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Chiasm in Zephaniah 3:14-17 – A new proposal

ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on Zephaniah 3:14-17 and investigates the chiastic structure of the pericope methodologically. The history of research on this unit shows that not all commentaries recognise the chiastic structuring of this unit, while others opt for a parallelism rather than a chiastic structure. The reason why the chiastic structuring will be the focus of this investigation is that, while scholars, in more recent research, have recognised the chiastic structuring of verses 14-17, there is a difference of opinion on how to view the chiastic structuring. As a solution to the problem, a new proposal as to how to view the chiastic structure is suggested. According to the results of this research, an interesting and complex chiastic structure has been detected and can be schematised as follows: A-B-C-D-D-C-B-A. Finally, the article briefly mentions some implications of the new proposal.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Zephaniah is part of the so-called Minor Prophets or to use the more recent and better term, the Book of the Twelve. The relatively brief book consists of only 53 verses. Zephaniah 1:1 commences with “a Word of YHWH” (דבר יהוה) and concludes, in Zephaniah 3:20, with “says YHWH” (אמר יהוה), thus creating an *inclusio*. The *inclusio* makes it clear that the book should be read as the words of YHWH through the prophet Zephaniah. The book presents the reader with a kaleidoscope of a universal outlook combined with a focus on the people of God (Snyman



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2020:93). Judgement and salvation are pronounced on both the nations and the people of God. Similar to other prophetic books, a movement may be detected from doom and disaster at the beginning of the book to salvation proclaimed at the end of the book.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Although the tripartite division of the book of Zephaniah is contested (Werse 2018:571-585; Quine 2021:500), the book may be divided into three main parts. After the heading in the first verse of the book, the first part consists of Zephaniah 1:2-2:3, announcing universal judgement and, perhaps, salvation. The second part consists of Zephaniah 2:4-15, containing prophesies of judgement on other nations. The last part (3:1-20) consists of a combination of judgement and salvation pronounced both upon Jerusalem and the nations. Zephaniah 3:9-20 is mostly divided into two passages consisting of Zephaniah 3:9-13 and 14-20, respectively.

This contribution focuses on Zephaniah 3:14-17 and investigates the chiastic structure of the pericope methodologically. Not all commentaries recognise the chiastic structuring of this unit, while others opt for a parallelism rather than a chiastic structure. The reason why the chiastic structuring will be the focus of this investigation is that, while scholars, in more recent research, recognise the chiastic structuring of verses 14-17, there is a difference of opinion on how to view the chiastic structuring. This article highlights and discusses briefly the problem of the different results on how to view the chiastic structure of these verses. As a solution to the problem, a new proposal as to how to view the chiastic structure is then proposed. Finally, the article briefly mentions some implications of the new proposal.

3. THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

- 14 רְנִי בַת־צִיּוֹן הֲרִיעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂמָחִי וְעֲלִי בְכָל־לֵב בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַם;
 15 הַסִּיר יְהוָה מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ פָּנָה אֵיבֶךָ מִלֵּד יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה בְּקִרְבֶּךָ לֹא־תִירָאֵי רַע עוֹד:
 16 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יֹאמֶר לִירוּשָׁלַם אֶל־תִּירָאֵי צִיּוֹן אֶל־יִרְפוּ יָדֶיךָ:
 17 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּקִרְבֶּךָ גְּבוּר יוֹשִׁיעַ יִשִׁישׁ עֲלֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה יַחְרִישׁ בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ יְגִיל עֲלֶיךָ בְּרָנָה:

The translation of Zephaniah 3:14-17, according to the NRSV:

- 14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
 Shout, o Israel!
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
 O daughter Jerusalem!
- 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
 He has turned away your enemies.
 The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
 You shall fear disaster no more.
- 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
 Do not fear, O Zion;
 Do not let your hands grow weak.
- 17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
 A warrior who gives victory;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness,
 he will renew you in his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing.

It should be pointed out that the NSRV accepts the controversial text-critical option in verse 17, where the second last line is translated as “he will renew you in his love”. The alternative reading preferred by the NRSV is based on the argument that another verb (חדש) has been used than the one in the Masoretic Text (חרש). It is argued that the Hebrew letters “dalet” (ד) and “resh” (ר) are close to one another and that a scribal error has been made (Ben-Zvi 1991:249-250; Dietrich 2016:240; Renz 2021:622). There is indeed a great deal to be said for this reading, but for the purposes of this contribution, the more difficult reading of the Masoretic Text has been retained and the translation of the NIV is followed that renders the line as “he will quiet you with his love”.

4. EXPLORING CHIASM IN ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

Some scholars do not mention a chiastic structuring of 3:14-17. A cursory view of some of the major commentaries and publications on the book of Zephaniah over the last 50 years will prove the point. Williams (1961:277-285) makes exegetical comments on this part of Chapter 3, but he does not mention any literary devices used. Rudolph (1975:292) detects a parallelism in verse 15, but no mention is made of the use of chiasm as literary device. Elliger (1975:81-82) does not refer to the possibility of a chiastic structuring of this unit. Van der Woude (1978:135-139) distinguishes three units (3:14-15, 16-18a, 18b-19), followed by a postscript (v. 20) with no consideration for the chiastic structure of 3:14-17. Smith (1984:144) analyses Zephaniah 3:14-20 into five sections, with no mention of chiasm as literary device used. In her commentary, Szeles (1987:110-113) makes no mention of a chiasm as literary device in verses 3:14-17. House (1988:60-61) discusses verses 14-17 as part of his theory of the book of Zephaniah as a prophetic drama, but he does not mention any chiastic structuring of this unit. Clark and Hatton (1989:196-200) discuss the translation of the text in detail, but no mention is made of a possible chiasm in verses 14-17. In fact, verses 17-18 are grouped together in their analysis, with the result that no distinction is made between verses 14-17 and 18-20, as most commentaries do. Roberts (1991:219-223) treats verses 14-20 as a single unit, with no mention of chiasm in this passage. Kirkpatrick (1993:146) notices the similarities in terms of vocabulary used in 3:14-17 and argues for two subunits consisting of verses 14-15 and 16-17, respectively, but makes no mention of a chiastic structuring of the unit. Vlaardingerbroek (1993:200-211) regards verses 14-15 as a subunit, followed by verses 16-18, followed then by the conclusion of the book in verses 19-20, with no indication of a chiasm in this final part of Zephaniah. Floyd (2000:243) recognises the “structural elements of verses 16-17 (that) neatly mirror those of verses 14-15”, but he refrains from describing the mirror-image relationship as a chiasm. Ufok Udoekpo (2010:161-165) discusses the literary structure of Zephaniah 3:14-20, but he does not view verses 14-17 as a chiasm. Likewise, Tuell (2016:135-136) makes no comment on a possible chiastic structuring of verses 14-17.

Robertson (1990:333-334) detected parallelism as literary device in Zephaniah 3:14-17:

- 14 a Sing,
 b daughter of Zion;
 a shout,
 b Israel;
 a rejoice and be jubilant with all your heart,
 b daughter of Jerusalem.
- 15 a Yahweh has removed
 b your punishments,
 a he has turned back
 b your enemy.
 The King of Israel,
 Yahweh,
 (is) in your midst;
 Never will you fear evil again.
- 16 In that day
 a it shall be said to Jerusalem,
 b Do not fear;
 a Zion,
 b do not let your hands fall limp.
- 17 Yahweh your God (is) in your midst,
 a mighty warrior who saves.
- a He will delight
 b over you
 c with joy;
 a he will be quiet
 b (over you)
 c in his love;
 a he will rejoice
 b over you
 c with singing.

According to Robertson's analysis, there is a clear A-B structuring in the form of parallelism throughout the unit. However, the obvious chiasmic structuring of the king of Israel, who is in the midst of the people *vis-à-vis* YHWH's presence as a mighty warrior, cannot be overlooked. According to Baker (1988), there is a synonymous parallelism in verses 14-15, but he does not elaborate on this.

Ball's (1972) first detailed study investigates the chiasmic structure of verses 14-17. Ball (1972:263-272) pays extensive attention to the structure of verses 14-17. According to Ball (1972:263), the unit can be divided into two columns consisting of verses 14-15 and 16-17, respectively. Each column is then divided into two parts. This analysis presents the reader with the following structure: Column I – verse 14 set A, verse 15 set B followed by Column II – verse 16 set A, verse 17 set B. Column I set A (v. 14) is marked by an *inclusio* consisting of the parallel term "daughter Zion" and "daughter Jerusalem" in the first and last lines of verse 14. Column I set B (v. 15) starts with two parallel lines indicating the reason for rejoicing – YHWH will act and remove the causes for fear. The remainder of verse 15 contains the proclamation of the presence of YHWH as king (Ball 1972:266). Column II set A (v. 16) addresses Jerusalem and Zion, as was the case with verse 14. Column II set B (v. 17) corresponds with the proclamation of the presence of YHWH, this time as a warrior securing victory (Ball 1972:268). The end result of Ball's analysis is that the unit is marked by a triple chiasm where "sing aloud" (v. 14) corresponds with "loud singing" in verse 17. "Be glad" (v. 14c) corresponds with "with gladness" in verse 17c, and finally "you shall not fear" (v. 15c) corresponds with "do not fear" in verse 16c (Ball 1972:270). By way of a summary the chiasm can be schematised as follows:

- A Sing aloud (v. 14);
- B be glad (v. 14);
- C do not fear (c. 15);
- C' do not fear (v. 16);
- B' with gladness (v. 17);
- A' loud singing (v. 17).

According to Ball (1972:270), there is also a "motif chiasmus" or a "chiasmus of meaning or structure" (Ball's terminology) to be detected. The order of verses 16-17 is the exact reverse of verse 15. Verse 15

portrays (a) the activity of YHWH (v. 15ab), (b) the attributes of YHWH (v. 15c), (c) the presence of YHWH (v. 15d), and (d) the response of the people (v. 15e). Verses 16-17 are (d) a response of the people (v. 16bc); (c) the presence of YHWH (v. 17a), (b) the attributes of YHWH (v. 17b), and (a) the activity of YHWH (v. 17cde). According to Ball (1972:270), the structure of the pericope is marked by a combination of parallelism and chiasmus between the two columns consisting of verses 14-15 and 16-17. Barker and Baily (1999) noticed an “inner thematic chiasm” in Zephaniah 3:14-17, but they do not point it out to the readers of his commentary.

Motyer (1998:956) detected a seven-part poem structured as a chiasm:

- a the joy of Zion over the Lord (v. 14),
- b the Lord's action in deliverance (v. 15a-b),
- c the Lord, the indwelling king (v. 15c),
- d the city without fear (vv. 15d-16),
- c' the Lord, the indwelling God (v. 17a),
- b' the Lord's action in salvation (v. 17b),
- a' the joy of the Lord over Zion (v. 17c-e).

Nogalski (1993:203; 2011:748) outlined the chiasm in verses 14-17 as follows:

- A Rejoice Zion, YHWH has withdrawn judgement (vv. 14-15a),
- B King YHWH is in your midst (v. 3:15ba),
- C Do not fear Zion (v. 3:15bb),
- C Do not fear, Jerusalem will be told (v. 3:16),
- B Warrior YHWH is in your midst (v. 3:17a),
- A YHWH will rejoice over you, Zion (v. 3:17b).

According to Dietrich (2016:241-242), verses 14-17 “[are] formulated quite artfully as a linguistic chiasm”:

- a “exult” (v. 14a),
- b “rejoice” (v. 14b),
- c “in your midst” (v. 15ba),
- d “fear no calamity” (v. 15bb),
- d “do not fear” (v. 16),
- c “in your midst” (v. 17a),
- b “with joy” (v. 17ba),
- a “with exultation” (v. 17bb).

Renz (2021:627) detected “a palistrophic reuse of key words”:

- a resound (v. 14a),
- b be glad (v. 14b),
- c in your midst (v. 15b),
- d no longer fear (v. 15b),
- d do not be anxious (v. 16a),
- c' in your midst (v. 17a),
- b' with gladness (v. 17b),
- a' resounding shout (v. 17b).

The appreciation of the chiasmic structuring of verses 14-17 is a relatively recent development in the study of Zephaniah. Ball's (1972) study is seldom mentioned or quoted in more recent publications on the book of Zephaniah, despite the detailed analysis of the chiasmic structure of the pericope. Only commentaries published over the past three decades recognise and explore chiasm as literary device in 3:14-17. Although there are obvious similarities in recent publications on the issue of chiasm in 3:14-17, there are also some minor differences. The similarities and differences can be noted when comparing the commentaries of Motyer (1998), Dietrich (2016), Nogalski (2011), and Renz (2021). The different views on the structuring of this unit are testimony to the complex structure of the unit. The differences amount more to the wording together with the weight given to the call not to fear in verses 15-16. Scholars agree that the call not to fear forms the core of the chiasmic structure of verses 14-17. Scholars also agree that the metaphors for YHWH, as king and warrior, are related and pertain to his presence in the midst of his people.

5. A NEW PROPOSAL

While recognising the similarities and the differences of past endeavours to come to grips with the chiasmic structuring of this passage, a new proposal is argued. Verse 14 commences with a call to sing (רני). The same verb occurs as the last word in verse 17 (ברנה), creating an *inclusio*, thus rounding these verses off as a unit. Verse 14 also calls upon daughter of Jerusalem to rejoice (שמח). Once again, the same verb is used in verse 17 (בשמחה), where YHWH will rejoice over his people, thus forming a chiasm: A Sing (רני) Zion (v. 14a), B rejoice (שמח) daughter of Jerusalem (v. 14b), B YHWH rejoices (בשמחה) (v. 17a), A YHWH will sing (ברנה) (v. 17b).

There is also a second chiasm in this unit. A YHWH, as king of Israel, is in the midst of his people (מלך ישראל יהוה בקרבך) (v. 15b), B Israel has no evil to fear again (לא תיראי רע עוד) (v. 15b); B fear not, Zion (אל תיראי ציון) (v. 16b), and A YHWH, your God, is in your midst (יהוה אלהיך בקרבך) (v. 17a). It is also interesting to note that the sequence of Zion and Jerusalem mentioned in verses 14-17 also forms a chiasmatic pattern: A Zion (v. 14), B Jerusalem (v. 14), B Jerusalem (v. 16), and A Zion (v. 16).

Schematically, an interesting chiasmatic arrangement emerges:

A Sing (רני) *Zion* (a)

B Rejoice (שמח) daughter of *Jerusalem* (b).

C YHWH as the king of Israel in the midst of his people (מלך ישראל יהוה בקרבך)

D Israel has no evil to fear (לא תיראי רע עוד)

D It shall be said to *Jerusalem* (b), Fear not, *Zion* (אל תיראי ציון) (a)

C YHWH your God is in your midst as a warrior (יהוה אלהיך בקרבך)

B YHWH rejoices (בשמחה)

A YHWH will sing (ברנה)

5.1 Implications for understanding Zephaniah 3:14-17

The complex and artful way in which this unit is structured should be appreciated. The unit is framed by a chiasm (vv. 14 and 17) and the middle section of the unit also displays a chiasm (vv. 15-17a). Within the overarching chiasm marking the beginning and the end of this unit, there is another inner chiasm where the focus is on the two metaphors (king and warrior) for YHWH. It can hardly be viewed as a coincidence that the unit contains such a complex chiasmatic structure. The way in which scholars struggled to unravel the structure of this unit is indicative of the complex nature of this unit.

The first chiasm that frames the unit is quite remarkable – what the people are summoned to do, YHWH will do. In the second chiasm, two dominant metaphors for YHWH are used. In fact, what is said about YHWH is said with the two metaphors for YHWH in verses 14-17. In verse 15, YHWH is described as the king of Israel who is present in the midst of his people. In verse 17, YHWH is described once again as present with his people but this time as a warrior or hero who will save the people. It is important to note that both metaphors are part of the second chiasm, thereby binding these two metaphors together in a single literary device.

YHWH is thus both king and warrior for and of his people. Other analyses have claimed that the metaphors of king and warrior used for YHWH form the core of this unit, not the call not to fear. YHWH, as king and warrior, is present in the midst of his people, with the result that the people are summoned to no longer fear.

As a result of this investigation, the grouping together of Zephaniah 3:14-20 as the final, single unit of the book should be reconsidered. Zephaniah 3:14-17 forms a separate unit, due to the *inclusion*, clearly marking the beginning and the end of this pericope as a separate unit. No less than ten words are used twice in Zephaniah 3:14-17 (עליד,אל תיראי,בקרובד,ירושלם, בשמחה שמחי, ישראל, ציון, ברנה רני) and not one of these words is repeated in Zephaniah 3:18-20. The only verb shared between verses 14-17 and 18-20 is the verb ישע (vv. 17 and 19). The chiasmic structuring of the pericope serves as another argument in favour of viewing verses 14-17 as a unit independent of verses 18-20.

The temporal linking phrase used in verses 19 and 20, “at that time” (בעת ההיא) (Ben-Zvi 1991:324), is also different from the temporal phrase “on that day” (ביום ההוא) in verse 16. The vocabulary used (“renowned and praised”, “all earth”, and “all the peoples of the earth”) in verses 18-20 is not found in verses 14-17. Furthermore, the metaphors used for YHWH differ in the two sections. In verses 14-17, the metaphors of YHWH, as king and warrior, are used, while verses 18-20 hint at the metaphor of YHWH as shepherd. Consequently, the acts that YHWH as king and warrior/hero will perform are different from what he will do as shepherd. It should also be noted that verse 18 introduces divine speech in the first-person singular form distinct from the previous verses that are prophetic speech (Renz 2021:627). All these arguments point to the fact that verses 14-17 and verses 18-20 are two distinctive yet related units to form the conclusion of the book.

6. A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is a controversial and risky undertaking to situate the different parts of the book in an exact historical location. However, from a historical point of view, these two parts also differ. Although the book is viewed as a pre-exilic book dated around the reign of Josiah, the son of Amon and king of Judah, according to Zephaniah 1:1 (639-609 BCE), the concluding verses of the book represent probably a later addition to the initial prophecies contained in the book (Hadjiev 2020:119-120). Verses 14-17 seem to be at home in early exilic times. The people are devastated by the events of the

exile, leaving them in an almost hopeless situation with their limbs hanging, according to verse 16. No mention is made of a Davidic king, probably because the Davidic kingdom has come to an end with the Babylonian exile. Instead of a Davidic king, YHWH is now the king of the people. The idea of the exile as YHWH's punishing still lingers in the people's minds, but the prophet opens up a new perspective that punishment is something of the past. The people will once again experience YHWH's love for them. Verses 18-20 are perhaps more at home in a late exilic *Sitz im Leben*, with the Babylonian empire on the decline and with the prospect that the people will be gathered and restored again among all the peoples of the earth. The terrible event of the exile will come to an end. The humiliation experienced with the exile will be reversed so that the shame will turn to praise, as they will once again be renowned.

7. CONCLUSION

To detect and be aware of literary devices used in both the Old and the New Testaments is an indispensable aid in the never-ending process of trying to understand the ancient texts of both the Old and the New Testaments. The literary devices used uncovered the artful way in which the literature has been composed. In this respect, Prof. Francois Tolmie is known for his meticulous reading of the New Testament. He did an enormous job with his study of New Testament literature and the uncovering of literary devices used in these texts. I honour Prof. Tolmie as a former student, a dear colleague, a good friend, an excellent dean, and a renowned New Testament scholar. I wish him many years of fruitful research in retirement.

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