

# Israelite or Universal Horizon: Zephaniah 3.8–10 in the Hebrew and Greek Bibles

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[tbt.sagepub.com](http://tbt.sagepub.com)**Adrian Schenker**Professor Emeritus, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and Coordinator of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* Editorial Committee**Abstract**

Zephaniah 3.8–10 is translated in current English Bibles in different ways. The translations either follow the Hebrew Masoretic text or the Greek or a mixture of both, or they introduce emendations, whether explicitly or without note. Unless translators understand this difficult textual situation they are at a loss how to translate. Emendations certainly should be avoided. The Masoretic text and the Old Greek have different meanings. These two meanings are explained and compared. The probable reason for the divergence is given, and the more original and the later text are determined. Thus translators are in a position to choose one of the two existing textual forms, not by guessing but by understanding.

**Keywords**

Hebrew Bible; Old Greek Bible; Masoretic text; translation; emendation; English Bibles; textual criticism; Zephaniah 3.8–10; universalism in the OT; divine judgment

## 1. Variety of translation in some biblical passages

Roger Omanson has devoted much of his life to the explanation of the Bible with special attention to the needs of translators. This work involved two skills. He had first to be thoroughly familiar with the languages of the Bible in order to interpret the meaning of its manifold texts with all their nuances. Second, he had to be able to show translators the best choices for rendering a biblical expression in the many places where there are two or more ways to read the transmitted text of the Bible. Indeed, it happens quite often that

one biblical text witness offers a different reading from another witness. I would like to express my high esteem for Dr. Omanson's scholarly work, and my personal friendship, by presenting him a small study on Zeph 3.8–10.

In this important word of the prophet Zephaniah, there occur two mysterious expressions which have always puzzled readers and interpreters. The first word is to be found in v. 8: "for booty," "for prey" (KJV), or, as it is sometimes understood according to a slightly different vocalisation, "forever," while in other modern translations we read, "as a witness" (RSV/NRSV), "to accuse you" (NEB/REB), "as an accuser" (NJPS), "as accuser" (NAB). The second surprising phrase occurs in v. 10: "my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones" (RSV), "my suppliants, my scattered ones" (NRSV). Let us imagine a translator faced with these differences and expressions which are hard to understand in the modern English translations. How can a translator find his or her way through these contrasting interpretations towards the most accurate and authentic reading?

## 2. The interpretation of Zephaniah 3.8 and 3.10 in English Bibles

Dominique Barthélemy's exhaustive study of the Masoretic text (MT) of Zeph 3.8 (1992, 906–10)<sup>1</sup> has shown that the best manuscripts have vocalised the three consonants *lamed*, *'ayin*, *daleth* with a *shewa* in the first syllable and a *pataḥ* in the second: ַלַּעַיִן. Thus the meaning of the expression is "for booty," "in order to acquire spoil." However, the Old Greek (G) translator of the Twelve Minor Prophets vocalised it differently in the second syllable, namely with *šere*: ַלַּעֵיִן. This expression means "as a witness." The Greek translator of the Minor Prophets made his version in the third or second century B.C., while the Masoretes added their notation of the vowels about a thousand years later, in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. However, they did not invent the vowels, but transcribed the living oral reading tradition handed down to them through the centuries. The transliterations found in the old Greek and Latin versions and in the second column of Origen's Hexapla (third century A.D.) allow us to observe the pronunciation of the Hebrew Bible text at their time.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in words and phrases attested by these witnesses, we are able to see which elements of the pronunciation remained unchanged between the early centuries A.D. and the Masoretic vocalisation some six or seven centuries later, and which elements, on the

<sup>1</sup> In this article the bibliography is restricted to a few essential works.

<sup>2</sup> See Brønno (1943 and 1970).

contrary, have changed. For Zeph 3.8 no such witness is available. However, the phonetics reflected in Zeph 3.8 by the Masoretes, although they were noted much later, may be almost as early as those implied in the Greek translation, because both words,  $\text{זָרַע}$  and  $\text{זָרַע}$ , are correctly distinguished and translated elsewhere in the Old Greek Bible. It is easy to see that in v. 8, among English translations, KJV and the Geneva Bible of 1560 followed MT, while RSV/NRSV, NEB/REB, NJPS, and NAB adopted the reading of G, in the midst of the Hebrew text they claim to translate.<sup>3</sup>

In Zeph 3.10 the phrase “my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed” (this is the very literal and accurate rendering of KJV) is missing in the original G.<sup>4</sup> KJV, the Geneva Bible, and RSV/NRSV render this part of the Hebrew verse according to MT while NEB and REB reconstruct the Hebrew text by revocalising its words and dividing them differently. NJPS and NAB replace the phrase with a conjecture or emendation, that is, a supposed reading which is not attested by any witness of the biblical text. NJPS explains its conjectural reading in two notes while NEB justifies its supposed Hebrew reading in its companion fascicle of textual notes.<sup>5</sup>

Translators, therefore, do not find guidance by looking into some of the widely used English Bible translations because their renderings of Zeph 3.8–10 differ so much. The best way out of such a perplexity seems thus to be a new close look at the important textual witnesses, in this case MT and the Old Greek Bible (G). If it is possible to determine which text is earlier, that is, which comes closer to the original, the door is open for a reasonable choice which does justice to the respect the text of the Bible deserves.

### 3. Two points of methodology

It is useful to make two points of methodology. First, upon reading textual notes and explanations of textual matters in commentaries, one quickly becomes aware that textual differences are usually treated in isolation. They are not put into relationship with each other. Often, however, several readings of a given text witness, in the case of Zeph 3.8–10 the witness of G, may form a coherent system of meaning. Therefore, it is wrong to treat them

<sup>3</sup> In its note *f*, NJPS claims to translate MT: “understanding ‘*ad* as equivalent to ‘*ed*, with Septuagint and Syriac.” This is a kind of evasion because  $\text{זָרַע}$  is never the same thing as  $\text{זָרַע}$ . NAB and NEB/REB do not explain their textual choice in a footnote, but each of them gives an account of it in a companion volume of textual notes.

<sup>4</sup> The critical edition of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* indicates this absence in the textual apparatus (Gelston 2010, 110, 129\*–130\*).

<sup>5</sup> The companion volume (Brockington 1973) declares, erroneously, that the reconstructed Hebrew text base of NEB and REB corresponds to the text of G, “with Sept.”

separately, and to observe exclusively the phonetic or orthographic possibilities of scribal mistakes when comparing two variant readings.

Second, a closer look at the meaning of words and of the whole context may be indispensable for a sound textual judgment.

In connection with Zeph 3.8–10 this would imply research into the meaning of מַעֲדָה “prey, booty” and מַעֲדָה “witness” in the context of v. 8 and the relationship between v. 8 and v. 10.

#### 4. The word מַעֲדָה applied to the Lord in G

G reads the first part of v. 8 thus: “Therefore, wait for me, says the Lord, for the day of my arising as a witness.” The Greek expression is εἰς μαρτυριον “in order to bear witness.” There is a parallel in Mic 1.2 with the same rendering in G. It seems that the Greek translator hesitated to directly translate the expression “as a witness.” He preferred a circumstantial phrase in place of the noun “witness.” Did the title or the quality of “witness” as applied to the Lord seem inappropriate to him? Whatever may have been the reason, he replaced the agent noun (*nomen agentis*) with a circumstantial expression.

However, the Lord is called “witness” elsewhere in the Bible. Indeed, the Lord is called “witness” again in Jer 42.5 (G Jer 49.5). Here G uses the Greek word for witness without difficulty. In this passage, however, the context clearly shows that the word מַעֲדָה means not only a “witness” in the sense of someone who sees and hears an event and a word which he reports afterwards in court. In Jer 42.5 it means a guarantor or warrantor. This second meaning of the word is especially obvious in Josh 24.22. According to this context, the Israelites declare themselves to be ready to assume all consequences of their undertaking to serve the Lord, which they have accepted of their own will; they have not been forced into it. They unreservedly acknowledge their full liability towards the Lord. The case is similar in Jer 42.5; there the captains and the people ask the Lord to be the witness of their engagement with the prophet Jeremiah. They declare themselves to be willing to fulfil their promise towards him. This means that the Lord is the security or guarantee for Jeremiah. He will defend the prophet against any breach of promise. This is more than being a “witness” in the modern sense of this word in English. A guarantor is not only the person who has heard the promise. He is himself actively engaged in the promise because he has been asked to assure its realisation. Thus he is liable for the vindication of the promise at any time (Schenker 2000, 3–6). It is unfortunate that the biblical dictionaries usually do not record this important component of meaning of the words מַעֲדָה and μαρτυς in the Bible.

What, then, would be the obligation the Lord will take care of in Zeph 3.8 G? The easiest way to interpret the Lord's engagement is in terms of the promise the Lord himself is making in favour of his people in vv. 8–10. Indeed, he promises first to bring the judgment of punishment upon the nations of the earth which had done such great harm to Israel and Judah (v. 8). Then, however (יִן in Hebrew, τῶτε in Greek), according to the Greek Bible, the Lord will change the language of the nations giving them “a pure lip” and thus it will become possible for them to call upon his name, to serve him and to bring him offerings as his worshippers, together with the people of Israel (vv. 9–10). The enmity between the nations and Israel will cease because the nations will come side by side with Israel to worship the same Lord. This double promise proclaimed by the Lord—first the punishment of the unjust nations, and then the establishment of peace between Israel and the nations—is warranted by himself for he will rise as a guarantee for it (v. 8). This is the coherence of Zeph 3.8–10 in G.

## 5. The return of the exiles

The coherence of MT is different. Verse 8 is a threat by the Lord against the nations. He is announcing his judgment upon them. The expression נַפְשָׁם “for prey” is part of the punishment. The Lord will take the spoils from them, or he will take the nations themselves as spoil. In v. 10 the expression “my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed” (KJV) is explained well by Barthélemy (1992, 906–10). The word “daughter,” when applied to a group, means a group as an organised body both here and in Mic 4.13(14). And “my dispersed ones,” a passive participle in the plural, is the accurate rendering of the Hebrew plural passive participle construed with a possessive pronoun in MT. Thus, the Hebrew Bible identifies these worshippers coming from afar with the Judean or Israelite exiles coming home and going to celebrate again the long-missed cult in Jerusalem, invoking again his name and bringing him their offerings. They are called “his [the Lord's] exiles.”

## 6. Comparison of the Hebrew and Greek Bible in Zeph 3.8–10

G most likely corresponds to a Hebrew text base different from the MT, although the two outstanding scholars Barthélemy and Gelston do not agree with this view. They suppose that the Greek translator has not correctly understood Zeph 3.8, that he was at a loss as to what to do with the expression “my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed” and therefore dropped it

in his rendering (Barthélemy 1992, 906–10; Gelston 2010, *ad loc.*).<sup>6</sup> This assumption is not likely, however, because elsewhere the translator shows that he knows all the words, their meaning and their morphology, which occur in this phrase. Thus, the conclusion recommends itself that G did not read these words in its Hebrew text base. They were not there.

The difference between MT and G is the different identities of the worshippers bringing offerings from afar. In MT they are Judean or Israelite exiles. This is the specific meaning of the phrase present in MT and absent in G. Because of these words, MT is able to interpret those coming from afar in order to worship the Lord as Israelite or Judean exiles. In G they are the nations of the earth. Thus, in MT the horizon is Judean and Israelite, in G universal. The same difference between an Israelite perspective in MT and a universal one in G occurs in Amos 9.12, which is quoted in Acts 15.16–17 in the universal form of G. There the universal horizon is crucial since it is the theological foundation for the church in Jerusalem to acknowledge the pagans as full members of the church, alongside the faithful from among the Jews. It is likely that in Amos 9.12 MT is secondary while G reflects an earlier Hebrew text which might well be the original text (Schenker 2010). Since Zeph 3.8–10 is analogous to Amos 9.12 one may draw the same conclusion for it. The recension of MT restricted the universal pilgrimage of the nations coming to the Lord from afar in order to worship him to the return of the Israelite and Judean exiles. In order to do that, the phrase “my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones” (according to the rendering of RSV) was added to the original wording later on.

Both forms of the text convey an important message with enduring relevance. G opens the horizon to a view of the conversion of all nations to the Lord. MT strengthens the hope that all exiles will one day gather in the unique flock of the people of Israel and Judah. Both forms of hope are vital for Jewish and Christian readers of Scripture.

All things considered, it therefore seems more likely that the form of G has been changed into that of MT rather than vice versa. Here it is

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek translator of the Twelve knows the meaning of the verb פָּרַץ “to disperse,” as Zech 1.17; 13.7 prove, where he correctly interprets and translates the word. The form of the passive participle with the vowel *û*, specific to *mediae waw* verbs (having *waw* as second letter), is known to him as well. The second to last word in Mic 2.8 demonstrates this. In Mic 4.13 the same translator understands perfectly the special meaning of the word בָּת as the organised body of the people, which is the meaning here too. As for עָתָר, the Greek translators of Gen 25.21; Exod 8.26(30); 10.18 know its meaning: to pray. If therefore the components of the phrase present in MT had been present there also in the Hebrew text read by G, there is no reason to assume that this translator was not able to understand it in Zeph 3.10.

important to understand what is meant by “G.” “G” refers to the Hebrew text base the Greek translator had in front of him and which he faithfully rendered in Greek. The comparison is not between the Hebrew of MT and the Greek of the Old Greek Bible. It is a comparison between two Hebrew text forms, the one identical with MT, the other mirrored in the Greek version of Zephaniah. Thus in all likelihood Zeph 3.8–10 is a further example for a new recension or edition of the Twelve Minor Prophets which corresponds to MT, while G attests to an earlier form of the Bible text, today lost from any Hebrew text witness, but indirectly preserved in the clothes of the Greek translation.

### 3. Conclusion

The variant readings in MT and G in Zeph 3.8 and 3.10 must be read and interpreted together. They form a coherent meaning in MT, different from that of G, which is coherent too. The difference concerns the promise of the Lord. In MT this promise announces on the one hand the just punishment of the nations which are to become the spoils of the Lord, and on the other hand the return of the exiles from the utmost parts of the world. In G the Lord promises that he himself will be the guarantee of the fulfilment of his twofold promise: first he will punish the nations, and after that, these same nations will change and serve the Lord, coming from the ends of the earth with their offerings for him. This universal perspective is similar to that of Amos 9.12 G, where, just as in Zeph 3.8–10, MT replaces the universal horizon with an Israelite perspective. In these two passages G mirrors most probably a Hebrew text base different from MT and earlier than MT. Readers and translators of the Bible who read both forms, and pay attention to them as a precious legacy of the whole biblical tradition, will get a deeper insight into the prophetic words in the books of Amos and Zephaniah and hence will receive the benefit of a “stereophonic” prophetic theology.

What, however, is the conclusion for translators? Which text should they translate, MT or Old Greek? Both choices may be justified. To choose MT means to opt for a homogenous textual tradition, that of the Jewish community, received by the Christian churches. To opt for G would mean to give preference to an earlier, more original text. In both options, translators should follow either MT or G in v. 8 *and* v. 10 because they belong together and express one coherent idea about God’s ultimate saving act. In translations which use footnotes, both choices might be accompanied by a note quoting the other reading in order to inform their readers about the complete biblical tradition.

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## Bible versions cited

G	Old Greek
KJV	King James Version
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NEB/REB	New English Bible/Revised English Bible
NJPS	Tanach (New Jewish Publication Society Version)
RSV/NRSV	(New) Revised Standard Version