

PLUNDERING THE LION'S DEN—A PORTRAIT OF DIVINE FURY (NAHUM 2:3-11)

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Two books of the Bible end with a question. Both are found in the prophetic corpus of the OT and both are addressing Nineveh. One, however, depicts the reluctance of a prophet fleeing the presence of the Lord—the book of Jonah; the other, written a century later, reflects the burden of the prophet Nahum the Elkoshite, who decrees the vengeance and fury of the Lord. In the one book, Nineveh repents. In the other, Nineveh is ravaged. In light of the generally accepted view that Nahum's prophecy dates between 650 and 612 B.C. (the fall of Nineveh), the northern kingdom of Israel had long since fallen. At approximately 700 B.C., Esarhaddon had secured his reign in Assyria. Civil war however began to weaken the northern power some fifty years later, precipitating a slow deterioration. After 634 B.C., one may speak of the Assyrian demise, during which time the Babylonian revolt, lasting roughly fourteen years, climaxes in the year 612. It is the league of Babylonians and Medes which ultimately destroys Nineveh. Nah 1:12 suggests that the city is not yet visibly crumbling ("Though they are yet whole and numerous . . .").

Nineveh, that imperial seat of the Assyrian Empire and cultic seat of Ištar, patron-goddess of war, had been used as Yahweh's vessel to judge Israel. The tables were now being turned. Nineveh herself was to become the besieged. In this vision-oracle of Nahum, the audience is given a prophetic and exceedingly descriptive account of the assault and sack of the Assyrian stronghold. Structurally, the sack of Nineveh as depicted in the vision-report consists of three components: the siege (2:1-5), vain resistance with capture and flight (2:6-10), and the prophet's exultation over the destruction (2:11-13).

Both Jonah and Nahum are a commentary on the character of Yahweh. Interestingly, both draw as a reference point from Exod 34:6-7, an allusion to Yahweh's compassion and slowness to anger. Jonah ultimately learns of Yahweh's mercy. It is Nahum who stresses Yahweh's justice.

According to the command of Aššur and Ištar, I did march . . .

(from the Aššurbanipal Annals)¹

The immense armies of Aššur I mustered, and went out to conquer those cities. With powerful battering-rams I smashed their fortified walls and reduced them to the ground. The people together with their possessions I took as booty. Those cities . . . I devastated, destroyed, burned with fire.

(from the Sargon Annals)²

In the might and strength of the great gods, my lords, I marched victoriously in Elam through his whole breadth. Turning back, with my hands full due to my might, I returned to Assyria . . . cities I conquered, destroyed, laid waste and burned with fire. Their gods, their inhabitants, their cattle and herds, their possessions, their goods, wagons, horses, chariots, spears and other war-materials I led back to Assyria.

(from the Aššurbanipal Annals)³

I felled with the sword 800 of their combat troops, I burned 3000 captives from them. I did not leave one of them alive as hostage. I captured alive . . . their city ruler. I made a pile of their corpses. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls. I flayed . . . their city ruler and draped his skin over the wall of the city.

(from an inscription of Tiglath-Pileser I)⁴

ASSYRIA, NINEVEH AND THE PROPHETIC BURDEN

In the Genesis 10 table of nations, a brief and somewhat more personal narrative is found in the midst of an otherwise "dry" genealogy delineating the offspring of Noah's sons following the flood. Of interest are three particular items: (1) mention of Nimrod as "a mighty hunter" (twice in v 9), (2) allusion to Nineveh (twice in vv 11-12), and (3) the statement that out of that land "he went forth to Aššur" (v 11). Certainly characteristic of his progeny to come, Nimrod⁵ exercised rule from Uruk in the south to Akkad in the north, stretching eastward with the Tigris bordering on the west.⁶ Following

¹S. A. Smith, ed., *Die Keilschrifttexte Asurbanipals, Königs von Assyrien (668-626 vor Christus)* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Pfeiffer, 1887), 1.47 (col. 5), 61 (col. 8), 69 (col. 9), 75 (col. 10).

²A. G. Lie, ed., *The Inscriptions of Sargon II King of Assyria—Part I: The Annals* (Paris: Lib. Orient. P. Geuthner, 1929) 9.

³Smith, *Keilschrifttexte*, 41-42 (col. 5).

⁴A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (2 vols.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975) 2.547.

⁵Cf. Mic 5:5, where the prophet employs this older designation for "Assyria" in a context of Assyrian military advance, the imminent siege of Jerusalem, and contrasting eschatological promise (5:1-5).

⁶P. E. Botta, *The Buried City of the East: Nineveh* (London: Off. of the Nat. Ill. Lib., 1851) 27.

the establishment of his rule, there is no mention in the OT of his kingdom for another 1500 years.

The first allusion to Nineveh in a cuneiform text comes from the twenty-first century B.C.,⁷ from whence is found the etching of a fish in the middle of a city drawn in the form of an ideogram. The fish emblem was that of the goddess Nina.⁸ From the time of the kings of Akkad (2500–2300 B.C.), however, Nineveh was consecrated primarily to Ištar, goddess of love and war, to whom the oldest temple in Nineveh, the war-temple, was dedicated. It is significant that we find in Nahum 3 the blending of both “harlot” (vv 4–6)⁹ and “war” (vv 1–3) imagery.

Many of the reliefs found in the royal palace of Nineveh make boast of the pride of Assyria: hunting and warfare.¹⁰ It was customary for the king to take part in lion-hunts,¹¹ since such provided the best training for the battlefield.¹² Because the Assyrians never lacked for warfare,¹³ it is thus fitting that the imagery of roaring, devouring lions—used to depict Yahweh in chap. 1 and to taunt the Assyrians in chap. 2—is exploited in the Nahum prophecy. Here one encounters vivid representation of the Assyrian war-machine. Isaiah, a contemporary to Sargon II, described the advance of the Assyrian juggernaut:

Their roaring is like that of a lion,
They roar like young lions;
They growl upon seizing their prey
And carry it off where none can rescue.
(Isa 5:29)

Throughout the book of Nahum “Assyrian propaganda”¹⁴ is being utilized, much of which is found in Isaianic traditions one hundred years earlier. But whereas Isaiah portrayed the awesomeness

⁷A. Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1955) 24.

⁸Note the connection between another prophet addressing Nineveh and a fish: Jonah.

⁹References will follow the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁰A bounty of information is available due to Assyrian reliefs, most of which graphically depict facets of Assyrian warfare. Particularly useful is Y. Yadin's *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* (2 vols.; New York-Toronto-London: McGraw-Hill, 1963), esp. 2.291–314 with corresponding illustrations.

¹¹Cf. M. Wolff and D. Opitz, “Jagdperde in der altorientalischen und klassischen Kunst,” *AJO* 10 (1936) 317–58, esp. 328–30. In Nineveh's imperial palace, two winged lion sculptures and eight reliefs were found which showed the king chasing a wild bull and a lion (see Botta, *Nineveh*, p. 120).

¹²Parrot, *Nineveh*, 72.

¹³A. Parrot (*Nineveh*, p. 72) described peace to the Assyrians as that “unstable armistice” which was made to be broken. It was of little use.

¹⁴So P. Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah,” *JAOS* 103 (1983) 736.

of Assyria in the height of its military ventures, Nahum announces that the northern power is to be felled, and this by the Lord of Hosts Himself: "I am against you," says the Lord of Hosts" (2:14 and 3:5). Using theophany at the outset of his prophetic outcry, Nahum is not disposed to depict a mere random demonstration of Yahweh's might. Rather, the "burden" (מַשָּׂא) ¹⁵ which he is carrying (1:1) is focused on revealing the *divine purpose*:¹⁶ the anger and fury of the Lord of Hosts is directed toward *judgment*. For,

The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?"¹⁷

Who can withstand His indignation?

Who can endure His fierce anger?

His fury is poured out like fire,

The rocks are shattered before Him.¹⁸

Following the opening hymn of theophany,¹⁹ the divine purpose unfolds: the yoke of the Assyrian oppressor is to be broken (1:13). The unit 2:3-11 serves graphically and dramatically to give reassurance that the affliction spoken of in 1:12 would cease and good news (1:15) would be published. The prophet in essence is declaring: "Now this is how catastrophe will strike Assyria . . ."

POETIC AND GENRE ANALYSIS OF 2:3-11

Nah 2:3-11 has been classified in literary type as a "vision-oracle" or "vision-report."²⁰ M. Sister,²¹ F. Horst,²² and B. O. Long²³ all build on Hermann Gunkel's distinction made earlier this century between *הִזְיוֹן* ("vision") and *דְּבָר* ("word" or "hearing"). That is, the prophet is not merely a messenger of Yahweh (and hence, the *דְּבָר*). He also reports what he has seen (*הִזְיוֹן*). The nature of the content found in the vision-report could encompass a threat, a promise, a

¹⁵The term is derived from *אַשָׂא*, "lift up" or "bear," hence a "load" (H. S. Gehman, "The 'Burden' of the Prophets," *JQR* 31 [1940] 109).

¹⁶H. Schulz, *Das Buch Nahum* (BZAW 129; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973) 74-75.

¹⁷Amos 3:8; cf. 1:2.

¹⁸Nah 1:6.

¹⁹For further discussion of the theophanic hymn, see Schulz, *Nahum*, pp. 74-75. See also J. Jeremias, *Theophanie. Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1965).

²⁰So M. Sister, "Die Typen der prophetischen Visionen in der Bibel." *MGWJ* 78 (1934) 399-430. Others following suit are A. S. van der Woude (*Jona, Nahum* [Amsterdam: Nijkerk, 1978] 97), R. F. Ungern-Sternberg and H. Lamparter (*Der Tag des Gerichtes Gottes* [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1975] 216-17), and W. Rudolph (*Micha-Nahum-Habakkuk-Zephanja* [Gutersloh: Mohn, 1975] 170).

²¹"Typen," 399-430.

²²"Die Visionsschilderungen der Propheten," *EvTh* 20 (1960) 193-205.

²³"Reports of Visions among the Prophets," *JBL* 95 (1976) 353-65.

rebuke, a word of consolation, a judgment-speech, or a call to listen. Horst describes the vision-report as the announcement of the intrinsic out-working of Yahweh's purpose as perceived by the prophet,²⁴ whereby image and word are closely linked.²⁵ Such a definition would indeed fit Nahum's oracle.

The language and style of the vision are living and dramatic, full of intensity and force. Scene upon scene storms upon the reader's mind, with an acceleration throughout the book reaching a near-fever pitch. In effect, the audience finds itself amidst the destruction and ruin, feeling the full impact with the inner eye. Apocalyptic in character, the vision-report depicts Yahweh's hand behind all. The audience is enveloped in the sobering awareness of divine *retribution*.

The prophet is a genuine literary artist. Included in the variety of his literary modes are a hymn (1:2-9), a threat (1:10-14 and 3:8-17), a salvation-oracle (1:12-2:3), a vision-report (2:4-10), a taunt (2:11 and 3:7-10), a woe-oracle (3:1-3) and a rhetorical accusation (3:19). Specifically in 2:3-11, he utilizes four particular devices: sound-play, irony, repetition and striking imagery. The latter is perhaps most evident, engulfing the whole of the vision-report and playing upon several of Nineveh's cherished symbols: war-materials (vv 4-5), water deluge (vv 7-8), the palace (v 7), the temple cult of Ištar (v 8), military plunder and the taking of spoils (v 10), and helpless reaction to siege and fall (v 11). In examining the vision-report, one cannot help but be struck by the abundance of parallel or contrasting images:

- 2:3 Jacob // Israel
 "restoring" vs. "wasting" and "ruining"
 2:4 "shield" // "chariots" // "spears"
 "reddening" // "making scarlet"
 "covering" // "array"
 2:5 "raging" // "reverberating"
 "torches" // "lightning"
 2:6 nobles of the past vs. stumbling of the present
 "stumbling" vs. "dashing"
 2:7 "sluice-gates" opening // palace dissolving

²⁴While the task of the prophet was to "*forth-tell*" the דבר יהרהר, it is erroneous to extract the prophetic-predictive element from the context of his utterances, as is so often the case among modern readers. Indeed Nahum is affirming the sovereignty of Yahweh and triumph in history, yet it is significantly *before* (note the προ—in προφήτης), not *after*, the event (contra A. S. van der Woude, "The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile," *OTS* [1977] 108-26). Furthermore, Judah is *still* afflicted (1:12-13) and feasts are *not yet* being celebrated (2:1).

²⁵Horst, "Visionsschilderungen," 193-205.

- 2:8 the city's "queen"²⁶ // "her maidens"
 moaning // "beating the breasts"
- 2:9 "pool of waters" // "its waters"
 two cries vs. no one looking
- 2:10 silver // gold
 silver and gold // "store"
 "precious things" // "glory" or "wealth"
- 2:11 "pillaged" // "plundered" // "stripped"
 "melting heart" // "buckling knees"
 "trembling bodies" // "paling faces"

2:3-11 AS A UNIT

The vision-report contained in 2:3-11 follows an oracle to Judah in which comfort (1:12) and a loosening of the Assyrian yoke (1:13) are promised. The prophet's message is emphatic: "Now I will break . . ." Though Judah is at the time of the utterance still afflicted (1:12), the tables are about to be turned. Yahweh will restore Israel, that is, "Israel" of the monarchy (note the use of "Jacob" and "Israel" in 2:2), to its prestige (2:3a). How is it, then, that the tables will be turned? The prophet offers a vivid preview in the climactic vision-report of 2:3-11.

Following the dramatic fall of Nineveh is a taunt of the Assyrian "lion" in 2:12-13. How is it, voices the prophet, that the "plunderer" has become the "plundered"? The first of two divine affirmations then ensues: "'I am against you,' says the Lord of Hosts" (2:14).²⁷ In order to view 2:3-11 in the context of the whole prophecy, we would suggest the following structure for the book as a whole:²⁸

- 1:1 Introduction
- :2-10 Hymn of Theophany: the Lord Comes in Judgment
- :12-2:2 Oracle of Hope to Judah
- 2:3a Transition: the Announcement
- :3b-11 Vision-Report: the Plunder of Nineveh
- :12-13 Taunt: Where are the Lions?
- :14 Threat: Promised Destruction
- 3:1-3 Judgment Speech: Woe to the War-Goddess
- :4-6 Judgment Speech: Woe to the Love-Goddess
- :7 Taunt: Nineveh Laid Waste
- :8-10 Taunt: Nineveh's Antecedent

²⁶One's rendering of 2:8 pending. See pp. 8-9.

²⁷Also in 3:5.

²⁸For a helpful discussion on the structure of Nahum, see W. Staerk, *Das assyrische Weltreich im Urteil der Propheten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1908) 177-79.

- :11-18 Threat: Nineveh's Sealed Fate
 :19 Taunt/Accusation: Final Word on Assyria's Cruelty

COMMENTARY

2:3

As in the closing question of 3:19, 2:3 employs an emphatic clause²⁹ to introduce the vision-report: "Indeed the Lord is restoring the splendor of Jacob . . ." The Hebrew particle כִּי ("for," "indeed") underscores the divine purpose behind Nineveh's destruction: the restorative work of Yahweh. Verse 3 is emphatic ("even the glory of Israel") and transitional. Since in 1:2-13 it was announced that Yahweh would storm the enemy's citadel, 2:2 serves as a call to watch, to man the ramparts. It is to the *Ninevites* that the commands "climb the ramparts," "keep watch" and "keep guard" are spoken. In Assyrian reliefs, the ramparts are *always* manned.³⁰ However, in 2:1, the roles are reversed. The inhabitants of Nineveh are the ones being besieged. It is *they* who will need to deal with the assault. The reversal is demonstrated in 2:3b. Those normally "devastating" (קָרַקַרְ), the Assyrians, are now on the receiving end: "the devastators are being devastated."³¹

Verse 3 shows that Yahweh works within history.³² His work is one of "restoring" (שׁוּב), as in Ps 126:1: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream" (RSV). In Nahum, Yahweh is restoring Jacob's/Israel's former "prestige" or "pride" (גָּאוֹן). In Isa 14:11, גָּאוֹן is the "pomp" of the king of Babylon which is to be cast down. In Isa 23:9, it is the "pride" of Tyre which the Lord of Hosts would stain. Similarly, in Jer 13:9, Yahweh declares that He would mar the "pride" of Judah and Jerusalem. And in Amos 6:8, it is the "pride" of Jacob which the Lord abhors. Here, however, the גָּאוֹן is being restored, insofar as the Assyrian yoke is to be loosened.

²⁹Of the six כִּי-clauses in Nahum (1:10, 1:13, 2:1; twice in 2:3, 3:19), three function to give accent: 1:13, 2:3 and 3:19. Cf. K. Cathcart, "More Philological Studies in Nahum," *JNWSL* 7 (1979) 6.

³⁰Parrot, *Nineveh*, 82.

³¹See J. Halévy, "Le Livre de Nahum," *RevSem* 13 (1905) 107.

³²C. A. Keller, "Die theologische Bewältigung der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit in der Prophetie Nahums," *VT* 22 (1972) 411, is of the opinion that Nahum alludes to few—if any—specific facts regarding history. Contrarily, we would argue that Nahum is *quite* accurate in depicting specifics of Nineveh's ruin. Keller seems to blithely disregard what has been commonly known regarding Nineveh's destruction. See, for example, A. Parrot (cf. n. 7) and P. E. Botta (cf. n. 6). Also, A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (2 vols.; New York: Putnam, 1849), and C. J. Gadd, "The Fall of Nineveh," *Proceedings of the British Academy 1921-1923* (London: Oxford U., 1923) 475-76. In truth, the accuracy of the prophet is astounding.

The tone of 2:3 is not so much "restorative" in an *exilic* sense,³³ as it is firstly in an imminent sense (release from dreaded Assyrian domination in the late seventh century B.C.). And yet, the restoration of "Jacob, even Israel" hints at a further level of "reorganization," one which will be reminiscent of the former monarchy. Cathcart³⁴ correctly notes that the phrase "like the splendor of Israel" is not superfluous;³⁵ rather, it reinforces the ideal notion of Israel. Interestingly, the metaphor of "wasted vines" present in v 3 also appears in Hos 10:1, in which context Israel had been tried and found lacking.

2:4

With almost apocalyptic fervor, Nahum describes the array of war-materials "in the day of preparation." The shields of the warriors are "made red" (אָרָם) and the valiant men are "in scarlet" (עֲלֵל).³⁶ The imagery derived from the red color is fantastic and fear-evoking.³⁷ Some would corroborate Ezek 23:6 and 14 (reference to the Assyrian violet) with the notion that red was the color of the Babylonian and Median armies,³⁸ and thus, Nahum is seeing their approach.³⁹ As to the "reddened shields," several explanations have been advanced: (1) a dying or treating of the leather, as in 2 Sam 1:21 and Isa 21:5,⁴⁰ (2) the reflection of the sun against copper, as in 1 Macc 6:39,⁴¹ (3) the color of victorious might,⁴² and (4) blood dripping.⁴³ Since the context still entails "preparation," (פְּרִיּוֹם הַכְּרִינִי), the latter explanation would be insufficient. However, to be conclusive on the "reddening" is

³³Contra van der Woude, "Letter," 108-26.

³⁴More Studies," 6.

³⁵Contra van der Woude ("Letter," 118) who dates Nahum during the exile.

³⁶Interestingly, both אָרָם and עֲלֵל appear together in Isa 1:18 where they relate to Israel's sins.

³⁷Consider the red appearance of the apocalyptic horseman in Rev 6:4 and the dragon of red in Rev 12:3.

³⁸Gadd ("Fall," 475) notes that a combined assault of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians resulted in Nineveh's sack in 612, though supposedly scattered attacks on the city had been made for three years prior.

³⁹See for example, P. Billerbeck and A. Jeremias, "Der Untergang Ninevehs und die Weissagung des Nahum von Elkosch," *BA* 3 (1898) 97, and E. Sellin, *Das Zwölfprophetenbuch* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Deichert, 1930), 2.367.

⁴⁰J. H. Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (London: SCM, 1961) 65, and earlier, B. Duhm, "Anmerkungen zu den zwölf Propheten," *ZAW* 31 (1911) 103.

⁴¹A. B. Davidson and C. O. Lanchester, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1920) 26.

⁴²von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Tag*, 228.

⁴³J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel* (Edinburgh: Clark, rep. 1974) 312.

impossible. The מָגֵן was a smaller shield, probably made of leather and coated with grease.⁴⁴

Many interesting explanations for the אֶשׁ-פָּלָדָרֹת have been offered in the history of the text. A. Haldar considered this *hapax legomenon* to be enigmatic ("perhaps an epithet for fire").⁴⁵ Some consider it to have been a metal instrument of some type.⁴⁶ A. Billerbeck and A. Jeremias,⁴⁷ having earlier construed it to be a technical military term, would seem to be most accurate. In describing the reliefs found among the remains of Nineveh, A. H. Layard⁴⁸ pointed to the grandeur with which even the horses pulling the Assyrian chariots (cf. vv 4 and 5) were clad. Embroidered cloths were frequently draped over the backs of the steeds.⁴⁹ Ezekiel seems to have this very thing in view when he states "Dedan was your merchant in elegant saddle blankets" (27:19). The "horses" or "chariots" or "chargers"⁵⁰ flashing as fire would evoke a fearsome image, just as the רָכָב of Hab 1:8.⁵¹

Their horses are swifter than leopards,
Fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
Their horsemen come from afar . . .⁵²

Moreover, the "cover" draped over the horses leading the war-chariots could have furnished a third "red" object, along with the shield and uniform. Indeed, "flashing as fire" would be a fitting description.⁵³

The "spears quivering" (הַבְּרָשִׁים הַרְעֵלוּ) were the spears (similar to the Akkadian "staff," *paruššu*)⁵⁴ of the cavalry (the second fighting

⁴⁴T. K. Cheyne ("Influence on Assyria in Unexpected Places," *JBL* 17 [1898] 106) devised a more fanciful emendation and rendering of v 4: "The warriors gird on their tunics, and the fighting men put on their shoes."

⁴⁵A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum* (Uppsala: Lundquist, 1947) 44.

⁴⁶E.g., Davidson (*Books*, 26), Smith (*Commentary*, 314) and Rudolph (*Micha-Nahum*, 165).

⁴⁷"Untergang," 97.

⁴⁸*Nineveh and Its Remains* (2 vols.; New York: Putnam, 1849) 2.272-74.

⁴⁹Cheyne, "Influence," pp. 106-7, saw this as a harness or decoration for the horse. Further, M. Dietrich and O. Loretz, "Zur ugaritischen Lexicographie," *BO* 25 (1968) 100-101, argue that "wool" or "linen," not *steel*, appears to be the constitution of פָּלָדָרָה. See also C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (AnOr 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965) 2045.

⁵⁰So Davidson, *Books*, p. 27.

⁵¹A common practice was to use mares for war-horses, whose excitement over mares was exploited. See M. Pope, "A Mare in Pharaoh's Chariotry," *BASOR* 200 (1970) 60.

⁵²Habakkuk's "burden" is similar: vengeance and judgment.

⁵³Cf. Rev 9:17 with its comparable apocalyptic imagery.

⁵⁴T. H. Gaster, "Two Notes on Nahum," *JBL* 63 (1944) 52.

unit), whose shafts were made of wood,⁵⁵ and not those of the foot-soldiers, who, serving as shock troops, were decisive in assaulting the fortified walls.⁵⁶

2:5

The chariots "rage" in the streets and they "reverberate as thunder"⁵⁷ in the squares. Nahum is using vivid imagery to heighten the effect of the vision-report. Note how effective the "echo" notion is in the "broad ways" or "squares."⁵⁸ The "streets" would most likely be in the suburban areas.⁵⁹ Significantly, Assyria's foremost military weapon, the chariot corps, was comprised of highly developed chariots drawn by a team of three horses with a two- or three-man crew.⁶⁰ The raging back and forth of enemy chariots within the city would indicate, at any rate, that the double fortifications of the Assyrian capital were of no avail.⁶¹

In 2:5b, the prophet further depicts the mad fury of the invading chariots storming through Nineveh as blazing torches, flashes of lightning. C. H. Gordon⁶² maintains לָפִיר ("torch") to be a non-Semitic loan-word and suggests that new kinds of torches and lamps were introduced by the technically superior Philistines. S. Segert⁶³ looks for the Akkadian equivalent in the Mari texts.

The following rendering then of v 5 would relate the climactic level of intensity which has been building in 2:3-11 thus far:

In the streets the chariots are madly raging;
They reverberate in the open squares,
Their appearance being like torches
That give flashes of lightning.

2:6

In v 6, we incur a stroke of irony as Nahum alludes to past Assyrian military splendor which is contrasted with the present de-

⁵⁵Cf. Gordon, *UT*, p. 603, where Baal's spear is called a "tree of lightning."

⁵⁶Yadin, *Warfare*, 291.

⁵⁷J. Reider, "Studies in Hebrew Roots and Their Etymology," *AJSL* 34 (1917) 68.

⁵⁸Cathcart (*Nahum*, 90) notes that it is in the *squares* that people will be yelling (cf. v 9: עֲקָדוּ עֲקָדוּ).

⁵⁹So Billerbeck and Jeremias, "Untergang," p. 100.

⁶⁰Yadin, *Warfare*, 297-98. The third horse served as a replacement (by the time of Sargon II, some chariots even utilized a team of four horses). Under Assurbanipal, the chariot became most advanced, carrying a crew of four men - a driver, an archer, and two shield-bearers.

⁶¹See n. 71 on the somewhat exaggerated ancient descriptions of Nineveh's fortifications, which, to be sure, reflect superior defensive measures.

⁶²"Homer and the Bible," *HUCA* 26 (1955) 61.

⁶³"Zur Etymologie on Lappid 'Fackel,'" *ZAW* 74 (1962) 323.

bacle. Instead of exhibiting valor and courage as that of old ("he recalls the nobles" of past military campaigns), they are now stumbling in their own steps. Contra T. H. Gaster⁶⁴ and K. Cathcart⁶⁵ ("he musters") as well as J. M. P. Smith⁶⁶ ("he summons"), the context seems to require a touch of irony—irony which provides the appropriate contrast to the "stumbling" or "staggering" (לָשַׁל). Here the LXX, μνησθήσονται οἱ μεγιστᾶνες αὐτῶν ("they recall their great men"), catches the correct sense, as does W. Rudolph:⁶⁷ "He remembers his men of pomp."

They "hasten" or "press" to the wall, that is, the fortress-wall, not the wall of the temple (contra Eaton),⁶⁸ for the process of the siege is being intensified. Nineveh is now being *stormed* from the outside and its walls cannot withhold the flood of incoming assailants. In Volume II of his *Nineveh and Its Remains*, A. H. Layard⁶⁹ rehearses the procedure of how the city would have been stormed. The first step was the use of the battering-ram. Isa 37:33, Jer 32:24 and Ezek 17:13 mention the use of "banks," "forts," "mounts" and "towers." The Assyrian army utilized infantry, cavalry and chariot corps. What distinguished Assyrian military prowess was its ability to combine the storming of the ramparts, scaling of the city-walls, tunneling, exploiting breaches in the walls and the use of psychological warfare against the enemy.⁷⁰ Ezekiel's symbolizing of siege upon Jerusalem is here worth comparison: "Lay siege against it; erect a fort against it; build a ramp, set up camps against it and battering-rams around it" (4:2).

Ladders were used against the gates of the city as well as to scale the walls at vulnerable points. Soldiers would man the base of the ladders to provide defense.⁷¹ "Preparing the cover" (הִכְנֵה הַסֶּכֶל) refers to the mobile protective covers which were put up to shield the assailants from stones, arrows, etc., being hurled from the wall.⁷²

⁶⁴"Two Notes," 52.

⁶⁵*More Studies*, 6.

⁶⁶*Commentary*, 314.

⁶⁷*Micha-Nahum*, 168.

⁶⁸*Obadiah, Nahum*, 65.

⁶⁹Pp. 281-86.

⁷⁰See, for example, Yadin, in *Warfare*, pp. 318-23. In no other period, writes Yadin, was warfare on fortified cities so highly developed as by the Assyrians (p. 313).

⁷¹Xenophon, in *Anabasis* 3.4.7, parts of which are reproduced in P. Haupt, "Xenophon's Account of the Fall of Nineveh," *JAOS* 28 (1907) 99-107, and Lucian (cited in Layard, *Nineveh*, 2.128) seem to offer somewhat exaggerated accounts of Nineveh's wall in depicting its ruins, claiming it to have been 100 feet high with a thickness of twenty-five feet. Further, it was to have included 1500 towers (each of which was 200 feet high), being constructed by a corvee of 1,400,000 men over a period of eight years. Xenophon viewed the ruins some 200 years after the city's destruction.

⁷²Parrot, *Nineveh*, 82. When considering reliefs which depict the infantrymen who are laying siege, one is immediately struck by the large top-curved shield of the

Further, battering-rams, which had appeared during the reign of Aššurbanipal,⁷³ aided in storming the gates and walls. Soldiers operating them (the mechanism consisted of a wooden frame perched on a chassis with six wheels)⁷⁴ were covered on the sides by shields.⁷⁵ This scene, as depicted in v 6, is illustrated frequently on Ninevite reliefs.

2:7

There can be little doubt that the "gates of the rivers" (שַׁעְרֵי הַנְּהַרֹת) refer not to the gates to the city, rather to the "water- or canal-gates."⁷⁶ Bordered on the west side by the Tigris, Nineveh was also divided by a mountain stream running through the city and surrounded by a moat which measured fifteen feet deep and one hundred fifty feet wide.⁷⁷ D. J. Wiseman⁷⁸ offers the suggestion that breaches in Nineveh's wall may well have been due to an unusually high tide of the Tigris. P. E. Botta,⁷⁹ one hundred years earlier, had advanced a similar notion, maintaining that as much as twenty furlongs (roughly two-and-one-half miles) of wall may have been swept away. Regardless of any speculation, the mention in 1:8 of an "over-running flood"⁸⁰ and "devastation," in addition to "pools of water" and "fleeing" in 2:9, would indicate that here we are not merely dealing with a literary metaphor, or with ancient Near East chaos-symbolism,⁸¹ but rather a literal flooding of the canal-gates of the Tigris. Xenophon⁸² and Diodorus Siculus⁸³ each confirm the flooding based on traditions they received.⁸⁴

Assyrian soldier. It protects him from arrows being shot from the wall above (see renderings in Y. Yadin, "The Earliest Representation of a Siege Scene and a 'Scythian Bow' from Mari," *IEJ* 22 [1972] 93.

⁷³Yadin, *Warfare*, 314.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶So P. Humbert, "La vision de Nahoum 2,4-11," *Afo* 5 (1928) 16; K. Cathcart, *Nahum*, p. 95; *ibid.*, *More Studies*, p. 7; and P. Machinist, "Assyria," 735.

⁷⁷Haupt, "Xenophon," 99.

⁷⁸*Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1956) 17.

⁷⁹*Buried City*, 37.

⁸⁰See the discussion of "water" in the commentary on 2:9, p. 9. Cf. also R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (AfO Beih. 9; Graz: Im Selbstverlage des Ausgebers, 1958).

⁸¹Contra J. D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1975) 113.

⁸²*Anabasis* 3.4.12.

⁸³*Library* 2.26-27.

⁸⁴From a clay prism of Sennacherib's time, Nineveh possesses fifteen gates on the east side and five on the west or river-side (cf. Sellin, *Zwölfprophetenbuch*, 2.368).

A fitting contrast to the "flooding" of water in the city is Nahum's image of the "palace melting" (הִהִיבָל נְמוֹג). The gutting of the city is thorough. The royal palace (not Ištar's temple),⁸⁵ a work of lofty magnificence, is dissolved in the midst of the catastrophe. It is interesting that the palace was situated on the *west* side of the city, nearest the river. Doubtless the prophet has the scenes which were etched on the walls of the royal residence—a constant reminder of Assyria's prowess in conquering—in mind as he reports the vision.

2:8

G. R. Driver⁸⁶ responded in 1964 to the hilarity he found in traditional commentary on Nah 2:8 concerning the cryptic הִצִּיב. Not a few notions have been offered as to its correct interpretation.⁸⁷ These include (1) the Assyrian proper name *Huṣabu*,⁸⁸ (2) the rabbinic view that this is an inference to an unknown queen (queens were made to "stand" [גִּלְתָּה] at the right hand),⁸⁹ (3) a transposing of the third word הִעֲלֶתָהּ, re-pointing it so as to render it the Hebrew equivalent of the Assyrian "queen" (*etelletu*),⁹⁰ (4) a contracted form of הִעֲצִיבָהּ, a "female idol" (cf. Isa 48:5),⁹¹ (5) an emendation to read הִצִּיבִי ("the beauty"),⁹² (6) agreement with the LXX reading ἡ ὑπόστασις while citing the Akkadian *gullatu* ("column base"),⁹³ (7) a cryptic name for Nineveh,⁹⁴ (8) a slur,⁹⁵ and (9) the equivalent of the goddess Ištar.⁹⁶

As a suggested solution to this problem, we would cite several factors without seeking radically to emend the MT: (1) the verb "carry away" which is immediately following, (2) the practice of the Assyrians after they have laid siege to a city, (3) the feminine endings in v 8, (4) the custom of addressing a city by its queen,⁹⁷ (5) the

⁸⁵Contra Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum*, 65.

⁸⁶"Farewell to Queen Huzzab!" *JTS* 15 (1964) 296-98.

⁸⁷M. Breitenreicher (*Nineve und Nahum* [München: Lentner, 1861] 71) counted at least twenty different renderings.

⁸⁸Halevy, "Nahum," 112.

⁸⁹Driver, "Farewell," 296.

⁹⁰van der Woude, "Letter," 114.

⁹¹J. Reider, "A New Ishtar Epithet in the Bible," *JNES* 8 (1949) 104-7.

⁹²Cathcart, *More Studies*, 7.

⁹³H. W. F. Saggs, "Nahum and the Fall of Nineveh," *JTS* 20 (1969) 220.

⁹⁴Davidson, *Books*, 30.

⁹⁵Haldar, *Studies*, 52.

⁹⁶A. Van Hoonacker, *Les douze petits prophètes* (Paris: Etudes bibliques, 1908) 438.

⁹⁷See, for example, A. Fitzgerald, "The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the Old Testament," *CBQ* 34 (1972) 403-16. Fitzgerald (p. 405) notes that ancient capital cities were virtually equated with their goddesses.

forceful role Ištar played in Assyrian war, and therefore, in Assyria's demise, and (6) the relationship between הַצָּב and "her maidens"⁹⁸ following. The "bemoaning of her"⁹⁹ and "breast-beating" in 2:8b and c appear as consequences of the "carrying away" in 2:8a. The visual effect being generated here is one of strong irony. M. Delcor¹⁰⁰ has correctly noted the context in which 2:8 is found: ruin. While the Ištar symbolism is absent from Nahum 1, it surfaces in 2:8 and 3:4-6. In texts stemming from the time of Aššurbanipal, the patron-goddess is frequently called "Ištar of Nineveh, the heavenly queen."¹⁰¹

Once a siege had been successful, a common scene was to find women appearing at the walls begging for mercy.¹⁰² Normal procedure was that an indiscriminate slaughter followed. Any women, children or cattle remaining would be led away captive by the Assyrians on carts drawn by oxen. If indeed a "queen-type" is the focus of 2:8—and her cultic devotees are implied in the verse—then it is fitting that the prophet would announce the breaking of the Assyrian backbone in such symbolic terms: "Ištar of Nineveh, genius of war,¹⁰³ that "lady of Nineveh" and heavenly queen, is being hauled away captive as the spoil of the Lord of Hosts!" We agree with L. Gry¹⁰⁴ that, at the *very least*, Ištar should be in the background of the oracle depicting Nineveh's demise. For she was "foremost among the gods," "mistress of tumult," the one "who adorns battles."¹⁰⁵ Nahum would not spare so strategic a motif!

2:9

Nineveh was "like a pool of water" (כְּבִרְכַת־מַיִם), strong and resourceful, through her whole history,¹⁰⁶ indeed, from the begin-

⁹⁸In a Hurrian hymn dedicated to Ištar, praise is offered twice to her attendants (for a translation of the hymn, see H. G. Guterbock, "A Hurro-Hittite Hymn to Istar," *JAOs* 103 [1983] 155-58.

⁹⁹On "moaning," see Ezek 7:16. On doves and mourning, see Isa 59:11.

¹⁰⁰"Allusions à la déesse Ištar in Nahum 2,8?" *Bib* 58 (1977) 72-73.

¹⁰¹In his *Annals*, Aššurbanipal will use this designation twelve times in ten columns (Stele Rm I). The text is reproduced in Smith, *Keilschrifttexte*, 1.3-83.

¹⁰²Layard, *Nineveh*, 1.286.

¹⁰³One might indeed argue, as M. Weippert ("'Heiliger Krieg' in Israel und Assyrien," *ZAW* 84 [1972] 460-93), that Assyria practiced its own form of "holy war." Consider an excerpt from an Esarhaddon text: "I, Esarhaddon, . . . in trusting the great gods, my lords, did not turn my back in the midst of battle . . . As a lion I waxed furious . . . To the gods Aššur . . . to Ištar of Nineveh I lifted my hands. With their dependable word they sent me . . . : 'Go! Do not hold back! At your side we go and slay your enemies.' . . . Quickly I marched on the way back to Nineveh . . . Ištar, the lord of war and battle . . . stood at my side and loosed their battleplan, so that they all cried, 'This is our war!'" (cited from R. Borger, *Asarhaddons*, 43f.).

¹⁰⁴"Un Episode des Derniers Jours de Nineve (Nahum ii,8)," *RB* 7 (1910) 402.

¹⁰⁵From a text of Tiglath-Pileser I (see Grayson, *Inscriptions*, p. 52).

¹⁰⁶Cf. Jonah 1:2 and 4:11.

ning.¹⁰⁷ Her strength, however, in v 9, is not merely "receding";¹⁰⁸ it is vanishing cataclysmically, "fleeing" (נס). The prophet's depiction here is reminiscent of an image commonly found in Assyrian texts: the king advancing into battle is likened to raging water,¹⁰⁹ symbolic of terrifying destruction. In sharp contrast to her proverbial invincibility, enterprising spirit, and aggression, Nineveh is suddenly robbed and impotent. In the prophetic eye, it is Yahweh, the ruler of the nations and divine warrior, who manifests Himself as an *overwhelming flood* (1:8). Nineveh's strength is no more. Verse 9 resembles very much a battle description found in Jeremiah:

What do I see?
They are terrified,
They are retreating,
Their warriors are defeated.
They flee (נס) in haste without looking back
And there is terror on every side.

(46:5)

In spite of man's cry to "Stay!" (עֲמֹדוּ, עֲמֹדוּ), Nineveh's resources (note the emphatic pronoun הִיא: "the waters of *her*") are vanishing. In contradistinction to the inundation coming from without, her strength is vanquished within. Nahum compares the unstoppable stormers with the unstable fleers.

2:10

Verse 10 rushes toward fulfillment of Nahum's opening proclamation: "The Lord takes vengeance . . . The Lord takes vengeance . . ." (1:2). The exhortation is now to plunder. The treasures which were brought home by Aššurbanipal's army from Thebes alone were fabulous.¹¹⁰ The testimony of the Assyrian kings which became ritual was:

I scattered, I stormed and conquered the town . . . I carried away booty."¹¹¹

I marched . . . , destroying, tearing down and burning . . . , carrying booty away from them which was beyond counting.¹¹²

Of the tribute one king paid to Sennacherib, the king wrote:

¹⁰⁷Cf. Gen 10:9-12.

¹⁰⁸Contra Haldar, *Studies*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁹See Machinist, "Assyria," 726-27. Cf. also Jer 47:2 and Dan 11:10, 40.

¹¹⁰See, for example, pp. 5-6 in Smith, *Keilschriften*.

¹¹¹J. B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) 189.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 191.

... thirty talents of gold, eight hundred talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches (inlaid) with ivory, *nîmedu*-chairs (inlaid) with ivory, elephant hides, ebony-wood, box-wood (and) all kinds of valuable treasures, his (own) daughters, concubines, male and female musicians.¹¹³

To be sure, after several hundred years of military conquest in which spoils were continuously hauled back home, Nineveh must have been a store for incomparable wealth. Thus, Nahum's prophetic call is to "plunder" (נָזַז used twice). Indeed, "the supply is endless."

2:11

In v 11 is contained a picture which D. Hillers¹¹⁴ would describe as a "reaction to bad news," stated mildly! The reaction is a result of being "pillaged," "plundered" and "stripped" (note the strong assonance of the Hebrew verbs in v 11: בּוֹקָה, מְבוֹקָה and מְבֻלָּקָה). People's knees are knocking, hearts have melted, faces wax pale, literally "withdrawing their color" (פָּגַי כְּלָם קָבְצוּ פְּאֵרוֹר),¹¹⁵ and their loins are, as it were, in travail. Similar descriptions are found elsewhere in the prophetic corpus. Jeremiah asks sarcastically,

Then why do I see every strong man
With his hands on his stomach as a woman in labor?
And every face waxed pale?
(30:6)

And similarly, by Isaiah:

... every hand will go limp,
Every man's heart will melt.
Terror will seize them.
Pain and anguish will grip them;
They will writhe in pain as a woman in labor.
They will look aghast at each other,
Their faces aflame.
(13:7-8)

Indeed, Nahum's depiction is a reaction to *very* bad news. Nineveh's hour has finally come.

¹¹³Ibid., 200-202.

¹¹⁴"A Convention in Hebrew Literature: The Reaction to Bad News," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 86-90.

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CONCLUSION: THE "LION-HUNT"

With the use of utterly fantastic imagery and fiery zeal, the prophet Nahum has pronounced a vision-oracle against Nineveh, the Assyrian stronghold. As if standing in the royal palace himself and gazing at the spectacular reliefs depicting the king of Assyria who fears nothing as he hunts his lions and trains for war, the prophet adds a taunting epilogue:

Where now is the lion's den,
 The place where they fed their young,
 Where the lion and lioness went,
 And the cubs, with nothing to fear?
 The lion killed enough for his cubs
 And strangled the prey for his mate,
 Filling his lairs with the kill
 And his dens with the prey.

(2:12-13)

It is the Lord of Hosts Who promises to combat the lion-king of Nineveh. The stalker of prey, in the prophetic vision-report, has become stalked by Yahweh. True irony is at work. In 2:12, Nahum remembers one more time the insatiable craving of the Assyrians for plunder, before announcing that יהוה צבאות would cut off His prey from the earth (2:14).¹¹⁶

The lion-imagery employed by the prophet is crucial, for it represents the self-asserting autonomy with which one acts. Of the fearsome northern empire it has been stated:

... the terrifying mask that was deliberately turned toward the outside world was undeniably effective. The Old Testament reflects in numerous poignant passages the fear inspired by Assyrian military might and by the ruthless aggressiveness directed against all those nations that found themselves in the path of Assyrian expansion.¹¹⁷

However, the hunter had now become the hunted.

¹¹⁶Yahweh's threat in v 14, "I will burn . . . the sword will devour . . . I will cut off . . .," may reflect, as K. Cathcart ("Treaty-Curses and the Book of Nahum," *CBQ* 35 [1973] 179-87) has suggested, the curse invoked on a party breaking an ancient treaty.

¹¹⁷H. D. Laswell et al., *Proc. of the Conference on Symbolic Instrument in World History—I: The Symbolic Instrument in Early Times* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1979) 133-34.

BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF NAH 2:3-11

Divine Kingship

The divine kingship of Yahweh is a central theme of the OT. He rules over the chaos-waters, over the forces of nature, over all the nations surrounding Israel. His kingship over the nations is particularly prominent in the prophetic corpus, and especially so among the eighth-century B.C. prophets.¹¹⁸ In Isaiah, the theme emerges chiefly from a restorative point of view. Cyrus is hand-picked to carry out the divine purpose (44:28). That Yahweh reigns is, in effect, Isaiah's "gospel."

Nebuchadnezzar is called "the servant of Yahweh" by Jeremiah (25:9 and 27:6). In principle, this designation extends to the pagan rulers, even the likes of Sargon, Sennacherib and Aššurbanipal. In Daniel, Yahweh is expressly the One removing and promoting kings (2:21-22). The book itself is an active commentary on such.

As for the Nahum prophecy, it is Assyria which—albeit involuntarily—must submit to the will and purpose of Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts.

Divine Justice

Both Jonah and Nahum end with a question. Nineveh, the seat of Ištar, called "the great city" (Jonah 1:2 and 4:11), whose wickedness had risen before the Lord (Jonah 1:2), had been extended mercy some one hundred years prior to the Nahum prophecy. However, in the end, her would was "grievous" and no "healing" was possible, so widespread was her cruelty (Nah 3:19). Even the sins of the nations do not escape divine wrath. Yahweh is the Supreme Avenger (Nah 1:2).¹¹⁹

Divine Warfare

Nahum's prophecy illustrates a significant motif: the divine "reversal" of events concerning Israel and the nations. From the period of the conquest until the exile, Yahweh manifested Himself as the "divine warrior." On one level, He fought for Israel against the nations (in which category the Nahum oracle fits). When Israel had breached covenant, however, Yahweh fought against *His people*. Either way, the prophets were adamant that it was *Yahweh Who* was doing the fighting.

¹¹⁸For example, Nah 2:1 (1:15, Eng. Bib.) is reminiscent of Isa 52:7: "Behold, there on the mountains, the feet of the one who brings good news, the one who proclaims peace."

¹¹⁹On the contrast of Nahum to Jonah, see T. F. Glasson, "The Final Question in Nahum and Jonah," *ExpTim* 81 (1969) 54-55.

The exercise of divine warring in the OT is frequently termed the "Day of Yahweh." Normally depicting calamity, upheaval and distress transpiring at a particular juncture in Israel's history, the "Day of Yahweh" involved Israel as well as the nations. And for Assyria, that "day" was "now" (1:13).