

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

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SUMMARY: The article constitutes an analysis of the motif of the day of Yahweh in the Book of Zephaniah. God's anger, a crucial element of that day, may be interpreted as a metaphor for God's mercy. The starting point for the verification of this hypothesis is the exploration of the semantic fields employed in the descriptions of the day of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Then, the historical-salvific background for the motif of God's wrath is outlined. Situating God's anger in the context of the covenant and Exodus helps pinpoint the function of the metaphor of anger in the message of God's mercy.

KEYWORDS: the day of Yahweh, the wrath of Yahweh, the Book of Zephaniah, covenant, Sinai, mercy

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Dzień Jahwe, gniew Jahwe, Księga Sofoniasza, przymierze, Synaj, miłosierdzie

The Book of Zephaniah, more than any other fragment of the Old Testament, centres on the prediction of “the day of Yahweh”. Zephaniah's depiction of this event is particularly rich in detail. Undoubtedly, many points Zephaniah makes are based on the texts of Amos (5:18-20) and Isaiah (2:12-17)¹, yet what distinguishes Zephaniah's book from the other two is his focus on the wrath of Yahweh. For Zephaniah, the expression “the day of Yahweh” (1:7.14[*bis*]) is synonymous with the syntagma “the day of the wrath of Yahweh” (1:18; 2:2.3; cf. 1:15), whereby the wrath of God is posited as the most significant feature of that day. Many exegetes find Zephaniah's perspective to be at odds with the Old Testament's message of God's mercy. According to Spickermann, “an account of the day of God's wrath constitutes a mere episode in the whole Old Testament, an episode that casts a shadow

¹ Such an argument is the conclusion of J. Homerski's analysis titled “Rysy eschatologiczne Dnia Pańskiego u proroka Sofoniasza”, *RTK* 30/1 (1983) 33-45.

over the true depiction of God who is slow to anger²². Is it really the case that Zephaniah's rendering of the day of Yahweh contradicts the notion of God's mercy? Or may it be that the motif of Yahweh's anger as employed in the Book of Zephaniah functions as a metaphor for God's mercy? This article will try to verify the above hypothesis. First, it will attempt to map semantic fields used in the Old Testament's descriptions of the day of Yahweh. Secondly, it will try to outline the historical-salvific background of the motif of God's anger, which – when situated in the context of the covenant and Exodus – will help pinpoint the function of the metaphor of anger in the whole message of God's mercy.

1. The Semantics of Biblical Depictions of the Day of Yahweh

Zephaniah, who lived and prophesied at the beginning of King Josiah's rule (641-609 BCE), was not the first prophet to predict the coming of the day of Yahweh. Among his predecessors were Amos and Isaiah from the second half of the seventh century BCE, whilst his successors included Ezekiel, who lived in the first half of the sixth century BCE, his contemporaries Jeremiah and Obadiah, as well as Malachi, Joel and Zechariah, who were active after the Babylonian exile. An intertextual reading of Zephaniah's prophecy evinces the existence of the topos of the day of Yahweh, which encompasses certain anthropomorphic and anthropathic descriptions of God, deriving from diverse backgrounds.

To begin with, Yahweh is metaphorically presented as a warrior (*gibbôr* in Zeph 3:17)³ and his day as “a day of trumpet blast and battle cry⁴ against the fortified cities and against the high towers” (Zeph 1:16). Such a depiction

2 H. Spickermann, “Dies irae. Der alttestamentliche Befund und seine Vorgeschichte”, *VT* 39 (1989) 208.

3 This anthropomorphism is alluded to also in 1:14, where the term *gibbôr* refers to human warriors facing a military confrontation with Yahweh. If MT is to be treated as *lectio difficilior* (“the sound of the Day of Yahweh is bitter, a warrior cries out there”), their fear seems a result of the battle cry uttered by Yahweh (cf. M.A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah* [Hermeneia; Mineapolis 2003] 74).

4 The expression *torû'āh* is used in the Hebrew Bible also to refer to a cry or the sound of trumpet calling people to participate in a liturgical celebration. Because of that some exegetes who take into account the cultic use of the horn see in this fragment an allusion to the feast of the New Year (Num 29:1) or the beginning of the Jubilee Year (Lev 25:9); cf. A.S. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah. Morphology and Ideas* (Oslo 1975) 63; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 101. Such a liturgical call would be one of the many ironies used by the prophet: the celebration, which was supposed to be the source of blessing, brings misery.

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

derives from the tradition of the holy war, which was particularly salient during the conquest of Canaan by the tribes of Israel. Just like “Yahweh fought for Israel” then (Jos 10:15), he appears now as a warrior defending his people (Zeph 2:15.17; cf. Isa 13:3-6; 34:2.5-7; Jer 46:10; Ezek 7:14; 38–39; Amos 2:14-16; Joel 2:11; 4:9-10.16; Zech 14:3).

In later prophetic texts this military clash is presented as a final eschatological battle Yahweh wages against those who oppose his justice. Hence, God's military activity is strictly connected with a metaphor of a judge. The day of Yahweh will be the day of judgment on those whose behaviour violates God's order. The judgment will be passed according to God's justice (Zeph 3:5; cf. 2:3), which is not external to him but constitutes the very essence of his being (Zeph 3:5; cf. Ps 129:4). For this reason, God – who “does no wrong” (Zeph 3:5) – is a “witness” to people's actions (3:8). Unlike human judges – called “evening wolves” (3:3) – Yahweh “every morning brings his justice to light” (3:5). The dynamic character of God's judgment is rendered with the use of the verb *pāqad*⁵. This polysemantic word may refer to the moment of the judge's arrival (“he visits”), to the process of passing judgment (“he appraises or reviews”) and, finally, to the enforcement of judgment and the carrying out of punishment (cf. Zeph 1:8-9.12; 2:7⁶; 3:8.15). In other prophetic texts God's judgment has a more static character and is presented simply as a final moment of the day of Yahweh (cf. Joel 4:1-2; Zach 14:9; Mal 3:5).

Additionally, God's judgment is depicted as having a cultic facet, for the day foreseen by the prophet is essentially “the day of Yahweh's sacrifice” (Zeph 1:8). Zephaniah employs the motif of sacrifice in a novel way. Prophetic texts about the day of Yahweh typically predict the sacrifice that Yahweh will make of the nations (Isa 34:6; Jer 46:10; Ezek 39:17). However, in the Book of Zephaniah the sacrificial matter is the people invited by God to participate in the cultic act (1:7)⁷. To be able to take part in the sacrifice one needs to be

⁵ G. André, “*pāqad*”, *TWAT* VI, 716.

⁶ This verse indicates that the aim of God's judgment is not merely punishment and destruction, but primarily the restoration of violated justice. For this reason, King understands the verb under analysis here to mean “simply to inspect, to control and if need be, to intervene in one manner or another in order to reestablish the order” (G.A. King, “The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah”, *BSac* 152 [1995] 18).

⁷ S. Potocki (“Księga Sofoniasza”, *Księgi proroków mniejszych*. Wstęp – przykład z oryginału – komentarz [PŚST XII.2; Poznań 1968] II, 158) identifies “his invitees” with pagan nations, which were supposed to “sacrifice” – that is, destroy – the Kingdom of Judah. Homerski (“Rysy eschatologiczne Dnia Pańskiego u proroka Sofoniasza”, 36), in turn, distinguishes between two groups of Israelites who are affected by God's actions: those who are sentenced to destruction are sacrificial matter, while those who are acquitted during God's judgment are “consecrated”, which means that they participate in the sacrificial feast. The parallel structure employed in the second part of verse 7 together with the subsequent description in verse 8 of those who receive punishment make it clear that the invitees are to be identified with sacrificial matter (cf.

ritually clean (cf. Num 11:18; Jos 3:5; 7:13; Isa 30:29; 66:17; Ezek 44:19; 46:20). In Zephaniah's prophecy, Yahweh's invitees keep ignoring their sins and for this reason God will cleanse them by destroying the sinners and saving the righteous ones (cf. 3:11-12). Like in the Book of Malachi (3:2-3.19), God will use fire as a tool to cleanse people. In Zephaniah's text, fire is a metaphor for God's wrath, which will lead to the cleansing not only of the chosen people but also of pagan nations (cf. Zeph 1:18; 3:8). Thanks to this, the latter will be given "purified lips" to be able to "call on the name of Yahweh and serve him with one accord [...] [and] bring him offerings" (3:9-10)⁸.

The day of Yahweh will be celebrated in the whole universe (cf. Zeph 1:2.3.18; 3:8,10). God's intervention as judge, warrior and priest will turn into a theophany transforming the universe. The beginning of Zephaniah's prophecy shows this transformation as a complete destruction, which seems the reversal of the act of creation (cf. Zeph 1:2-3). The universal character of this event is underscored by some cosmic phenomena, which Zephaniah enumerates when describing the day of Yahweh as "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and dark fog" (1:15). Similar depictions of extraordinary natural phenomena may be found in the prophecies of Isaiah (13:10; 34:4), Joel (3:3-4) and Zechariah (14:4-9), and these depictions tend to be even more dramatic and elaborate⁹ in post-Zephaniah texts.

What is then the position of the motif of God's wrath in the metaphorical construction of the day of Yahweh? Does it constitute, from the perspective of semantics, a separate tradition of describing the day of Yahweh, or does it belong to one of the characterizations of this event mentioned above? All the three terms Zephaniah uses to denote God's anger appear also in

A. Berlin, *Zephaniah. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 25A; New York 1994] 79; M.A. Sweeney, "Zephaniah", *The Twelve Prophets* [Berit Olam; Collegeville 2000] II, 504.

- ⁸ The semantic analysis of these verses conducted by Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 182-186) shows that Zephaniah does not really predict an eschatological event, but rather confirms the realization of previous prophecies from Isa 18-19. The prophet foresees there the appearance in the Jerusalem Temple of Egyptians ("beyond the rivers of Cush": Isa 18:1; Zeph 3:10), who will "bring an offering" (Isa 18:7; Zeph 3:9) and will "call in the name of Yahweh" (Isa 19:18; Zeph 3:9). This might have happened under the rule of King Uzziah, who was visited in 724 BCE by the messengers of Pharaoh So, his partner in an anti-Assyrian coalition. They are called the "daughter of my dispersed", a clear allusion to the story of the Tower of Babel, which ends with the dispersion of people (Gen 11:4.10). The Polish translator of the Millennium Bible is thus wrong to translate the expression the "daughter of my dispersed" in the footnote to Zeph 3:10 as referring to diaspora Israelites. The same mistake is made by Potocki in "Księga Sofoniasza", 193.
- ⁹ N. Wendebourg, *Der Tag des Herrn. Zur Gerichtserwartung im Neuen Testament auf ihrem alttestamentlichen und frühjüdischen Hintergrund* (WMANT 96; Neukirchen-Vluyn 2003) 65. The transformation of the universe is one of the elements of a later literary genre, namely prophetic eschatology, which was eventually transformed into apocalyptic writing.

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

Isaiah's and Ezekiel's descriptions of the day of Yahweh: *ʔaḇ* (Zeph 2:2.3; 3:8 – Isa 13:3.9.13; Ezek 7:3.8; 38:18), *ḥārôn* (Zeph 2:2; 3:8 – Isa 13:9.13; Ezek 7:12.14), and *ʕebrāh* (Zeph 1:15.18 – Isa 13:9.13; Ezek 7:19; 38:19)¹⁰. The analysis of Zephaniah's understanding of the "wrath of Yahweh" thus needs to acknowledge the texts of Isa 13 and Ezek 7 and 38–39. Since Ezekiel prophesized after the year 597 BCE (cf. Ez 1:1-2), and the text from the Book of Isaiah was written in the period directly preceding the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE¹¹, Zephaniah may be treated as the first prophet to include the anthropathism of God's wrath in the metaphorical construction of the day of Yahweh. Spickermann, however, questions the originality of Zephaniah's deployment of the motif of God's wrath¹². According to him, the prophet took his inspiration from Assyrian and Babylonian divination and numerological texts, in which anger is one of the signs heralding unlucky days. The art of divination of bad-luck days in Assyria and Babylonia is a fact that cannot be negated, yet in none of these texts is anger presented as a dynamic and autonomous reality, the way it is in the Book of Zephaniah. The prophet personifies wrath and makes it the protagonist of the day of Yahweh. What is most emphasized in the expression "the day of Yahweh" is not the temporal element ("day") but rather the person of Yahweh, who makes his presence known throughout the world on account of the events of that day¹³. In light of this, the synonymous expressions referring to the day of Yahweh, such as "a day of wrath, a day of distress and tribulation, a day of ruin and of devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thick fog, a day of trumpet and battle cry" (Zeph 1:15-16a), bring to mind successive pictures that metaphorically render methods of God's intervention. Only one of these – the metaphor of wrath – is not external to Yahweh, but remains in close connection to his person as an expression of his actions in the universe (cf. 1:18; 2:2; 3:8).

God's wrath should not be perceived in emotional terms as an expression of revengefulness, retaliation or violence, for then indeed it would be at odds with God's mercy. The day of the wrath of Yahweh is God's reaction to the

¹⁰ What makes this similarity even more striking is the identical combination of the three terms used to point out the intensity of God's anger: *ḥārôn ʔaḇ* in Zeph 2:2; 3:8; Isa 13:9.13; *bəyôm ʕebraʔ yḥwh* in Zeph 1:18; Ezek 7:19 (cf. Isa 13:13).

¹¹ Cf. the redaction criticism of Isa 13 in: J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19; New York 2000) 276-277.

¹² Spickermann, "Dies irae", 200-205. It needs to be added that the first scholar to pay attention to these texts was L. Černý, *The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* (Prag 1948) (cf. Kaperlud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah*, 83-85).

¹³ K. Koch, *The Prophets. I. The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia 1983) 161; cf. H.D. Preuss, *Yahwehgläubigkeit und Zukunftserwartung* (BWANT 87; Stuttgart 1968) 171.

evil the world is riddled with. The list of sins calling for God's intervention into the history of mankind is long. It is worth noting that the prophet does not speak of transgressions in an impersonal manner; on the contrary, he is very precise in pointing out those who are a source of injustice. In 1:4 he mentions first the "remnant of Baal"¹⁴, that is people who introduced into both the Jerusalem cult and everyday life in Judah pagan elements which are at odds with the faith in Yahweh. These are mainly priests – "idolatrour servants" (*kōmer*, cf. 2 Kgs 23:5; Hos 10:5) – who get involved in astral cult (1:5), who swear by other gods they see as source of blessing (1:5) and who follow superstitions while serving in the temple (eg. leaping over the threshold in 1:9; cf. 1 Sam 5:4-5). Religious syncretism was also reflected in culture, an example of which were foreign outfits worn by the king's officials (v. 8). Deserting Yahweh generated even more serious consequences in social life. Zephaniah points out ironically that what people bring to the Jerusalem temple are not offerings, but "violence and deceit" (cf. 1:9). He elaborates further on this idea when he calls Jerusalem "the rebellious and defiled city, the oppressing city" (3:1). The capital of Judah is "defiled", because the hands of its leaders are covered with the blood of their victims (cf. an identical characterization of Jerusalem in Isa 59:3). The prophet does not justify the charges against the "oppressing" city in the manner reminiscent of Ezek 18:12, that is by summarizing the city's transgressions; instead, he uses a metaphorical argumentation, comparing the city officials to "roaring lions" and its judges to "evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning" (3:3). Zephaniah's description of the ruling classes emphasizes their exploitation of their weak subjects, their taking advantage of their superior positions and their caring only about their own good (cf. a similar metaphor used with reference to false prophets in Ezek 13:4). The malpractices both in cult and in social life make Jerusalem a "rebellious" city, which "does not listen to any voice, does not take instruction, in Yahweh does not trust, does not draw near to him" (3:2). Such an attitude towards God leads to the negation of his presence in the world: "They say in their hearts: «Yahweh does no good and he does no evil»" (1:12). These words show human conceit, which is exactly like the conceit of Nineveh "that says in its heart: «I and no other!»" (2:15). Even if Israelites do not question God's existence, they still treat him as incapable of shaping history, which remains in human hands. A conviction that follows from such an argumentation is that God

¹⁴ When used with a modifier noun in the Hebrew Bible, the term "remnant" always refers to people, e.g. "remnant of Moab" in Isa 16:14, "remnant of Aram" in Isa 17:3, etc. Hence, the expression does not denote material objects used in syncretic cult, but rather people who are involved in it (cf. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 67-68).

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

is indifferent to people's actions; such a belief is in essence tantamount to putting the blame for the world's wickedness and injustice on Yahweh¹⁵.

In this context, God's wrath signifies his personal intervention into human history, through which he will express "his disagreement, his rebellion and indignation against those who do injustice, who do harm and who bring death upon the powerless"¹⁶. Yahweh is not the instigator of evil that has spread among Israelites, for, as he concludes, they themselves have "sinned against" him (Zeph 1:17). Therefore, the wrath of Yahweh is not some irrational emotional state, but rather his reaction to and retribution for the evil perpetrated by man¹⁷. This way, anger becomes in the prophecies of the day of God a metaphor for God's justice, which stands in contrast to human wickedness and iniquity and which aims to restore violated order through the destruction of human sin.

2. The Historical-Salvific Context of the Metaphor of Yahweh's Wrath

By taking into account the imagery employed by Zephaniah to describe the day of Yahweh it is possible to understand the historical-salvific background of this event. The metaphorical component of Zephaniah's prophecy sketched above constitutes the basis for various exegetical hypotheses concerning God's intervention predicted by the prophet. Gressmann, the author of the first of these hypotheses, posits the connection between the day of Yahweh and the neighbouring religions' expectations of a world-wide catastrophe, such a connection being an oldest example of mythological eschatology¹⁸. Mowinckel, in turn, sees the origins of the day of Yahweh in a hypothetical enthronement festival of Yahweh, with its roots supposedly in the Babylonian New Year festival¹⁹. A scholar already mentioned in this article, L. Černý indicates another possible borrowing from the religions of the ancient Near

15 Cf. A. Bonora, *Nahum – Sofonia – Abacuc – Lamentazioni*. Dolore, protesta e speranza (Lob 1/25; Brescia 1989) 82. P.R. House notes that what Jerusalem's citizens say in 1:12 testifies to their misinterpretation of God's mercy, for they mistakenly take God's patience for a sign of his powerlessness (P.R. House, *Zephania. A Prophetic Drama* [JSOT.S 69; Sheffield 1988] 77).

16 H. Witczyk, *Pascha Jezusa odpowiedzią na grzech świata* (Lublin 2003) 45.

17 W. Groß, "Zorn Gottes – ein biblisches Theologumenon", *Gott – ratlos vor dem Bösen* (ed. W. Beinert) (QD 177; Freiburg – Basel – Wien 1999) 64, 79.

18 H. Gressmann, *Der Ursprung der israelitisch-jüdischen Eschatologie* (Göttingen 1905) 141-143.

19 S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien II. Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (Amsterdam 1922). His hypothesis was later discussed by other exegetes, eg. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1962) 316-320.

East by arguing for the link between the day of Yahweh and the Babylonian day of wrath (Akkad. *ibbû*)²⁰. All of these theories, however, overlook the historico-salvific aspect of prophetic renderings of the day of Yahweh, which was first brought to scholarly attention by von Rad²¹. He locates the origins of the day of Yahweh in the tradition of the holy war, which – without using the expression “the day of Yahweh” as such – describes the climax of that day as Yahweh’s victory over Israelites’ enemies and as a source of blessing for Israel. The line of von Rad’s argumentation is undoubtedly right, but as his opponents have noticed, prophecies of the day of Yahweh are not limited to the topos of the holy war²². If the day of Yahweh is essentially, as Preuss puts it, the actualization of a historical event of Israel’s salvation due to God’s intervention, then its archetype would be the Exodus, not the holy war²³. Theophanic elements play a crucial role in the imagery of the day of Yahweh, and it needs to be remembered that the Sinaitic theophany is the fundamental experience of salvation in Israel’s history²⁴. This contention sheds new light on the prediction of the day of Yahweh. In the prophet’s account, the day of Yahweh is characterized in a manner similar to Sinaitic theophany and its function is linked to the logic of the Sinaitic covenant. Fenham sees the day of Yahweh as the realization of the curse that was to befall the party that would break the covenant, an argumentation that is later adopted also by King. Through the events of that day, God would personally punish his unfaithful people, in the way described in Deut 27–28²⁵. If the assumption that the Sinaitic covenant was the background for the prophecies about the day of Yahweh is to be accepted, it requires first that a question be posed about the role played by God’s wrath in the former event. Is it true that for Zephaniah the day of Yahweh is merely the realization of the curse brought about by the breach of the covenant with God by the chosen nation?

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- 20 Černý, *The Day of Yahweh*, 17. Spickermann’s analysis goes along similar lines, “Dies irae”, 200-205.
- 21 G. von Rad, “The Origin of the Day of Yahweh”, *JSS* 4 (1959) 97-108. His argumentation was supported by many other exegetes, eg. K.D. Schnuck, “Strukturlinien in der Entwicklung der Vorstellung vom «Tag Yahwehs»”, *VT* 14 (1964) 319-330 (especially pp. 321, 325).
- 22 Cf. Wendebourg, *Der Tag des Herrn*, 82.
- 23 Preuss, *Jahweglaube und Zukunftserwartung*, 173-174.
- 24 Similar interpretations of teophanic elements in the Book of Zephaniah may be found in: G. Krinetzki, *Zefanjastudien. Motiv- und Traditionskritik + Kompositions- und Redaktionskritik* (Regensburger Studien zur Theologie 7; Frankfurt am M. – Bern 1977) 77; I.J. Ball, *Zephaniah. A Rhetorical Study* (Berkeley 1988) 95-96.
- 25 F.C. Fenham, “A Possible Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord”, *Die Ou Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid Afrika-9th Congress* (Potchefstroom 1966) 90-97; King, “The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah”, 26-29. The latter points out that Zephaniah’s negative depiction of the day of Yahweh follows in many respects the Deuteronomic tradition (eg. Zeph 1:17 – Deut 28:28-29).

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

When one looks for parallels between the Sinaitic covenant, as narrated in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and the day of Yahweh in the Book of Zephaniah, one is struck first and foremost by God's theophany that the two events share and that manifests itself in thunder, lightning, thick cloud, the blast of trumpet and/or earthquake²⁶. Apart from that, the two events are linked by the motifs of cleansing (*qādaš* in Hi: Zeph 1:17; Exod 19:10.14.22.23) and sacrifice (*zeḅaḥ*: Zeph 1:7; Exod 24:5). The Sinaitic covenant is not, however, a single event, as it constitutes the climax of the whole Exodus narrative and in a way seals Israel's release from the Egyptian captivity. In this account theophanic elements (such as darkness or cloud) stand side by side with representations of God as a warrior fighting against his people's enemies (Exod 14:14; 15:3). Another element of the Exodus narrative is the motif of God's anger (Exod 15:7), which will later play a crucial role in the renewal of the covenant broken by Israelites soon after having been entered into (Exod 32:10.11.12). The enumeration of the parallels between the Exodus narrative and the day of Yahweh foreseen by Zephaniah makes it possible to interpret the motif of anger beyond the curses mentioned in the covenant²⁷.

The crux of the covenant is expressed in the words that convey God's desire to be attached to Israel: "You have seen [...] how I carried you away on an eagle's wings and brought you to me" (Exod 19:4). At the foot of Mount Sinai a new people is being created, released not only from economic and political dependence on Egypt, but also from religious dependence reflected in the cult of pagan deities (cf. Ez 20:7). Yahweh gets personally involved in shaping Israel's history by making Israel his most "peculiar treasure" (*seḡullāh* in Exod 19:5) in the whole universe. The fact that such a gift is given to Israelites for free does not preclude the chosen nation's freedom; after all, they were asked to "obey and keep" the words of the covenant (Exod 19:5). Israelites' loyalty to God is first put to test even before Moses receives the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. Tired of a prolonged waiting for Moses' return, the people mould a calf, which in their minds is a representation of "god who brought [them] up from the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:4). Yahweh reacts with anger (Exod 32:10.12), which is a clear sign of his unequivocal objection to his people's betrayal. The breach of the covenant

²⁶ Cf. *ʿānān*: Zeph 1:15 – Exod 19:9.16; 24:15.16[*bis*].18; 34:5; Deut 4:11; 5:22; *ʿārāḇel*: Zeph 1:15 – Exod 20:21; Deut 4:11; 5:22; *ḥōšeḳ*: Zeph 1:15 – Deut 4:11; 5:23; cf. Exod 14:20; *šōḇār*: Zeph 1:16 – Exod 19:16.19; 20:18.

²⁷ A positive aspect of Yahweh's wrath in the context of his covenant with Israel is emphasized by H. Witczyk, who, on the one hand, treats anger as a sign of God's jealous love for his people, and, on the other – as the only way to save the chosen nation, which has become involved in idolatry (Witczyk, *Pascha Jezusa odpowiedzią na grzech świata*, 40-46).

will ultimately lead Israel to death. Moses shows his understanding of that fact when he says that without Yahweh their journey to the Promised Land is pointless (cf. Exod 33:15). Their departure from God also nullifies their identity as the “people of Yahweh” (cf. Exod 32:7-8).

Nevertheless, God does not give up on Israel. Wrath constitutes a response of God, who loves his people and does not want its demise. His new intervention is supposed to free the chosen nation of everything that leads to its death. The declared punishment is a consequence of people’s actions, an aftermath of their sins. Sin, however, is not enough to thwart God’s original intentions concerning his people (Exod 32:10). Paradoxically, wrath – a sign of God’s retribution – reveals the truth about God who is “slow to anger” and – by inference – “merciful” (Exod 34:6). Punishment, then, is an element of God’s salvific action, whereby a new people is freed and created from the “remnant” of Israel.

3. God’s Wrath as a Metaphor for God’s Mercy

The way to interpret the Sinai pericope outlined above may be likewise employed to analyse Zephaniah’s prophecy, as his vision of the day of God harks back to the story of the Exodus and the Sinaitic covenant. The prophet’s words are addressed to Yahweh’s people, whose current situation shows that they have “turn[ed] aside from Yahweh and do not seek Yahweh and do not inquire of him” (1:6). The breach of the covenant transcends the cultic dimension indicated by the verbs *biqqeš* and *dāraš*. It is actually the rebellion against Yahweh (verbs *mārā’* in 3:1 and *pāša’* in 3:11), as a result of which all ties with God are severed. Verse 3:2 is a perfect illustration of that: a physical distance (they “do not draw near to me”) is accompanied by a certain breach of the dialogue of love (they “listen to no voice, accept no instruction, do not trust in me”). The people view Yahweh as someone absent from their lives (cf. 1:12). The position of the true God has been overtaken not only by pagan deities (cf. 1:4-5), but primarily by people themselves, who aspire to Yahweh’s power. The rulers of Jerusalem “exult in their pride” and “are haughty on Yahweh’s holy mountain” (3:11); they replace God’s law in social life with “violence and deceit” (1:9). The path of conceit the nation has chosen to follow will irrevocably lead to its self-annihilation²⁸, which God cannot remain indifferent to.

²⁸ Biblical scholars see in Zephaniah’s attitude to human conceit a sign of his being influenced by Isaiah, who not only criticized the haughtiness of the nations, but primarily denounced the haughtiness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (cf. Isa 2:6-22; 3:16-21; etc.). The reliance of Zeph 3:11 on Isaiah’s texts is analyzed in detail in Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 187-189.

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

The prophesized personal intervention of God will bring about a reversal of Israelite's hitherto attitudes. On the day of his wrath, Yahweh himself will carry out the inspection of Jerusalem (1:12), unlike in the prophecies of Jeremiah (5:1) and Ezekiel (9:4-7), where he does so through his intermediaries. God's visitation will result in an irreversible destruction of the whole earth (cf. 1:2-3), not only of those who negated Yahweh's presence in the world (1:13). God's activity is not, however, meant solely to annihilate. God engages in a dialogue with himself, attempting to find some possibility of salvation. Faced with the demise of his people, God does not refuse them his word and indicates the potential salvation of the "humble of the land" (2:3). Their behaviour is characterized by the verb "to seek", which – used three times in 2:3 – brings forth a definition of a new Israel. First, a new Israel "seeks Yahweh", which in 1:6 and 3:2 means turning towards God and establishing a personal relationship with him. This leads to the "seeking of righteousness", which in the context of the expression under study may be interpreted as carrying out God's law. The practical implications of such an attitude are expressed in 3:13: "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and utter no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths" (cf. 1:9 describing a completely different situation). Finally, the "humble of the land" are those who "seek humility". Unlike the haughty, they accept their dependence on God, they trust in him and they seek salvation in his name (cf. 3:2.12). Their hopes will come true on the day of the wrath of Yahweh, when God will "remove" the haughty (3:11) and "cause a people humble and lowly to remain" (3:12). The creation of a new people will be accompanied by the restoration of the world, whose centre will lie in Jerusalem and in Yahweh himself (3:5). The covenant with God will transcend the borders of Israel, for at the end of the day everybody will "call in the name of Yahweh and serve him with one accord" (3:9). The day of the wrath of Yahweh will turn out for Israel to be the source of joy. Predicting the restoration of the nation, the prophet encourages it to rejoice: "Sing, oh, daughter Zion; shout, oh, Israel! Rejoice and exult with a full heart, oh, daughter Jerusalem!" (3:14), for "Yahweh has removed your judgment, has turned aside your enemy" (3:15). The joy is a result of Yahweh's presence amongst his people (3:15.17). He is the ruler who on the day of his wrath saves his people from death (cf. 1:14 with 3:17). Now, the chosen nation may participate in the joy of God, who exults – as the translation of 3:17 in the Septuagint puts it – in his "renewed love"²⁹ for Israel. This confession made by God contains the

²⁹ The difficulty in translating the Hebrew text of Zeph 3:17 stems from the verb *hāraš* used there, which literally means: God will "keep silent in his love", or God will "plow with his

key to the understanding of the metaphor of wrath in the context of the day of Yahweh. The verb *ʾahābā^h* employed here is used in the Hebrew Bible to signify the emotional dimension of love, its wants and desires, especially in a marital relationship³⁰. Zephaniah's choice of this particular word seems even more meaningful when one remembers Hosea's prophecy, in which the verb and the noun formed from the root *ʾhb* are crucial to the description of Yahweh's relation with Israel³¹. In his account of the Exodus and the Sinaitic covenant, Hosea claims that God "led them with bonds of love (*mšḵ baʿābōtōt ʾahābā^h*), and [he] was to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws" (Hos 11:4). The comparison of Hosea's statement with Jer 31:3 leads to the conclusion that the root analysed here belongs within the terminology of the covenant³². In the context of the covenant "yoke, bonds and cords" signify the responsibilities of the partners (cf. Ps 2:3; Jer 2:20; 5:5). By releasing Israel, Yahweh placed the "bonds of love" upon it, through which he tied it to himself by means of the covenant. *Deuteronomium* makes sense of the Exodus in a similar fashion: "because Yahweh loved you (*mēʾahābat*)... [he] brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (7:8)³³. In the Book of Hosea love is presented as a force that led to Israel's liberation from Egypt and to the creation of Yahweh's people through

love". The first suggestion may be understood in three ways: (1) God's love is too gentle to express it; (2) God has satisfied his anger, hence his silence; (3) God keeps silent about the sins of Israel for he has already forgiven them (cf. A. Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 145-146). Following Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 202-203, the second rendering of the verb calls for an interpretation of the activity of plowing as a metaphor for conjugal love, which would serve to represent a new marital relationship between Yahweh and his people. Both of these translations are fraught with problems. The first one – God keeps silent – is at odds with the context, for the same verse describes Yahweh as someone who "rejoices in delight". The metaphorical interpretation of the second one – God plows – does not have any biblical parallels. Judg 14:18, mentioned by Sweeney, does not apply the activity of plowing to the conjugal love of Samson and his wife (unless one assumes that it is a caricature of the proper relationship). The rendering of this text in LXX, "renew you with his love" – employs the verb *ḥādaš* instead of the verb *ḥāraš*, which would suggest a possible confusion of two similar letters, *dalet* and *reš*, in MT. The Greek version is confirmed by Peshitta.

³⁰ G. Wallis, "ʾāhab", *TWAT* I, 109.

³¹ Cf. the analysis of the root *ʾhb* in the Book of Hosea in: W. Pikor, "«Albowiem Bogiem jestem, nie człowiekiem» (Oz 11,9). Miłosierdzie jako objawienie «inności» Boga w świetle proroctwa Ozeasza", „Dobrze, slugo dobry...” (Mt 25,21). Księga pamiątkowa ku czci ks. dra Huberta Ortona (ed. K. Milecarek) (Studia Biblica 9; Kielce 2005) 105-125.

³² Jer 31:3 resembles Hos 11:4 in many respects: "I have loved you with an everlasting love (*ʾahābat ʿólām*); therefore I have drawn you (*mšḵ*) with loving kindness (*ḥesed*)". What is more, Jeremiah treats *ʾahābā^h* as prior to *ḥesed*. The latter can only be true "faithfulness" when accompanied by the former.

³³ The employment of the root *ʾhb* in Deut confirms the dependence of the Deuteronomic tradition on Hosea. Zephaniah, who supported King Josiah's reforms, was also influenced by Hosea (cf. Wallis, "ʾāhab", 124).

The Motif of God's Wrath in Zephaniah's Prophecy about the Day of Yahweh

the Sinaitic covenant. It is this love that makes God renew his relationship with Israel, whom he “shall cure of their disloyalty [and] shall love them with all [his] heart (*ʾōhābēm*)” (14:5). Before that, Yahweh expected Israel to reform its ways (14:3), but now he unexpectedly refrains from posing any preliminary requirements. Instead of waiting for his bride’s change of heart, God himself “turns away his anger” (14:5) and approaches her with love. God fights a battle with himself, in which “his heart turns against him, all [his] compassions (*niḥûmîm*) are kindled”. God’s anger in a way fights with God’s *niḥûmîm*, which in its two other appearances in the Hebrew Bible (Isa 57:18; Zech 1:13) denotes repentance, compassion and mercy meant to comfort another person. This feeling transforms God’s anger and reminds him of his original decision to love Israel: “I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim again” (11:9).

The force of God’s salvific action on the day of his wrath lies in his love and mercy. Paradoxically, God’s wrath does not preclude love. In the context of the covenant, wrath constitutes a response of God, who loves his people and cannot stand to watch its self-annihilation. It is precisely God’s mounting anger that makes him prone to mercy and willing to bring about the “restoration of the fortune” of those who he attached himself to by means of the covenant (Zeph 3:20; cf. 2:7).

* * *

A close reading of the Book of Zephaniah leads to the conclusion that the expression “the wrath of Yahweh” belongs to a theological, and not psychological, category. Seeing only its emotional connotations results in a misunderstanding of the relationship God forms with man. Making use of anthropopathic language, Zephaniah expresses the truth about God’s real interest in the world. Present among his people, Yahweh could not passively observe its self-annihilation. The historical-salvific aspect of the covenant – forming the context in which to understand the day of Yahweh – shows that God’s anger expresses his willingness to save Israel, constitutes his reaction to the history of human sins and manifests his love for people. This way God’s mercy paradoxically takes on an aspect of God’s anger.