
Exegesis 9: Reformation and Renewal

Stephen Dray

*The evangelical church today echoes with calls to **reformation and renewal**. This article considers how **Zephaniah 1:1-6** provides perspectives for our response to these clamant voices.*

There is, of course, 'nothing that is new under the sun'. The issues are as old as God's people and others, with more authoritative voices, have addressed such matters in the past. This is singularly true of the Book of Zephaniah which, though over two and a half millenia old, speaks with a contemporary relevance so characteristic of the word of God.

Exegesis

The title ascription to Zephaniah (1:1) is basically similar to that in Hosea, Joel, Micah, Haggai and Zechariah. It is unique, however, in tracing back the prophet's ancestry for four generations. The most reasonable explanation is that attention is being drawn to the fact that he was of royal lineage, notably that of Hezekiah the great and godly king of Judah. There are three objections to this:

a) the king is not identified as such;

b) Hezekiah was a popular name;

c) there are only three generations from Hezekiah to Josiah and Josiah was young when he came to the throne. Can an extra generation be found for a collateral line? None of these difficulties is, however, insuperable:

a) the omission of mentioning the title 'king' when speaking of Hezekiah may be to avoid syntactical clumsiness (since Josiah is also addressed as 'king') and in view of the ease of identification;

b) there is only one Hezekiah in the Bible;

c) the addition of another generation is not impossible, especially if Zephaniah's ministry was later in the reign. This point is hotly debated and most modern commentators assume that Zephaniah prophesied early in the reign of Josiah and acted as a catalyst for the Josianic reformation. However, the chronological difficulties this creates and references such as that to the 'remnant of Baal' (1:4) suggest that it is more probable that Zephaniah spoke in response to the reformation and as its critic.

The probability, then, is that *king* Hezekiah is being referred to and that Zephaniah was a member of the royal family who lived in Jerusalem (certainly he was very familiar with its geography, see 1:10ff) and that he prophesied when it was clear that the reform had only achieved a superficial success.

Zephaniah's inaugural oracle (1:2,3) was such that, 'most of his listeners would have branded him a religious crackpot' (Craigie, p 112). He launched immediately

into a speech of comprehensive destruction in judgement. While he adopted a familiar prophetic pattern of denouncing judgement before offering hope (compare 1:2-3:8 with 3:9-20, see Walker p 544) it is true that 'No hotter book lies in all the Old Testament' (Adam Smith, p 48). Of particular significance for the purposes of this study is the fact that though these two verses are something of a heading (Powis Smith, p 185) it does not appear that they stand alone. Thus Ralph Smith notes (p 126) the repetition of certain key words and phrases throughout 2-6: 'sweep away' occurs three times, 'cut off', 'one's bowing down' and 'swearing' and 'oracle of Yahweh' twice. He also suggests that this language, drawn from the cultic vocabulary of Yahwism, indicates that the setting itself is cultic. This view, endorsed by Craigie, seems highly likely and suggests that Zephaniah probably spoke at the time of (or even during) one of the great annual religious feasts of God's people.

Drawing his language from that which applies to the deluge in Genesis (eg 6:7; 7:4; 8:8) Zephaniah described a total destruction of all things and people (the *COL* as Pusey notes, p 235, is without limitation). Interestingly, the fish who escaped the deluge (Gen 7:21-23) do not escape now (Powis Smith, p 186) as all the subordinate creatures share the fate of their ruler, man. Keil (p 127) suggests that the language is intended to draw attention to the last phrase, 'I will cut off man' and that it emphasises sinful mankind as the objects of God's wrath.

There is also a play on words (characteristic of Zephaniah and Hebrew literature generally) in verse 3. 'I will cut off *ADAM* from *ADAMAH* This recalls the creation story (Gen 2:7). Sinful man is cut off from the environment in which he was created to give glory to God.

'Heaps of rubble' (NIV) translates an obscure Hebrew phrase. It is not in the LXX. Various explanations are offered by the commentators. Perhaps Laetsch (p 355) is nearest the mark when he says it depicts the ruins of every social and political organisation whether of divine or human origin.

It is important also to note two other features in these verses which emphasise the seriousness and the certainty of the judgement. Twice 'declares the LORD' (a particularly solemn formula) is uttered and the whole oracle begins with an infinitive absolute construction best rendered: 'I will certainly sweep away...'

Zephaniah seems to have in mind the final eschatological judgement which he depicts in graphic and universal terms. However, the distinctive purpose for such a mention here becomes apparent in the subsequent verses.

The central section of the prophecy (1:4-3:8) is basically structured around a series of oracles against the nations all around Judah: Philistia (to the west), Moab/Ammon (to the east), Cush (to the south) and Assyria (to the north). These oracles are bracketed by two oracles against Judah (1:4-2:3 and 3:1-8). This structure, together with the significant placement of verses 2,3, indicates that Zephaniah is using a technique which emphasises that though Judah had been the recipients of the special revelation of God they would also be the recipients of his special judgement (Walker, p 546) for their contempt for him was the greater in view of the honour which had been bestowed on them (Laetsch, p 356). His

message would have been shocking indeed to his first hearers for 'The Jews thought themselves safe for ever, because they had escaped that (the judgement of the northern kingdom) calamity' (Calvin, p 740).

However, Judah, and especially Jerusalem, is singled out as the object of God's judgement (4a). This judgement is not, however, irrational. Through Zephaniah a succession of offenders are listed. First *Baal* is identified (4b). If the prophecy dates from late in the reign of Josiah the 'remnant' presumably refers to the vestiges of Baalism still found in Judah, almost certainly not publicly displayed but privately entertained.

The remainder of verse 4 may be variously understood as amplifying this phrase or as identifying some other group. In the Hebrew text two different words for priests are used: *CHEMARIM* and *COHENIM*. Pusey regards the words as synonyms and argues that words for priests other than those of Yahweh are always further identified. Thus the reference is to priests of Yahweh who engage in idolatrous Yahwism (p 237). Keil argues the two words are to be distinguished: the first applying to idolatrous Yahwists and the second to those who were more strictly idolatrous (p 128). Calvin distinguishes between priests and their attendants (p 741). Perhaps it is best to see the one explaining the other. The prophet speaks of 'pagan priests' but then identifies them as the priesthood of Yahweh. Their outward orthodoxy is thus seen to hide hearts which are still far from God.

Verse 5a may single out the astral Babylonian religion (although Baalism included an astral element). Perhaps the latter is the best view and the shift is not to another religion but from public to *private worship* (Pusey, p 238).

5b refers more specifically to *syncretism*, the mixing of Yahwism and Baalism (in the form of Moloch-worship, derived from Ammon). Notes Pusey, 'They owned God as their king in words; Moloch they owned by their deeds' (p 238). This he argues on the basis of the deliberate ambiguity of the 'nonsense word' *MALCAM* whose Hebrew consonants can be re-vocalised as either 'king' or 'Moloch'.

Verse 6 is best understood not as a summary of the foregoing (Baker) but introduces a different group or groups. *Practical atheism* is clearly in mind (Baker, p 94). The question is whether two different groups are intended, viz the backslider (apostasy) and the unbeliever (religious indifference). Keil (p 128) favours one group, Laetsch (p 358) the latter.

Pusey suggests that indifference, listless service of God is in mind in 6a, not deliberate apostasy. This, says Calvin, is the fountain of all false worship (p 745). In the context the 'unbeliever' must be more precisely defined as the nominal professor who has never taken God really seriously.

Comment

Zephaniah prophesied during a period in which a reform movement, calling people back to the old paths, had enjoyed considerable success. Such a movement was pleasing to God and was endorsed by his messengers (2 Kings 22:2). However, Zephaniah was called by God to remind the reformers that reform is never to be an end in itself. The outward forms of religion may be perfectly in order but the

lives of its adherents remain unrenewed and still under that judgement of God which is common to all unregenerate mankind, a point vividly made by the blood-curdling description of judgement in verses 2,3. His message is one which demands a careful examination of our own lives and then those of our churches so as to ascertain whether true spiritual life is present.

It is particularly interesting to note that today there is a distinct movement within the evangelical church which is self-styled as 'renewal'. However, many of the features of the movement are, from Zephaniah's perspective, far more characteristic of reformation than renewal. It is laudable that there is a desire to return to the old ways (even if the detailed understanding of what this means is debated). However, even so, the interest is sometimes primarily in forms and structures not in spiritual life.

Finally, it is important to note that such renewal was not (as is revival?) the sovereign intervention of God but a response demanded by God of his professing people. It is the responsibility of each believer to live a renewed life to the glory of God and to engage in such careful self-examination and repentance as will root out those attitudes which Zephaniah recognised as endemic within the 'reformed' people of God. These may perhaps be summarised as the unrenewed mind (4), the private denial of a public profession (5a), failure to acknowledge God's lordship (5b) and the practical atheism manifested in the person for whom religious acts have become a matter of routine or in the person who has never really taken God seriously in their life (6).

May we see *real* renewal in the evangelical church of our day!

Rev Stephen Dray, MA, BD, is Lecturer in Homiletics and Practical Exegesis, at Moorlands Bible College.

Sources

- D W Baker, NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH, IVP, 1988
J Calvin, THE MINOR PROPHETS, Associated Publishers and Authors, n/d
P C Craigie, THE MINOR PROPHETS, vol 2, St Andrew Press, 1985
C F Keil, THE MINOR PROPHETS, Eerdmans, 1973
T Laetsch, THE MINOR PROPHETS, Concordia, 1956
E B Pusey, THE MINOR PROPHETS, vol 2, Baker, 1974
G Adam Smith, THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE PROPHETS, vol 2, Hodder and Stoughton, 1902
J Powis Smith et al, MICAH, ZEPHANIAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, OBADIAH, JOEL, T & T Clark, 1959
R L Smith, MICAH-MALACHI, Word, 1984
Larry Walker, ZEPHANIAH (in F E Gaebelein: Expositors Bible Commentary, vol 7, Zondervan, 1985)