

# IN SEARCH OF TRADITION MATERIAL IN ZEPHANIAH 1:7-13<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The question investigated in this paper is a simple one: are there any indications of the use of tradition material in Zephaniah 1:7-13? Apart from the prominent theme of the יהוה יום this paper argues for allusions to at least two of the prominent traditions of salvation present in the Old Testament, i.e. the Sinai tradition and the tradition of the conquest of the land. The mentioning of a coming theophany, a sacrificial meal and a disregard for the first commandment point in the direction of the Sinai tradition. The threat of verse 13 points to the tradition of the land. The positive content of both these traditions are turned against the people. What once was beneficial to them is now a very real threat of doom and disaster.

## OPSOMMING

Die vraag wat in die bydrae gestel word, is eenvoudig: is daar enige aanduidings van die gebruik van tradisiemateriaal in Sefanja 1:7-13? Bo en behalwe die voorkoms van die prominente tema van die יהוה יום, word daar in die artikel ook geargumenteer vir aanduidings van twee van die heilstradisies in Israel, te wete die Sinai en die landtradisie. Die aankondiging van 'n komende teofanie, 'n offermaaltyd en die verontagsaming van die eerste gebod is aanduidings na die Sinai-tradisie. Die dreiging van vers 13 wys in die rigting van die tradisie van die land. Die positiewe inhoud van beide die tradisies word teen die volk gedraai. Wat eers tot hulle voordeel was, is nou 'n bedreiging van hulle voortbestaan.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Not much attention has been paid to the possibility of tradition material in Zephaniah 1:7-13. Except for the very detailed study of Krinetski (1977), scholarly attention was focussed more on other problems in the text. Literary criticism highlighted the position of verse 7 and the various temporal clauses in the unit as possible later additions to the original text.

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Verse 7 should be seen either as part of the previous unit (Rudolph 1976:264; Robertson 1990:260) or should be relocated to the beginning of verses 14-16 introducing the theme of the Day of the Lord (Edler 1984:184-186). Another point of view is that verse 7 forms an independent unit, not connected to either the previous part or to verses 8-13 (Elliger 1975:62; Seybold 1985:23-24; House 1988:58). Or should verse 7 be seen as part of a unit beginning at verse 7 up to the end of verse 13 (Van der Woude 1978:95; Williams 1961:110-111; Roberts 1991:176)? There is also a number of text-critical questions to be answered that received the attention of scholars (cf the commentaries).

The interpretation of  $\text{זָבַח}$  in verse 7 and 8 is crucial to the understanding of the unit as a whole. Should it be considered as a sacrifice or a meal? If it is interpreted as a sacrifice, who or what is to be sacrificed? Who are the consecrated invitees mentioned in verse 7? Is it foreign nations serving as instruments of God's judgement upon his people or is it the heavenly hosts of Yahweh or perhaps a combination of both interpretations (Van der Woude 1978:95; Robertson 1990:270-271; Rudolph 1976:266; Edler 1984:194; Vlaardingebroek 1993:96-97) or is there another possibility?

The  $\text{בְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ}$  in verse 8 was the cause for a variety of opinions on the matter. Does the expression refer to the physical sons of the king (Robertson 1990:275), the kingly family (Van der Woude 1978:96; Ben-Zvi 1991:92) or court officials in general (Rudolph 1976:267; Edler 1984:126; Seybold 1985:27)? The superstitious beliefs mentioned in verse 9 gave rise to a lively discussion in relevant literature.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The question investigated in this paper is a simple one: are there any indications of the use of tradition material in Zephaniah 1:7-13? Whether or not traditions (and if so, which traditions) are present in a particular passage does have an effect on the search for the meaning a passage might have. It is therefore a question worthwhile to investigate as the outcome of the investigation will aid us in the determining of the meaning of the unit.

Tradition-critical interpretation is normally associated with the pioneering work of Von Rad and Noth. Stories telling the tales of Yahweh's mighty deeds in the history of his people were transmitted in either oral or written form from generation to generation and gradually in the course of time became standardised or "fixed". Traditions on creation, the patriarchs, the exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, the events at Sinai, the conquest of the land and the Zion tradition can be considered as the core

traditions in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Later authors like the prophets and the psalmists made use of these traditions to convey their convictions to the people of Yahweh in a particular period of time.

Apart from the prominent theme of the *יום יהוה* this paper will argue for allusions to at least two of the prominent traditions of salvation present in the Old Testament, i.e. the Sinai tradition and the tradition of the conquest of the land.

### 3. THE *יום יהוה* IN ZEPHANIAH 1:7-13

When speaking of traditions in Zephaniah 1:7-13 the prominent theme of the *יום יהוה* immediately comes to mind. Although the *יום יהוה* cannot be considered as a tradition, it is a "geprägte Thema" in the prophetic literature and an important one in the book of Zephaniah (Smith 1984:131), especially in this particular passage. It was Von Rad (1959:102-103) who once noted that

Zephaniah's prophecy of the Day of Yahweh certainly belongs to the most important material at our disposal concerning the concept of the Day of Yahweh.

Vlaardingerbroek (1993:93) noted that the *יום יהוה* is deeply rooted in the traditions of Israel.

The *יום יהוה* is a central concept occurring only in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (Is 13:6,9; Eze 13:5; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 11, 3:4, 4:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Ob 15; Zeph 1:7, 14; Mal 3:23). The *יום יהוה* indicates an important event to occur in close connection to a person - Yahweh will be the initiator of the day to come. The emphasis is very clearly on Yahweh as the one to bring about the coming of the day. It is accepted that it is a term not invented by the prophets but known by the people and taken up by the different prophets. It is also clear that the term was initially interpreted as an eschatological one indicating a future event.

In the history of the research done on this concept more than one possible *Sitz im Leben* has been proposed. At the beginning of the twentieth century Hugo Gressmann (1905) related the term to the Babylonian mythology. Mowinkel (1954:145) sees the day in connection with a festive day, the day of the enthronement of Yahweh as King. Von Rad (1975) relates the term to the institution of holy war in Israel where Yahweh will punish his enemies which will at the same time mean deliverance for the people of Israel. The day is not necessarily seen as a future eschatological

event, it may in fact also refer to a past event. Eventually the Babylonian exile was seen as the *יום ידוה* par excellence.

The *יום ידוה* was presumably expected by the people to be a day (or rather an era) of deliverance by Yahweh and simultaneously his judgement on foreigners. It was a day filled with positive and optimistic expectations. The prophets turn this popular expectation against the people predicting disaster, judgement and disillusion on the day for those who anticipate salvation. Yahweh will not only destroy his enemies of the day, the people of Israel will likewise experience the judgement of Yahweh.

This is also the case in Zephaniah. The *יום ידוה* is announced as near, at hand in verse 7. Irsigler (1977:295) noted that "dieser Tag als Mahloper ein furchtbares Gericht Jahwes bedeutet, das vollständig vorbereitet ist und mit Sicherheit eintritt". The *יום ידוה* is presented as a theophany followed by a sacrificial festival (Vlaardingerbroek 1993:96). It will, however, be a festival of ultimate judgement and not of communion. The text of the pericope makes it clear that no one will escape the coming judgement. People coming to worship will discover that they will be sacrificed, nobody, neither the royalty nor people serving in the royal palace (verse 8), nor religious although superstitious people (verse 9), nor the merchants (verse 11), nor the complacent ones (verse 12) will be able to escape the coming day of disaster because Yahweh himself will come and search Jerusalem with lamps. The result of the coming day is that their accumulated wealth, their houses and their produce will be devastated in judgement (verse 13).

#### 4. IN SEARCH OF TRADITIONS IN ZEPHANIAH 1:7-13

There is of course the possibility that no traces of any tradition material may be found in this passage. Not every text needs to have a tradition or traditions. There may even be a theological purpose not to mention any of the great deeds of Yahweh in the history of his people in this particular passage. Yahweh is the one who does not do either good or bad (verse 12), is the popular conviction. That means that Yahweh is an inactive God - his great deeds of the past forgotten. That is why the deliverance from Egypt, the granting of the land and his continuous caring for his people are not mentioned (Eidler 1984:145). The absence of the salvation traditions serves a theological purpose - Yahweh is silenced by his ignorant people.

In this contribution it is argued that there are at least two traditions present in this text, the Sinai-tradition and the conquest-tradition.

#### 4.1 The Sinai-tradition

It is widely accepted that הָאֵל at the beginning of the passage in verse 7 is a liturgical or cultic call (Williams 1961:111; Rudolph 1976:266; Van der Woude 1978:94; Roberts 1991:177; cf Hab 2:20; Zech 2:17), warning the people to get ready and expect the appearance of Yahweh. This implies an element of movement and the element of movement is considered by Jeremias (1965:15; cf also Ball 1972:64) as an essential element in the descriptions of theophanies. The element of imminence and moving is further strengthened by the next phrase in verse 7: כִּי קָרוֹב יוֹם יְהוָה It seems thus reasonable to assume that הָאֵל was the announcement of a cultic theophany (Vlaardingerbroek 1993:95; Seybold 1985:24). Edler (1984:189) remarks in this regard: "Dieser Aufruf war der Aufruf des Priesters zu ehrfürchtiger Stille vor der Theophanie Jahwes im Tempel".

The link between Zeph 1:7-13 and the Sinai-tradition lies in the theophany that is described in both instances. The coming of Yahweh in a theophany is closely associated with the events at Mount Sinai. Yahweh said to Moses that he will come to the people (Ex 19:9) and in typical theophanic way Yahweh did come in a thick cloud, thunder, lightning, smoke and a loud trumpet. At Sinai Yahweh expected from his people to sanctify (קָדַשׁ) themselves (Ex 19:10). In Zeph 1:7 Yahweh will consecrate (קָדַשׁ) those he has invited. So the purification of the invited guests in Zeph 1:7 makes one think of the sanctification of the people in anticipation of the coming of Yahweh at Sinai (Robertson 1990:271).

The word זָבַח provides the second link between Zeph 1:7-13 and the Sinai-tradition. In Zeph 1:7 Yahweh prepared the sacrificial meal. What makes this worth noting is that זָבַח is found only here (Zeph 1:7,8) in the book of Zephaniah. The sacrificial term זָבַח is seen as a technical term in relation to Yahweh's punishment by some scholars (Is 34:6; Jer 46:10; Ez 39:17, 19; Irsigler 1991:287; Ben-Zvi 1991:81) while others (Krinetski 1977:55) see it as a reminder of terminology found in Leviticus 19:6, making one think of priestly circles. According to the study of Kraus (1965:118-120) the זָבַח was a peace offering eaten together by a community (family, clan or tribe) creating communion - a basic feature of this kind of sacrifice. The communion created is a twofold one, it is not only between the members of the community eating together but also between the members and the *deus praesens*, the present God. Von Rad (1975:257) is in agreement:

This is the sacrifice which, more than any other, came into the category of a communion sacrifice - the participants knew Jahweh to be invisibly present as the guest of honour.

The point that needs to be emphasised is that this sacrifice was meant to be a communion of the people with Yahweh in which his presence was expected in a theophany (Ball 1972:65-66). The זבח is a sacrifice marked by joy and celebration closely related to the covenant. Seybold (1985:24) remarks:

Der Allherr erscheint nicht in der hymnisch vielfach gepriesenen Gestalt als Schöpfer und König der Welt, sondern als Opferherr, der ein Schlachtopfer mit Communio-Mahl angemeldet und angesetzt hat...

Ex 24:4-11 explicitly mentions a זבח offered to Yahweh while Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy leaders of Israel eat and drink together (Ex 24:11). At Sinai Yahweh entered into a covenant with his people and the covenant was established and consummated when representatives of the people eat and drink in the presence of God (Robertson 1990:271) as recorded in Ex 24. That Yahweh would prepare a זבח (Zeph 1:7) would make the people think back and remember the זבח in Ex 24 sealing the covenant at Sinai.

There are scholars who are of the opinion that the reference to "all who avoid stepping on the threshold" (NIV) points to the first commandment (Rudolph 1976:268). The Decalogue is part of the Sinai-tradition and it may well be that the first commandment is implied here, especially in view of the other allusions to the Sinai-tradition. Roberts (1991:179) noted that special clothing was sometimes worn in the worship of Baal (II Kings 10:22), and it may be that Zephaniah's reference to foreign clothing is concerned with religious syncretism. If this is the case, then this may be yet another allusion to the disregard the people had for the first commandment in the Decalogue.

*Summa summarum*, there are three arguments in favour of linking Zephaniah 1:7-13 to the events at Sinai:

- In both cases the anticipated theophany plays a major role. Yahweh will come and his people must prepare (קדרו) themselves and be ready for it.
- In both cases the eating of a זבח is an important element. In Ex 24 the זבח is seen as the final and joyous establishment of the covenant and in Zeph 1:7 it is Yahweh who prepares the sacrificial meal to be eaten by his consecrated (קדרו) invitees.

- The superstitious custom of avoiding to step on a threshold is nothing but a disregard for the first commandment given to the people at Sinai.

#### 4.2 The tradition of the land

Although Krinetski (1977:71) sees no traces of references to the tradition of the granting of the land, the threat voiced in verse 13 may also be seen as a reference to the tradition of the land. According to verse 13 the wealth of the people “will be plundered, their houses demolished, they will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine” (NIV). The word חילם denotes the idea of strength, power or wealth. On the eve of the entering into the land promised to the people by Yahweh they are warned not to think that they acquired their wealth (חיל Dtr 8:17) by the strength of their own hand. Instead, it is Yahweh who gives them the power to acquire wealth (חיל, Dtr 8:18) in the land promised to them.

It is in the land where they will build themselves houses to live in (Dtr 8:12) and where they will plant vineyards (Dtr 8:8) amongst many other blessings Yahweh will bestow upon them. The land is a land flowing with milk and honey where Israel may come to rest after a journey of many years from Egypt to finally occupy the land (Jos 21:43-45).

### 5. THE AMBIGUITY OF THE TEXT

Can we know beyond any doubt that the arguments presented above prove the presence of the Sinai and land traditions in this passage? It is clear from the fore going argumentation that there are no overt or direct references to the traditions mentioned. References to the traditions are indirect and subtle - it merely alluded to traditions. In recent research done on the book of Zephaniah a number of scholars pointed to the ambiguity of the text.

Roberts (1991:177; cf also Sabottka 1972:33) regards Zephaniah's announcement of the יום ידוה as an ambiguous announcement. Over against the positive expectations of the coming day, there is the nearness of the day meaning doom for the people. The announcement of the sacrificial meal is according to Roberts (1991:177) a continuation of the ambiguity. Although Yahweh prepares the sacrificial meal, the Judeans would not eat it, because they would be the sacrifice.

The use of the word זבח is also ambiguous. Sabottka (1972:33) recognises the ambiguity of זבח: “Es scheint aber auch hier die Mehrdeutigkeit von *zebah* bewusst ins Spiel gebracht zu sein”. Nel (1989:159) points out that the lexical term זבח is used as a polysematic pun. As was shown earlier, זבח may have connotations with a sacrificial meal eaten in communion with

Yahweh. The word זָבַח also has the meaning of "slaughter". So, the question arises: is the זָבַח prepared by Yahweh going to be a sacrificial (even covenantal) meal or is it going to be a slaughtering of the people?

Identifying the guests at the sacrificial meal (1:7, 8) has always been a problem in the exegesis of this passage. While some scholars (Rudolph 1976:266; Van der Woude 1978:95; Vlaardingebroek 1993:96-97; Robertson 1990:270-271) think in terms of the heavenly hosts of Yahweh but carried out by earthly armies as instruments of God's judgement, others (Ben-Zvi 1991:82) identify the guests with the sacrificial victim. Already in 1961 Williams (1961:116) noted that Zephaniah may have allowed for more than one interpretation and Sabottka (1972:35) speaks of the "Doppeldeutigkeit" of the text.

The expression "house of their lord" is also an ambiguous one. It is difficult to decide whether it refers to a human king or to the deity and whether "house" refers to the temple or royal palace (Roberts 1991:179).

Ben-Zvi (1991:85) speaks of an intentional ambiguity in Zeph 1:7 and later in his book he typifies verse 7 by saying that the main stylistic feature is that of ambiguity. According to him the ambiguity brings uncertainty concerning the identity of the guests and the sacrificed, and therefore, calls attention to question.

The vague and subtle references to the traditions of Sinai and the land are in line with the ambiguity of the text. The ambiguity of the text lends itself to a search for subtle indications of tradition material used in this passage.

## 6. THE FUNCTION OF THE TRADITION MATERIAL IN ZEPHANIAH 1:7-13

Whether or not traditions (and if so, which traditions) are present in a particular passage does have an effect on the search for the meaning a passage might have. It is of little value only to identify tradition material in a passage. One also has to enquire into the function of the tradition material in a particular passage. How does the tradition material alluded to in this passage aid us in determining the meaning(s) it might have?

Both the theme of the יום יְהוָה and the traditions of Sinai and the land identified in Zeph 1:7-13 are turned against the people. The initial positive message the age old salvific traditions has is turned into a message of doom and destruction for the people. Irsigler (1977:295) noted:

Die Einheit hat ihr besonderes Charakteristikum darin, dass sie geprägte Sprache und Vorstellung aufgreift und deren bekannten positiven Sinngehalt in eine Gerichtankündigung gegen die Adressaten unumünzt.

Whereas the  $\text{יְהוָה יוֹם}$  was initially understood as a message of salvation for the people of Yahweh, they will now have to face the judgement of Yahweh upon them. According to Rudolph (1976:266; cf also Irsigler 1977:295) what the prophet did was to

kehrt die Tradition in ihr Gegenteil; denn in dieser war das Opfer natürlich nicht Juda, sondern es waren gerade die Feinde, und zu den Geladenen gehörten gerade die Israeliten, die zusehen durften, wie Jahwe mit seinen himmlischen Helfershelfern die feindlichen Völker abschlachtete.

A theophany was initially meant to be beneficial to the people. Yahweh came to them at Sinai and a covenant between Yahweh and his people was made. In Zephaniah 1:7 the coming theophany means judgement and destruction for the people. Irsigler (1977:295) noted that the call to be silent has been understood as an indication of the merciful, divine presence but that became a threatening call for the people.

The  $\text{זֶבַח}$  brings back memories of a peace offering, a communion-meal enjoyed by members of the family, clan or tribe, a peace meal to take pleasure from in the presence of Yahweh as the guest of honour, a celebration of the covenant sealed between Yahweh and his people. This has all changed. Edler (1984:191) rightly remarks:

Der Bund, der mit einem  $\text{זֶבַח}$  begann (Ex 24:4-11; Ps 50:5), wird im Richten Jahwes über die Bundestreue seines Volkes wiederum zu einem  $\text{זֶבַח}$ , doch wird dieses Communioopfer zur tödlichen Bedrohung für die Abtrünnigen.

Instead of being part of a sacrificial festive occasion, Judah will be the one to be sacrificed (Vlaardingerbroek 1993:96). Irsigler (1977:291, 295) speaks in this regard of a "Gegenliturgie" which is in practice here: "das beliebte *zibb* wird Bild des blutigen Gericht."

The land as the place where they once finally came to rest (Jos 21:43-45) will be a place of turmoil and unrest. The wealth of the land promised to them will not be enjoyed by them. Although they will build houses as was promised, they will not live in them. The promises of the land turned into threats of doom and disaster.

The wonderful salvific traditions of the past were turned into predictions of misery and misfortune. The steadfast covenant of Sinai stands in danger of becoming null and void.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation differ from that of Krinetski (1977) and many other commentaries who did not find any traces of the either the Sinai or the conquest of the land tradition in this pericope. This article argued for an appreciation of the subtle and even vague references to the Sinai and land tradition in Zephaniah 1:7-13. The mentioning of a coming theophany, a sacrificial meal and a disregard for the first commandment point in the direction of the Sinai tradition. The threat of verse 13 points to the tradition of the land. The positive content of both these traditions are turned against the people. What once was beneficial to them is now a very real threat of doom and disaster.

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