

## A LITERARY LOOK AT NAHUM, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH

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*Although the stool of proper biblical exegesis must rest evenly upon the four legs of grammar, history, theology, and literary analysis, too often the literary leg receives such short fashioning that the resulting hermeneutical product is left unbalanced. While in no way minimizing the crucial importance of all four areas of exegesis, this paper concentrates on the benefits of applying sound literary methods to the study of three often neglected seventh century B. C. prophetic books. Thorough literary analysis demonstrates that, contrary to some critical opinions, all three books display a carefully designed structure that argues strongly for the unity and authorial integrity of all the material involved. Likewise, the application of literary techniques can prove to be an aid in clarifying difficult exegetical cruxes.*

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THE time has passed when evangelicals need to be convinced that the application of sound literary methods is a basic ingredient for proper biblical exegesis. A steady stream of papers, articles, and books attests to a growing consensus among evangelicals as to the essential importance of literary studies in gaining full insight into God's revelation.<sup>1</sup> This paper presents some observations drawn from the study of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah in preparation for a forthcoming volume in Moody's Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary series (WEC).

<sup>1</sup> Among recent books giving attention to literary analysis may be cited: Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) and *Words of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); and Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).

## A LITERARY LOOK AT NAHUM AND HABAKKUK

Because I have written elsewhere concerning the outstanding literary craftsmanship of the book of Nahum, it remains here only to summarize briefly the results of those studies. I have suggested that Nahum delivers his prophecies of the doom of Nineveh in a bifid structure (1, 2-3) in which he demonstrates that God, the great Judge of the universe, will both see to Nineveh's punishment and the restoration of his own people. In the first section, following a grand hymn praising God both for his chastisement of the wicked and care of the godly, Nahum applies the principles inherent in the hymn to the current situation of Nineveh and Judah. In the second, he carries his argument forward by painting a twofold picture of Nineveh's certain doom (2, 3), each portion being closed by graphically presenting taunt songs celebrating Nineveh's demise.

It was also noted that Nahum took full advantage of the compilational and compositional techniques known to the Semitic world and practiced by the OT writers such as: bookending/enveloping to enclose sections ("scattering" 2:1 and 3:18-19), sub-sections (גַּל יַעַל "wicked[ness]"-1:11, 15), and individual cola (יְהוָה, "Yahweh/The Lord"-1:3), and hooking/stitching, to link together the distinctive units at various levels. In addition, Nahum uses the technique of refrain to mark not only major sections and sub-sections, but even to initiate or conclude small units, for example: "not (again)/no (one)" (1:15; 2:9, 13; 3:3, 7[?], 19), הִנֵּה, "behold/lo"(1:15; 2:13; 3:5,13), and the motif of "fire" that "consumes"(1:6, 10; 2:3, 13; 3:13, 15). Those earlier studies called attention to the richness of Nahum's use of literary figures, a fact that caused Bewer to remark, "Nahum was a great poet. His word pictures are superb, his rhetorical skill is beyond praise. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Turning to the book of Habakkuk, it may be noted at the outset that while this seventh century B.C. writer was caught up in the problems of his age, he was more concerned with the basic principles by which God regulated his world. This prophet was particularly perplexed as to how a holy God could tolerate a Judean society that was riddled with materialism and injustice.

The book itself rehearses Habakkuk's spiritual odyssey. It records his deep spiritual concerns over the godlessness of his people, a condition which he boldly brings to God's attention (1:2-4). The account moves on to give God's reply to Habakkuk: he is already at work raising up the vicious and voracious Chaldeans to chastise his people (1:5-11). This startling answer catches Habakkuk by such surprise (cf. 1:5-6) that the prophet has a still deeper perplexity. How could God

<sup>2</sup> Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (3d ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 148.



As noted above, the central portion of the third chapter preserves a long two-part victory ode, composed in epic style, that sings of God's great superintending of his people during the era of the Exodus and conquest (3:3-15).<sup>3</sup> Encased in the prophet's prayer (3:1-2) and praise (3:16-19), it tells of the might deliverance of Habakkuk's people by the God before whom he was to stand in silent awe (2:20). Habakkuk has utilized the epic psalmic material to illustrate and validate his thesis that God is in control of earth's unfolding history and, as in the past, may be expected to deal justly with his covenant nation which he has instructed to live by its faithfulness (2:4) and "be silent before him" (2:20), resting its case with Israel's true hero and victor-God himself!

One may also make a satisfactory case for considering the whole third chapter as a *tephillah*-a prayer. Indeed, one may see here many of the features common to this type of poetry (cf. Pss 17,86,90,102, 142): opening cry/ statement of praise, and attestation of reverence / trust (v. 2a), petition or problem (v. 2b), praise and exaltation of God (w. 3-15), statement of trust and confidence in God (vv. 16-18), and concluding note of praise (v. 19). All of this is developed in such a fashion as to settle fully both the prophet's concerns and to assure his readers that God truly is in control of earth's history, guiding the destinies of nations and all men in accordance with his most holy and wise purposes.

Through all of this it becomes apparent that Habakkuk's literary artistry is not inconsiderable. Not only does the account of his spiritual wrestling with God often approximate Israelite wisdom literature in sentiment and expression,<sup>4</sup> but his lively interchange with God is characteristic of the utilization of dialogue technique in narratives.<sup>5</sup> If Habakkuk does not reach the level of Nahum's literary artistry, nevertheless his employment of several literary devices and his skillful adaptation of traditional epic material shows that Habakkuk is not without literary sensitivity.

#### A LITERARY LOOK AT ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah is concerned with matters relative to the Day of the Lord as a time of judgment for sinful men and of purification for a redeemed people. Like Nahum, the book of Zephaniah proceeds in a

<sup>3</sup> For justification of Hab 3:3-15 as epic, see R. D. Patterson, "The Psalm of Habakkuk," *GTJ* 8 (1987): 163-94.

<sup>4</sup> See D. E. Gowan, "Habakkuk and Wisdom," *Perspective* 9 (1968): 157-66.

<sup>5</sup> For dialogue technique in Hebrew narrative, see Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, pp. 63-87. Alter particularly stresses the great importance of direct speech in narrative texts by pointing out that "the biblical writers. . . are often less concerned with actions in

basic bifid format, the first half proclaiming the judgment and its severity (1:2-2:3) and the second disclosing the extent and purposes of that coming judgment (2:4-3:20).

Zephaniah accomplishes his goals by utilizing two basic types of prophetic material: (1) positive prophetic sayings (2:1-3; 3:9-13, 14-20) and (2) threats to various groups: the nations of this world in general (1:2-4; 2:4-15), Judah and Jerusalem in particular (1:4-6, 7-13), and individuals (3:1-7). He also employs exhortations (1:7-13; 3:8) and instructional admonitions (2:1-3; 3:14-20),<sup>6</sup> and laments (1:10-11) and woes (2:4-7; 3:1-7). As well, he uses distinct pronouncements (1:2-3, 4-6; 2:4-15) and detailed informative discussions (1:14-18; 3:9-13).

Like Nahum and Habakkuk, Zephaniah makes full use of the compositional techniques of bookending and stitch wording. Thus the first major section (1:2-2:3) forms an inclusio by means of the theme of God's dealing with the earth (1:2, 3; 2:2). Both major portions of the book as well as their sub-units are linked via distinctive stitchwords. For example, in the first section the opening pronouncement of judgment (1:2-6) is hooked to the following exhortation and warning (1:7-13) by the skillful employment of the tetragrammaton. This latter stanza is in turn linked to the following teaching stanza (1:14-2:3) with a reference to the Day of the Lord. In the second major section the pronouncements against the nations and Jerusalem (2:4-3:7) are hooked to the exhortation (3:8) by means of the stitchword "nation" and the exhortation, in turn, to the teaching portion (3:9-20) by the linking device "nations/peoples." It may be added that each strophe within the stanzas of each major portion shows similar stitching techniques so that the overall structure may be diagrammed in accordance with the accompanying table.

A great deal of discussion has developed as to Zephaniah's use of the genre of apocalyptic. George Adam Smith observes that at times Zephaniah turns to ". . . a vague terror, in which earthly armies merge in heavenly; battle, siege, storm, and darkness are mingled, and destruction is spread upon the whole earth. The shades of Apocalypse are upon us."<sup>7</sup> Similar language concerning Zephaniah has been put forward by such evangelicals as Freeman and Ralph Smith.<sup>8</sup> Certainly the

themselves than with how individual character responds to actions or produced them; and direct speech is made the chief instrument for revealing the varied and at times nuanced relations of the personages to the actions in which they are implicated" (p. 66).

<sup>6</sup> This admonition is almost hymnic in nature.

<sup>7</sup> G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (rev. ed.; 2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1929), 2:54.

<sup>8</sup> H. E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), pp. 232-33; R. L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1984), pp. 130-32.

TABLE 1  
Structure of Zephaniah

I Declaration of the Day of the Lord's Judgment (1:2-2:3)			II Details Concerning the Day of the Lord's Judgment (2:4-3:20)	
Subject Matter	Stitching	Stanza	Subject Matter	Stitching
Pronouncements On the Earth (1:2-3)	"cut off"	-A -	Pronouncements On the Nations (2:4-15)	"woe"
On Judah / Jerus. (1:4-6)	יהוה		On Jerusalem (3:1-7)	"nations"
Exhortation (1:7-13)	(near is)	-B -	Exhortation (3:8)	nations / peoples
Teachings Information (1:14-18)	The Day of	-C -	Teachings Information (3:9-13)	"scattered / afraid "
Instruction (2:1-3)	Lord		Instruction (3:14-20)	

presence of apocalyptic themes and language<sup>9</sup> is noticeable in Zephaniah's description of the Day of the Lord as being one of darkness and gloominess, accompanied by remarkable earthly and celestial phenomena (1: 15) and as being the outpouring of a divine wrath that brings destruction, devastation, and death (1:14-18) through a period of great warfare (1:16-18).<sup>10</sup> Further apocalyptic language may be seen in Zephaniah's stress on the element of divine intervention in a climactic judgment that will effect the restoration and everlasting felicity of God's people (3:8-20).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For important discussions of apocalyptic, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) and *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); and Ronald Youngblood, "A Holistic Typology of Prophecy and Apocalyptic," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* (ed. Avraham Gileadi; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 213-21.

<sup>10</sup> See also R. D. Patterson, "Joel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank Gaebelein; 12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:255-57.

<sup>11</sup> The essential importance of this feature is emphasized by D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 91.

However, it must be confessed that such themes as divine intervention followed by a golden age of peace and prosperity in connection with the judgment of the Day of the Lord are present elsewhere in the OT prophets (e.g., Isa 24-27; Ezek 38-48; Joel 2:1-32 [Heb. 2:1-3:5]; 3:9-21 [Heb. 4:9-21]; Zech 14:1-21). This makes the isolation of a

special apocalyptic genre in distinction from normal eschatological prophecy somewhat difficult and calls into question any proposal of apocalyptic material per se in Zephaniah.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, while many of Zephaniah's themes will permeate the pages of the later apocalyptists, Zephaniah's presentation is considerably removed from the emotional fervor that will mark those writers. Accordingly, it may be safest to conclude that while Zephaniah's language anticipates apocalyptic, it does not contain an apocalypse; it is "emergent apocalyptic."<sup>13</sup>

One further feature of Zephaniah's literary style is worthy of particular notice. Zephaniah's prophecy is everywhere punctuated by repetition and wordplay. These are found in extended lines of compound parallel structure in such frequency that Zephaniah's presentation is somewhat monotonously predictable. However, this observation needs to be balanced with the realization that this feature allows for a straightforwardness and forcefulness that are especially effective in capturing his readers' attention. Accordingly, J. M. P. Smith can rightly remark,

He had an imperative message to deliver and proceeded in the most direct and forceful way to discharge his responsibility. What he lacked in grace and charm, he in some measure atoned for by the vigour and clarity of his speech. He realised the approaching terror so keenly that he was able to present it vividly and convincingly to his hearers. No prophet has made the picture of the day of Yahweh more real.<sup>14</sup>

#### A LITERARY LOOK AT NAHUM, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH

Despite the necessary brevity of the paper, enough has been said to demonstrate that all three of these prophets display the techniques of composition and style that brand their books as good literary productions. Each of these authors makes use of such things as book-ending and stitchwording. Each prophetic book has a clearly defined and carefully reasoned literary structure. In the case of Habakkuk, the

<sup>12</sup> See further Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, p. 12; Youngblood, "Prophecy and Apocalyptic," pp. 215-16.

<sup>13</sup> P. C. Craigie (The Old Testament [Nashville: Abingdon, 1986], p. 200) speaks of Zephaniah as "one of the pioneers of apocalyptic thought."

<sup>14</sup> J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Zephaniah and Nahum* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), p. 176.

prophecies are developed around the prophet's perplexities (1:2-4; 1:12-2:1) together with God's answers (1:5-11; 2:2-20) and the great prayer chapter (ch. 3) whose central epic contains a twofold psalm commemorating God's great victory during the Exodus event (vv. 3-15). A clear bifid structure can be traced in Nahum and Zephaniah, Nahum's two halves being built around the features of theme (1:2; 2:2), development (1:3-10; 2:3-10; 3:1-7), and application (2:11-15; 3:8-19), and Zephaniah's two portions being formed with pronouncements of judgment (1:2-6; 2:4-3:7), exhortations (1:7-13; 3:8), and teachings (1:14-2:3; 3:9-20) culminated by forceful admonitions (2:1-3; 3:14-20).

Careful attention to structural matters provides at least two distinct dividends. (1) The attention to organization in all three books argues strongly for authorial integrity. The observable unity in subject matter, theme and development, vocabulary, and perspective that permeates all three chapters of Habakkuk is best explained as the unified product of its author. Likewise, the discernible bifid structure of Nahum and Zephaniah, section answering to section, again argues for authorial intention.<sup>15</sup>

(2) Structural data can provide a valuable aid to exegesis. Thus, in Nahum attention to the opening hymn reveals the presence of an interesting (though incomplete) acrostic poem that invites the reader's more critical insight, while consciousness of a hinge verse (3:4) in the midst of a chiasmic pericope (3:1-7) adds freshness and vigor to the flow of thought in a woe oracle. A similar hinging device in 2:4 presents Nahum's readers with a vivid picture of the prophesied military advance against Nineveh: the staging operations (2:2-3), the initial advance (2:4), the all-out attack (2:5-6), and the battle's aftermath (2:7-10). Similarly, Habakkuk's use of the root **חָזַק** in 1:12 and 2:1 as a bookending device argues strongly for the idea that the emphasis of 2:1 is upon the prophet's expectation of divine reproof and correction (so NASB, Armerding) as opposed to the thought that Habakkuk was strongly voicing his complaint (NIV, Keil). So construed Habakkuk is saying that much as the Chaldeans had been sent to reprove/correct the Judeans, he expects and deserves God's correction concerning his doubts and understanding of the full scope of God's plans for the future.

In like fashion, viewing Zeph 3:8 as a hinge verse (established on the basis of the observed stitching with the surrounding verses, **חֲשׂוֹנֵי** ["judgment"] vv. 5, 8 and **כִּי** ["because"] vv. 8, 9) makes the flow of

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, D. W. Gooding ("The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel," *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 [1981]: 68) remarks concerning the bifid structure of Daniel, ". . . we must take seriously the book's internal proportions, as having been deliberately planned by the author."

thought from that of judgment (3:1-7) to future hope (3:9-13, 14-20-Zephaniah's twin theological themes) to be both smoother and strikingly contrastive.<sup>16</sup> It also reinforces the suggestion that contrary to critics who routinely dismiss prophetic messages of hope as later insertions into otherwise prevalent prophetic pronouncements of judgment, not only do hope and judgment commonly occur together, but judgment is integral to hope. From the prophet's point of view, proper corrective to current conditions by divine judgment produces the responsiveness necessary to circumstances of hope. Indeed, judgment may thus be viewed as a veiled hope. Such is the case in 3:8. The correction of Jerusalem becomes a prelude to that universal judgment out of which Israel's subsequent blessings proceed (3:9-20).

One further literary comparison between these three prophets revolves around their use of figurative language. Each of the prophets makes rather good use of the standard literary figures utilized by the OT authors, as illustrated in Table 2. Even a casual glance at this list is sufficient to convince the fair-minded critic that our authors were writers of considerable literary ability. Since I have demonstrated Nahum's powerful use of tropic language elsewhere, it will, perhaps, be enough to add an example from each of the other two prophets.

Turning first to Habakkuk, one may note this prophet's exceptional use of literary tools in his fourth denunciation of the Chaldeans (2:15-17). Utilizing the standard format of a woe oracle, the Chaldean is first likened to a man who in feigned friendship gives his neighbor strong drink only to get him drunk and denude him. Moving from invective to threat, Habakkuk turns the metaphor into allegory, the false friend now himself being forced to partake of his own drink and subsequently suffering the shame and disgrace of exposure. Employing the motif of the cup, Habakkuk points out that the Chaldean will pour out a cup of wrath but in turn will drink it himself. He will now know the shame he has brought on others. He is given a sarcastic command, "Go on! Drink! . . . and expose yourself!" The last imperative is extremely graphic. It means literally show yourself as uncircumcised. Naked and without covenantal grounds for leniency, the Chaldean faced certain doom. One could hardly overestimate the cumulative force of the concatenation of the powerful literary figures here.

Although Zephaniah uses literary figures throughout his prophecy, the prophet is at his best in blending such tropes with his employment

<sup>16</sup> Zephaniah's employment of the remnant motif, which he threads throughout the fabric of his presentation (e.g., 2:3, 7, 9, 12), is underscored by Herbert Marks, "The Twelve Prophets," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, p. 216. For the necessary wedding of the themes of judgment and hope, see W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), pp. 219-37.

TABLE 2

Special Literary Features.	Nahum	Habakkuk	Zephaniah
Acrostic	X		
Allegory	X	X	
Alliteration! Assonance	X	X	X
Authropopoeia			X
Chiasmus	X	X	X
Enallage	X		X
Heniadys		X	X
Hyperbole		X	
Irony	X		X
Lament	X		X
Merismus			X
Metonymy		X	X
Metaphor! Simile	X	X	X
Paronomasia		X	X
Personification		X	X
Picturesque Brevity	X		
Repetition! Refrain		X	X
Rhetorical Question	X	X	
Satire	X		X
Special Parallelism	X	X	X
Synechdoche	X	X	X
Woe	X	X	X

\* Full details can be found in the author's forthcoming commentary on *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Moody).

of literary allusions. Thus, in 1:2-3 he calls upon hyperbole and wordplay to draw attention to God's coming judgment while drawing upon allusions to both the flood and the creation. In depicting the destruction of the Philistine cities (2:4-7), Zephaniah combines wordplay with the metaphor of a deserted woman, thus dramatically portraying their sure demise. Zephaniah's boldest stroke of all comes in 3:9f. Here Zephaniah alludes to earlier Canaanite literary tradition, that tells of a time when Baal was to be handed over to Yamm both as servant and tribute,

Thy slave is Baal, O Yamm,  
 Thy slave is Baal for[eve]r,  
 Dagon's Son is thy captive;  
 He shall be brought as thy tribute.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *ANET*, p. 130. That the literary allusion is to this text is rendered certain by Zephaniah's choice of vocabulary drawn from the Ugaritic epic: עֶבֶד ('ebed) "servant/slave," יָבַל (yabal) "bring," and מִנְחָה (minḥa) "tribute! offering." For the Ugaritic text itself, see UT#137:36-38.

The recognition of the literary setting of Zephaniah's words serves as a clue to their translation and understanding. Thus, even as Baal was to be Yamm's servant and was sent as tribute to him, so converted Gentiles who "call upon the name of the Lord" and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" are "my worshipers" who will "bring my scattered ones" (the Jews) as "my tribute."

That these prophets, then, were skilled authors who composed their prophecies with careful design and utilized polished literary techniques to achieve their purposes is undeniable.<sup>18</sup> This fact alone argues strongly for the unity of the books that bear their names. Regardless of that question, however, it is certain that the key to yet more precise understanding in the exegesis of these three prophets lies along the lines of literary analysis.

<sup>18</sup> The matter of the relative degree of literary craftsmanship displayed in each prophecy, left unanswered in this paper, will be addressed in a subsequent study.

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