Introduction

The three books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, each only three chapters in length, together yield a surprisingly multifaceted view of biblical prophecy. It includes martial and threatening but also caring and gentle depictions of God; severe indictments of guilt against the people of Yhwh but also comforting promises; rage against foreign nations but also engaging tones toward them; rock hard but also plaintive, lamenting expressions by the prophets; dark images of the future but also radiant brightness. Each of the three books has its particular hue but to a certain degree they are attuned to each other. Within the still broader prophetic mosaic of the Book of the Twelve, these three together and alone contribute definitive colors and contours.

The Place of Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah within the Book of the Twelve[1]

The Book of the Twelve is in principle ordered chronologically, that is, in three blocks – one of six books and two of three. The following list provides an overview of the introductory headings of each, especially the naming of certain kings.

1. Hos 1:1: The word of Yhwh that came to Hosea ben Beeri in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of *Jeroboam ben Joash, the King of Israel*.
2. Joel 1:1: The word of Yhwh that came to Joel ben Pethuel.
3. Amos 1:1: The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa, that he saw concerning Israel *in the days of Uzziah, King of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam ben Joash, the King of Israel*, two years before the earthquake.
4. Obad 1: The vision of Obadiah.
5. Jonah 1:1: And the word of Yhwh came to Jonah ben Amittai …
6. Mic 1:1: The word of Yhwh that came to Micah the Moresheth *in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the Kings of Judah,* which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.
7. Nah 1:1: An oracle concerning Nineveh, book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.
8. Hab 1:1: The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk the prophet saw.
9. Zeph 1:1: The word of Yhwh that came to Zephaniah ben Cushi ben Gedaliah ben Amariah ben Hezekiah *in the days of Josiah ben Amon, King of Judah*.
10. Hag 1:1: *In the second year of King Darius* in the sixth month on the first day the word of Yhwh came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubabbel ben Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua ben Jehozadak, the high priest.

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1 The following section largely agrees with my essay "Three Minor Prophets."

11. Zech 1:1: *In the eighth month of the second year of Darius* the word of Yhwh came to the prophet Zechariah ben Berechiah ben Iddo.
12. Mal 1:1: An oracle. The word of Yhwh to Israel through Malachi.

The reigns of the named kings are: Jeroboam II of Israel 786–746; then the Judeans Uzziah (= Azariah) 786–736, Ahaz 742–725, Hezekiah 725–696, and Josiah 639–609; finally Darius I of Persia 521–485. The first six books evidently intend to provide illumination during the time when both Israelite states still existed in relative independence alongside each other (8th c.), books 7–9 the time of Assyrian and Babylonian influence on Judah, which now remained alone (7th c.), and books 10–12 the time of the emergence of the province of Yehud under Persian rule (late 6th c.).

Of interest here is especially the second block, books 7–9. Their assignment to the seventh century is understandable. The northern kingdom of Israel no longer plays a role in Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah; Judah stands alone, and opposite it are the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires. The first is present in Nahum and Zephaniah, occasionally under the name "Assur" (Nah 3:18; Zeph 2:13), but more commonly represented by its capital city Nineveh (Nah 2–3; Zeph 2:13–15).[2] In contrast, the "Chaldeans" enter the scene in Habakkuk (Hab 1:6) and also stand for the Neo-Babylonian empire in the book of Jeremiah.

While the assignment of these three books to the Assyrian-Babylonian epoch makes good sense, the order is perplexing: why is Habakkuk, in which Babylon is the adversary, not placed *after* Nahum and Zephaniah, which concern Assur, but instead *between them*? Answers to this question can be sought by means of both synchronic and diachronic analysis.

Synchronic Reading – or: The Northern Empire in Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah

Scholarship has reached a consensus that the Book of the *Twelve* Prophets first came into existence in the later Persian, or presumably even in the Hellenistic Period. This means a separation of about half a millennium from the Assyrian and Babylonian eras of the history of Judah that Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah treat! It is quite conceivable that by this point the contours of the two Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylon had converged. The end point of this development can be seen in the book of Daniel, which emerged in the second century. In the two visions of Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 four world empires are brought before the eyes of the viewer. The first of them (relatively speaking still the most noble!) is at one point expressly equated with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon (Dan 2:38), the following then with the Median, Persian, and Hellenistic empires. Assyria has disappeared from view, or rather from memory – although the first animal of the second vision is a winged lion (Dan 7:4), well known from Assyrian (and admittedly also from Babylonian) iconography. It was still different in Herodotus (ca.

2 Nineveh was the imperial capital from the time of King Sennacherib (705–681) on.

470 B.C.E.), with which the visions of the world empires in Daniel share a considerable amount of content. In his work the first world empire is the (Neo-) Assyrian, the second the Median (not the Babylonian!), the third the Persian.[3]

An initial explanation for the conspicuous order of Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah could lie in the disappearance of the historical progression of Assyria-Babylon (-Persia) in the collective Jewish memory. "Nineveh" and "the Chaldeans" then both stood for an earlier Mesopotamian empire that once cast its shadow over the history of Judah. From this perspective the order Nahum/Assyria – Habakkuk/Babylon – Zephaniah/Assyria might be reckoned artistic, building a kind of *inclusio*: a favorite artistic form, especially for material of the prophetic tradition.[4]

It is not that the northern empires in Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah always play the same role. From this perspective it is much more the case that a chiasm appears. In Nahum 2–3 the prophet vehemently attacks the Assyrian metropolis as greedy beyond measure and immoral without restraint. He paints a scene of how the arrogant without conscience will soon be humbled and plundered. In Hab 1:5–10 the prophet receives an oracle that the Chaldeans will advance with irresistible military power and God's consent. In Zeph 2:13–15, on the other hand, the prophet threatens Assyria and its capital city, which boastfully declares: "I and none other!" If we view this sequence synchronically with the assumption that later periods generally only remembered *one* Mesopotamian empire, we can see them drawing the historical background in these texts. In order to appreciate this fully, one must also take into consideration the preceding book of Jonah (in both versions of the canon). Already in this book, which is fictively set back as far as the reign of Jeroboam II, that is, before Assyria's advance into the southern Levant,[5] the metropolis Nineveh appears as full of "wickedness" (Jonah 1:2). Of course, God succeeds, with Jonah's begrudging help, in bringing them to repentance, in response to which God spares them. The repentance, however, is not enduring; why else would Assyria have struck out against Israel and Judah some time later, thereby provoking Nahum's cry against the "harlot" Nineveh?

The anti-Nineveh texts in Nahum 2–3 are admittedly not declared to be the words of God; in fact, here the prophet "alone" speaks with tangible disgust. But then, in Habakkuk 1, God himself speaks – and he does not announce something like the immediate destruction of the horrible enemy, but rather their unstoppable advance! However, at the end of the oracle the prophet is told that their coming will only be temporary; they will be shipwrecked on their own self-idolization (their god is their own might, 1:11). Zephaniah 2 ties in with this: Assyria and Nineveh are the dramatic climax of a chain of *Divine* words directed against ene-

3 Herodotus I 95, 130, cf. Klaus Koch, *Daniel 1–4*, BKAT XXII.1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 203, with the conjecture that the Greek historian created this (and then especially the numbers of years: 520 for the Assyrians, 128 for the Medes, then the Persians) from Persian sources.

4 Cf. only Hos 1, 2, 3; Amos 1–2; 3–6; 7–9. On Micah cf. Eckart Otto, "Techniken der Rechtssatz-Redaktion israelitischer Rechtsbücher in der Redaktion des Prophetenbuches Micha," *SJOT* 2 (1991): 119–50. Chiastic and also ring compositions can also be observed in the redaction of legal literature (e.g., the Covenant Code of Exod 21–23) or of narrative literature (e.g., the Jacob story in Gen 27–33 or the narrative of Absalom's revolt in 2 Sam 16–19).

5 Cf. 2 Kgs 14:24 und Dietrich, "Ninive."

mies in the west, east, south, and north. This intends to say that God will also put a stop to the actions of the greatest and most dangerous of enemy powers.

Read in succession and synchronically, these declarations in Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah concerning the northern empires yield the following statement: Judah had every reason to fear them greatly and hoped understandably that God would eliminate them in good time (Nah). However, God decided to give them free rein (Hab). In the end, however, they would indeed encounter divine judgment (Zeph). This presents a thinly veiled theodicy with regard to the apparent inactivity of God at the demise of the Israelite states. These took place, according to these texts, not because the empires were too powerful or Yhwh powerless. They instead are part of his plan for history, which allows the terrifying enemy a certain amount of time. God's people must first be chastened, but then their tormentor will be destroyed.[6]

The creator of the Book of the Twelve probably considered this progression enlightening not only with regard to the past, that is, the Assyrian-Babylonian era, but also for the subsequent period. In the same way that the Mesopotamian empire once carried out a painful, but also temporally limited mandate against Israel, after its completion God rescinded its power so Israel could also count on the temporal limit of every further foreign hegemony, be it Persian or then Greek. The visions in Daniel 2 and 7 conceptualize, or visualize this point of view. No world empire is eternal; even the time of the world itself will end.

The sequence of the books of Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah may be interpreted synchronically somewhat as stated. There are, of course, reasons to assume that the composers of the Book of the Twelve Prophets were not completely free to arrange the books as they wished. So the considerations above were not the *cause* behind the sequential order of Nahum – Habakkuk – Zephaniah; these instead appeared meaningful *after the fact.*

Diachronic Analysis – or: The Empires of Assyria and Babylon in Nahum, Habbakuk, and Zephaniah

In scholarship there is overall unanimity that the redactional processes leading to the Book of the Twelve Prophets began long before the Persian or even the Hellenistic period. Proposals that see the emergence of a Book of the Two Prophets Hosea – Amos in the seventh century, in the sixth century becoming a Book of the Four Prophets Hosea – Amos – Micah – Zephaniah,[7] and in the fifth century enlarged with the two-prophet-book of Haggai – Proto-Zechariah have a wide appeal.

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6 This double thematic is seen by O'Brien ("Persian Period") as the commonality among the three books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah within the Book of the Twelve. God is determined to punish the empires he previously used as instruments to punish his people.

7 The acceptance of an exilic date for a book of four prophets is supported by Albertz ("Exile as Purification"), Bornand ("Un 'Livre des quatre'"), Nogalski (*Literary Precursors*), Schart (*Entstehung*; "Das Zwölfprophetenbuch"), and Wöhrle ("No Future"). Objec-

If this is accurate, then Zephaniah was incorporated relatively early into the prior book of prophets.[8] It is unclear, however, when Nahum and Habakkuk were added and why these two books were placed *before* Zephaniah. In answering this question, the compositional history of Nahum and Habakkuk must be taken into consideration.

The prophet *Nahum* in my view comes across as fitting in the middle of the seventh century,[9] while the Assyrian Empire was still completely intact but had been shaken by the murderous civil war between the Emperor Assurbanipal and his brother Šamaš-šum-ukīn, residing in Babylon. Contrary to Nahum's great hopes, Nineveh did not perish at that time – not yet. Judah was and remained firmly in the hands of the Assyrian lackey Manasseh (696–641 B.C.E.). Nahum's attacks were directed against both: the metropolis of the empire (Nah 2:4–3:19) and the ruling class in Judah that was completely oriented toward Assyria (still recognizable under the present text of Nah 1:9–2:3). Whether he originally delivered his oracles orally or immediately wrote them down need not be decided at this point; at least the poetically demanding Nineveh poem points in the direction of the latter conclusion.

The political situation in Judah changed soon after Manasseh's (late) death. His son and successor Amon fell victim to a palace revolt after only about a year's reign, after which the *'am-ha-'arets* – known at the latest since the removal of Queen Athaliah, that is, since the middle of the ninth century, as an active political group – killed the murderers of the king and raised the eight-year-old Josiah to the throne (2 Kgs 21:23–24). During his reign (639–609) the Assyrian Empire met its end, allowing Judah to emerge from its shadow. A signal of this was probably that in the year 625 Babylon under Nabopolassar freed itself from Assyrian hegemony. Only three years later – whether by chance or not – Josiah carried out his reform in accordance with the principles of Deuteronomy and, among other things, appears to have brought about the abolition of the Assyrian astral cult in Jerusalem.[10] In 612 Nineveh was destroyed and Nahum's expectations came true in triumphal if gruesome fashion.

Habakkuk probably debuted as the Assyrian era came to an end, but before the Babylonian era had really begun. His attention was turned primarily to the internal circumstances within Judah. "Oppression and violence" spread, "instruction" and "justice" became powerless. The "just" were helplessly handed over to the "wicked" (Hab 1:2–4). Unlike the prophets of the eighth century, Habakkuk did not directly address those responsible (perhaps this would have been too dangerous during his time), but he complained to God. And God answered him: the Chaldeans would rise up and overrun the world (1:5–8) – which arguably intends to say that soon the regime in Jerusalem would be swept aside.

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tions are brought by ben Zvi ("Deuteronomistic Redaction"), Hadjiev (Zephaniah and the 'Book of the Twelve' Hypothesis"), and Levin ("Das 'Vierprophetenbuch'").

8 This naturally does not stand in the way of the text being expanded still more at a later date (and it was expanded! See the exegesis of Zeph 3:9–20 in this commentary).

9 Cf. Dietrich, "Nahum/Nahumbuch," following Jörg Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung.*

10 Cf. 2 Kgs 23:5, 11–12.

This announcement was apparently fulfilled less quickly than the prophet had hoped.[11] So he again turned to God and asked him accusingly (Hab 1:12): "Have you not been Yhwh, my holy God forever?" in order to continue: "Your eyes are too pure to look at evil, and the viewing of anguish you cannot bear. Why do you watch the treacherous, silent when a villain swallows one more righteous than himself?" (Hab 1:12–13). Again the prophet receives an answer. He should write down the "vision" – what is meant is arguably the declaration of the Babylonian advance (1:5–8) – because it will remain in effect "for a set time" (2:2–3). Yhwh himself vouches for the fact that the Chaldeans truly will come.

And how they came! With unimaginable speed they tore the Assyrian Empire off its hinges. In Judah hopes of a better time arose. Deuteronomy, if it was the guideline for the Josianic Reform, contained not only cultic ordinances but also a social law treatise that accommodated the critique of the prophets to a considerable degree. But before this reform could really take effect, the Assyrian giant dragged Judah into a political abyss. When Josiah confronted Pharaoh Necho near Megiddo when Necho was hurrying to help the Assyrians, "he killed him when he saw him." It sounds strangely casual, as if Josiah did not have any soldiers with him – or as if they did not fight for him. Necho was unable to rescue Assyria, just as he was unable to hinder Babylon from becoming its successor. So Judah, after a short Egyptian interlude, fell under Babylonian hegemony, with the well-known catastrophic ending.

What happened to the traditions of Nahum and Habakkuk during the time of the Babylonian Exile? With *Nahum* it is likely that wherever "Nineveh" appears, "Babylon" was (also) heard. However, the attacks against the Judahite ruling elite, after these has been severely punished in the meantime, were changed into a comforting message of the liberation of Judah (naturally from the Babylonian yoke) reminiscent of Deutero-Isaiah: "Look, on the mountains are the feet of the herald of joy, the one announcing peace. Celebrate, Judah, your festival, fulfill your vows .... Yhwh is restoring the majesty of Jacob" (Nah 2:1a, 3a).

The *Habakkuk* tradition underwent an analogous transformation during or shortly after the time of the Exile. The pro-Babylonian elements contained in the text were inverted into anti-Babylonian statements. It is no longer the case that the Chaldeans advance to put an end to the activities of the exploiters in Judah. Instead, "he" – probably the King of Babylon – is now an exploiter himself. "He gathers prisoners like sand," "he laughs at every stronghold," "power is his God" (Hab 1:9–10). Habakkuk's social critique is to that degree changed, so that it is no longer directed toward the nation's own powerful, but toward the foreign power. Where Habakkuk had threatened an unscrupulous (certainly Judahite) creditor (2:6–7), he now becomes one who "plunders many peoples" and therefore soon "the rest of the nations [will] plunder" – naturally Babylon (2:8). Where Habakkuk had hurled a "woe!" against one who "built a city on blood" (2:12), it becomes a complaint that somebody lets "the nations weary themselves for nothing" – naturally Babylon (2:13). The originally socially critical direction of the series of woe

11 This indicates that we truly are still in the Assyrian period, which for some in Judah lasted too long.

oracles in 2:6–17 now ends in a polemic against divine images, reminiscent of Deutero-Isaiah, and probably also aimed at the Babylonian divine world (2:18–19).

This polemic against idols was picked up by the (early post)exilic book of Habakkuk. It would be more correct to call it the book of Nahum-Habakkuk. Rainer Kessler proposed and supported with solid arguments the thesis that Nahum and Habakkuk were – like Hosea and Amos or Haggai and Proto-Zechariah – already connected before they became part of the Book of the Twelve at a considerably later date.[12] This linking probably took place in connection with the above-described revision of both books. That revision also added the headings that are quite similar to one another but single themselves out from the Book of the Twelve: "An oracle concerning Nineveh, book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh" (Nah 1:1), and "The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk the prophet saw" (Hab 1:1). The noun משׂא and the root חזה are only connected in this way in these two texts.[13] The names of the two speakers, on the other hand, including the identification of the origin of the first ("from Elkosh") and the title of the second ("the prophet") were probably already extant before the redaction. That is, they belonged to the older traditional material.

The order of the two is very logical: Nahum has the Assyrians as opponent, Habakkuk has the Babylonians. By their connection they now signify the following: Just as Nahum proclaimed the end of Nineveh and that end really took place, the end of Babylon also occurred. The double book of Nahum – Habakkuk is then to be seen as an attempt at self-affirmation by a Judah resurrected from beneath the rubble of the Babylonian era.

Naturally there are textual layers and redactional activity present in all three books – Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah – that are concerned neither with the Assyrian nor with the Babylonian periods of the history of Israel. These layers appear to have left those eras far behind them. It is not that the Persians or even the Greeks expressly enter the scheme. No, the question concerning the identity of Israel or, as the case may be, Judah was no longer determined by its relationship with empires, but alone by its engagement with Yhwh. Israel-Judah is no longer a people whose sovereignty has been stolen by foreign states; it is not even a self-determining nation state; it is nothing but the community of Yhwh. And Yhwh is no longer the one who protects Israel-Judah from empires or snatches them from them. He is the master of the whole world, and as such he holds his hand over his people.

This trans-political status, so to speak, as it appears in Nah 1:2–8; Hab 3:1–19; Zeph 3:9–20, is found on the margin of the three prophetic writings treated here. This makes sense in terms of the literary expansions of a larger sort that are often found only on the margin of an older text corpus and no longer have a place within it.[14] These three texts are not homogenous, but they do resemble one another. They are all hymnic in style and sing of the powerful appearance and activ-

12 Kessler, "Nahum-Habakuk."

13 Alone they are still found elsewhere: משׂא in Mal 1:1, חזה in Amos 1:1; Obad 1; Mic 1:1.

14 Well-known examples are the successive expansions of the Ancestral Narratives from back to front (from Jacob to Isaac and then to Abraham) and of the book of Isaiah from front to back (from Proto- to Deutero- and to Trito-Isaiah). Also worth mentioning here is the appendix to the books of Samuel, 2 Sam 21–24.

ity of Yhwh against Evil and the evil ones in the world for the benefit of those belonging to him. In this way a certain consonance emerges between the quite variant traditions of the prophets Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

The introduction of Nahum with a psalm and closing of Habakkuk with one so that the two together are framed by psalms left the above postulated Book of Two Prophets of Nahum-Habakkuk[15] open to being connected to Zephaniah as well as to further writings of the growing Book of the (Multiple) Prophets. The hymnic elements of these three writings should probably be seen in connection with similar – likewise late – texts in Amos (where they are split into a number of so-called "doxologies" : Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:5–6) and Jonah (the song of the prophet from the belly of the fish in Jon 2:2–10).

The various psalm texts interspersed through the Persian-period prophetic anthologies suggest the use of the text corpus in a cultic setting. In connection with this we should point out an inconspicuous yet important matter. The Habakkuk psalm (Hab 3:1–19) was not directly connected to the exilic-period polemic against divine images in Hab 2:18–19, but the connection was facilitated by a transitional element that juxtaposed the impotence of other gods with Yhwh's mighty power: "Yhwh is in his holy temple.[16] The whole earth – be silent before him!" (2:19). The cultic call "Be silent before him!" (חס מפני יהוה) rings out similarly three more times in the Book of the Twelve – in Amos 6:10; Zeph 1:7; and Zech 2:17. The earliest appearance was probably in Zeph 1:7. The Persian-period revision inserted the other three: at the end of the Nahum-Habakkuk writing that preceded Zephaniah, quite near the beginning of the Haggai-Proto-Zechariah writing following Zephaniah, and near the beginning of the entire corpus, in the text of Amos. In this manner an arc supported by four posts emerged that spanned almost the entire future Twelve Prophets.[17]

> Nogalski (*Literary Precursors*) has noted a further literary, or, redactional, form of connection among the writings of the Twelve Prophets. There is an undoubtedly conscious net of catchword links that extends beyond individual components; this is true also of the block of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Micah 7, and Nahum 1 are linked in this way through an entire series of catchwords: enemy, darkness, day, mountain, land, inhabitant, Carmel, Bashan, dust, earth, sea, rage, to pass. Nahum 3 and Habakkuk 1 exhibit a shared martial language (horse, rider, kill, nations, stronghold, power, captivity, destroyer, overpower, flee, king, people, slaughter). Habakkuk 3 and Zephaniah 1 both speak of earth, hill, land, lake, thunder, calamity, and day of terror. Zephaniah 3 and Haggai 1 are connected by the repeated use of the formula "on that day" as well as the term "people/peoples."

15 This double expansion also fulfills aesthetic standards, thought it stretches the chiasm that already marked the exilic double book of Nahum – Habakkuk: A) *Psalm* (Nah 1:2–8); B) Indictment of Internal Grievances (Nah 1:9–2:3); C) Indictment of the Foreign Power (Nah 2:4–3:19); C') Proclamation/Indictment of the Foreign Power (Hab 1:1–2:5); B'); Indictment of Internal Grievances (Hab 2:4–19); C') *Psalm* (Hab 3:1–19).

16 The "Temple" is naturally the Second Temple, which was built in 520–515.

17 According to Schart ("Totenstille und Endknall"), in this way the most severe break within the history described in the Book of the Twelve, the Babylonian Exile, was set in "brackets of silence."

As a result, other books were seemingly added to the older Book of the Four Prophets of Hosea – Amos – Micah – Zephaniah simultaneously with Nahum – Habakkuk. These were Jonah and Haggai – Proto-Zechariah, and possibly also Obadiah and Joel.[18] It is easy to recognize the reason for placing Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah next to each other within this larger arrangement. These three writings treat the Assyrian-Babylonian period. It would have made sense in terms of chronology to separate the double writing of Nahum-Habakkuk and place Zephaniah between them, but this appears to have been nearly impossible. Nor was it necessary because the current order, as shown at the outset, makes very good sense.

18 Schwesig (*Die Rolle der Tag-JHWHs-Dichtungen*, summary on pp. 282–300) reckons following Schart (*Entstehung*) with a markedly successive development of the multiple-prophets book: from four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah) to six (with Nahum and Habakkuk), eight (with Haggai and Proto-Zechariah), ten (with Joel, Obadiah, and also Deutero-Zechariah), and finally to twelve books (with Jonah and Malachi). O'Brien ("Nahum-Habakkuk-Zephaniah"), on the other hand, views the Book of the Twelve too one-dimensionally, solely from the perspective of the Persian period.

Nahum

Introduction

Synchronic Perspective

Structure

After the heading in 1:1, the book of Nahum can be divided into two sections of unequal length: 1:2–2:1 and 2:2–3:19.

The first section announces a "jealous and wrathful God" (1:2–3a). He is the one who upsets nature (1:3b–6); he indeed protects and saves those belonging to him (1:7, 13; 2:1), but also pursues and destroys his enemies (1:8–12; 2:1–2). The text section is presented in hymnic style and in 1:2–8 in the artistic form of an acrostic. This means that each set of parallel lines begins with successive letters of the alphabet (though admittedly the sequence ends in 1:8 with *kaph*, about halfway through the alphabet).[1] After this the salvation and judgment proclamations alternate conspicuously with one another: 1:9–12a, threat; 1:12b–13, promise; 1:14, threat; 2:1, promise.

The second section contains a collection of poems concerning Nineveh:

- A somewhat enigmatic fragment about an approaching "scatterer" whose destructive action will "restore the splendor of Jacob" (2:2–3);
- A flaming painting with broad perspective of the inferno during the conquest of the city (2:4–11);
- A short taunting song at a lions' den that the hunters are now breaking into (2:13–14);
- A raging "woe" against the "city of blood" that has shamelessly enriched itself and now will be assaulted and pilloried (3:1–7);
- A memory of the fate of Thebes in Upper Egypt (once conquered by Assyria), which will become the example for the fate of Nineveh (3:8–15a);
- A satire about the apparently unbounded mighty ones who savage the world like a swarm of locusts but will now be "blown away" (3:15b–17);
- An address to the king of Assyria, whose shepherds disappear and whose flocks will be scattered (3:18–19).

Although assembled out of different pieces of text, the Nineveh section does form a coherent whole. In 2:12 and 3:5 the same so-called challenge formula appears ("I am against you!"). Three taunts answer like a refrain to the preceding scenarios of calamity (2:12–14; 3:8; 3:18–19).

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1 Much puzzlement has arisen concerning the variation from the expected order of letters and the abandonment of the acrostic after *kaph*. For a long time interpreters attempted to reconstruct a continuation through to the letter *taw* out of 1:9–2:3. This has proved a failure. In spite of this – and contrary to the resignation on the part of some (Fabry, *Nahum*, 132, states that the assumption of an acrostic brings nothing but difficulties) – there is no reason to doubt the use of this artistic trope in Nah 1:2–8.

It is striking throughout the book of Nahum as a whole that in the second, larger section a number of images of judgment and destruction are linked together, while in the first section gloomy images are interrupted by bright streaks. In the opening song of 1:2–8, Yhwh appears as immensely powerful and raging, but he is also longsuffering (1:3a) and a trustworthy refuge for those belonging to him (1:7). Later he is seen marching to judgment, but he also shatters yokes and rips off bonds (1:13). A messenger of joy announces peace to Judah, and a feast is to be celebrated (2:1). As a result, the first section casts a clear shimmer of light onto the second. The calamity planned by God aims at a final consummation in salvation.

Is there an overarching form that can describe the book of Nahum? One theory that exercised significant influence viewed the text as composed as a liturgy for a specific cultic ceremony.[2] There are some portions of the text, however, that clearly go beyond such a scope. Hanging over that ceremony would have been a scarcely bearable "smell of burning and corpses."[3] It is more fitting to see the book as a "dramatic text."[4] While Nahum was certainly never "performed" as a drama, the text could have been consciously formed in such a way that the readers or those listening to the reading could imagine a drama taking place within their imaginations. Different actors would perform, the point of view would be shifted from one angle to another, changing scenes would demand the audience's attention, different impressions be awakened among the audience and various opinions or assurances triggered. The final sentence of the "drama" is a question to the king of Assyria: "Against whom has your perpetual malice not arisen?" The audience knows the answer: it arose against all, also against us. Therefore the judgment concerning Assyria and Nineveh – and with it also our liberation – is unavoidable.

> Here is an attempt to break down the individual "acts" and "roles" in the "Nahum drama".
>
> – *Prelude:* At the beginning, if one may put it this way, the director or a "speaker in front of the curtain" introduces to the audience what the coming piece is about: the vision of a prophet by the name of Nahum concerning Nineveh (1:1).
>
> – *Act 1:* Nahum from Elkosh, who plays the main role, initially instructs the audience with sweeping, serious declarations about the powerful nature of God (1:2–8). Unexpectedly, he then speaks directly and in a quite cutting tone to the public: "What thoughts are you nourishing about Yhwh?" He has certainly expressed himself quite clearly (1:9–10)! Without waiting for an answer, he turns to a female figure that apparently stands next to him on the imaginary stage. She is the one who has "gone forth from the advisors of Belial" – indicating a male figure who also appears in the imagination (1:11). While one is still puzzling over who "she" and "he" might be, the prophet announces regarding the woman in first-person divine speech that she has been humiliated, but that will come to an end. "His" yoke (probably that of the advisor of Belial?)

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2 Humbert, "Le Problème": Nahum is the festival liturgy for the cultic service celebrated in the Jerusalem Temple on the New Year's Day after the fall of Nineveh. A number of signals in the text support this view (e.g., the opening psalm-"song"), but when taken as a whole, a composition-critical model for the text is much more appropriate.

3 Lamparter, *Der Prophet Nahum,* 214.

4 On Zephaniah: House, *A Prophetic Drama*; on Micah: Helmut Utzschneider, *Micha* (ZBK; Zurich: TVZ, 2005); on the so called Isaiah-apocalypse: Stefan Ark Nitsche, *Jesaja 24–27: ein dramatischer Text: Die Frage nach den Genres prophetischer Literatur des Alten*

will be destroyed, he will have no descendants, his worship of idols will be brought to an end, and those "ruling" (with him?) will "not escape unshorn" (1:12–14). Finally the prophet directs Judah (is this the "she" or another female figure?) to the "messenger of peace," who is seen coming upon the "mountains" and who announces peace. Judah should celebrate: "Belial" is "destroyed" and will not come again (2:1).

– *Act 2:* In a long monologue the prophet narrates a sensational event. First he sees a "scatterer" come up against a female "you" – apparently a different one than in the first act. "She" can choose to arm herself, but it makes no difference because Yhwh himself desires to restore "the splendor of Jacob" (2:2–3). Immediately after this the prophet, looking in another direction, sees an enemy roaring nearer and storming through the "streets" (2:4–5). According to this, the "she" in 2:2–3 is a city, probably the one named Nineveh in the prelude. There is a "he," evidently an important personality, who now takes the stage and frantically attempts to organize the defense – too late (2:6). The gates stand open, the palace sways, and a noble woman is led away with her maidservants (2:7–8). Nineveh (yes, it is Nineveh, now the name appears) empties out like a leaky water basin (2:9). Uncountable treasures are there to be plundered. The defenders are without courage (2:10–11). Where, then, is the lions' den, in which the beasts felt so secure and to which they would have carried their plunder (2:12–13)? With this question the prophet makes way for Yhwh himself. He affirms (whether on the stage or from off-stage) that he will "deal with you"; naturally this is the feminine "you = Ms Nineveh," whose war chariots he burns, whose "lion whelps" will be consumed by the sword, whose hoard will be carried away, whose "messengers" will be brought to silence (2:14).

– *Act 3:* In a typical prophetic "woe" the prophet accuses "her" (evidently Nineveh again) of its prodigious robbery and evil harlotry and once more announces her conquest (3:1–4). Yhwh again speaks, once more opening with "See, I will deal with you." This time he will brutally expose and dishonor "Ms. Nineveh," so that everybody (every man!) will abandon her and no one will have compassion on her (3:5–7). In a long final monologue the prophet draws up the last accounting first for Nineveh, then for its king. Next the fate of one of Nineveh's rivals is recalled: No-Amon, Upper Egyptian Thebes, appeared unconquerable, but then was captured (3:8–11). It will not be better for Nineveh, whose bulwarks will not hold out, whose warriors will be like fearful women, whose hasty fortification measures will bring nothing. Unstoppable "fire" and "sword" will come against the city (3:12–15a). Just as in the second act, an animal comparison follows: this time with locusts, a species feared almost as much as lions. Nineveh's merchants and officials are like them: numerous, ravenous, and lazy – until the hot sun one day chases them away (3:15b–17). Then finally, the "king of Assyria": soon he will be abandoned by his nobles and soldiers and he will be fatally struck down, mourned by none (3:18–19).

One could call the "drama" about the punishment of Nineveh and the liberation of those under its yoke "expressionistic" because of the diversity of its textual forms, the abrupt changes of scene, the puzzling nature of a number of its statements, and the power of its language. It is undoubtedly one of the poetic masterworks of the Old Testament.

Christensen (*Nahum*, 46–50) thinks less in dramatic and more in musical categories, thereby uncovering profound secrets. He divides Nahum into seven "cantos" (1:1–10;

Testaments und die Textgraphik der großen Jesajarolle aus Qumran, BWANT 166 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

1:11–14; 2:1–11; 2:11[!]-14; 3:1–7; 3:8–13; 3:14–19), *all* of them constructed out of seven elements and in chiastic form, that is, the fourth element is the mirror axis.[5] Calling this an "archaeomusicology," apparently a Kabalistic and numerological method, Christensen discovers that in the ordering of the letters in the book of Nahum the "Kali Yuga, dark age," whatever that is, and numbers like 1126 (= $3^3 \times 125$) and 777,600,000, but especially 120,000 play significant roles. The final number is the population of Nineveh according to Jon 4:11! The word אשור, "Assur," sorely missed on the surface of the text, "appears as an acrostic of the initial letters of four consecutive words in Nahum 1:12. In place value gematria (where the letters of the alphabet are numbered consecutively 1 through 22), these four Hebrew letters have the numerical value of 1 + 21 + 6 + 20 = 48, which is the number of counters in the matrix of the Nineveh octave 120,000:60,000 and also the number of verses in the book of Jonah" (p. 38). The foundation for this is a "knowledge of harmonics, which was the norm for scribes in antiquity, who were schooled in what subsequently became known in the Middle Ages as the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music)" (p. 155). Follow him who will.

Subject

One can justifiably say that chap. 1, namely, the introductory hymn, provides the theological reason for the main message of the book that appears in chaps. 2–3: Yhwh, the powerful lord of the world who does not shrink from imposing severe punishment, will certainly be able to put imperial Assyria in its place and bring down its proud metropolis Nineveh to the dust.[6] Nahum is the only writing in the Book of the Twelve besides Jonah that is so single-mindedly focused on a single subject: the fate of Nineveh. This is understandable, given that the Neo-Assyrian realm was the first empire that caused Israel and Judah to become painfully aware of their small size and weakness. Assyrian imperialism put an end to the independence the Israelite states had achieved and arduously maintained, and this end was the beginning of a millennium in which Israel ceased to exist as a nation (a situation interrupted only by the brief Maccabean era). For Israel, Assyria was more than just one empire among others; it was the symbol of a power hostile to Israel. As such, "Nineveh" as the central or almost the only subject of Nahum becomes comprehensible, as is the fact that Assyrian, or rather Akkadian, loan words appear[7] and there are repeated contradictory plays on Assyrian imperial ideology.[8]

According to Johnston ("Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses"), Nahum repeatedly alludes to the imprecatory threats in Assyrian vassal treaties, in particular those of Esarhaddon. In these the suzerain threatens the vassals in the case of political betrayal with military subjection, with the destruction especially of war chariots, with feminization, that is, effeminacy of the soldiers,[9] with sexual humiliation of the women, with plundering, diseases, locust plagues, floods, etc. Nahum takes these threats and turns them against their originator, establishing "poetic justice." This perspective is quite convincing in Nahum 2–3. Johnston unfortunately also includes Nahum 1 in the comparison (threats of drought and darkness, obliteration of one's name

5 Christensen speaks of a "menorah pattern" (171).
6 This overall structure of the book of Nahum is emphasized by Baumann (*Gottes Gewalt*), Becking ("Wrath"), Christensen (*Nahum*, 209), Pinker ("Acrostic"), and Wessels ("Expression"; "Awesome God").
7 See below on Nah 3:17.
8 With this he advances the investigations of Cathcart ("Treaty-Curses") and Becking ("A Judge").
9 For this also see Berlejung, "Erinnerungen an Assyrien," 335.

and descendants), as if this chapter also concerned the "genuine" words of Nahum against Assyria. The same is the case for Johnston's assertion of connections to the Assyrian royal annals, especially in their reports of the conquests of foreign lands ("Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors"). In reality, the images in Nahum 2–3 of lustrous, victorious weapons, of unstoppable military power, of locust-like assaults, of cities lying in ruins, of deportations, etc. could have come from those reports. The images of the impending storm and the devastated countryside in Nah 1:2–8, however, mirror the appearance of God rather than the rise of Assyria.

Berlejung ("Erinnerungen an Assyrien") doubts that individual texts of Nahum can be traced back to specific passages in Assyrian sources in such a way. In the first place, our knowledge of the sources is too fragmentary and haphazard.[10] Second, Nahum hardly cites concrete Assyrian texts, but instead dips quite generally into the language world of ancient Near Eastern war and postwar portrayals. Berlejung's primary catchword is "prestige". In the entire ancient Near East, but especially in Assyria, the kings laid considerable value on their own prestige and the destruction of the prestige of others. They only report things about themselves and their armies that are laden with and promote their prestige, while the things they report about their enemies are those that damage and destroy their prestige. Nahum adopts this technique, "inverting" the relevant declarations against the empire that had used this form of propaganda to excess. "As a whole we may say that Nah 2:4–3:19 applies against Nineveh the entire repertoire of polemic against enemies, which comprises the stripping away of prestige, overturning of the order of things in the enemy country, feminization, emotionalization, animalization, dishonoring and demonizing the enemy, rendering them passive (sleeping shepherds), proclaiming their fatal wounding and desertion by the gods" (347–48). "The stabilizing structures in place and prestige-laden themes for royal portrayals (in both Assyria and the broader ancient Near East) are thus, according to Nahum, utterly inverted in Assyria" (349).

Violence

The three chapters of the book are replete with severe, sometimes gruesome words and images. The sound of the language is heavy, the metaphors flashing and crashing, the constantly restated "you" is provocative, the smoldering wrath and sweltering thirst for vengeance are unsettling. In terms of its poetic excellence, the book of Nahum ranks quite high. Theologically, however, it is objectionable for many.

Mare and Serfontein ("The Violent, Rhetorical-Ideological God") address the theological problem of the violent nature of a number of passages in Nahum directly and radically.[11] In their opinion these are a witness "that humankind creates a god that serves its needs and ideologies" (176). Nahum expresses a worldview in which "the fittest survive, the strongest win and the violent conquer. It is a worldview where women are treated as objects and the patriarch has all the power" (179). Some have attempted to tackle the problem by pointing apologetically to the brutality exercised by Assyria, by understanding the fiery speech in Nahum as an attempt to prop up a subjugated demoralized nation, or by interpreting the images of the violent God in Nahum as an expression of absolute divine sovereignty. For Mare and Serfontein those are only excuses. For them it is clear that "we are obliged … to reject the ideology"

10 Interpreters usually point to the Sefire steles (which are, however, in Aramaic) and the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon.

11 Mare and Serfontain address and find especially problematic Nah 1:2, 8; 2:7; 3:3, 5–6, 10, 15 ("The Violent, Rhetorical-Ideological God," 176).

> (182).[12] What is needed is a "counter-reading" (183) that provides concrete human faces for those insulted and threatened in Nahum: the corpses in 3:3, for example, which are "someone's husband and father" or the harlot in 3:5 as "someone's beloved." Whoever reads in such a way will shed any enjoyment of the violent fantasies of Nahum. All of this is certainly worthy of consideration. Yet how might the interpreter avoid the accusation thus directed at the text, that everyone just devises his or her own God? And what about the other accusation that modern, enlightened, cultivated persons if anything produce too little empathy for the suffering of other people and for their urgent desire for the end of and atonement for that suffering? And does this elevated morality too flippantly obliterate the differences between perpetrator and victim?[13]

Nahum's prophecy has been and still is considered the clearest Old Testament example of salvation-, or cultic prophecy, in that the message of doom for a foreign enemy nation is at the same time a message of salvation for its own nation. It is often imagined that such prophecies would have been located in the temple cult and proclaimed by the *nebi'îm* permanently employed there. As a prophet of salvation and of the cult, Nahum appears diametrically opposed to independent prophets like Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. To a certain degree, Nahum shares the disposition of Hananiah, who countered Jeremiah with the message of the impending end for Babylon when Jeremiah himself preached the subjugation of Judah under Babylon (Jer 27–28).

Such classifications and evaluations are problematic. First, the so-called prophets of judgment also hoped for salvation. For example, Jeremiah hoped that Hananiah would be proved right (Jer 28:6). Second, as will be shown below, Nahum addressed not only Nineveh but also the grievances in Judah. Third, a prophecy against a formidable realm, on whose mercy one is apparently hopelessly dependent and with whose leadership one must curry favor, is an absolutely nonconformist and courageous act.[14] Fourth, Christian exegesis in particular should be aware of the problematic nature of a sweeping preference for a prophecy of judgment over one of salvation. Old Testament prophecy of judgment initially entails internal Judean self-criticism, from which non-Jews should maintain a respectful distance. Fifth, a prophet's raising his voice in the name of his people and his God against a markedly gruesome enemy cannot be held against him or her. That would mean gagging victims and protecting perpetrators, denying those mistreated the right to protest against their maltreatment.

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12 A similarly severe judgment is made by Michael Carden (in *The Queer Bible Commentary* [ed. D. Guest et al.; London: SCM Press 2006], 473): There is "no alternative but to condemn YHWH's character in Nahum and the text's relentless celebration of both sexual and other violence."

13 These objections are also directed against Julia M. O'Brien's recommendation to "feminist readers to see in the face of Nineveh their own faces, as well as those of rape victims around the world" ("The Problem of the Other(ed) Woman in Nahum," 116).

14 Cf. Perlitt, *Nahum*, 2–3, who argues that Nahum, in his certainty regarding Nineveh's demise, "demands from his addressees the same thing that Isaiah demanded from the Judahites decades earlier: trust in Yhwh despite appearances. For what Nahum saw while Assyria was at the apex of its power and Judah at the deepest point of humiliation was completely unbelievable." Coggins and Han (*Six Minor Prophets*, 10) cite a poem of Rudyard Kipling's from 1897, an admonitory comparison of Nineveh with the British Empire – also a nonconformist and courageous act.

> Biblical interpreters, who generally have had the good fortune not to suffer much, would do well now and then to try to understand those who suffer severely. To quote an insight from 1948: "If the critics of Nahum had lived in the last decade and witnessed the brutality that had been visited upon the helpless people in the European and Asiatic concentration camps, they would rather have joined their voices with Nahum in his joy over the fall of the 'bloody city,' than have condemned his righteous indignation in the comfort and the security of their ivory tower."[15] Apparently this viewpoint faded from the minds of interpreters very quickly after the horrors of the Second World War. As a result the horrors that give voices like Nahum's their justification have not ceased even now.[16]

Nahum's voice has not been taken up into the choir of the Twelve Prophets by chance. Nahum offers a very individual, bitter sound, but as a vehement protest, even as outcry against the injustice that nations do to each other – and especially the great, powerful nations to the smaller nations at their mercy – voices like Nahum's have every right to be heard. And it can also be heard with a good dose of self-critique!

> According to Wendland ("The Drama of Nahum"), the flip side of the wrath against Nineveh is the comfort given to Judah (and all other nations) oppressed by Nineveh. According to Wessels ("Nahum, an Uneasy Expression"), people who have experienced oppression have unmediated access to this sort of "expressive literature." It of course does not authorize every cruelty, but rather calls for a sophisticated "ideological-critical reading." Nysse ("Keeping Company") goes one step further and recommends the present-day audience not bring objections against the prophets (and prophecies) against foreign nations, but instead see themselves "under the judgment of God" (418). Finally, in the eyes of Bosman ("The Good, the Bad," 597), the circumstance in which "Nineveh" surfaces in the text of Nahum first in 2:9 should lead the reader to the self-critical declaration "Do not be so sure of yourself. Yes, Yahweh will punish his enemies and bring salvation to his people, but they are *his* enemies and you could be the next in the line."

Jonah and Nahum

This having been emphatically said, something else must be added: Nahum stands alone in its harshness within the Book of the Twelve Prophets. For this reason it is important to note that within the Twelve Prophets, Nahum is in dialogue with Jonah.[17] In the Hebrew canon this dialogue is somewhat obscured because Micah is positioned between them; it is unmistakable in the Septuagint because Jonah and Nahum stand immediately next to one another.[18] The two books represent opposing positions on the question of what should happen to Nineveh. According to Jonah it should be (have been) spared, according to Nahum it should perish. There is an electrifying tension between Jonah and Nahum: repentance or destruction, grace or justice for Nineveh? It is surely no accident that these two books – and only these two – end with a question. In Jonah 4:11 God asks the prophet if

15 Mihelič, "The Concept of God." 199–200, cited in Spronk, *Nahum*, 1997, 15, and Christensen, *Nahum*, 219.

16 Christensen (*Nahum*, 219) provides the keywords Cambodia, Bosnia, Serbia, Uganda, Rwanda, and Darfur. One can also consider the social stratification in the wake of the globalization of the economy.

17 According to Hyun Chul Paul Kim ("Jonah Read Intertextually," *JBL* 126 [2007]: 497–528), these two books make up the "chiastic center" of the Book of the Twelve.

18 Cf. Dines, "Verbal and Thematic Links," 358.

Figure 1: Nahum among the Prophets in Chartres

he should not take pity on such a great city, in which so many people (and animals!) live that are unable to differentiate between good and evil. In Nah 3:19 the prophet asks the city who, then, has *not* been affected by its wickedness, such that it should not be surprised if the whole world would enthusiastically welcome its demise. The first question – and along with it the first book – is a plea that Nineveh be spared (if it only repents!). The second demands its destruction (no ifs or buts). Both books engender a sharp debate concerning the attitude of Israel and its God toward powers that are hostile to Israel and God. This commentary can only present one side of the dispute, yet it is urgently necessary at all times to keep the other one present as well.

> At this point several aspects of the reception history should be pointed out, beginning in ancient Judaism. In the Nahum Pesher from Qumran[19], the Essene community sees itself in the role of "Judah," oppressed by "Assyria." "Nineveh" becomes a cipher for the Pharisees, "No-Amon" for the Sadducees, two parties in Judaism of that time from which the Qumran community separated itself.
>
> The history of Christian interpretation – from Theodore of Mopsuestia through the reformers Luther and Calvin into the modern period – has repeatedly noted the tension between the books of Jonah and Nahum and understood it as a warning against falling back into a sinful, violent pattern after having once acquired insight and repented. One preacher from the 19th century, James Randall (1790–1882) raised the concern that while the Ninevites had merely forgotten Jonah's message, Christians had turned a deaf ear to the message of all the prophets and preachers and thereby are in danger of incurring much greater guilt (cf. Coggins and Hann, *Six Minor Prophets*, 7).

19 It has been discussed extensively in scholarship; cf. the three contributions by Berrin, the two by Doudna as well as those by Fabry ("Die Nahum- und Habakuk-Rezeption"; "The Reception of Nahum and Habakkuk"), Flusser ("Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes"), Kratz ("Der Pescher Nahum"), and VanderKam ("Pesher Nahum").

> Ball ("When the Towers Fall") points out an interesting facet of Christian reception history. The Tree of Jesse window on the west wall of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres consists of three lancets of images. In the middle are Jesse, David, Solomon, Rehoboam, and Abijah – the beginning of the Davidic dynasty. At the top are Mary and Jesus. On each side are two rows of Old Testament prophets: left are *Nahum*, Samuel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Moses, Isaiah, and Habakkuk; right are Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Balaam, Daniel, and Zephaniah. In this Christian work of art, created around 1150 C.E., Nahum, often viewed as quite "un-Christian," takes his place as a matter of course even in an elevated position as a prophetic witness to Christ from the Old Covenant, while his antithesis in the Twelve Prophets, Jonah, and Jeremiah as well, are omitted.[20]

Diachronic Perspective

Differently from, for example, Amos 1:1 or Zeph 1:1, the superscription in Nah 1:1 does not append a date for the book. "Nahum, the Elkoshite" is not placed in the reign of any particular king. A historical hint is admittedly tucked into the mention of the name "Nineveh." This city located at the headwaters of the Tigris had been the metropolis of the Neo-Assyrian realm since the end of the eighth century. In the year 612 B.C.E. the Babylonians, the new aspiring empire in the Near East, and their allies, the Medes, leveled it to the ground. Because Nah 3:8 mentions the destruction of No-Amon, Upper Egyptian Thebes, in the year 664/63, the time span for the formation of the book of Nahum is limited to the second third of the seventh century. If the oracles against Nineveh are understood instead as *vaticinia ex eventu*, this would indicate a time after 612.

Before returning to the absolute chronology, let us consider the relative, text-internal date. The book of Nahum features, as will be shown in the commentary, a three-stage compositional history:

Compositional Stages

Stage I: The earliest stage of the writing is in two parts. The first part consists of two oracles of doom (1:10–12a; 1:14). While they make a somewhat enigmatic impression because of their brevity, they are evidently not directed against an external power (Assyria), but against grievances or opponents in Judah and Jerusalem. Belonging with them is the second element of the superscription, 1:1b ("The record of the vision of Nahum, the Elkoshite"). The other part is an extensive composition of poems against Nineveh and Assyria (2:2–3:19). The first element of the superscription, 1:1a ("Oracle concerning Nineveh") belongs with this part.

Evidently a number of individual texts (2:2–3; 2:4–11; 2:12–14; 2:1–7; 3:8–15a; 3:15b–17; 3:18–19) were combined into an aggregate. Earlier layers of text and redaction – except perhaps for small passages in 2:14 and 3:15 – can hardly be separated literarily and historically from one another. Both could also go back to the same hand; whether it was that of the prophet himself or one of his associates cannot be determined.

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20 He is, however, present in another of the church's windows – admittedly again with Nahum. The large rose window in the north wall presents the Madonna with child in the center, surrounded by three rings of twelve angels, twelve Davidides, and the twelve Minor Prophets.

The recognition that 1:1a did not originally introduce the entire book of Nahum but only its second part provides a critical argument against the assumption by Floyd ("The מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*)," 411) according to which the word משׂא in a superscript of a prophetic book – cf. besides Nah 1:1 also Hab 1:1; Mal 1:1; also Zech 9:1; 12:1 – marks a separate genre "organized around the reinterpretation of a previously promulgated prophecy, so as to make claims about Yahweh's involvement in a later situation or course of events while giving directives about an appropriate response to this initiative of Yahweh." Is this not fundamentally the case for every written prophecy? Why then does משׂא also stand at the beginning of individual oracles against foreign nations (e.g., Isa 13:1; 15:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1)?

Stage II: At a second stage the two sections from Stage I were combined and the double superscription of 1:1 was formed. While the content of the Nineveh section remained largely unchanged in this combination, the first part was substantially expanded. Two oracles of salvation (1:12b–13; 2:1) were inserted between the older, ominous-sounding oracles. As a result the internal criticism (of the first section) acquired a conciliatory note and the anti-Nineveh prophecies (the second section) provide a horizon of promise for Judah.

Stage III: A further redaction places a psalm at the beginning of the book – the acrostic of 1:2a, 3b–8 (which originally may not have ended with the letter *kaph*). The song was adapted to the context by way of 1:2b, 3a, and 1:9. A wordplay resulted between the name Nahum (נחום) in 1:1 and the roots נקם, נקא and נטר ("avenge," "agitate" and "be angry with") in 1:2. The verb חשׁב ("scheme") in 1:9 points forward to 1:10, while the noun צרה ("distress") in 1:9 picks up a catchword from the psalm (1:7). By way of the introductory hymn, the book of Nahum receives a decidedly theological accent: the powerful God is the one who brings about everything that will be described in what follows.[21]

Date

How can this relative chronology be combined with the absolute chronology? It would seem appropriate to apportion each of these three developmental stages to the three great epochs of the history of Israel whose influence is also found elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve. Stage I could be assigned to the preexilic, Stage II to the exilic or early postexilic, and Stage III to the late postexilic period. Indeed, this allocation is supported by numerous textual observations.

Stage I

When an historical event stands in the foreground as clearly as the demise of Nineveh in Nahum 2–3, there are two basic possibilities. It is either a case of "genuine" prophecy, i.e., the event is still in the future, or the event already took place and its "prophetic" announcement is fictive. Old Testament exegesis would not be "critical" if it did not consider the second possibility – and all the more so because Nahum exhibits clear traces of (post)exilic editing and use. Could it therefore be that the prophecy as a whole is *ex eventu*, arising either shortly after 612 or much later, in the Babylonian or even the Persian period?

21 Fabry (*Nahum*, 131) correctly emphasizes that the terminology of the hymn is clearly different from that of the rest of the book of Nahum, while it matches that of the psalm in Habakkuk 3.