

THE BOOK OF NAHUM: THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP WITHIN THE CANONICAL PROCESS

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Concerning the prophet Nahum only one historical datum is known—namely, that he is from the village of Elkosh (Nah 1:1). But the location of Elkosh itself is not known. From the time of Jerome some have located it in Galilee, but in modern times the tendency has been to place it in Judah.¹ According to one legend the tomb of Nahum is to be found in the village of Al-Qush, not far from Nineveh where the tomb of the prophet Jonah is located according to yet another tradition.² In short, though we can date his activity with some assurance on the basis of both his reference to the fall of Thebes (3:8) and the very subject of his book, we know virtually nothing about the prophet Nahum himself from an historical point of view. He is not mentioned by name within the OT apart from the opening verse of his book.

A reading of James Boice's new commentary reminded me once again of the simple fact that the book of Nahum has generated intense interest in matters of history, particularly among conservative scholars.³ Boice reminds us that "these judgments, recorded so vividly in the pages of the Word of God, are not given to us to titillate our minds by comparing them with their eventual fulfillment in history."⁴ But having said this he then goes on to give his attention primarily to that very historical backdrop in order to discuss the actions of what he calls "The Avenging God" of Nahum. In spite of his remarks the God of this book, and of the OT as a whole, is not a God of vengeance—at least not in the manner in which this term is normally understood. In a series of studies that spans at least twenty-five years George

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¹On the location of Elkosh see E. Nestle, "Where Is the Birthplace of the Prophet Nahum to Be Sought?," *PEFQS* (1879) 136-138; U. Cassuto, "La patria del profeta Nahum," *Giornale della Società asiatica italiana* 26 (1915) 291-302; O. T. Allis, "Nahum, Nineveh, Elkosh," *EvQ* 27 (1955) 67-80.

²See R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, *A Century of Exploration of Nineveh* (London: Luzac, 1929); A. Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1955) 22-23. According to Parrot the traditions about Jonah's tomb in Nineveh have been collected by the Rev. Father Fieh in the *Bulletin du séminaire syro-chaldéen* 4 (1943) 101-114.

³The most striking illustration of this fact is the commentary by W. A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), which includes an exhaustive survey of historical detail relevant to the interpretation of the Biblical text.

⁴J. M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2. 64.

Mendenhall has shown convincingly that the Hebrew root *nqm* is mistranslated when it is rendered “to avenge, to take vengeance.”⁵ The term is more properly translated by words that designate punitive vindication in a judicial sense, both within the Hebrew Bible and in various extra-Biblical sources recovered from the ancient Near East. There is nothing in the term to be construed as “malicious retaliation for inflicted wrongs.” It is this very misconception that, from the time of Marcion in early Christian history, has turned so many against the so-called “primitive God” of the OT in favor of another God of the NT as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

This paper is concerned primarily with a close reading of the Hebrew text of Nah 1:1-10 in relation to the rest of that book and to 2:11 in particular. It will be shown that there is remarkable sophistication here in terms of scribal art, in a form that some might call a cipher. The text is not exactly what it appears to be on the surface. It apparently contains coded information that would not have been evident to the very audience to which it seems to have been originally directed. Moreover, the nature of this scribal activity is much more than mere copying or preservation of material on the part of presumed disciples or followers of the prophet in question. The scribal activity involves the essential content and structure of the book as a whole in an authorial sense. The hand at work is not that of a mere scribe as such, so much as that of an artist—an author or composer who was apparently involved in a canonical process that involved much more than simply the preservation of the words of the prophet Nahum.

Some years ago I published a study of the so-called “acrostic of Nahum” in 1:3-8.⁶ In a more recent study of that same text I have argued that the proper literary unit that contains this apparent acrostic poem on the first half of the Hebrew alphabet includes the whole of 1:1-10.⁷ In that study I have apparently reconstructed a source used by the author of the book of Nahum who seems to have done something perhaps unique with it. It was an observation of van der Woude that led to my discovery.⁸ Noting the irregularities in the presumed acrostic in 1:2-8, van der Woude noted: “When one accepts (one) small change of the text, it turns out that the first letters of each line together with *lpny* in verse 6a constitute a sentence: *ny bg^h wlpny htyk*, ‘I am the Exalted One and confronting them who commit sin against you.’”⁹ He continued:

If the first letters of the individual lines are chosen deliberately, it follows also that they are a literary composition from the outset, since the peculiarity of the

⁵G. E. Mendenhall, “God of Vengeance, Shine Forth!”, *Wittenberg Bulletin* 45 (1948) 37-42; “The ‘Vengeance’ of Yahweh,” in *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973) 69-104.

⁶D. L. Christensen, “The Acrostic of Nahum Reconsidered,” *ZAW* 87 (1975) 17-30.

⁷D. L. Christensen, “The Acrostic of Nahum Once Again: A Prosodic Analysis of Nahum 1,1-10,” *ZAW* (forthcoming).

⁸A. S. van der Woude, “The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile,” *OTS* 20 (1977) 108-126.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

text would remain unnoticed if spoken publicly. Meanwhile, the initial letters summarize in a condensed way the basic preaching of Nahum's writing.¹⁰

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that van der Woude's observation is essentially correct and that the scribal activity observed here is part of a much larger aspect of the book of Nahum as a whole.

In another study I have subjected the entire book of Nahum to a careful prosodic analysis according to a new theory of Hebrew meter, one that combines the counting of morae (units of length in terms of subdivisions of the syllable) and syntactic accentual-stress units as delineated by the Polish linguist Jerzy Kurylowicz.¹¹ The theory itself is discussed elsewhere.¹² Here I am concerned only with the results of that analysis and the light it sheds on van der Woude's observation.

*Nah 1:1-10: A Prosodic Analysis*¹³

1	An oracle / concerning Nineveh //	{ 8 2 }	
	a book of the vision / of Nahum / the Elkoshite //	{ 16 3 }	
2	⌘ A jealous and punishing God (El) / is YHWH /	{ 10 2 }	} 9
	punishment YHWH metes out /	{ 7 1 }	
	yea, (he is) a Lord (Baal) of wrath //	{ 8 1 }	
	⌚ Punishment YHWH metes out / against his foes /	12 2	} 4
	yea, he stores up (fury) / for his enemies //	13 2	
3	⌚ YHWH / (is) slow to anger / but immense in power /	{ 16 3 }	} 5
	he will surely not acquit / the guilty //	{ 10 2 }	
	* YHWH /	3 1	} 5
	in the whirlwind and in the storm / (is) his way /	{ 15 2 }	
	yea, clouds / (are) the dust of his feet //	{ 10 2 }	
4	⌚ He rebukes the Sea / and he dries it up ^(a) /	{ 14? 2 }	} 8
	yea, all the Rivers / he desiccates //	{ 12 2 }	
	⌘ It languishes ^(a) (that is) Bashan / and Carmel /	{ 9? 2 }	
	yea, the green of Lebanon / languishes //	{ 12 2 }	

¹⁰Ibid.

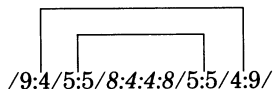
¹¹J. Kurylowicz, *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics* (London: Curzon, 1973). For a convenient summary and illustration of this approach see T. Longman, "A Critique of Two Recent Metrical Systems," *Bib* 63 (1982) 230-254.

¹²See my discussion in "Zephaniah 2:4-15: A Theological Basis for Josiah's Program of Political Expansion," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 669-682; "Two Stanzas of a Hymn in Deuteronomy 33," *Bib* 65 (1984) 382-389.

¹³Notes to the translation: (a) In the text as reconstructed in my forthcoming article in *ZAW* the pronominal suffix is deleted from MT *wayyabbēšehū*, and *dālēlū* is substituted for *ʿumlal* to restore both the presumed acrostic pattern and the metrical balance in this verse; (b) taking the definite article with the previous word and repointing as *wattiššāʿeh* from the root *šʿh*, "crash into ruins," rather than the root *nšʿ* of MT; (c) deleting the *wāw* conjunction as dittography to improve the metrical balance and meaning within the presumed cipher (see discussion below).

5	ה	Mountains / quake before him / yea, the hills / melt away //	13	2	} 4
			14	2	
	ו	And the earth crashes (in ruins) ^(b) / before him / yea, the world / and all who dwell in it //	13	2	} 4
			14	2	
6	*	<i>In the presence of his fury / who can stand? / yea, who can endure / his burning anger? //</i>	{ 12	2	} 8
			{ 15	2	
	ז	His wrath / is poured out like fire / yea, the rocks / are broken asunder by him //	{ 13	2	
			{ 13	2	
7	ח	Good is YHWH / indeed, a stronghold / in the day of distress // yea, he knows / those who take refuge in him //	{ 5	1	} 5
			{ 12	2	
			{ 12	2	
8	*	[<i>In the passing flood</i> ^(c) / <i>a full end / he will make of her place //</i> <i>yea, his enemies / he will pursue into darkness //</i>	{ 7	1	} 5
			{ 12	2	
			{ 12	2	
9	ט	What will you devise / against YHWH? / <i>a full end / he himself will make //</i>	10	2	} 4
			10	2	
	י	It will not arise a second time / (namely) distress // for / (you will become) like entangled thorns / and (though you are) like sodden / drunkards //	{ 14	2	} 9
10			{ 12	2	
			{ 12	2	
	יא	Consumed (you will be) / like dry stubble / <i>completely (mālē²) //</i>	{ 10	2	} 1
			{ 4	1	

In the above analysis and translation I have tried to represent the actual word order of the Hebrew text as closely as possible. A single slash (/) indicates the presence of a disjunctive accent in the Masoretic accentual system. The double slash (//) indicates the presence of the two major breaks or pauses in that same tradition—namely, the ²*atnāh* and *sillūq*. The first column of numbers in the right-hand margin indicates the number of morae in that particular line of the Hebrew text. These numbers tend to fall into balanced pairs in which the total mora-count is virtually the same for parallel versets or sometimes individual bicola within a verset.¹⁴ Occasionally these parallel units are separated by a pivot element that serves as a connector between the two segments of a verset—such as occurs in 1:3, which scans 26 + 3 + 25 in terms of mora-count. The second column of numbers indicates the number of disjunctive accents in that line. These numbers tend to group themselves in concentric patterns throughout the entire book of Nahum. Here that pattern is as follows:



¹⁴The term “verset” is taken from R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985) 8–9. Alter is adapting the terminology of B. Hrushovski in an attempt to avoid the current terminological confusion in the use of such terms as “colon” (plural “cola”), “hemistich,” etc. In my analysis most versets are in turn arranged in either diadic or triadic form, which I will continue to designate as

It should be noted that these five poetic "strophes" (or whatever the proper term may be to describe such metrical units) are carefully balanced in terms of content as well as metrical structure. The outside elements (9:4//4:9) focus on the dark side of Yahweh, his jealous anger that leads to punishment. The inside frame (5:5//5:5) focuses on the other side of Yahweh, who is "slow to anger" (Nah 1:3) and "good . . . a stronghold in the day of distress" (1:7). The central unit is a sort of metrical refrain that focuses on the reaction of the cosmos itself to the presence of the Divine Warrior and contains most of the mythic allusions noted by various scholars.¹⁵

The Hebrew letters in the left margin are an attempt to show the cipher, which was first noted by van der Woude.¹⁶ After the introductory verse, which calls attention to a certain "book of the vision of Nahum," each successive line begins with a significant letter until the original acrostic on the letters of the alphabet begins in 1:3. In that verse both *ʔālep* and *bēt* are repeated twice and in each case are preceded by the tetragrammaton (YHWH). From this point on the acrostic unfolds in a regular pattern for six versets in the form of bicola, each of which is introduced by a successive letter of the alphabet or a significant variation of that original order. In 1:4b the *dālet* word is replaced by repetition of the parallel word *ʔumlal* from the end of the same bicolon, which begins with *ʔālep*. It is probably significant that the metrical balance in terms of mora-count here is disturbed. As I have argued elsewhere¹⁷ the *dālet* word that was removed by the author was probably *dālēlū*, and the pronominal suffix on *wayyabbēšēhū* in the first part of this verse may have been added to compensate for the substitution of the shorter term *ʔumlal*. In terms of mora-count I have reconstructed an original 12+12//12+12 unit here with a total of 48 morae as opposed to 47 (14+12//9+12) in the received text, which no longer balances in terms of internal symmetry.

In 1:6 the *zayin* is preceded by *lpny*. The situation in 1:7-8 is even more complex. The *yōd* line is now preceded by a *wāw* conjunction and is no longer at the beginning of a verset as such. And the *kap* word is now preceded by an entire phrase: [*w*] *bštp* *ʕbr klh*. In 1:9-10 the initial letters now spell out the final word of this opening section of the book of Nahum, namely *ml*². The resulting sentence may be reconstructed and scanned as follows:

ʔny YHWH gʔh / wēlipnē ḥṭ(ʔ) / 15 2
bēšetep ʕōber kālā / māleʔ // 15 2

I am the exalted Yahweh / and (I am) in the presence of sin /
 In a flood (I am) bringing a full end / completely //

bicola or tricola. I reserve the term "verse" to designate the units as given in the Masoretic division into chapters and verses. No attempt is made here to resolve the current dispute in regard to the definition of a poetic line in Biblical Hebrew.

¹⁵See in particular the work of A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum* (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska, 1947).

¹⁶See n. 8 above.

¹⁷See n. 7 above.

It is interesting to note that the book of Nahum as a whole falls into two equal halves in total length, both in terms of mora-count and the total number of syntactic accentual-stress units, if 2:11 is taken as an element outside this structure that is framed by these two halves. That structure may be diagrammed as follows:

	<i>Distribution of Accents</i>	<i>Mora-Count</i>
1:1-10	/9:4/5:5/8:4:4:8/5:5/4:9/	[128 + 154 + 132]
1:11-14	/5:9:5:9/	[162]
2:1-10	/5:4/7:8/8:4:4:8/8:7/4:5/	[161 + 151 + 148]
2:11	/4:4/	[60]
2:12-14d	/4:8:8:4/	[157]
2:14e-3:7	/4:5/5:9/4:4/9:5/5:4/	[138 + (26+27) + 138]
3:8-13	/4:4/6:8:8:6/4:4/	[132 + 134]
3:14-19	/8:6/6:4:4:6/6:8/	[141 + 145]

In terms of total mora-count the book scans 1041 + 60 + 1038 with 2:11 (60 morae) at the center. In terms of the total number of accentual-stress units the book scans 170 + (4+4) + 170.

The three occurrences of the metrical refrain /8:4:4:8/ (in 1:4-6; 2:4-6) and its variant /4:8:8:4/ (in 2:12-14d) are italicized in the above table. In terms of mora-count they are virtually equal in length: 154, 151 and 157 morae respectively. If the first and last of these units are taken as a pair framing a larger segment of the book as a whole and hence removed, the resulting pattern demonstrates remarkable parallelism on a macro-scale in terms of total mora-count:

[128//132], [162//161], [151//153]
[164//165], [132//134], [141//145]

Once again it should be noted that 2:11 stands precisely between these two three-part structures. It may be scanned as follows:

Desolation and devastation / and destruction //	{ 19 2 }
and hearts faint /	{ 7 1 }
and knees give way /	{ 7 1 }
And anguish / is in all loins /	{ 11 2 }
and all their faces / grow pale //	{ 16 2 }

The final two words in this verse, *qibbēšû pā-rûr*, are enigmatic as noted by most commentators. These words seem to take on a somewhat different meaning when combined with the coded verse in the acrostic pattern of 1:1-10 to form a single poetic unit, one that scans /4:4:4/ in terms of accentual-stress units and contains the essential message of the book of Nahum in summary fashion:

I am the exalted Yahweh / and (I am) in the presence of sin /
In a flood (I am) about to bring a full end / completely //

Desolation and devastation / and destruction //
 and hearts faint / and knees give way /
 And anguish / is in all loins / and all their faces /
 They are gathered (as) boughs (for burning) //

The words *qibbēšû pāʾrûr* are here interpreted in terms of the content of 1:10, which presents the nature of Yahweh's "final solution" in terms of the image of burning dry stubble, even if the fact of the matter is more like that of a mass of sopping wet, matted thorns. The fire of Yahweh knows no limitation in regard to normal principles of combustion, as the prophet Elijah demonstrated so vividly on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). The term *pāʾrûr*, which appears only here and in Joel 2:6, has long been a conundrum among interpreters.¹⁸ One should note the term *pōʾrâ* in Ezek 17:6; 31:5, 8, 12, 13, where it is normally rendered as "boughs" (of cedar). The term *pūʾrâ* in Isa 10:33 is rendered "boughs" (of cedar) in a context where Yahweh, the Divine Warrior, is presented as a mighty forester destroying the "thickets of the forest" of Lebanon (cf. Nah 1:4).¹⁹ The denominative verb *pēʾer* in Deut 24:20 is translated in BDB as "thou shalt not go over the boughs (of the olives) after thee (i.e. glean)."²⁰ In Ezek 17:6 the *pōʾrôt* are clearly the more external parts of the vine, which would eventually be pruned and presumably burned.

What is perhaps most significant here is what van der Woude also saw.²¹ The reading suggested here would indicate that this particular text was a rather finely crafted literary composition from the outset and not simply the memory of the spoken words of a prophet in ancient Israel. Moreover the evidence seems to point toward a canonical process somewhat different from what is often assumed. The text of the book of Nahum has indeed "undergone an unusually complex process of growth and transformation," as Simon De Vries has noted,²² but in quite a different manner from what he and others like him have described. One cannot simply separate the received text into five redactional stages or layers through skillful use of the scholar's scalpel. The final text has remarkable integrity of its own from a metrical point of view. In short, the final hand that shaped the text of Nahum as we now have it must also be seen to be that of an author, rather than a mere redactor, of a rather sophisticated work of literary art. Even its juxtaposition to the book of Habakkuk may be an "authorial decision" of some sort,²³ within a canonical

¹⁸Cf. J. J. Gluck, "Pārûr—pāʾrûr—A Case of Biblical Paronomasia," in *Biblical Essays 1969* (ed. A. H. Van Zil; *Die Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Africa* 12 [1969] 21-26).

¹⁹See my earlier study, "The March of Conquest in Isaiah x 27c-34," *VT* 26 (1976) 385-399.

²⁰BDB 802b.

²¹See n. 8 above.

²²S. J. De Vries, "The Book of Nahum," in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (ed. C. M. Laymon; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 491.

²³See my brief discussion of this point in "Nahum, the Book of," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; San Francisco: Harper, 1985) 681. I hope to explore this matter more fully in another study under the provisional title "Nahum-Habakkuk as a Canonical Literary Unit."

process that leaves much yet to be explained in regard to the so-called “Book of the Twelve” (minor prophets) as a canonical entity.

The book of Nahum is the only prophetic work in the Hebrew canon that describes itself as a “book of (the) vision” of the prophet. The term “book” (*sēper*) in this context may have been chosen with care to describe the literary nature of a liturgical composition, one that is rather different from much of the more familiar prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. In this particular instance the final text seems to have suffered relatively little in terms of subsequent textual expansion or corruption in transmission. The hand of the author is still evident throughout, even if that author stands somewhat removed from the original acrostic hymn of theophany that he apparently chose to modify for his own purposes in 1:1-10. And those purposes were not at all the narrow nationalistic concerns highlighted by a number of critical scholars in recent years who seem content to dismiss Nahum as an example of perhaps the best of the so-called “false prophets” whom Jeremiah opposed.²⁴

²⁴See J. M. P. Smith, *Nahum* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911), who was followed by W. C. Graham in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (1929) and others.