching on the “poor in spirit” in Matt 5:3.

The Poor in Spirit (*hoi Ptōchoi tō Pneumati*) in Matt 5:3

The prophet Zephaniah had announced that God would remove the proud from his holy mountain (Zeph 3:11) and preserve “a people humble and lowly” (*ʿānî wādāl*) who seek refuge in the Lord (Zeph 3:12; cf. 2:3). The two words used to define the faithful remnant in Zephaniah are ‘humility’ and ‘lowliness’ - *ʿānî wādāl* (Greek: *praus* and *tapeinos*, Zeph 3:12; cf. 2:3). These same words feature prominently in Matt 11:28-29. Here Jesus welcomes all who are weary and heavy-laden, using the same Greek words *praus* and *tapeinos* (“humble and lowly”) used in the Septuagint of Zephaniah. In Zephaniah, the humble and lowly are people who seek the Lord and put their trust in God. It is a poverty in spirit which finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the New Testament.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus proclaims “the poor in spirit” (*hoi ptōchoi tō pneumati*) as blessed and declared that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). Matthew puts the beatitude concerning the *ptōchoi tō pneumati* at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The phrase, “poor in spirit” (*ptōchoi tō pneumati*) in Matt 5:3 reflects the same attitude of trust in God as the “humble and lowly” (*ʿānî wādāl*) in Zeph 3:12f. In the Greek translation, this first beatitude (“Blessed are the poor in spirit” [*makarioi oi ptōchoi tō pneumati*]) in Matt 5:3 stands in close relation to the third in Matt 5:5: “Blessed are the meek” (*makarioi oi praeis*). Both the “poor in spirit” (*ptōchoi tō pneumati*) and “the meek” (*oi praeis*) reflect Zephaniah’s “humble and lowly” (*ʿānî wādāl*). The

²¹ E. Gerstenberger. “ʿānā”. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 11. G. J. Botterweck (Ed). (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2001): 241 (Pp. 230-252).

Matthean “poor in spirit” express dependence not on the material security but on God. This is the same emphasis in Zephaniah.

Most scholars are of the view that the Hebrew term, *ānāwîm*, is an equivalent term for *ptōchoi tō pneumatī* in Matt 5:3, and that the terms can be used interchangeably.²² The term *ānāwîm* is used in Judaism to refer to the class of pious Jews. It is a designation for a group, and not a social state of being. Both Matt 5:3 and 5:5, as Bammel has said, contain the blessedness of the poor, and both verses contain two different additions which “together display the full breath of *ānāwîm* piety from purely earthly hopes.”²³

Both in Zeph 3:12f (cf. 2:3) and Matt 5:3, 5, the emphasis on poverty shifts from the material sphere to the spiritual sphere and hence to the religious sphere. Both in Zeph 3:12 and in Matt 5:3, the terms *ānāwîm* and *ptōchoi* point to the same attitude of trust and dependence on God. Matthew could be using the term, “poor in spirit” (*ptōchoi tō pneumatī*) to mean an internal dependence on God in the face of external battles. The poor in spirit, to Matthew, are those who are humble and contrite of mind.²⁴ This is the sense that Zephaniah used the terms *ānāwîm* or the “humble of the land” (*kol-‘anwê hā’āreṣ*).

The Gospel of Luke, too, stresses the important place of the “poor” in the ministry of Jesus. Luke introduces the theme of the rich and poor in the infancy narrative. For Luke, the preaching of Jesus opens, not with the blessing of the poor, but with the thematically used quotation from Isa 61:1, which makes *euangelion ptōchois* (“good news to the poor”) the specific task of Jesus (Lk 4:18a).

Contemporary Relevance of Zephaniah

Zephaniah’s main message is the coming of the Lord. In a world wracked by oppression and violence, Zephaniah proclaims hope. God is always close to those who love him. To those who look to the Lord for deliverance Zephaniah makes it clear that one day, God will turn their suffering into joy. This is an invitation to be steadfast in keeping God’s commandments.

²² O. A. Sopeju. “The Term - Poor in Spirit. In the Matthean Beatitudes: Its Sources and Position Within the Gospel of Matthew.” <http://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl>.

²³ E. Bammel. “Ptōchoi,” *TDNT* 6. G. Friedrich (Ed). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1968, p.904. (Pp.888-915).

²⁴ O. A. Sopeju. “The Term - Poor in Spirit. In the Matthean Beatitudes: Its Sources and Position Within the Gospel of Matthew.” <http://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl>.

Conclusion

The book of Zephaniah is a declaration of the tenderness of the love of God for the remnant of Israel. The prophet may not have “the universal sweep of later revelations as well as the depths of New Testament spirituality,” but “true spirituality” is embedded in his notions of the poor (*ānāwīm*), who seek the Lord and place their trust in him. In Zephaniah, the humble and lowly are people who seek the Lord and put their trust in God. It is a poverty in spirit which finds its highest expression in the Beatitudes of the New Testament. The Matthean “poor in spirit” express dependence not on the material security but on God. This is the same emphasis in Zephaniah’s. Both *ānāwīm* in Zephaniah and *ptōchoi* in Matthew (5:3) point to the same attitude of trust and dependence on God.

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