NAHUM'S THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Nahum, the seventh-century BCE prophet of Judah, has failed in the eyes of many to attain a level of moral and theological greatness on a par with typical classical prophecy found in the Hebrew Bible. His descriptive mastery was hailed, but his prophetic message was belittled. Fohrer considers Nahum a "representative of optimistic prophecy with a strong feeling of nationalism," though he may have "some genuinely prophetical insights."[1]

In Fohrer's view, "He nevertheless belongs among the cult prophets, with whom Jeremiah had to struggle a few years later and who came dangerously close to the boundary between true and false prophecy."[2] Haldar believes that the book of Nahum originated in cultic circles, and that it is a religio-political propagandistic pamphlet.

Haldar's characterization of the Book of Nahum was explicitly or implicitly adopted by a number of commentators, though his derivation of the book's ideas and expressions from ancient Near Eastern myths and cults has been widely rejected.[3] Pfeiffer argued:

> Nahum was not a prophet − neither a reforming prophet like his contemporary Jeremiah nor an optimistic "false prophet" like Hananiah (Jer. 28). He was a poet . . . . There is nothing specifically religious in this exultant outburst of joy over the inevitable downfall of the Assyrian Empire.[4]

It is interesting to note that no lectionary reading has been taken from the Book of Nahum, as if implying that it does not have anything ethical or theological to offer of the same caliber as the other prophets.

Nahum is essentially a prediction and celebration of the fall of Assyria and its capital Nineveh. A prediction stunning in its audacity when it was delivered, yet relatively quickly realized. Because there is no condemnation of Judah or call to repentance in Nahum's oracles, but rather great

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exultation over the fall of Nineveh, scholars have depicted Nahum as a virulent nationalist, and have even alleged that he tends to exhibit the characteristics of false prophecy. To retain Nahum in the fold of bona fide biblical prophecy, some exegetes have attempted to show that the book contains prophecies chastising Jerusalem and Judah.[5] Others considered Nahum in a more general sense, as heralding the triumph of justice over tyranny.[6]

A further abstraction was suggested by Keller, who believes that Nahum viewed Nineveh not as a historic entity, but rather a historic concretization of an egocentric world power opposing the Lord. He says:

> For not History dominates Nahum's thinking: not the concrete event in its unrepeatable singularity, but rather the mythical structure, which underlies all and that ostensibly in the single event effects . . . victory of order over disorder.[7]

The purpose of this paper is to show that Nahum's small book contains an unusually rich theological perspective, and a prophetic message of eternal validity, which is in line with the best prophetic traditions.

Heschel has observed, "The Bible is not man's theology, but God's anthropology, dealing with man and what he asks of him rather with the nature of God." [8] While true in general, the Divine demands on man also reveal certain characteristics of God, which form a framework and general principles that are foundations of a theology. If the number of demands on man is large enough, it is possible to discern a pattern and details of a theology. God would then be expected to act within the realms of what is predictable by such a theology, with possibly some exceptions.

Nahum, as a biblical prophet, well aware of God's demands on man as well as biblical characterizations of God, probably had his own view of God's nature. Some of his theological understandings may, perhaps, be gleaned from his book. What was Nahum's theology, as expressed in his book? Gottwald says: "Nahum demonstrates a limited theological range, and we are not necessarily correct in assuming that anything he does not mention he opposed . . . or disregarded.[9] It must also be recognized that to an early editor of Nahum's prophecies, any exposition of the standard prophetic theological milieu might have seemed less important than a prophecy against such a super-power as Assyria, which was realized within half a century. Further, it is indeed surprising how many theological perceptions

have been directly or indirectly expressed in this short collection of just 47 verses.

It is noteworthy that the book begins with a statement about God, mentioning Him no less than four times in the very first sentence of the book (1:2). Indeed, the theophany described in the first eight verses of the book is a theological prolegomenon to the entire book. It establishes the origin of Nahum's theological coordinate system, which is obviously and indisputably theocentric, a perception that permeates the entire prophecy and underlies the prophet's irony toward Assyria. Nahum sees God as the cause of historical dynamics, exercising characteristics attributed to Him by man. While expressed in human terms of emotions such as "jealousy," "anger," and "vengeance," God's attributes convey an image of a God that does not tolerate injustice and is intent on restituting moral imbalances.

Nahum reaches out to torahitic descriptions of God's 13 attributes in Exodus 34:6-7 for presenting an image of a God Who is about to break down a long-lasting empire. These attributes are detailed in the statements:

> *The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generation.*

While this is not the place to discuss the theological perspective presented by these attributes, it is clear that at least some of them have served Nahum for understanding God's role in exacting the punishment of Assyria.

The following are some specific beliefs that can be discerned in the Book of Nahum.

1. <u>God demands universal adherence to His moral code</u>: Nahum expresses this theological principle in terms of the human emotion of "jealousy." God is jealous (Nah. 1:2), because He jealously guards against human transgression of the set moral code. With God, jealousy is not a fault but an attribute. Only because He does not act out of a caprice, as gods usually do, can He be jealous. God's jealousy presupposes an accepted moral fabric. It is the basis for man's hope that a just cause would be recognized. Moreover, God's jealousy implies the existence of a purpose. The achievement of

this purpose involves His chosen people. Those who pose a threat to His people become His enemies, because they obstruct the attainment of His purpose.

2. God punishes transgressions: Again, Nahum expresses this theological principle in terms of the human emotion of "vengeance." The Lord avenges (1:2) because He is the most effective combination of judge, jury, and executioner. The avenging God does not lash out blindly against an offender, inflicting disproportionate harm. An avenging God gives hope and comfort that justice will be done.

3. God is "temperamentally" involved: Nahum perceives the Lord as an involved Deity, expressing this characteristic in terms of the human emotion of "anger or fury." God possesses anger (1:2), which is a consequence of the discrepancy between the reality of the human condition and God's expectations from man. God is not apathetic, nor is He distanced and uninterested. Being in possession of anger means that He is involved, interested, and near to man and historical events. The Lord's nearness is the source of Nahum's comfort. At the same time, the Lord is in full control of His anger or fury, unlike man in whom anger often feeds on anger to a point of senselessness.

4. Transgressors of God's moral code are His enemies: Nahum does not justify the impending destruction of Assyria by invoking its assaults upon Israel and Judah, and its oppression of Judah for close to a century. The fate of the Assyrians has been sealed when they became God's enemies (1:2), transgressing His laws. While originally assigned the role of the Lord's punishing rod (Isa. 10:5), Assyria has apparently abused its mandate.

5. God bears a grudge: The Israelites are forbidden to bear a grudge against each other: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen* (Lev. 19:18). This principle, so essential for the proper functioning of human society, is obviously of no consequence for the Lord (Nah. 1:2), who is a society of One. Nahum makes this point by stressing that what is forbidden to any Israelite is proper for God the unique. God's bearing a grudge guarantees that every act has to be accounted for.

6. God is slow to anger: This attribute explains the persistence of evil and delay in the realization of prophetic pronouncements. The *Lord is slow to anger* (1:3), providing sufficient time for repentance, for a turn around.

This is, from the theological point of view, a problematic attribute.[10] Time allowed for the sinner to reform is usually also an extension of the suffering of the righteous. A prophecy whose fulfillment is delayed results in loss of esteem for God's word. Prophets were well aware of the problems and frustrations caused by God's being slow to anger (Mic. 7:18-20). How the Lord harmonizes between "being slow to anger" and "timely justice" is not altogether clear.[11] The attribute, however, is in force for all, and over a reasonable period of time it evens out temporal inconsistencies. While Nahum describes a "furious" and "avenging" God, it is clear that this is a state reached only after all the "patience" has been exhausted.

7. God is great in power: God's strength is exhibited not only by His restraint and patience, but also by His exacting the punishment due. He is the omnipotent, almighty God. He can do (and always does do) all that He is pleased to do. To the Israelites, national defeat did not mean defeat and subjugation of their God to the god of the conqueror. Their God was not one belonging to the pantheon of national gods whose fate was subject to the vagaries of their nation's fortunes. Nahum has no doubt that God has the power (Nah. 1:3) to undo the Assyrian Empire. Though the corresponding phrase in the 13 attributes is abounding in kindness (Ex. 34:6), Nahum chose to emphasize God's power. This may be intended as a counter- argument to the popular perception that God's being slow to anger enables Assyria to become so powerful that its undoing will never be possible. It is, however, possible that Nahum speaks at a time in which the execution of the judgment is imminent. Assyria's sense of invincibility becomes a joke in apposition to God's might (1:6).

8. God does not remit all punishment: Using the exact phrase "*v'nakeh lo yinakeh* [and cleanse he would not cleanse]" (1:3) as in the 13 attributes (Ex. 34:7), Nahum is also tapping into a tradition that may have understood this phrase as presenting two options: "*v'nakeh*" connotes "and He pardons those who return to His law" and "*lo yinakeh*" connotes "but does not leave unpunished those who do not return." This reflects the extraordinary concern of the Hebrew Bible with justice, due process, opportunity for reform, and integration of justice with mercy.

9. God's majesty is exhibited in nature's reaction to His appearance: It is notable that Nahum does not link the Lord's appearance (1:3-8) with pre-

vious historical or mythological feats. Nahum states, what to him is a fact, that God's way is to be awesome and majestic. His appearance causes a cataclysm of nature, indicating His supremacy over the forces of nature and His ability to reverse long-standing features (1:4-6). This is the basis for his argument that God can undo the Assyrian Empire, a lasting phenomenon of might and subjugation.

10. God is good:[12] Understanding that God's acts are for a good purpose is essential to a sustaining belief in Him. Nahum sees such an understanding as spiritual strength, in particular at time of strife (1:7). The logical implication of this principle is that God's works should be viewed as good in time of prosperity and success as well as in time of loss and defeat. Judah's century-long suffering the yoke of Assyria's oppression, as its deliverance from it, is an expression of God's essential goodness.

11. Belief in God is a source of strength in time of distress: The intimate knowledge that God is good, which serves as a source of human strength in time of distress, derives from sheltering in Him. The Lord emanates goodness, which can be only felt by those who find shelter in Him, becoming strength in times considered bad. God's strength is exhibited in what He does, and what He does is a source of strength to His believers:

> *The Lord is good to* [those who hope in Him]. *A haven on a day of distress;He is mindful of those who seek refuge in Him* (1:7).[13]

This verse has served as an indication of the Lord's individual selectivity, to punish the guilty and simultaneously protect those that look for refuge in Him (see Kimchi).[14] While such general theological interpretation is useful as a tenet of faith, it seem out of place in Nahum's prophecy. Judah as a vassal-state of the Assyrian Empire could reasonably fear that any geopolitical upheavals affecting Assyria could have disastrous repercussions for it. Nahum counters such potential reactions to his momentous prophecy with two promises: the Lord will care for the Judeans in the day when judgment overtakes their world, and the Lord's "big sweep" will be "localized in main," aimed at His enemies (1:8). Perhaps, the more realistic belief is ultimately a greater source of comfort in times of distress then expectations for the miraculous.

12. Deliverance as a consequence of the other's punishment: God is the Lord of the historical dynamics of a multi-element system. Meting out jus-

tice in such a system could lead to temporary anomalies, in which a non-deserving nation benefits from the punishment of another nation. That may have been the case with Judah at the time of Nahum's prophecy. Judah received a respite from oppression because Assyria had to be punished, not because Judah deserved salvation (1:7). Nahum is castigating Assyria in his prophecy because Judah is not the subject of it. Judah happens to be an unintended beneficiary.

13. God's verdict can not be countervailed: This is Nahum's major thesis, and the basis for his ironic description of Nineveh's efforts to defend itself (2:2-9, 3:14-15). While a real attacker would assail Assyria and Nineveh, it is clear from the prophecy that this attacker is just a tool for achieving God's intent. Objectively, Nineveh was a formidable fortress and well protected. Yet, *Who can stand before His wrath? Who can resist His fury?* (1:6).

14. There is a moral code by which God judges nations: Though God chose Assyria to act as His instrument of punishment against the rebellious and recalcitrant Israel (Isa. 7:17, 10:5-6), and enabled it to establish an empire through conquest, He holds that nation corporately responsible for the excesses and atrocities committed in fulfilling this role (Isa. 10:7-19, cf. Zeph. 2:14-15). Nahum considers Nineveh a city that prospered on murder, robbery, lies, and treachery (Nah. 3:1, 4).

15. God is in charge: The prophet evidently conceives of the Lord as One in charge of everyone's destiny. Nahum naturally says, *He commands* and Assyria's future is terminated (1:14). This same notion is the basis for the rhetorical comparison of Nineveh to Thebes in 3:8. The reason Nineveh is not better than Thebes is that God controls the destiny of both cities. Nahum implies that just as God used Nineveh to overthrow Thebes, He can and will use another instrument to overthrow Nineveh.[15]

16. Restoration of the special relationship with God: The deliverance of His people from oppression signals to the prophet a chance for renewing the special relationship between the Lord and His people. When the messenger brings the tidings of peace (2:1), Nahum urges Judah joyfully to celebrate its feasts and fulfil its vows. This directive implies a new start without any resentments or recriminations. Such "new beginnings" are possible with the Lord.

This list of theological premises clearly places Nahum among Israel's prophets who share with him a view of an universal Deity Who is just, compassionate, forbearing but not negligent. Achtemeier says:

> We have here only a little less than a complete presentation of the biblical witness to God's person: the testimony to his covenant love and to his patient mercy; his intimate knowledge of his own and his protection of them; his just lordship over his world and his might in maintaining his rule; his specific but also eschatological defeat of all who will challenge his sovereignty.[16]

While most of Nahum's theological understandings are expressed in the first part of the book, Spronk is correct in stating: "The theological tone set at the beginning rings through in the complete book."[17]

GOD IN HISTORY

Nahum's book appears to be imbued with a strong sense of God's sovereignty and clearly portrays His lordship over history.[18] This serves as the principal element of Nahum's comforting message, transcending the specific historical situation that was the cause for its announcement. Nahum's eternal message is one of hope, which gives comfort to anyone oppressed by seemingly invulnerable tyranny. He clearly presents the normative theological position held by the biblical prophets: The Lord is powerful, applies His power to counter evil and protect the righteous. There is nothing shallow in Nahum's theological perspectives. His theocentric view of history would not have permitted a position of an opportunistic national propagandist. For it was clear to him that Judah's salvation is not one that it deserves but rather is a consequence of Assyria' s fall. Nahum rejoices, firstly, because the sanctuary will be cleaned and sacrifices brought (2:1), enabling a recovery of religious norms.

Nahum's main message is part and parcel of a tradition of prophetic pronouncements with respect to Assyria and Nineveh. Probably the earliest texts are those in Isaiah (746-681 BCE), in which the king of Assyria was considered an instrument of God against Judah: *The Lord will cause to come upon you and your people and your ancestral house such days as never have come since Ephraim turned away from Judah -- that selfsame king of Assyria* (Isa. 7:17). However, the Hebrew prophets have never seen

this heavenly mandate to any nation as a license for unbridled oppression and cruelty to others. Once such nation lost what the prophets believed to be the proper theological perspective, it became a subject of the Lord's anger and punishment. That was the case with Assyria.

Isaiah attests that Assyria attributed its success to its own capabilities: *By the might of my hand have I wrought it, By my skill, for I am clever . . .* (10:13). As a Hebrew prophet, he could not comprehend such arrogance, asking rhetorically: *Does an ax boast over him who hews with it, Or saw magnify itself above him who wields it? As though the rod raised him who lifts it, As though the staff lifted the man!* (10:15). Assyria had overstepped its role as God's agent and violated its mandate, becoming the subject of God's punitive wrath, He will punish the majestic pride and overbearing arrogance of the king of Assyria (10:13). Similar sentiments are expressed in a number of other texts (14:24-27, 30:27-33, 31:8-9).

The Book of Zephaniah (640-609 BCE) also attests to this tradition about Assyria's haughty self-image. Zephaniah characterizes Assyrian pride by the words of the personified city: *I am, and there is none but me* (Zeph. 2:15). He, too, foresaw Assyria's eventual demise and Nineveh's desolation: *And He will stretch out His arm against the north and destroy Assyria; He will make Nineveh a desolation* (2:13). Yet, this prophetic tradition that castigated Assyria for its self-pride and predicted its doom and destruction was not indifferent to a change of heart and repentance, as described in the Book of Jonah. Jonah's mission to Nineveh shows that Assyria's eventual demise was of its own making. The prophecies of Isaiah, Zephaniah and Jonah are the backdrop for Nahum's prophecy. Nahum steps in when the Lord's *slow to anger* has been exhausted and the stage of *absolve He will not absolve* has been reached (Nah. 1:3). His ferocious language is warranted because the last phase in the traditional process has to be enacted. Nahum is not concerned with Assyria's indictment but rather with its punishment.

Nahum does not express or discuss sublime thoughts, confront the Lord with questions of justice in the universe, provide insight into truth and life, or bemoan societal inequalities and moral decadence. He is, however, a prophet who is steeped in the prophetic theological framework, the tradition of literary prophecy, and its genre. His greatness lies not only in the

poetic beauty of his prophecies and their imaginative power, as is commonly recognized, but also in the theological timeliness of his message of the Lord's power to intervene in a time of crucial need, as should be recognized.[19]

NOTES

1. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 451.
2. Ibid.
3. A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1947).
4. R.H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1941) p. 595.
5. J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit*. MW ANT 35. Neukirchen (1970) pp. 11-55.
6. M. Delcor, *La Sainte Bible*, Vol. VII (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1964) p. 366. Delcor says, "*Nahum est le héraut de la justice qui proclame le jugement de Dieu contre la ville maudite opposé au plan de Dieu . . . . Assur ser puni parce qu'il s'est attaqué au plan divin, qu'il a tramé contre Yahweh* (i 11)."
7. C. Keller, "*Die theologische Bewaltigung der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit in der Prophetie Nahums*." *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972) p. 418.
8. A.J. Heschel, *Between God and man; an interpretation of Judaism, from the writings of Abraham J. Heschel, selected, edited, and introduced by Fritz A. Rothschild* (New York: Free Press, 1997) p. 112.
9. N.K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth - Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) p. 232.
10. Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Collected Works* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1951) p. 35. Bialik aptly expressed this sentiment in his famous poem *On the Slaughter*, "And if there is justice-Let it appear right now! But if after my demise from under the sky justice will appear-may its rule be erased for ever." [My translation.]
11. R.P. Carroll, "Eschatological Delay in the Prophetic Tradition?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982) pp. 47-58.
12. E. Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986) p. 9. Achtemeier says, "Our very term 'God' is a shortened form of 'good' and is an acknowledgment that all good flows from him."
13. A. Pinker, "Shelter or Strength in Nahum 1, 7?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005). Pinker argues for the emended reading טוב ה׳ למעוז ביום צרה in Nahum 1:7.
14. This understanding reflects the saying in the Midrash (Midrash Rabbah on Deuteronomy 5:4): טוב ה׳ למעוז ביום צרהGod's *modus operandi* is not like man's. A king whose country rebelled causes an upheaval in it, killing the good with the bad. God is not so, when a generation angers Him, He saves the righteous and annihilates the evil. When the generation of Enos angered Him, he annihilated them but saved Enoch (Gen. 5:24). Why ביום צרה ויודע חוסי בו? The generation of the flood angered Him, so He annihilated them and saved Noah (Gen. 6:8). . . . The Sodomites angered, He annihilated them and saved Lot (Gen. 19:29). He brought darkness on the Egyptians (Ex. 10:23), but there was light for all the Israe-

lites.

15. J. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993) or (BZAW 217) p. 119.

16. Achtemeier, p. 8.

17. K. Spronk, *Nahum* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997) p. 15.

18. K.J. Cathcart, "Nahum, Book of," In D.N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary IV* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 999.

19. S.J. De Vries, "The Acrostic of Nahum in the Jerusalem Liturgy," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966) p. 481.