

THE INVISIBLE DEMARCATION LINE IN ZECHARIAH 13

Matthew Bryce Ervin

ABSTRACT

The first six verses of Zechariah 13 are written in prose. The structure suddenly shifts to poetry with verse 7. This creates an invisible demarcation line of sorts between verses 6 and 7. As much of the Old Testament is written in poetry, this demarcation line would not be especially remarkable. However, the purposes for shifting from prose to poetry can be for more than just adding heightened emotion and memorable phrasing. In this case, the shift suggests that the Shepherd, who is YHWH's Associate in verse 7, is meant to be differentiated from the false prophet (or *prophets*) discussed in verses 4–6. Making such a distinction is necessary to avoid common conflation, thereby helping us to better understand the chapter and related passages.

Keywords: *Zechariah 13:7–9; Struck Shepherd; YHWH's Associate; Hebrew poetic parallelism; Masoretic petuchah; Messianic prophecy; Jewish remnant*

Overview and Placement of Zechariah 13:7–9

Our key passage of interest:

⁷ “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd,
And against the man, My Associate,”
Declares the Lord of hosts.
“Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered;
And I will turn My hand against the little ones.
⁸ “It will come about in all the land,”
Declares the Lord,
“That two parts in it will be cut off *and* perish;
But the third will be left in it.
⁹ “And I will bring the third part through the fire,
Refine them as silver is refined,
And test them as gold is tested.
They will call on My name,
And I will answer them;
I will say, ‘They are My people,’
And they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’” (Zech 13:7–9).

This passage prophetically describes the Lord calling for *His Shepherd* to be struck down. This Shepherd in a Christian canonical reading, is indisputably the Messiah, as Jesus applies the passage to Himself in Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. As a result of the Messiah being struck, the *flock* (Jesus' disciples) would be scattered, and the Lord's personal judgment would come upon the Jewish people. This would then lead to a time when two thirds of the Jews in the land would be killed. The surviving third of the Jews would then be refined so that they would place their full trust in the Lord and become His people in an intimate and permanent way.

This passage, like many prophecies on the Messiah, connects His work at the First Coming to the Second. It prophesies suffering, death, and judgment. Yet it ends with hope; a purified remnant will emerge from a time of tribulation to be restored into a faithful relationship with the Lord. It is fitting that such a scenario would begin with a description of the Messiah being struck.

The passage immediately follows the first six verses of Zechariah 13. These verses describe a future time of restoration for the Jews in the land, which will result in idols being banned and false prophets being publicly shamed. Of special interest is the singular false prophet in verses 5–6. He is presented as a figure who epitomizes the false prophets. He may be understood as a generic false prophet, one who, once ashamed, not only denies being a prophet but affirms being a simple farmhand and a man of low status, having been sold as a slave in his youth. This false prophet further lies about the wounds on his body, received as a result of those punishing him for his deception or self-inflicted in ungodly rituals, as merely being the result of an accident in his friend's home. He may be a more specific false prophet, the "*foolish shepherd*" from Zechariah 11:15–17. In which case, this false prophet could be the antichrist, and the details are especially about him more than the other false prophets. This possibility is especially intriguing given that the "*house of my friends*" could indicate the temple as this is where the antichrist will perform his greatest deceptions and claims to divinity (e.g., Dan 9:27; Matt 24:15; 2 Thess 2:3–4). The wounds the false prophet will receive, then, could be understood as people he once deceived having injured him. Regardless, this shameful figure contrasts sharply with the true Shepherd in our key passage. This contrast coincides with the end of the prose section. Verse 6 should not be treated as a transition that identifies the wounded false prophet with the Shepherd of verse 7.

Unfortunately, *verse 6 is often misinterpreted* because it is viewed as a transition or even that it is meant to be grouped in with verses 7–9. Many commentators identify the prophet in verse 6 as Jesus Himself, while others strain to at least apply the words of the verse to the wounds Jesus received at His passion and crucifixion. "*To see in this passage a reference to our blessed Lord and his crucifixion, though such an opinion has the support of the Roman Liturgy and of many interpreters, is to do violence to the context, and to read into the words a meaning wholly alien from the subject of false prophets, which is the matter in hand.*" (Pusey et al 1885).

Hebrew Evidence for the Literary Break

The literary break between Zechariah 13:6 and 13:7 is also supported by the Hebrew text itself. Zechariah 13:7a opens with a new poetic lineation: חָרֵב עוֹרֵי עַל־רֵעִי / וְעַל־גֹּבֶר, "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd / and against the man,

My Associate / declares the LORD of hosts.” The first two lines form a clear synonymous parallelism: “My Shepherd” corresponds to “the man, My Associate,” and both are governed by the same summons against the sword. This parallel structure identifies one exalted figure from two complementary angles. He is YHWH’s Shepherd, and He is the man who stands in special nearness to Him. This is a sharp change from verses 4–6, where the subject is the shameful false prophet who denies his prophetic identity and attempts to explain away his wounds. Verse 7 does not naturally continue that portrait. Instead, it introduces a new oracle concerning YHWH’s own Shepherd. The Masoretic tradition also supports this separation, since the codices mark an open section (*petuchah*) before verse 7, where the command “Awake, O sword” begins. This is the stronger of the two Masoretic division types, for an open section marks a major break or the start of a new unit, whereas a closed section (*setumah*) marks only a minor subdivision. The division is preserved in the Aleppo Codex itself, which is intact for Zechariah 12 to 14, and it stands in the Leningrad Codex behind BHS, so the break belongs to the received Hebrew text and not merely to later English formatting.¹

The Struck Shepherd

YHWH’s true Shepherd is spoken of only in verse 7 of Zechariah 13, though the verse is theologically dense. It is fundamentally a command from the Lord. He declared, “Awake, O sword,” which is poetic language. The sword is an inanimate object, yet the Lord spoke to it like an agent sent forth to carry out His will. A “sword” often symbolizes violence, death, or divine punishment (e.g., Num 22:23; 1 Ch 21:12). The Lord summoned judgment to come against His Shepherd. He directly and unreluctantly commanded the sword to strike the Shepherd. The Lord’s direct command makes it plain that He has sovereignly ordained this event.

The Lord referred to this man as “My Shepherd,” which at the very least means that He is a servant of YHWH. That “My Associate” is coupled with “My Shepherd,” means that the latter title implies a special intimacy with YHWH. The Lord called the Shepherd, the “man,” which could just mean “individual” in this case. The natural implication, though, is that this man is a male human. He is a גִּבֹּר (*geber*), a *notable man*; He is a “hero” and a “mighty man.” The second title for the man, “My Associate” (e.g., NASB95) is translated from עֲמִיתִי (*'amiti*), which is a rare word in the Tanakh. The only other book it appears in is Leviticus, where it is typically translated as “neighbor” (e.g., 6:2; 19:15). *'Amiti* could also be translated along the lines of “My Companion” (e.g., NKJV), “My Fellow” (e.g., KJV), and “who stands next to me” (e.g., ESV). All these options, but especially the last, indicate that the Shepherd is especially near YHWH in a unique sense.

The combination of the following **supports** a high Christological reading when read canonically:

YHWH calling Him **My Shepherd**,
YHWH calling Him **My Associate/Fellow**,
the Shepherd being struck by divine command,
Jesus applying the passage to Himself,
broader Christological fulfillment.

Rashi commented that the Lord's Associate is whom YHWH "associated with Me to watch My flocks as I do." To be so close to YHWH, as his fellow worker, implies that the Shepherd is Himself YHWH (cf. John 8:28). Feinberg agreed, asserting that "*There is no stronger statement in the OT regarding the unimpeachable deity of Israel's Messiah, the Son of God.*" Indeed, the highest use of the title belongs chiefly to He who declared, "*I and the Father are one*" (John 10:30). This Shepherd is clearly not a false shepherd or prophet like those condemned earlier in Zechariah. This is the good Shepherd approved by the Lord. The Shepherd's titles and his identification as a man, are rightfully reconciled by concluding that he is both fully God and fully man.

The Shepherd belongs to YHWH and He is connected to Him in a unique way. Yet the Lord ordered the sword to "strike the Shepherd," to smite Him. The Lord personally ordered the death of His Shepherd. While the doctrine cannot be proven from this verse alone, it strongly supports *penal substitutionary atonement* and should more often be cited among the classic verses in defense of it (e.g., Isa 53:5–6; Mark 10:45; John 3:14; Rom 3:25–26; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24; 3:18). "The divine witness to the death and deity of the prophesied Messiah makes this verse one of the most significant in the entire Old Testament."

The striking of the Shepherd is directly connected to the Lord's declaration that "the sheep will be scattered." The immediate context suggests that the flock that is the Lord's people would be dispersed in chaos, coinciding with the striking of the Shepherd. Immediately following, the Lord would turn "My hand against the little ones". The phrase includes the preposition **עַל**, "upon/against," followed by **הַצְעִירִים**, a masculine plural substantive meaning "the little ones," "the young," or "the insignificant." The idea is that the Lord would turn to bring judgment upon His own people, the Jews, who are likened to weak children in comparison to the Lord as their corrective Father. This judgment directly leads into verses 8 and 9, where two thirds of the Jewish people in the land will be "struck down," with the third being refined as a precious metal in fire.

Jesus directly quoted Zechariah 13:7 on the night He was betrayed: "Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered''" (Matt 26:31; also Mark 14:27). It was at Jesus' arrest that his closest disciples fled, *scattering* as it were. Yet, the Shepherd being struck is literally fulfilled by Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. This is supported by Jesus' explanation, "after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (Matt 26:32). Thus, the *striking* is best understood as being inclusive of Jesus' arrest, suffering, and crucifixion, as these events preceded the resurrection. The Lord Jesus stated, "for it is written," which strongly suggests fulfillment in this context. It is *because* the quoted prophecy *was written* that the Shepherd Jesus would be struck. Not all conclude that Jesus meant that Zechariah 13:7 was fulfilled:

Despite the NT use of this text to speak of the scattering of the disciples following Jesus' crucifixion (Matt 26:31; Mark 14:27), the immediate context of Zechariah suggests that unfaithful shepherds (kings) will be punished by the Lord precisely so their flocks (disobedient Israel) can be scattered (cf. Zech 11:6, 8, 9, 16). It is likely

that Jesus drew on this passage merely to make the point that whenever shepherds are incapacitated, sheep will scatter. Thus he was not identifying himself with the shepherd in this text (the shepherd in the Zechariah text is a character who is portrayed negatively).

It is true that if one was to understand Zechariah 13:7 as a direct continuation of the subject in verse 6, that the Shepherd must be not only be unfaithful but wicked. But in addition to the change in poetry, the figure spoken of in verse 7 is YHWH's own Associate. To maintain that the false prophet is the same as the Shepherd forced one rabbinic commentator to alter the wording of the verse to mean that the Shepherd *only thought* that He was the Lord's Associate. While Jesus did not specifically state that our verse was fulfilled, He did soon after declare, "all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets" (Matt 26:56). This statement was inclusive of Jesus' earlier quotation of Zechariah 13:7 in Matthew 26:31. Moreover, the fulfillment of the sheep scattering is synergistic with the earlier fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, with the triumphal entry of Christ (Matt 21:4–5). Understanding that there is a change of subject in Zechariah 13, from the false prophet to the faithful Shepherd, prevents us from adopting an interpretation that militates against Jesus' own words. And such an understanding will help us make a related distinction between the unfaithful shepherd (Zech 11:16–17) and the Shepherd who is YHWH's Associate.

The "little ones" that the Lord would turn His hand against are a related (Venn-overlap style) but distinct group from the sheep who would be scattered (though an application can be made to the disciples). They are "little" because they were weak and vulnerable. The use of the "LORD's Hand" indicates divine judgment. The judgment upon these people would directly lead to a final refined remnant of the Jewish people in the land. The "little ones" are, then, best understood as the Jewish people overall, with the destruction of the temple and their exile from the land by the Romans in AD 70 (Matt 23:37–38). The judgment brought about at that time was part of a series of judgments that will extend into the future. In this way, the final line of Zechariah 13:7 transitions into verses 8 and 9, which are fulfilled at the time of the Second Coming.

The One-Third Remnant

Zechariah 13:8–9 foretells events that would follow the striking of the Shepherd. But unlike the events that happened immediately afterward, these verses prophesy events yet future. During a time of great trouble in the land, two thirds of the Jewish people will be killed, and the final third will be purified and restored as God's people. Notably, this passage is the sole mention of the prophetic death of two thirds of the Jewish people and a surviving third remnant. (It is spoken of elsewhere, without the specific fraction [Rev 12:13–17].) As such, the passage's importance is difficult to overstate.

Verse 8 opens with the Lord's words, "It will come about." This suggests that while the events described here are related to those in verse 7, some amount of time would pass between them. Determining that amount of time depends on identifying when the events will take place. Since they have not happened literally yet, they must occur in the future. The setting will be "in all the land," the territory within the Promised Land controlled by

the Jewish people, with a particular focus on Judea. The Lord continued with the declaration that “two parts in it will be cut off and perish.” It is notable that two thirds of the Jewish people will be both “cut off” and “perish.” To *be cut off* is often a reference to being killed. If that is the case here, then the further mention that they will *perish* is for emphasis. It could be, though, that the same two-thirds of Jews that will die will be *cut off* in a different sense: they will die in their sins and be permanently severed from the Lord God. This is true regardless, since only the final third will be united to the Lord. That *two thirds will perish* could be taken to mean a great majority instead of a specific percentage. Still, the percentage is best taken as precise since there is nothing in the context to suggest otherwise. *A massive loss of life is expected.* In contrast to the two thirds, a final third “will be left in it”: these Jews will remain in the Promised Land. Verse 9 covers what will happen to the final third of Jews in the land. The Lord said, “I will bring the third part through fire.” It is the Lord Himself who will bring the final third of the Jews through “fire,” which is metaphorical for a time of great trouble and pain bringing about purification. A furnace is used to purify gold and silver as the fire burns away impurities in the metals. The “silver” and the “gold” both refer to the final-third remnant. Their refinement is likened to silver being “refined,” while the gold speaks to the people being “tested.” Taken together, the Jewish people’s time in the fire will both purify them and test them.

The result of the people’s time in the fire is a restored relationship with the Lord: the surviving third will “call on My name.” They will place their trust in the Lord’s character, in who He is. The Lord will respond to the remnant’s act of faith and declare that they are “His people.” The people will respond to the Lord’s declaration with their own: “the Lord is my God.” This exchange signals the restored covenant bond, an intimate relationship between the Lord God of Abraham and the descendants of the promise through Jacob. It is true that some covenant promises do apply to even non-believing Jews (e.g., Rom 11:28–29). Here, the believing remnant is restored to being God’s people in a complete sense; they have eternal life and will dwell with Him forever. Just when the death of the two thirds and the purification of the final third occur is not specified. It could take place during both halves of the tribulation. However, fulfillment more naturally fits during the great tribulation, beginning with the Abomination of Desolation; for it is at this time that Jesus advised those in Judea to flee to the mountains (Matt 24:15–16). The salvation of the final-third remnant is the direct result of both Zechariah 13:7 and 12:10:

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.”

This is the moment when the surviving Jews will place their full trust in Jesus as the divine Messiah. Every Jewish survivor in the land will have salvific faith at that time (Zech 12:11–14), given to them by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Zechariah 13:9 prophesies nothing less than the prerequisite for the Second Coming: the salvation of *all Israel*

(e.g., Isa 10:20–22; 29:7; 59:20–21; Jer 31:33–34; Matt 23:39; Acts 3:19–21; Rom 11:26–27).

Significance of the Poetic Elements

Most English translations of Zechariah 13:7–9 set apart the passage as poetry. However, only the first half of verse 7 is explicitly poetry, while the rest has poetic elements. The shift is clearest in Zechariah 13:7a, where synonymous parallelism and direct poetic address mark a new oracle. Verses 7b–9 then continue with elevated prophetic diction and poetic features, though not every line is equally strict poetry. The first half of verse 7 utilizes synonymous parallelism, a thought-rhythm, where the two lines intensify one another:

“Awake, O sword, **against My Shepherd,**
And against the man, My Associate,” (Zech 13:7a; emphasis added).

The second line echoes and amplifies the first. “My Shepherd” (רֹעִי, *roi*) and “the man, My Associate” (גִּבּוֹר עֲמִיתִי, *geber 'amiti*) refer to the same person from different perspectives. This parallelism conveys a sense of profound closeness. The Lord commanded the sword to strike someone intimately close to Him. This first half of the verse being strict poetry reinforces a change in subject from verse 6.

The second half of the verse uses synthetic parallelism, where an imperative is linked to two results. “Strike the Shepherd” is an imperative command. “*The sheep will be scattered*” is the first consequence and “*I will turn My hand against the little ones*” is the second. The results build upon the command, creating a cascade effect typical of prophetic poetry. The lines of verse 7 are brief and *punchy*, giving the verse a forceful, oracle-like quality.

“*Declares the Lord*” (נֹאמַר יְהוָה, *nə-’um YHWH*) in verse 8 acts as a poetic marker of divine speech. The verses also use numeric parallelism. “*Two parts in it will be cut off and perish*” is contrasted with “*But the third will be left in it.*” The result is a distinct *two to one* contrast. Hebrew poetry often uses numbers for emphasis (e.g., “*for three . . . and for four*” in Amos 1–2). This division into thirds makes this passage stark, and it has proven to be memorable. It is one that echoes judgment and remnant motifs appearing elsewhere in the prophets (e.g., Ezek 5).

Verse 9a uses synonymous parallelism to illustrate the refining process. The Lord stating that He will “*Refine them as silver is refined*” and “*And test them as gold is tested*” are parallel images for the same concept: the Jewish people will be purified through intense testing and tribulation. *Refinement* and *testing* are both mentioned twice, and they are paired with two different types of metals, *silver* and *gold*. This construction intensifies the prophecy without the need for exact repetition.

Verse 9b concludes the prophecy using progressive parallelism. “*They will call on My name*” is paired with “*And I will answer them.*” “I will say, ‘They are My people,’” is paired with “*And they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’*” This created a beautiful reciprocal structure. Each line has an action by the Jews, followed by the Lord’s responsive action.

It forms a chiasm-like covenant renewal, where both parties express love for one another.

Prophetic texts often group events thematically rather than chronologically, and that Zechariah 12–14 moves between the suffering of the Shepherd, judgment on Israel, purification, and final restoration.

- Zechariah 13:1–6 as future Jewish restoration,
- Zechariah 13:7 as Christ's first coming,
- Zechariah 13:8–9 as future tribulation / national Israel's restoration.

On the whole passage, Petersen explained that the poem provides something of an *inclusio*, presenting individuals with whom Yahweh interacts both at the beginning and end of the poem. Yahweh will slay the shepherd, but will ratify a covenantal relationship with the survivor. Through him, whom Yahweh views as symbolizing the people, a new relationship, one may even say a new covenant, is established. Or, using the imagery with which the poem began, the flock has been destroyed, reduced in size, and recreated.

An *inclusio* occurs when a writer repeats a word, phrase, or idea at the beginning and end of a section. This repetition creates a kind of frame that marks the boundaries of the unit and often emphasizes its main theme. The poetic framework of Zechariah 13:7–9 further sets apart the passage from the rest of the chapter. Taken together, the poetic elements, the concise and vivid imagery, and the literal reality of the prophecy make for an especially impactful passage. *An ancient Hebrew audience would have heard the abrupt summons to the sword as a dramatic shift in tone and subject, they would have been absolutely struck.*

Conclusion

Though they are spoken of in close proximity in the text, the context and New Testament fulfillment of prophecy demonstrate that there is a vast gulf between YHWH's Shepherd and the false prophet(s). Marking that gulf is the invisible demarcation line, the shift from prose in verse 6 to poetry in verse 7.

Footnote¹ On the open section before Zechariah 13:7, see the parashah divisions of the Masoretic Text, where the sequence runs "12:1–14; 13:1–6 {P} 13:7–9," the letter P (peh) marking a petuchah, an open section. The division is present in the Aleppo Codex, which is intact at this point, since the codex's lacuna in the Twelve Minor Prophets ends at Zechariah 9:17. The first two lines form a clear synonymous parallelism: "My Shepherd" corresponds to "the man, My Associate," and both are governed by the same summons against the sword. This parallel structure identifies one exalted figure from two complementary angles. He is YHWH's Shepherd, and He is the man who stands in special nearness to Him. (P, petuchah) marks a major division, the beginning of a new unit, as distinct from a closed section (S, setumah), which marks a minor subdivision; see Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, trans. and ed. E. J. Revell (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boda, Mark J. *The Book of Zechariah. New International Commentary on the Old Testament.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.

The Complete Tanakh (Tanach) With Rashi's Commentary. Rashi's Commentary Translated by Rabbi A.J. Rosenberg. Chabad, 2026.

https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm

Feinberg, Charles. "Zechariah." In *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, edited by Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrison, 2001. Chicago: Moody, 1962.

Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010.

Kimchi, David. *Rabbi David Kimchi's Commentary Upon the Prophecies of Zechariah.* Translated by Alexander McCaul. London: James Duncan, 1837.

Klein, George L. *Zechariah. New American Commentary.* Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008.

Meyers, Carol L., and Eric M. Meyers. *Zechariah 9–14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible 25C.* New York: Doubleday, 1993.

The NET Bible Full-notes Edition Notes. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019.

Petersen, David L. *Zechariah 9–14 & Malachi: A Commentary.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Phillips, Richard D. *Zechariah. Reformed Expository Commentary.* Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007.

Pusey, Edward B. *The Minor Prophets: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885.

Rydellnik, Michael, and Edwin Blum, eds. *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament.* Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019.

Spence-Jones, Henry D. M. *The Pulpit Commentary. Vol. 32.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889.

Unger, Merrill F. *Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah's Glory.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014.

Webb, Barry G. *The Message of Zechariah: Your Kingdom Come. The Bible Speaks Today.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.