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## KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT: THE STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY OF ZEPHANIAH

Clint Sheehan

Zephaniah may well be the most overlooked book in the Bible. It receives only sporadic treatment in the literature, and that far outweighs its use in the pulpit. Ask a church member when they last heard a sermon preached from Zephaniah, and they will probably respond with a blank stare.

That any part of God's word gets overlooked is completely inexcusable. That the message of Zephaniah does not get proclaimed is very unfortunate. The spiritual condition of many of our churches suggests that Zephaniah's message would be both timely and profitable.

Structural studies of Zephaniah tend to fall into one of two groups. Some classify Zephaniah as a tripartite prophetic book<sup>1</sup>, but the majority divide the book into two major sections<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the number of sections, there is little practical difference between these two systems. The understanding of the content of Zephaniah seems to vary more within each of these two systems than between them. The implication is that the structure of this book does not strongly impact its interpretation.

This article re-examines the literary structure and the theology of Zephaniah. The general structural unity of Zephaniah has been recognized by other authors<sup>3</sup>. This article confirms the structural unity of Zephaniah, and identifies the chiasmic nature of the structure. Furthermore, it is shown that a correct identification of the structure is critical to a proper interpretation of the message of the book. The chiasmic structure is the key to unlocking the theology of Zephaniah.

### 1. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

As stated in the introduction, the book of Zephaniah has been crafted in the form of a chiasm. For the sake of clarity, the outline of the chiasm will be presented prior to the analysis of the structure. This will help to maintain a sense of direction throughout the discussion. The structural outline is presented in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Ehud Ben Zvi, "Understanding the Message of the Tripartite Prophetic Books," *Restoration Quarterly*, 35, No.2 (1993), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Patterson, "A Literary Look at Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah," *Grace Theological Journal*, 11, No.1 (1991), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin A. Sweeny, "A Form-Critical Reassessment of the Book of Zephaniah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 53 (1991), 388,391,403.

- A Word of Yahweh (1:1a)
- B Universal Gathering For Judgement (1:2,3)
- C Judgement of Unfaithful Judah (1:4-6)
- D Be Silent For Judgement! (1:7)
- E Punishment of Unfaithful Judah (1:8-13)
- F Judgement of the World (1:14-18)
- G Judah Called to Repentance (2:1-3)
- H Oracles Against the Nations (2:4-10)
- I God's Kingdom Fully Realized (2:11)
- H' Oracles Against the Nations (2:12-15)
- G' Judah Warned of Judgement (3:1-8)
- F' Conversion of the Nations (3:9,10)
- E' Preservation of Faithful Judah (3:11-13)
- D' Shout and Sing For Joy! (3:14)
- C' Blessing of Faithful Judah (3:15-17)
- B' Universal Gathering For Blessing (3:18-20)
- A' Says Yahweh (3:20f)

**Table 1: The Chiastic Structure of Zephaniah**

Throughout this article, the individual sections will be referred to by the letter labels used in Table 1.

One thing merits attention before the chiastic structure is detailed, namely the strong Deuteronomic influence under which Zephaniah was written. It is certainly not a surprise to find a relationship between the message of an OT prophet and the Deuteronomic covenant. What is of interest here is just how intimate that relationship is in Zephaniah. One commentator was so impressed by the relationship between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy that he used it to date the writing of Zephaniah<sup>4</sup>. The proposal was that Zephaniah's ministry was immediately preceded by Hilkiah's rediscovery of the Book of the Law (cf. 2 Kings 22:8). Zephaniah then drew liberally from the recently rediscovered book for the content of his own message. This is an intriguing hypothesis, especially considering the striking similarities between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy.

At times, Zephaniah almost exactly quotes from Deuteronomy. For example, compare Deut.28:30 with Zeph.1:13:

Deut.28:30 - בָּיִת תִּבְנֶה וְלֹא תֵשֵׁב (You will build a house, but you will not live in it)

Zeph.1:13 - וּבְנֵי בָתַיִם וְלֹא יֵשְׁבוּ (They will build houses, but not live in them)

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<sup>4</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 254, 255.

Other times, the exact idea is taken and rephrased. In Deut.30:3,4 we read, “Yahweh your God will restore you from captivity ... and will gather you (יִקְבְּצֶךָ) from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you. If your outcasts (נִדְרָגָי) are at the ends of the earth, from there Yahweh your God will gather you (יִקְבְּצֶךָ) and from there he will bring you back”. Echoing this is Zeph.3:18-20 in which Yahweh promises to gather the exiles, “and gather the outcast” (וְהִנְדַּסְתִּי אֲבָרָה): “At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather (קָבַצְתִּי) you together”.

Still other times, more general concepts are repeated. For example, Deut.28:10 says “So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of Yahweh ...”. Similarly, Zeph.3:20 says “... I will give you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth” (NASB).

Table 2 shows that Zephaniah uses material from Deuteronomy in nearly every level of the chiasm. Apparently Zephaniah has structured the message of Deuteronomy into a form for his contemporary audience.

Zephaniah	Deuteronomy	Zephaniah	Deuteronomy
1:2	32:22	2:5,13	33:27
1:3	28:21	2:8-10	30:7
1:4-6	28:45	3:5	32:4
1:8-13	28:45	3:15	30:7
1:13	28:30,39	3:17	28:63; 30:9
1:15	28:53,55,57	3:18-20	26:19; 30:3,4
1:17	28:29	3:20	28:10
1:18	32:21,22		

**Table 2: Zephaniah to Deuteronomy Cross References**

While specific ideas from Deuteronomy are found throughout Zephaniah, the Deuteronomic covenant itself is the basis for the structure of Zephaniah. The essence of the Deuteronomic covenant is that Yahweh will reward obedience and punish disobedience. This is seen in each level of the chiasm, except A-A' which frames the message, and H-H' which brackets the climax. Each level of the chiasm has a specific referent. Then within each level, one side is a promise of blessing and the other is a warning of judgement. For example, the message of C-C' is directed towards Judah. The first side, C, warns of judgement for unfaithfulness and the second half, C', promises blessing for faithfulness.

The chiasm will now be examined level by level, starting with the foundation (A-A') and working up to the pinnacle (I). Since the purpose of this section is to unfold the structure, a detailed verse by verse exegesis is not necessary and so will not be undertaken. Only the material most relevant to the discussion of the structure will be considered.

A variety of links may be used to connect the two sides of a level of the

chiasm. The obvious link between the two sides of a level is the referent of that level. The second most noticeable link is the antithetical nature of the themes of the two sides (except A-A' and H-H'). Apart from conceptual links, the two sides of a level may be connected linguistically through synonyms, antonyms, and repeated words.

### 1. A-A' (1:1a; 3:20f)

Zephaniah opens with the two words  $\text{דְּבַר-יְהוָה}$  (Word of Yahweh), and it closes with the two words  $\text{אָמַר יְהוָה}$  (says Yahweh). This level is the foundation of the chiasm, and thus for the message of the book. Baker<sup>5</sup> writes,

The whole message of Zephaniah is finally united in one grand inclusio, in that it begins and ends with Yahweh, Israel's just but caring covenant God, whose word (1:1) is spoken (3:20).

By drawing attention to the fact that his message is the word of Yahweh, Zephaniah demands that his audience take notice.

### 2. B-B' (1:2,3; 3:18-20)

The scope of this level is universal, and the theme is the final gathering of all people by Yahweh. In B, the purpose of the gathering is judgement, while in B' the purpose is blessing. Three times in each side of this level, Yahweh proclaims that he will gather. This indicates the completeness of both the judgement and the blessing.

There is a strong use of synonyms in this level.  $\text{אָסַף}$  (gather) is used three times in B (once in a compound construction in 1:2, twice in 1:3). It is used once in B' (3:18), and  $\text{אָסַף$  is used for gather the other two times (3:19,20). Unfortunately, this parallelism between B and B' has been lost in the English translations. The verb  $\text{אָסַף}$  is consistently translated as 'gather' in the English versions, and some have rendered  $\text{אָסַף$  as 'I will gather' in 3:18 (e.g. NASB). In 1:2,3 however,  $\text{אָסַף$  is typically translated as 'sweep away' or 'remove', although the primary meaning of the verb is 'to gather'<sup>6</sup>. These other translations are not incorrect, but they do obscure the obvious play on synonyms which serves to link the two halves of this level.

The play on synonyms linking B to B' is not limited to 'gather'. The completeness of the judgement warned of in B is underscored by the twofold repetition of the phrase 'the face of the earth' (1:2,3). Similarly, the completeness of the blessing promised in B' is underscored by the use of 'all the

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<sup>5</sup> David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Robert B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 270.



earth' (3:19), and 'all the peoples of the earth' (3:20). What is interesting here is that both times in B', ארץ is used for earth, while both times in B, ארמיה is used. Either of these words would have been suitable for use in both sections. The fact that Zephaniah chose to demarcate the two sections by the use of synonyms suggests an intentional parallelism.

This parallelism is further highlighted by the use of synonyms for 'people'. In 1:3, אדם is used in the collective sense to denote mankind, or humanity. In 3:20 on the other hand, עמי (peoples) is used. Again, either would have functioned equally well in both applications but a distinction is drawn between B and B' by the use of synonyms.

One set of synonyms could easily be dismissed as a coincidence. Three sets ( עמ/אדם, ארמיה/ארץ, קבץ/אסף ) demonstrates a very intentional parallelism. The idea conveyed through the use of synonyms in B-B' is 'the same but different'. Both sides tell of a universal gathering by Yahweh. All of the people of the world will be involved. The purpose for the gathering in each side, however, is very different.

### 3. C-C' (1:4-6; 3:15-17)

In this level of the chiasm, the focus is the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Side C warns of swift and decisive judgement against the people for their religious infidelity. Side C' promises comfort and everlasting blessing for those who have remained religiously faithful to Yahweh.

In C-C', the people of Yahweh are provided with two powerful factors to motivate them to religious purity. If they serve Yahweh faithfully, they will be richly blessed. If not, they will be destroyed. It is this stark contrast that helps link the two sides of this level together.

To the unfaithful of Judah and Jerusalem, Yahweh warns that he will stretch out his hand in judgement (1:4). In contrast, Yahweh comforts the faithful by assuring them that his judgements against Judah will be taken away (3:15).

Unfaithful Jerusalem should fear, because Yahweh is against them (1:4). Faithful Judah can rejoice because Yahweh, the King of Israel, is in their midst (3:15).

Idolatrous Jerusalem has forsaken Yahweh and gone after Baal. Their doom is sure for Yahweh will cut off the followers of Baal from his holy city (1:4). Those who have remained faithful to Yahweh will be rewarded. Not only will the false gods be cut off from Jerusalem (1:4,5), but the true God, Yahweh is in their midst (3:17).

The religiously impure of Jerusalem will be cut off (1:4-6). With their removal, Yahweh can comfort the religiously pure of Jerusalem by assuring them that he has cleared away their enemies (3:15).

### 4. D-D' (1:7; 3:14)

This level of the chiasm creates a pause in the midst of oracles directed at

Judah. Section D is a pause, carefully placed in the middle of a long passage warning of Yahweh's immanent judgement of Judah for unfaithfulness. This heightens the tension, increasing the sense of urgency before the condemnation continues. It also separates condemnation primarily for violation of the first table of the law (1:4-6) from condemnation primarily for violation of the second table of the law (1:8-13).

Similarly, D' is a pause, carefully placed in the middle of a long promise of blessing for faithful Judah. This encourages the faithful in the audience to rejoice over their good estate. It also presents a joyful refrain, separating the promise of the preservation of a faithful remnant (3:11-13) from the promise of the reward that they will receive (3:15-17).

D and D' command the proper response to the surrounding messages. The unfaithful are ordered to be silent before Yahweh (1:7), while the faithful are encouraged to shout and sing for joy, to rejoice and exult with all their heart (3:14).

### 5. E-E' (1:8-13; 3:11-13)

As with C-C', the unfaithful are warned of punishment while the faithful are promised blessing. The unethical behaviour described in E, and in particular 1:9-11, suggests condemnation for violation of the second table of the law. In contrast, the description of the faithful in E', especially 3:12,13, suggests a people who are faithful to the second table of the law.

Apart from this general contrast, E and E' are connected by a variety of links. The two sides are connected by word repetition. The phrase ( **וַיְהִי** ) (on that day) appears in both sides (1:9,10; 3:11). This is an implicit reference to the day of Yahweh, indicating that it will be a day of both blessing and cursing.

The two sides are also connected by **וַיִּזְכֹּר** (to deceive). The people who will be punished are characterized by deceit (1:9), while those who will be blessed are characterized by the absence of deceit (3:13).

In this level, Zephaniah again employs synonyms to create a parallelism between the two sides. Again there is play on synonyms for 'people'. In 1:12, the audience is warned that Yahweh will punish the people ( **וְהָאֲנָשִׁים** ). In 3:12, the audience is promised that Yahweh will leave a humble and lowly people ( **וְעַם** ). As was the case in B-B', either word would have been suitable in both applications, but the use of synonyms helps to contrast the message of the two sides.

Concepts are also played off against each other in this level. The unfaithful are told that they will build houses, but not live in them (1:13). Conversely, the faithful will take their refuge in the name of Yahweh (3:12). The houses of the unfaithful will become desolate, and they will plant vineyards, but not drink the wine (1:13). On the other hand, the faithful will feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble (3:13). The unfaithful of Jerusalem complacently say that Yahweh will not do good or evil (1:12). In

contrast, Yahweh himself says that the remnant of Israel will do no wrong (3:13).

## 6. F-F' (1:14-18; 3:9,10)<sup>7</sup>

In this level of the chiasm, the focus shifts, becoming global. Yahweh's judgement of sin will be world wide (1:18). Yahweh's mercy will also extend world wide as he converts the nations (3:9).

Yet again, there is a play on synonyms for 'people' linking the two sides. When he pours out his wrath on the world, Yahweh will bring distress on people ( מַכָּה 1:17). When he converts the nations, Yahweh will give to the peoples ( אֲמֵת ) purified lips (3:9). Thus the parallelism continues.

The two halves are also connected conceptually. The condemned will cry out bitterly (1:14), while the converted will call on the name of Yahweh (3:9). Yahweh's wrath will cause the wicked to walk like the blind (1:17), while his mercy will enable the converted to serve him shoulder to shoulder (3:9).

There is also an interesting play on sacerdotal language between the two sides of this level. When Yahweh judges the world, the blood of sinners will be poured out like dust (1:17). In contrast, the converted will bring their offerings to Yahweh (3:10). The verb in 1:17, יָצַק (to pour out), is typically used in the technical sense associated with sin offerings (e.g., Leviticus chapter 4). There is definite irony here. The sinners themselves will be sacrificed as sin offerings for their own sins. On the other hand, the word in 3:10, תְּרִיבָה (offering) is used of gifts, and especially of bloodless offerings. The converted will freely and peacefully bring gifts to Yahweh. This amplifies the contrast between the two sides of this level. F is characterized by violence, bloodshed, and terror. F' is characterized by calm and worship.

## 7. G-G' (2:1-3; 3:111-8)

Attention is once again upon Judah and Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem is not explicitly named in 3:1-8, "references to prophets, priests, Torah and instructions of Yahweh in 3:2-4 make it clear that the oracle is addressed to Jerusalem"<sup>8</sup>.

This level interlocks the two sides of the chiasm. Until this point, the front half of the chiasm has been devoted to judgement oracles and the back half to blessing oracles. The two sides are bridged by this level in which the two themes are flipped. In G, Judah is called to repentance and they are warned of judgement in G'.

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<sup>7</sup> Many commentators group 3:8 with 3:9,10, but it seems better to group 3:8 with 3:1-7. First of all, this keeps judgement passages separate from blessing passages, rather than mixing judgement and blessing passages together. Secondly, 3:8 provides natural closure to 3:1-7 which is left glaringly open, with no conclusion if 3:8 is taken together with 3:9,10.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 137.

The two sides of this level are connected by repeated words, and by the use of synonyms and antonyms. **רָצוּ** (righteousness) appears in both sides. In the call to repentance, the people are urged to seek righteousness (2:3). In the warning of judgement, the sinful people are told that their sin will not be tolerated because Yahweh is righteous (3:5). **אֵשׁ אַרְיֵה** (burning anger) also appears in both sides. Part of the motivation for repentance is the avoidance of the burning anger of Yahweh (2:2). Similarly, the vessel of judgement is the burning anger of Yahweh (3:8). **גּוֹי** (nation) appears in both sides, and in both instances it is in conjunction with synonyms for gather. In 2:1 **אָסְפוּ** (to gather) is used while in 3:8 **רָצַף** is used. This again sets up a parallelism. The nation of Judah is instructed to gather themselves together in repentance (2:1), or else they will be consumed when Yahweh gathers the nations to pour out his wrath upon them (3:8).

The antonyms **צְדָקָה** (justice) and **אֲוֵלָה** (unjust) are used to draw a distinction between G and G'<sup>9</sup>. Those on whom Yahweh will exercise mercy are characterized by having done his ordinances ( **צְדָקָה** 2:3). Those on whom Yahweh will pour out his wrath are characteristically unjust ( **אֲוֵלָה** 3:5).

## 8. H-H' (2:4-10; 2:12-15)

This level of the chiasm is noticeably different from the other levels. Whereas the others show parallelism between two sides which are antithetical in nature, H-H' is symmetric. Both sides contain oracles against the nations. The structural function of this level is to bracket, and therefore draw attention to the climax of the chiasm (2:11).

Each side delivers oracles of judgement against two nations. The first side, H, addresses Philistia in 2:4-7, and Moab and Ammon in 2:8-10. The second side, H', addresses Cush in 2:12 and Assyria in 2:13-15.

Apart from the obvious symmetry, the two sides are connected by word repetition. **הָרַס** (to destroy) is used both in 2:5, and in 2:13. **יָרַד** (to lie down) appears both in 2:7 and 2:14. **עָרְבָה** (desolate) appears twice in each side. When he pours out his wrath, Yahweh will make Ashkelon (2:4), Ammon (2:9), and Ninevah (2:13,15) desolate.

The two sides are further linked by repeated concepts. Moab and Ammon will be possessed by nettles and salt pits (2:9), while Ninevah will be overrun by wild animals (2:14). The land of the Philistines will become pastures, with folds for flocks (2:6). Similarly, flocks will lie down in the midst of Assyria (2:14).

## 9. I (2:11)

This is the climax of the chiasm. It was already said that the level H-H' serves structurally to draw attention to the climax, and that function is per-

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<sup>9</sup> Some excellent examples of these two words being set in direct opposition in a single passage are Lev.19:5; Ps 82:2; and Is 26:9,10.

formed exceptionally well. Many scholars have noticed that 2:11 does not fit with the surrounding verses. For example, Roberts<sup>10</sup> writes,

Verse 11 stands in the series of oracles against foreign nations as an isolated and apparently misplaced fragment ... It is not a natural continuation of the divine oath in the preceding verses ... Why and when it was placed here is unclear.

This structural analysis demonstrates that 2:11 is not misplaced. Instead it has been very intentionally placed where it is because it is the focus of the chiasm, and therefore of the book itself. This will be further discussed in the following section of this article.

In this section, it has been shown that the entire book of Zephaniah has been crafted as a chiasm. The two sides of any given level are linked by a common referent. The two sides are further connected by the antithetical nature of their respective messages. In addition, repeated words and concepts, and play on synonyms and antonyms serve to bind the two sides together. In the next section, the theological implications of this structure will be explored.

## 2. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The previous section has demonstrated that the theme of covenant provides the framework for Zephaniah. The structure of the book is based on covenant, with each level of the chiasm containing both a warning of judgement and a promise of blessing. The structure has been arranged in order to provide the audience with a twofold motivation to repent and obey, the fear of judgement and the hope of blessing.

Not only does covenant shape the structure of Zephaniah, it permeates the content. A comparison of Table 2 with Table 3 shows that Deuteronomic material appears in virtually every section of the book. The prominent covenant theme of Zephaniah goes beyond simply calling the people of Yahweh to repentance. More importantly, it serves as a loud proclamation of the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of Yahweh.

It is generally recognized that the message of Zephaniah is primarily eschatological<sup>11</sup>. In Zephaniah, there is an eschatological promise of the ultimate fulfilment of each covenant that Yahweh has made with his people. The Deuteronomic covenant finds implicit fulfilment in levels C-C', E-E', and G-G'.

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<sup>10</sup> J.J.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 201.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Thurman and C.L. Taylor Jr., *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 6:1009-1011.

The Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen.12:1-3) as well is implicitly fulfilled in Zephaniah. Yahweh promises to bring judgement on the enemies of his people (1:14-18; 2:4-10,12-15). He will also bless all the families of the earth when he converts the nations (3:9-10).

Yahweh promised Noah that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood of water (cf. Gen.9:8-17). In Zephaniah, Yahweh is shown to be faithful to that promise. When he pours out his wrath in final judgement of the world, he will use fire to destroy the earth (1:18).

In the Davidic covenant (cf. 2 Sam.7:8-16), Yahweh promised to plant his people in their own place where they would never again be afflicted or disturbed. He also promised to establish the throne of David in their midst forever. This covenant is also seen in fulfilment in the message of Zephaniah. Yahweh's people will have their own place, free from oppression (3:11,12,14-20). They will also have their king in their midst. "The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst, you will fear disaster no more" (3:15, NASB).

The structure and content of Zephaniah broadcast the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of Yahweh. He will ultimately and completely fulfil all covenants.

As pervasive as the covenant theme is, it is clear that the sovereignty of Yahweh is a more fundamental concept. Anyone can make a covenant, but only one who is absolutely sovereign can guarantee that it is fully kept. The sure fulfilment of these covenants requires the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh. While covenant is the visibly dominant theme of Zephaniah, the Kingship of Yahweh is the major underlying theme, woven throughout the book. To Zephaniah, there is an interconnectedness between the themes of covenant and Kingship.

The Kingship theme is found throughout the content of Zephaniah. Yahweh is portrayed as absolutely sovereign. He is sovereign over creation (1:2,3). He is sovereign over the lives of individuals (1:8,9). He is sovereign over the nations (2:4-10,12-15). Yahweh refers to his vassals as 'My people' (2:8,9), 'My nation' (2:9), 'My worshippers' (3:10), 'My dispersed ones' (3:10), and 'the people of Yahweh' (2:10). Zephaniah speaks of the time when Yahweh will dwell as King in the midst of his people (3:15).

Zephaniah presents Yahweh as a King of many facets. Yahweh is a jealous King (1:5; 3:1,7). He is a conquering King (1:15,16; 2:4,5,9,10,12,13; 3:6,8,17). He is a lawmaker (2:2,3). He is a just King (1:7-13; 3:5,8,11,15,19). He is a merciful King (3:9,11,12,15,19). He is a loving King (3:16,17,19,20).

The Kingship theme lies beneath the covenant based structure of the chiasm, but that is not to say that it has not been incorporated into the structure of the book. The covenant theme provides the body of the chiasmic structure, but the Kingship theme provides the focus.

The structural analysis demonstrated that 2:11 is the focus of the chiasm. This verse depicts the realization of the eschatological Kingdom of Yahweh. While 'the Kingdom of God' is not mentioned explicitly, there is no mistak-

ing the language. Yahweh, the conquering King, will eliminate all competition when "He will starve all the gods of the earth". Then all the people of the earth will be true worshippers of Yahweh, 'and all the coastlands of the nations will bow down to Him; everyone from his own place' (NASB).

That 2:11 is a portrait of the realization of the eschatological Kingdom can be easily confirmed by comparison with a vast array of similar passages throughout the OT. In Isa.2:2-4, the reader is told that 'In the last days', Yahweh will establish the mountain of his house above all competition, and "all the nations will stream to it". In Zech.2:10,11 Yahweh declares that he will dwell in the peoples midst, and 'many nations will join themselves to Yahweh in that day and will become my people' (NASB). Malachi presents this idea in an inclusio in 1:11;

- A My name will be great among the nations  
B In every place incense is going to be offered  
to my name, and a grain offering that is pure.  
A My name will be great among the nations

In Psa.22:27,28 (NASB) we read, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before Thee. For the kingdom is the LORD's, and He rules over the nations". In Psa.86:8-10, a chiasm has been constructed out of this concept;

- A(v.8) No one like thee among the gods  
B(v.8) Not any works like thine  
C(v.9) All nations you have made will come and  
worship before you and glorify your name  
B'(v.10) Thou art great and doest wonderful deeds  
A'(v.10) Thou alone art God

Other passages which echo the Kingdom picture of Zeph.2:11 include Psa.138:4,5; Isa.19:19-25; 56:1-8; 66:15-24; Zech.8:20-23; 13:2; 14:9-11,16; and Micah 4:1-4. Space does not permit the treatment of these passages, but the interested reader will notice that they contain many remarkable similarities to the message of Zephaniah. This is especially true when they are examined within their immediate contexts. It is also interesting to notice that Zephaniah is not the only author to use literary structure to highlight a description of the eschatological Kingdom (e.g. Mal.1:11, and Psa.86:8-10, as outlined above).

To illustrate the striking similarities between the various Kingdom passages, Table 3 presents a comparison of the message of Zephaniah with Zech.2:10-13<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Zech.2:10-13 in the English versions is 2:14-17 in the Hebrew text. The verse references in Table 3 correspond to the English Bible.

Zechariah	Zephaniah
<p><b>2:10</b>  קָנִי וְשִׂמְחֵי בַת-צִיּוֹן  Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion.</p>	<p><b>3:14</b>  קָנִי בַת-צִיּוֹן  Sing for joy, O daughter of Zion.</p>
<p><b>2:10</b>  I will dwell in your midst declares Yahweh.</p>	<p><b>3:15,17</b>  Yahweh is in your midst</p>
<p><b>2:11</b>  בְּיוֹם הַהוּא  In that day</p>	<p><b>1:9,10; 3:11</b>  בְּיוֹם הַהוּא  In that day</p>
<p><b>2:11</b>  Many nations will join themselves to Yahweh and become his people.</p>	<p><b>2:11</b>  All nations will bow down to him.</p>
<p><b>2:12</b>  Judah/Jerusalem is restored/blessed.</p>	<p><b>3:9</b>  All peoples will call on the name of Yahweh, and serve him.</p>
<p><b>2:13</b>  הֵם בְּל-בָּשָׂר מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה  Be silent all flesh before Yahweh.</p>	<p><b>3:11–13, 15–17</b>  Judah/Jerusalem is preserved/ blessed.</p>
<p><b>2:13</b>  הֵם בְּל-בָּשָׂר מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה  Be silent before Lord Yahweh.</p>	<p><b>1:7</b>  הֵם מִפְּנֵי אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה  Be silent before Lord Yahweh.</p>
<p><b>2:13</b>  Yahweh is aroused.</p>	<p><b>2:2</b>  Burning anger of Yahweh.</p>

**Table 3: A Comparison of Zephaniah with Zechariah 2:10-13**

The day of Yahweh also is integral to the theology of Zephaniah. The phrase ‘day of Yahweh’ appears explicitly in Zephaniah seven times<sup>13</sup>, and implicitly an additional nine times<sup>14</sup>. It is referred to in both judgement passages and blessing passages. It is immanent (1:14), and it is eschatolo-

<sup>13</sup> 1:7,8,14 (twice),18; 2:2,3.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. “on that day” (1:10), “at that time” (1:12), also 1:14; 2:2; 3:8,11,16,19,20.



gical<sup>15</sup>. The focus of the day of Yahweh is the people of Yahweh (e.g. 1:7,8), but the scope is world wide (1:14-18; 3:8).

The day of Yahweh, as described in Zephaniah, is the eschatological intervention of Yahweh in his creation. He will gather the wicked for judgement, and the faithful for blessing. The outcome will be the inauguration of the eternal form of the Kingdom of Yahweh.

To review, the structure of Zephaniah presents covenant pointing to Kingdom. The content is a blending of the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of Yahweh together with his universal Kingship. The thread that ties these themes together is the day of Yahweh. The structure and content can be used to formulate the following summary of the theology of Zephaniah.

The day of Yahweh is near, and coming quickly. In that day, by perfectly and finally fulfilling all of his covenants, Yahweh will inaugurate the ultimate and eternal form of his Kingdom.

### 3. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

Gerhard von Rad has said that “Zephaniah’s prophecy concerning the Day of Yahweh is certainly one of the most important sources of material at our disposal for the various concepts connected with this subject.”<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Zephaniah has much in common with the other explicit day of Yahweh passages found throughout Scripture. The previous section of this article has shown that the outcome of the day of Yahweh is the inauguration of the eschatological Kingdom of Yahweh. There is therefore an intimate relationship between the day of Yahweh and the Kingdom of Yahweh. Just as the various day of Yahweh passages have much in common, the previous section has illustrated the strong similarities between the various Kingdom passages. These passages contain elements of different literary forms; oracles of salvation, oracles of judgement, prophetic eschatology, and apocalyptic eschatology. Yet none of these genres, by itself, provides a satisfactory classification scheme for these passages. This indicates the need for the identification of a new OT literary genre. As of the time of publication, the preliminary work towards this end is complete. A future article is being planned which will present the initial identification of this new genre, tentatively labelled ‘Prophetic Kingdom Proclamation’.

There is a general consensus regarding the importance of identifying the *mitte* of the OT. For example, Hasel writes<sup>17</sup>, “the matter of the centre plays

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<sup>15</sup> Ladislav Cerny, *The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* (Prague: University of Prague, 1948), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 97.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 139.

an important and at times even decisive role for presentations of OT theology". Unfortunately, there is nothing remotely close to a general consensus as to what actually constitutes the unifying centre of the OT. Two of the more popular candidates are Kingdom, and covenant. Either one of these choices functions well for much of the OT, but at times each of these also seems lacking. Neither seems sufficient to fully cope with the material of Zephaniah in which covenant is presented as the vehicle through which the Kingdom of Yahweh will arrive.

The material of Zephaniah however can be nicely organized around the concept of Kingdom through covenant. This retains the strengths of the two individual *mitte* candidates, while at the same time eliminates their shortcomings. A natural extension of this is to examine the possibility of utilizing the concept of Kingdom through covenant as the unifying centre of the entire OT. Kingdom through covenant would also encompass the strengths of *Heilsgeschichte*, while retaining the Scriptural primacy of the kingdom and covenant themes. Furthermore, the strong dependence of the NT on the OT suggests that this concept may also function successfully as the unifying centre of the NT, and therefore for the whole of Scripture. The investigation of this will require considerable study, however it does present intriguing possibilities.

Zephaniah urgently calls the people of God to individual and corporate religious and ethical purity. God will accept nothing less. The eschatological nature of the book indicates that its message applies as much to the church today as it did to the contemporary audience of Zephaniah.

The NT contains many calls to purity, but 2 Cor.6:14-7:1 is especially interesting. This passage mirrors the message of Zephaniah. Both call the audience to religious purity, and both speak of a time when God will dwell among his people (cp. Zeph.3:15,17 and 2 Cor.6:16). Particularly interesting is the fact that 2 Cor.6:17 contains the only NT occurrence of (εἰσδέξομαι) (I will welcome, NASB). This verb appears in various forms in the LXX fourteen times. Twice<sup>18</sup> it translates אָרַב, and the other twelve times<sup>19</sup> it translates יָרַב. Of these twelve, it is used nine times<sup>20</sup> of the eschatological gathering by God, of his people, for the purpose of blessing. In all probability, this is the intended use in 2 Cor.6:17.

Both Zephaniah and 2 Cor.6:14-7:1 contain exhortations to religious purity. Both indicate that God will gather (εἰσδέξομαι) the faithful for blessing, and both promise that God will ultimately dwell in the midst of his people. The way in which 2 Cor.6:14-7:1 mirrors Zephaniah underscores the relevance of the message of Zephaniah for the church today. The call to

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<sup>18</sup> Hab.2:5; Zeph.3:8.

<sup>19</sup> Jer.23:3; Ez. 11:17; 20:34,41; 22:19,20; Hos.8:10; Mic.4:6; Zeph.3:19,20; and Zech.10:8,10.

<sup>20</sup> Jer.23:3; Ez. 11:17; 20:34,41; Mic.4:6; Zeph.3:19,20; and Zech.10:8,10.

purity, coupled with the message of hope as found in Zephaniah must be proclaimed from the pulpit.

#### 4. SUMMARY

This article shows that Zephaniah is structured as a chiasm. The structure serves as the key to unlocking the theology of the book. Through a combination of structure and content, Zephaniah proclaims the message that God will inaugurate his eternal Kingdom via the ultimate fulfilment of all of his covenants.

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*Clint Sheehan is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Western Ontario in the field of Molecular Physics. He is enrolled in the M.Div. program at Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary where he is also the Professor of Science.*