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The “Poor” in Zephaniah and First World Bias: Implications for Interpretation and Preaching

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Abstract

The crucial lines in Zeph 2:3; 3:12 state that a people described as ani and anawim (in Hebrew) will be saved from the coming wrath and left as a remnant faithful to the LORD.¹ These terms in Hebrew, however, may be rendered either metaphorically (i.e., the spiritually poor or “humble”) or more literally as those who suffer material poverty (i.e., the poor). To date, the majority of First World English translations render the term metaphorically, including major Catholic translations. This article will argue, following historical and lexical evidence, that the terms ani and anawim in Zeph 2:3 and 3:12-13 should be translated as those who are economically poor. The common translation of “humble” or “meek” in these verses represents a First World bias and should be rejected. Revision to the Catholic lectionary’s translation would correctly represent the historical meaning of the texts as well as inspire homiletic exhortations on Catholic social teaching.

Demonstration of the Problem

The crucial lines in Zeph 2:3; 3:12 state that a people described as *ani* and *anawim* (in Hebrew) will be saved from the coming wrath and left as a remnant faithful to the LORD. These terms in Hebrew, however, may be rendered either metaphorically (i.e., the *spiritually poor* or humble) or more literally as those who suffer material poverty (i.e., the poor). To date, the majority of First World English translations render the term metaphorically, including major Catholic translations (New American Bible, Jerusalem Bible, and in the lectionary [Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A]). A decision to translate metaphorically greatly influences the meaning of the passages:

¹ I use all caps with “LORD” here in order to appropriately translate the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter proper name of God in Hebrew (YHWH).

2:1-3: Gather, gather yourselves together, / O nation without shame! / Before you are driven away, / like chaff that passes on; / Before there comes upon you / the blazing anger of the LORD; / Before there comes upon you / the Day of the LORD’s anger. / Seek the LORD, all you humble (*anawim*) of the earth, / who have observed his law; / Seek justice, seek humility; / perhaps you may be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.” (NAB)

3:12-13: “But I will leave in your midst / a people humble (*ani*) and lowly (*dal*), / Who shall take refuge in the name of the LORD: / the remnant of Israel... / They shall pasture and couch their flocks / with none to disturb them.” (NAB, emphasis added)

To whom is the exhortation—and hope for salvation—directed? To the pious, or to the poor? The former emphasizes personal piety, the latter warns against economic injustice. As yet, there has not been an article-length study that engages the terms *ani* and *anawim* both from their lexical and historical progression as well as their literary context. This study will provide both historical and literary evidence to argue both that “poor” is the appropriate translation for *ani* and *anawim* in Zephaniah. Furthermore, this appropriate translation of “poor,” it is argued, serves to strip away First World bias in order to understand the original author’s intended message, as well as to underscore the social justice implications for preaching this text today.

“The spiritually poor are those people who humble themselves before God.”

Arguments for “humble”

King (1994, p. 419) argues that *ani* and *anawim* shifted in meaning from literal to metaphorical in ancient Israelite culture prior to Zephaniah’s proclamation (ca. 590 BCE) in a way similar to that of the Greek term *praus* (Bauder: 1986, p. 257). Vlaardingerbroek (1999, p. 203) prefers to view the *anawim* as “spiritually poor” who are contrasted with the haughty in 2:1; 3:11. He views this contrast as religious, not economic. The spiritually poor are those “people who humble themselves before God.” Citing Lev 19:15 (which

commands that the Israelites not judge one another based on wealth or poverty in courts of law), Vlaardingerbroek contends that God cannot have a preference for the poor, and therefore neither can Zephaniah.

Others (e.g., Robertson) presume “meek/humble” as the inferred meaning based on the prophet’s condemnation of pride in 2:15; 3:4. Sharp goes so far as to view the “poor” as a group of pro-Deuteronomistic loyalists of the LORD who have gone underground during the polytheistic administration of Manasseh (1996, p. 13-15). Still others (e.g., McComsky) do not even address the ambiguity of the terms *ani* and *anawim*.

Contra-“humble” arguments

Despite the preponderance of “humble” supporters, there remain significant problems with the position. First, there is no evidence of a considerable shift in meaning for *ani* and *anawim* prior to Zephaniah’s prophesying. On the contrary, there is significant textual proof that the terms maintained a literal meaning of material poverty, as will be shown further below. Second, the text of Lev 19:15 is concerned with humans judging one another superficially and does not preclude a divine preference for the poor. At any rate, the text was not necessarily correlated into its final authoritative form until after the Exile (ca. 500 BCE), making dubious its influence on Zephaniah’s preaching. Third, aside from pride, Zephaniah also condemns the wealthy and corrupt in 1:8-12 and 3:3-4.

“Amos and Zephaniah are demonstrating the poor to be ‘truly righteous.’”

Pro-“Poor” arguments

The similar use of the terms *ani* and *anawim* in Amos 2:7; 5:10; 8:4 supports the meaning of “poor” in Zephaniah. “Poor” then means those who “are without wealth and influence in society” and are therefore more dependent on the LORD than their wealthy counterparts (Kapelrud: 1975, p. 32-33). Kapelrud argues that the prophets Amos and Zephaniah are demonstrating the poor to be “truly righteous,” contrasted with the proud and haughty who rob from the poor

through unjust means. This foiling is also found in other prophets (Isa 3:44; 10:2; 14:32; Hab 3:14, among others) and Psalms (10:2, 9; 14:6; 18:28; 68:11; 72:2; 74:19). In each of the cases above, there is a clear meaning of economic poverty rather than a metaphor. Several of these passages occur from 750-550 BCE and so represent a relative context for Zephaniah’s understanding of *ani* and *dal*.

Weigl engages the Zephaniah texts from a social-historical perspective and develops a similar conclusion for the identity of the poor. The verb used in 2:3 “to gather” (*qashish*) may be a play-on-words that refers to the activity of gathering fodder from the fields—a role associated with lower socio-economic status (1994, p. 219). For Weigl, this is a term that was linked to poverty in the original hearers’ ears. Since the verb *qashish* has a reflexive sense, it appears that the people are to collect themselves. This is a change from understanding the proud and arrogant of gathering together for the destruction that ensues in 2:2.

Weigl’s translation makes more sense of the ending of v.1 (unloved people) and of the odd temporal markers in 2:2 (Weigl: 1994, p. 219; Sweeney: 2003, p. 102). Why would Zephaniah call for the people to gather together “before” the impending doom? Rather, if the poor are the focus of the exhortation, then the poor are called together before the doom described in v 2 so that they can seek God as directed in v.3. This perspective will be discussed in more detail in the exegetical section.

Third, the surrounding contexts of 2:3 and 3:12 support “poor” as the proper translation of *ani* and *anawim*. Whenever *dal* is found alongside *ani* or *anawim* in Biblical literature, as it is in Zeph 3:12, the terms refer to material poverty (see, e.g., Exod 30:15; 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 3:14; 10:2; 49:13; Am 2:7; Ezek 22:29, among others).

Finally, there is textual proof for a consistent meaning of “poor” for *anawim* and *ani*. Prior to 787 BCE, songs from 1 Samuel (2:8) and the prophets Isaiah (Isa 3:14; 10:2; 11:4; 14:32) and Amos (2:7; 4:1; 8:4) use the terms *ani* and *dal* in direct contrast to those who are materially wealthy and often take advantage of and rob the *anawim* through unjust means. The focus is entirely

“ If the poor are the focus of the exhortation, then the poor are called together before the doom....”

economic. Around the time of Zephaniah’s prophesying, ca. 586 BCE, Ezekiel (22:29) and Habakkuk (3:14) also use the terms in a setting that points to material poverty.

Following the Exile, the terms are used often in Second Isaiah (Isa 41:17; 49:13; 51:21; 54:11). Images of being parched for thirst, needing consolation, national powerlessness, and a contrast with precious stones all denote a meaning of economic weakness to portray the Exiles who return to Jerusalem. Around the same time, the prophet Zechariah (7:10) includes the *ani* among widows, aliens, and orphans, and the Priestly tradition in Exodus (30:15) contrasts the *ani* with the wealthy. Later in the Second Temple Era, 160 BCE-200 CE, an Aramaic derivative of *ani* is found in Qumran and later rabbinic writings to refer to material poverty (Plein: 1192, p. 1116).

Revised Translation and Comment (Zeph 2:1-3)

¹ *“Gather yourselves together [as stubble];*

be gathered together, undesirable people...!

² *Before the decision comes—*

The day passes over as dust.

Before!

—Lest the wrath of God’s anger come upon you.

Before!

—Lest the day of God’s anger come upon you.

³ *Seek the LORD, all the poor of the land who do his command.*

Seek righteousness.

Seek dependence.

Perhaps you will be forgiven on the day of the LORD’s wrath.” (AT)

Zeph 2:1-3 may be delimited as a unit. What precedes it is a closed entity, 1:2-18 (Smith, p. 129). Two declarations from God to destroy the earth in 1:2 and 1:18 create an envelope to delimit this section as a whole. Within this section

God decries the evils of Israel, focusing on the injustice the wealthy have perpetrated. There is mention of inappropriate cultic or idolatrous actions (1:4, 8, 12b), but by proportion, their crimes are more deviant in the economic sphere: they gain wealth by violence (9b), mis-measure gold (11), and become fat at others’ expense (12b). Ironically, their material goods are used against them. Although they have gained much through cruelty, still they can neither enjoy their wicked harvest (13), nor can their wealth save them—God will not be bought off by gold (18a). At chapter 2, we see a shift to a denunciation of the nations.

The second verse can be separated into three units, each beginning with the repeated temporal marker “before!” The words “before,” “decision,” “wrath,” and “the day,” all refer to the same event, namely, God’s impending destruction. The event is precipitated through a decision or decree. His exhortation that follows in 2:3 is meant to encourage the audience to seek the LORD “before” the decision is made. God’s will is as guaranteed as it is evident. There are connotations with the Noah-Flood story in this section. The idea of universal destruction and salvation for a mere few are present here and in Genesis 6-7. The alternating interjections (“before” and “lest the day...”) intensify the force of the impending doom. The alternation underscores the prophet’s main point: the prophet’s instructions must be carried out before the LORD’s decision is made. Let the LORD’s wrath come upon them.

“God’s will is as guaranteed as it is evident.”

The third verse is driven by its three imperatives. All have the same directive verb, “seek,” and the same object, God. The verb “seek” here refers back to those who had ceased to seek God and have turned instead to idolatry and injustice (1:5-6). Its impact on the poor/wealthy context comes from likely economic implications of idolatry. Those who were of high status and wealth in Israel at Zephaniah’s time would be encouraged to use some Assyrian culture and religion as status symbols. This exhortation then calls the audience to keep away from idolatry and continue to seek the LORD.

The first imperative is to seek the LORD, and is self-evident. This is developed in the second imperative “seek justice”, which given the corrupt state

of Israel, cannot possibly mean human justice. Rather it is the divine judgment and decision of God that the poor are to seek after. Humanity's corrupt judgment has brought about God's wrath. The extent of the meaning of this exhortation is clarified further in the final imperative, which is addressed further below. For now, it suffices to say Zephaniah is calling on the poor to accept God's supreme sovereignty and his decision to "make an end" of all those on earth (1:18) and even Judah (2:1). Salvation is still not guaranteed after the acquiescence, but it is only through this acquiescence that the poor have an opportunity to be saved (2:3b2).

In light of the LORD's impending judgment, the economically impoverished are in the best position to accept the LORD's sovereignty. As with Amos, the wealthy have become so at the expense of the poor. The poor were not guilty of these serious violations and so are given an opportunity to escape the coming destruction. The exhortation to seek dependence refers to the state of powerlessness within a corrupt social structure. The poor are to seek the LORD and depend on him in order to escape his wrath.

"In light of the LORD's impending judgment, the economically impoverished are in the best position to accept the LORD's sovereignty."

Revised Translation and Comment (3:12-13)

¹² *And I will leave in your midst
a people poor and deprived,
and they will seek refuge
in the name of the LORD.*

¹³ *The Remnant of Israel
will not pursue greed through violence,
and they will not speak lies,
and a false word will not be found
on their lips,
for they will rest and find pasture
and will have no anxiety." (AT)*

The section 3:12-13 acts as a culmination of the oracle in 3:6-15. This penultimate part of the book focuses on gathering together the poor of the nations with those of Israel. In 3:19 God says he will “deal with” the oppressors and save “the lame” and “the outcasts.” He will then give these low-status groups “praise and renown.” These groups parallel the “people poor and lowly” in 3:12 and do not appear to be “spiritually lame” or “outcasts from the law”—these terms are intended to have a cultural and literal meaning, not metaphorical.

This same phrase (*am ani w’dal*) is found in 2 Sam 22:28 and Ps 18:28. Those cases recognize a dichotomy, namely, that God rescues the poor but looks down on “those who are filled.” Regardless of their relation to one another, one redactor who used the earlier copy (whether the psalmist or the redactor of 2 Samuel) decided to maintain the wording and dichotomous meaning. They also both preserve the view that God rescues the poor but looks down on those who are “full.”

The term *ani* is used heavily amongst the prophets to describe those who are economically oppressed. The prophets often condemn the wealthy for misdeeds against those of low status. “The spoil of the poor is in [the wealthy person’s] house” (Is 3:14; also in 14:32). Ezekiel describes the crime bluntly as “oppression” when corrupt judges take advantage of the poor (22:29). Second Isaiah describes the exiles’ condition often as one of deprivation (Is 49:13; 51:21; 54:11). Their time of purification has set them in a low status position; they seek for water but find none (41:17), which is clearly a concrete, and not metaphorical, image of poverty. Zechariah blatantly groups *ani* among other low status groups that could easily be taken advantage of in courts: the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner (7:10).

The meaning of poverty for *dal* has never been questioned. This term describes those who are lifted from the dust and are contrasted with princes (1 Sam 2:8). Amos also contrasts the wealthy with *dal*, stating that the “fat cows of Bashan”, the wives of the corrupt judges, have also crushed the poor by accepting the fruits of the oppression (4:1). This meaning is carried forward into the post-

“God rescues the poor
but looks down on
those who are filled.”

exilic era. The priestly codes make exceptions and offer less costly sacrifices for the poor (Ex 30:15; Lev 14:21; 19:15). Both *ani* and *dal* are seen in Isa 10:2 and Am 2:7. In both cases the context demands a meaning of economic poverty. Since *ani* and *dal* are paired elsewhere, and given the consistent meaning of poverty for both words independently, it is reasonable to translate these words as denoting a concrete state of poverty and oppression.

In the second part of 3:12, the poor remnant now takes refuge in the name of YHWH. In Ps 64:11 the just are said to take refuge in the Lord, as opposed to the wicked who hurt the innocent and expect to not be caught. A similar instance is seen now in Zeph 3:12—the wicked had oppressed the poor and expected not to be caught (1:11), but the poor were exhorted to depend on the Lord (2:3) and now are to take refuge in him (3:12). There is a running theme here of irony. The wicked oppress the poor and shield themselves from worry about God; their destruction comes from their unwillingness to accept the judgment that is apparent in God’s command; in short, they “shut out” God. The poor, on the other hand, have nothing to depend on but God; human justice and mercy have abandoned them. The poor’s dependence on God is what truly saves them in the end, while the powerful ones’ rejection of God brings their doom.

“This ‘wickedness’ is described elsewhere as the opposite of justice.”

The name of the Lord has a rich tradition. In Mic 4:5 “to walk in the name of the Lord” is a manner of conduct. Joel 3:5 states all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Zephaniah uses this phrase again in 3:9 as it is seen in Joel 3:5: the peoples will be purified, and thus will be able to call on the name of the Lord, in order to serve him. A patron-client relationship is being established between Gentiles and God in Zephaniah as they are in Joel. R. Smith argues that Zeph 3 combines ideas from Gen 11 and Isa 6 and looked to a time when peoples would be purified to call on God’s name. The “scattered ones” (v 9) probably refers to the scattered nations (as it did in Gen 11) who are converted as Jerusalem is renewed (Smith: 1985, p. 141).

In 3:13 the Remnant of Israel is said to be gleaned as a vine and like a flock gathered together by God and given rest and time to graze (see also Mic

2:12). Both images are messianic and utopian. The reader will recall the remnant “of the house of Judah” (2:7) and “of my people” (2:9) from earlier in the text. Berlin follows Ben Zvi in distinguishing the two remnants of Judah and Israel (Berlin, p. 136). They believe the former is “a geographical or political concept,” whereas the latter is a “religious, ideological concept” (Berlin: 1994, p. 136; Ben Zvi: 1991, p. 334). But the distinction along these lines seems overly anachronistic. Israel did not separate its religious self from its national self prior to the exile. This shift came only after the kingdom of Israel was dissolved.

The key word which connects this phrase, and likely the entire book, to condemnation of misused power is *a’olah*. This “wickedness” is described elsewhere as the opposite of justice (Hos 10:13; Mic 3:10; Hab 2:12; see also Zeph 3:5). Ezekiel, a later contemporary of Zephaniah, says that this wickedness resides in humanity as the result of over-reaching trade and merchandising, particularly through violence (28:15). Humanity’s corruption and desire for wealth have affected justice to the point that the poor have no recourse but to God; the corruption demands a powerful cleansing act, one which Zephaniah envisions as a universal destruction which precipitates in the gathering and salvation of the innocent poor among Israel and the Gentiles. Since the wealthy have given up on God and his commands in order to serve their own desire, God will destroy them but perhaps will seek to save those who seek him.

In sum, 3:12-13 is a critical portion of the oracle in 3:6-19 in which the poor (*am ani w’dal*) from the nations are joined to, and saved along with, the remnant of poor Israelites (*anawim* from 2:1-3). The LORD will give these low status groups (including “the lame” and “the outcasts”) “praise and renown” (3:19). Unlike the wealthy who have wronged them for gain, the poor do not pursue greed through violence and so may be left as a remnant following the judgment of their oppressors.

“Amos also contrasts the wealthy with *dal*, stating that the ‘fat cows of Bashan’, the wives of the corrupt judges, have also crushed the poor by accepting the fruits of the oppression.”

Conclusion

Following an analysis of historical, lexical, and literary evidence, this article has argued that the terms *ani* and *anawim* in Zeph 2:3 and 3:12-13 (respectively) should be translated as those who are economically poor rather than as the metaphorical "humble" or "pious." As yet, many modern translations render these terms metaphorically and thus perpetuate a first world bias that seeks to moderate any form of social shift. But such mistranslations miss the meaning of the text in both letter and spirit. Zephaniah's message is one of good news for the poor. Those who suffered injustice would now find comfort in the LORD. Economic corruption and injustice have required universal destruction (1:2-18). Yet, because the poor had no opportunity to become corrupt, they may escape the coming day of wrath. The "poor of the land" and "a people poor and deprived" may start anew in a revitalized world. The earthly situation is so vile that only the LORD's direct intervention can bring justice. It is through dependence on the LORD that one is able to remain in the new era of peace. The common translation of "humble" or "meek" in these verses should be rejected. Revision to the Catholic lectionary's translation would correctly represent the historical meaning of the texts as well as inspire homiletic exhortations on Catholic social teaching.

“Zephaniah’s message
is one of good news
for the poor.”

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