

1 Nahum

*The crusher has come up against you.
Secure the fortresses; scan the road;
strengthen your loins;
brace yourself with all your strength.
(Nah. 2:1, author's translation)*

The book of Nahum is famous for its portrayal of a God who executes vengeance upon enemies, demonstrating “Yahweh’s sovereignty over the nations, illustrated in the specific context of the Assyrian menace” (Coggin 1982: 84). Evoking a brutal vision of hatred toward the adversary nation, Nahum’s oracle expresses jubilation over Nineveh’s demise and Israel’s deliverance in such a way as to make the paradoxical nexus of divine wrath and comfort the focal point of the reception history of the book of Nahum.

In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Nahum is placed immediately after Jonah, as if anticipating the view held by ancients and moderns alike that “the book of Nahum is best read as a complement to the book of Jonah” (Christensen 1996: 187). When the people of Nineveh listened to Jonah and repented, they were saved; however, the book of Nahum shows that Nineveh returned to its sinful ways and once again stood under God’s condemnation. The pseudepigraphal *Lives of the Prophets* also juxtaposes Nahum and Jonah, stating that “after Jonah [Nahum] gave to Nineveh a portent, that it would be destroyed by fresh water and an underground fire, which also happened” (11:2; *OTP* 2: 393).

In the early church, Theodore of Mopsuestia continued to read Nahum in light of Jonah. In his commentary on Jonah, Theodore argues that the Ninevites listened to Jonah and repented because they “were seized with such dread at a simple threat made by an unknown man” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 245). Theodore attributes Jonah’s forceful ministry to the divine origin of his prophecy rather than the threat of destruction, for “it is obvious that he also mentioned God, the Lord of all, and said he had been sent by him” (*ibid.*, 202). In spite of Jonah’s successful ministry, the repentance of the Ninevites was short-lived, as Nahum shows, and they returned to their old ways, for “when God allowed them to show their true colors, they adopted such a depraved attitude and such ferocity and vicious behavior as to attack all the people of the ten tribes and take them captive; they laid waste their cities, robbed them of all their possessions and advanced even on Jerusalem, which they were anxious to take, showing no respect for the Temple, or the worship of God conducted there” (*ibid.*, 245). Both Martin Luther and John Calvin in the Reformation era castigated Nineveh’s evanescent repentance. Luther complains, “When the punishment ceased, so did the repentance” (1975: 281). In his commentary on Nahum, Calvin agrees that God’s punishment was merely postponed. Nineveh’s backsliding returned after a spurt of repentance “as it is usually the case” (1984–6, 3: 414). A nineteenth-century preacher, James Randall (1790–1882), thought of the book of Nahum as “a melancholy sequel to that of Jonah” (1843: 71). He submitted that the Ninevites were only guilty of ignoring Jonah, but Christians, who have heard from all prophets and preachers, will incur greater guilt than the people of Nineveh did for failing to heed God’s message (*ibid.*, 97).

Not every interpretation has focused on the Jonah connection. Jerome observes two layers of meaning in Nahum's prophecy, the literal and the spiritual, in his *Commentary on Nahum* (CCSL 76A, Jerome 1970: 535–78). On the literal level, according to Jerome, the prophet sought to “raise the spirits of his fellow-Jews groaning under the Assyrian yoke” (Kelly 1975: 166 commenting on Jerome [CCSL 76A, Jerome 1970: 533–6]). The words of Nahum have a spiritual lesson for Christians, who “may read them as dire warnings of the doom awaiting those who defy God and spurn the refuge of his Church” (ibid.).

Nahum has had particular appeal for those who understand prophetic books as prophecies that await fulfillment. The most important examples of this approach from antiquity are found in the book of Tobit (second century BCE) and a Qumran *peshar* commentary discovered at Cave 4 (first century BCE). In the Codex Sinaiticus manuscript, Tobit calls to his deathbed his son Tobias and seven grandsons, and asks Tobias to escape to Media with his family, for Tobit is convinced that the word of God prophesied by Nahum (Codex Vaticanus reads “Jonah” instead) is about to come true (Tob. 14:3–4). The interpretative framework of a prophecy fulfilled in due time is also at work in the Qumran *peshar* commentary (4QpNah [4Q169]). This work follows the typical structure of *peshar* commentaries, first citing the scriptural text and then offering a commentary introduced by the formula *pishro*, “its interpretation [is]” The Qumran commentary interpreted prophetic words as references to contemporary events that were affecting the life of the community (Horgan 1979: 158–9). The use of the prophecy-fulfillment pattern can be observed even in modern days. For instance, a footnote in the Scofield Reference Bible argues that “Nineveh stands in Scripture as the representative of apostate *religious* Gentiledom, as Babylon represents the confusion into which the Gentile *political* world system has fallen,” and “the coming destruction of apostate Christendom is foreshadowed by [the message of Nahum]” (Scofield 1945: 952).

Most modern interpreters, however, are more concerned with Nahum's unbridled jubilation over the enemy nation's destruction than with prophecy and fulfillment. They note the prophet's approval of divinely sanctioned violence in the interest of his own nation, for his prophecy does not contain even “a hint of the errors of Israel and their punishment” (Wright 1897: 112). He has been called “a representative of the old, narrow and shallow prophetism” (J. M. P. Smith 1911: 281). Another critic accuses him of casting “the first stone as a militant nationalist, showing no awareness whatsoever of the fact that the sins of the Assyrians were also the sins of the Judeans” (Cleland 1956: 957). Nahum's gory diction, portraying bloody scenes of war, is eerily reminiscent for modern readers of “physical and ideological battles between Israelis and Palestinians, Hutus and Tutsis, Serbs and Croats, ‘terrorists’ and ‘the West’” (O'Brien 2004: 20). One has to wonder if God's involvement in the violence that Nahum portrays does not betray “the ‘dark side’ of God” (Christensen 1999: 201).

A positive assessment of Nahum is not lacking. For some commentators, the prophet articulates the fulfillment of God's triumph over tyranny. He "proclaimed with passionate conviction the fundamental truth of prophetic religion, that God is in control of the history of the nations and that His moral government manifests itself in the punishment of the brutal tyrant" (Bewer 1949: 22). Biblical scholar Brevard S. Childs comments that the prophet calls attention to "divine justice to suffering Israel, whether suffering from the dominion of Assyria, Babylon, or Rome" (1979: 445). His perspective echoes a sermon preached by a Christian socialist, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72), more than a century earlier: "Nahum not only carries on the testimony of Jonah respecting the certain doom of an evil city; he also shows us how the called race in its deepest humiliation, as much as in its greatest prosperity, was still the preacher to the human race ... and made the rise and fall of empires, with all the dark crimes that led to both, give out pledges of consolation and hope" ("The Evil City Saved and Destroyed," Maurice 1853: 347).

Nahum in Literature

Modern biblical scholars praise the literary quality of the book of Nahum. The prophet is lifted up as the "poet laureate" of the Minor Prophets (Patterson and Travers 1990), and the book itself as a work of poetry with "no superior within the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible" (Christensen 1999: 201). These contemporary encomiums echo the estimation of eighteenth-century Oxford professor Robert Lowth (1710–87), who gave Nahum superlative praise in his *De sacra poesi Hebræorum* (1995, 2: 99):

None of the minor prophets ... seem to equal Nahum, in boldness, ardour, and sublimity. His prophecy too forms a regular and perfect poem; the exordium is not merely magnificent, it is truly majestic; the preparation for the destruction of Nineveh, and the description of its downfall and desolation, are expressed in the most vivid colours, and are bold and luminous in the highest degree.

The fall of Nineveh, the axis of Nahum's prophetic passion, is widely depicted in the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Edwin Atherstone's *The Fall of Nineveh* (1847, 1: 1) describes the city with unmitigated admiration:

Of Nineveh, the mighty city of old;
The queen of all the nations. At her throne
Kings worshipp'd; and from her their subject crowns,

Humbly obedient, held; and on her state
Submiss attended; nor such servitude
Opprobrious named. From that great eminence
How, like a star, she fell, and passed away;
Such the high matter of my song shall be.

The first stanza of John Masfield's "Cargoes" (1903: 18) also extols the wealth of Nineveh:

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

By contrast Nineveh the seat of empire is perennially juxtaposed with Nineveh the doomed city. *The Chosen People* (1868), Charlotte Mary Yonge's biblical and church history compiled for schoolchildren, describes Nineveh as "the bloody city" that was preserved only so that the divine will might use it as a means by which to punish God's own children (1868: 35–6). At the end of the nineteenth century, Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional" (1897) compares the British Empire with Nineveh:

God of our fathers, known of old –
Lord of our far-flung battle line,
Beneath whose awful hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine –
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

The poem was published on the same page of *The Times* as a message from Queen Victoria "expressing her gratitude for the spontaneous outburst of

loyalty and affection” on the sixtieth anniversary of her reign, at the peak of the Empire (Gilmour 2002: 120–23). The title “Recessional” alludes to the last part of the Anglican and Catholic liturgy, sung while the clergy and choir exit the sanctuary. In the poem, Kipling warns that the mightiest empire will fall if it forgets God and trusts in its own power, which is by nature ephemeral. He calls attention to Nineveh, Nahum’s symbol of divine justice, to infuse his poem with a prophetic admonition against nationalistic pomp and pride and self-destructive intoxication with power. Ironically, Kipling’s angst over the empire’s mortality can itself be taken to reflect the imperial dream of an empire where the sun never sets.

Nahum in the Arts

Visual representations of Nahum come from the early Christian, medieval, Romanesque, Gothic, Reformation, “Jesuit-Baroque,” and modern periods. An early Christian-style portrait of Nahum is found in the Syriac Bible of Paris (sixth to seventh century, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Syr. 341). The Rossano Gospels codex (sixth century, Diocesan Museum, Rossano, Calabria) has a page that shows Jesus in Gethsemane with three or four Old Testament figures including Nahum, who is displaying the text of Nah. 1:7.

Medieval portrayals of the prophets suggest that the illustrators must have worked with iconographic guides, while taking a modicum of liberty with details. One such manual of iconography is a list attributed to Ulpian the Roman (ninth to tenth century). In this list, which appears as an appendix to John Chrysostom’s homilies on Hebrews and Colossians, Nahum is described as “rounded-bearded, smoky [i.e., dark] on the cheeks, with the hairstyle on his forehead like a tall *mu*, a long head, like a man of forty-five, clipped hair” (Lowden 1988: 52). The *mu* apparently refers to a hairstyle shaped like the Greek letter.

Among medieval Byzantine images, the Codex Vaticanus gr. 699, folio 69v (ninth century) in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana features Nahum and Habakkuk on the same page. Each of them anachronistically holds a codex (a book format not created until the Common Era). On the Pala d’Oro in St. Mark’s in Venice (twelfth century), Nahum holds out a page containing a part of verse 13 of Nah. 3 (“*sol ortus e[st] et avolaverunt* [the sun rose, and they flew away]”), and his message of disaster is placed next to Isaiah’s promise of hope (Isa. 7:14, “*virgo concipiet et pariet filiu[m]* [a virgin shall conceive and bear a son]”). A prophet book (twelfth century, New College 44, folio 22v, Oxford) portrays the prophet with a scroll in his left hand, lifting up three fingers of his right hand as if he is about to deliver his oracle. In the prophet’s

portrait in the Codex Laudianus (twelfth to thirteenth century, gr. 30A, folio 255v, Bodleian Library, Oxford), Nahum holds a scroll in his left hand while making a stern gesture. The Codex Vaticanus gr. 1153, folio 41v (thirteenth century) gives Nahum a full-length portrayal, in which he displays a scroll with both hands. In this picture, the prophet is looking up, and a hand that emits rays of light from the corner suggests the divine origin of the prophetic message. The scroll is unrolled to reveal the words from Nah. 1:9 (LXX) which declare God's thorough punishment. In addition to these Byzantine works, a medieval Syrian portrait of Nahum, holding a scroll on which the beginning of the book can be read, is found in the Buchanan Bible in Syriac (twelfth century, Cambridge University Library).

A pre-Romanesque portrait of Nahum is embroidered on St. Cuthbert's stole (tenth century, Anglo-Saxon style), housed in the library of Durham Cathedral. The Romanesque period generated a number of works related to the book of Nahum. The Roda Bible (ca. 1000 CE, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Codex Lat. 6) includes a set of Nahum illustrations in the Romanesque style, which should be studied from bottom to top. The prophet's words at the bottom of the page depict the base from which disasters rise (Neuß 1922: 96 and fig. 113), and wildflowers pictured on the same page recall the mountains the herald climbed to deliver good tidings, or perhaps they symbolize the possibility of restoration after the destruction (Nah. 1:15). Other Romanesque portraits of Nahum are found in the Darmstadt Tower Reliquary (Schnütgen Museum, Cologne), the Worms-Frankenthal Bible (British Library, London), and the Pamplona Picture Bible (Bibliothèque de la Ville, Amiens).

Portraits of Nahum from the Gothic period (thirteenth to fourteenth century) are found in the Bible of Corbie (Bibliothèque de la Ville, Amiens), the Würzburg Psalter (Getty Museum, Los Angeles), the French Vernacular Bible (Morgan Library, New York), the Garrett Bible (Princeton University, Princeton), an archivolt in the Basilica of St. Servatus (Maastricht), the fresco of St. Michael's Church (Hildesheim), the portal of the Cathedral of Notre Dame (Amiens), the mosaics in the apse and gallery of the Florence Baptistry, and many other settings.

In the Reformation era, a scene of Nahum preaching at the port of Nineveh was included in the woodcut illustrations of Luther's Bible of 1534. In the atrium of the eighteenth-century "Jesuit-Baroque" church of Bom Jesus de Matosinhos in Brazil, Nahum is portrayed among the statues of prophets sculpted by Antônio Francisco Lisboa, also known as O Aleijadinho, "the Little Cripple" (Mann 1967: 120–3).

In modern times, John Singer Sargent presented a portrayal of a dark-robed Nahum in his "Frieze of Prophets" on the north wall of Sargent Hall in the



Figure 3 Fall of Nineveh. Poster for an American educational entertainment drawn from the book of Nahum (1892).

Boston Public Library. American artist Barry Moser produced a macabre engraving illustrating Nahum's prophecy and gave it the title "The Heap of Corpses," derived from Nah. 3:3; the work is found in the Pennyroyal Caxton Bible (*Holy Bible* 1999: 738).

In the performing arts, the nineteenth century saw a grand dramatization in *The Sublime Historic Bible Spectacle, Fall of Nineveh* (1892). Directed by Cincinnati artist John Rettig, this Adam Forepaugh production was purchased by Barnum and Bailey and performed in Philadelphia. The show's popularity was boosted by the mid-century discovery of the ruins of Nineveh by Austen Henry Layard. The production, advertised as a piece of religious entertainment and moral instruction, presented the ancient city as a distant, decadent Orient that deserved its fate (Long 2006: 365–78).

The book of Nahum has "the mark of original musical composition and performance within an ancient Israelite liturgical setting" (Christensen 1999: 201). The Orthodox liturgical calendar honors the prophet with a special canon. Part of a Byzantine hymn sung during this canon is included in *Hē theotokos en tē hymnographia* by Sōphronios Eustratiadēs (Hannick 2005: 73). In the West, Georg Friedrich Handel's majestic oratorio *Messiah* featured an aria, "How beautiful are the feet," that announced a messenger of good news that one might find in Nah. 1:15 as readily as in Isa. 52:7.

Nahum in Worship

Modern scholars believe the book originated in a worship setting such as the celebration of the Day of Nikanor in 161 BCE (Haupt 1907), the New Year festival of 612 BCE (Humbert 1926; Haldar 1946; Eaton 1961), or the Zion festival of ancient Jerusalem (J. D.W. Watts 1975). In later liturgical use, Nahum plays an intermittent but significant role in worship. For example, the exhortation in Nah. 1:15 ("celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows") is often featured in liturgical rubrics of the early church (see commentary).

In the Palestinian three-year cycle of Torah readings, whose origin is not known but which was still in use in the thirteenth century of Jewish worship, Nah. 1:12–2:6 and 1:7 served as the Haftarah (reading from the Prophets) to the Seder (order of service) beginning with Gen. 33:18 (Mann 1971: 269–70). In this selection, the Haftarah starts with Nah. 1:12, only to return at the end to verse 7. This change in verse order, unattested elsewhere, goes against rabbinic tradition (*b. Megillah* 24a), but it seems to be an arrangement designed to end the Torah lesson on a note of hope. Curiously enough, the Tanḥuma associates the Torah portion with banning superfluous talk (*dbṛ ytr*). One may wonder what the Genesis passage has to do with the vice of garrulousness on the

Sabbath, but the key word “fulfill” (*šlm*) in Nah. 1:15 (2:1 in the MT) may have recalled Jacob completing the journey safely (*šlm*) in Gen. 33:18 (Mann, *ibid.*). Another Jewish liturgical tradition took Nah. 1 as the Haftarah for the Torah lection that began with Exod. 11:1, so that the reading of Pharaoh’s oppression of Israel might be followed by God’s promise to end it (Mann 1971: 403). In contemporary Judaism, Nahum does not appear as the Haftarah for any Torah lesson (Alexander 1984: 180–1).

In Christian lectionaries, readings from Nahum have been limited to Ordinary Time, when there was no major feast day. For example, in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, a lectionary listed Nah. 1 for morning prayer and Nah. 2 for evening prayer on September 13, and Nah. 3 for morning prayer on September 14 (Holy Cross Day). The Church of England Lectionary of 1871 turned to Nah. 1 for evensong on the day of St. Barnabas on June 11, and evening prayer on October 10; then Nah. 2 for morning prayer and Nah. 3 for evening prayer on October 11. The Episcopal Church’s lectionary (1979) designates Nah. 1:1–13 in the daily office of Year One for the Tuesday of the week of Proper 29. The Roman Catholic lectionary of 1969 did not include Nahum in Sunday worship; it only listed Nah. 2:1–3; 3:1–3, 6–7 for the Friday of Week 18 in the Year II Weekday Lectionary. In the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary, Nahum is not read on any Sunday and its use as a daily reading has never been prominent. This “absence of Nahum from the lectionary presents an implicit confession that Nahum is a book that makes the church uncomfortable, one that it seldom, if ever, opens” (García-Treto 1996: 619).

Nahum 1: The Avenging God

1:1. Nahum is the only prophetic work that is designated a “book.” The book begins with a two-part heading. First, the book is announced as an “oracle” about Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and then the second half of the verse gives additional details concerning the context and origin of the oracle: it originates in a vision of the prophet Nahum from Elkosh.

Translators and interpreters have attempted to bring out the latent meaning of the term “oracle” (Heb. *maššā* “burden”). When the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word, it uses the Greek *lēmna* (“something that one receives”; cf. Prov. 30:1 LXX using a different Greek verb meaning “receive”), suggesting that the prophet delivers what he has received. The lexical construal of *maššā*’ as “oracle” is found as early as Gesenius’ seminal Hebrew lexicon (1833: 622). The content of the book as divine communication may be better conveyed by “oracle” or *lēmna* than “burden,” but until the Revised Standard Version, many

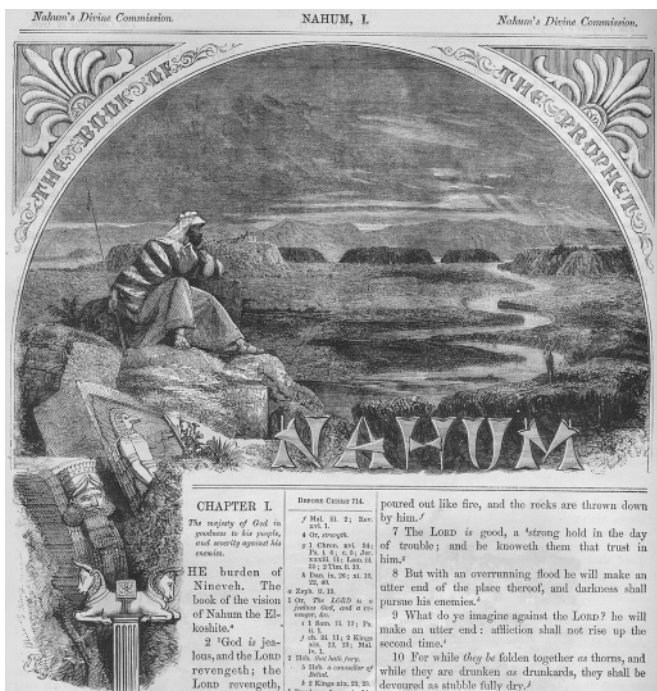


Figure 4 Opening page of the book of Nahum, from Cassell's Illustrated Bible (1870).

Bibles retain "burden" (AV; cf. Lat. *onus* in Vulg.; *Last* in Luther's German). Calvin entertains the possibility that prophecy as "burden" has a hint of cynicism pointing to the onerous nature of the prophetic task (1984, 3: 417). His view is later echoed by the Anglican theologian E. B. Pusey, who observes that "burden" is not used as the title of a prophetic book "save when the vision is heavy and full of burden and toil" (1860: 373).

Nahum's oracle focuses on the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire during the reign of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE). The book of Jonah describes Nineveh as a city with a population of over 120,000 as well as "many animals" (1:2; 3:2; 4:11) and so huge that it took three days to walk from one side of it to the other (3:3). The great city Nineveh gained notoriety through Assyria's imperial policy of terror and cruelty, and the book of Tobit (second century BCE) portrays Nineveh as a place under God's condemnation (14:3). Assyria's ominous reputation as a foreign invader lived on, as can be observed in the book of Judith (first to second century BCE), where Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is

introduced as king of the Assyrians decades after Assyria's fall to Babylon (Jdt. 1:1; cf. 2 Esd. 2:8). The tenth-century Karaite exegete Japheth ben Ali, in his commentary on Nahum, takes Nineveh as a cipher for Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, hoping that the latter's demise would lead to the abolition of the harsh laws its caliphs introduced (1911: 10–11). Nineveh as a symbol of brutality has continued into modern times. In the monograph *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet*, co-written by a biblical scholar and a psychologist, André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque call Nineveh “the concentration camp for God’s people,” which is “as *gemütlich* as a Gestapo torture chamber” (1981: 19). In *nuce*, Nineveh is “the iconically evil city” (Sherwood 2000: 108) and the ominous anthropological “Other” (Hagedorn 2006: 223–39).

In verse 1:1b, the oracle concerning Nineveh is further specified as a “vision.” Theodore of Mopsuestia regards “oracle” (*lēmna*) and “vision” (*horasis*) as complementary, for the former refers to the way the Holy Spirit delivered a message to the prophet, and the latter speaks of “the contemplation of what was shown to him” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 251). The prophet received the “vision” in rapture, in which “the prophet’s mind was seized by the grace of the Spirit and transformed so as to *contemplate* those things through which he learned of the fate of Nineveh” (*ibid.*; emphasis added). For Theodore, the “contemplation” (*theōria*, lit. “looking”) brought discernment as the Holy Spirit controlled the prophet’s mind. Theodore draws upon Acts 10:9–13, in which Peter falls into a trance (*ekstasis*, v. 10) and “contemplates” (*theōrei*, v. 11; “saw” NRSV) a vision.

The prophet’s name Nahum, which means “consoled,” is attested in letters discovered at Tell Arad (Aharoni 1966: 14, 15; Schwiderski 2000: 79) and Tell ed-Duweir/Lachish (Diringer 1941: 42; Thompson 1942: 24), indicating that it must have been a Judean name. This would agree with the tradition, preserved in *The Lives of the Prophets*, that Nahum was from the tribe of Simeon, always closely associated with Judah (11:1–3; *OTP* 2: 393). The name is not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament, although it is etymologically related to other names, including Menahem (2 Kgs. 15:14–23), Naham (1 Chr. 4:19), Nehemiah, Nahamani (Neh. 7:7), and Tanhumeth (Jer. 40:8), all of whom have a certain connection with Judah. It appears once in the New Testament, where Nahum appears as one of the ancestors of Jesus (Luke 3:25). In the Mishnah and the Talmud, several rabbis are mentioned with the name Nahum, notably Akiba’s famous teacher, Nahum of Gimzo (*b. Berakot* 20a).

“Elkosh” (v. 1) is not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament and the word has been interpreted as either a genealogical or a geographical detail. Ibn Ezra takes it as an ancestral name (Schapiro 1995/5796: 680). Calvin dismisses a Jewish tradition that Elkos, Nahum’s father, was a prophet (1984, 3: 418). *The Lives of the Prophets* regards Elkosh as the name of a place in southwestern Judah (11:1; *OTP*

2: 393). Both the Targum and the medieval exegete Rashi identify it as Nahum's hometown (Schapiro, *ibid.*), and later traditions speak of the prophet's tomb at Al Qush, an ancient Jewish settlement north of Nineveh, or Ain-Japhata, south of Babylon (Sperry 1941: 128, citing A. Asher's *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*). Eusebius of Caesarea locates Elkosh in Galilee, and Jerome mentions a place by that name in Galilee (*Commentary on Nahum*, Preface; *NPNF*² 6: 501; see also Kelly 1975: 134). A Syriac tradition, attributed to Epiphanius, refers to Elkosh as a place beyond Bet Gabre in the tribal territory of Simeon (Sperry 1941: 129), agreeing with the Simeon connection in *The Lives of the Prophets*. An alternative to all these views is the proposal that Elkosh is neither a place name nor a personal name, but an epithet of the prophet meaning "fierce god" (*lqšy*). Thus Nahum, as a gentle comforter (Heb. *nḥm*), is an Elkoshite (*lqšy*) sent by a ferocious God (cf. O'Brien 2002: 42–3).

The Oracle of Deliverance for Judah (1:2–15)

1:2. Nahum's notion of a jealous, vengeful, and indignant God in 1:2 represents a particular theological viewpoint that stands in sharp contrast to the biblical traditions that describe the Lord as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (cf. Exod. 34:6–7; Num. 14:18; Ps. 145:8; Jon. 4:2; see Fishbane 1977: 280–1; 1985: vii–viii). The Midrashic traditions make a great deal of effort to relieve the tension between these two portrayals of God. They offer a number of interpretive possibilities: God is angry but is not conquered by anger (*Genesis Rabbah* 49.8); God's fury is not against Israel but against idolaters (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 8.4); God does not bear a grudge against the children of Israel but will avenge them (*Genesis Rabbah* 55.3). Japheth ben Ali distinguishes between "adversaries" (*šrym*) and "enemies" (*ybym*) in verse 2 by arguing that "the former are idolaters who oppress Israel, whilst the latter show no such hostile feelings" (1911: 33).

Christian interpreters, too, have wrestled with Nah. 1:2. Tertullian finds the prophet's portrayal of God in the verse to be a complex theological discourse in which "God is 'jealous,' and is One who is not contemptuously derided – derided, namely, by such as flatter His goodness" (*On Modesty*; *ANF* 4: 76). In other words, God is patient, but the phase of patience will end eventually, for the divine demand for justice cannot be compromised by God's goodness. Theodore of Mopsuestia simply regards God's "jealousy" as just: it is directed at none but "the impious when [God is] provoked by what is done very wrongly" (*FC* 108, Theodore 2004: 251).

The Hebrew root *nqm* ("vengeance") is reiterated three times in this verse. Rashi, citing *Seder 'Olam Rabbah*, connects this repetition with the repeated exiles

of the ten tribes of Israel (Talmage 1975: 104, 291 n. 386). David Kimḥi regards them as a case of the biblical technique of repetition for emphasis (cf. Gen. 6:9; 1 Sam. 1:11, etc.; Talmage 1975: 104). Rhetorical effect is clearly behind Luther's translation, "*ein Rächer, ja, ein Rächer ... ein Rächer*," which makes the most of the harsh fricative sound of the German.

1:3. The wrathful God exercises restraint. From this verse and Exod. 34:6, a fourth-century collection of teachings on church conduct (commonly known as *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*) derives an admonition that church leaders should exercise the same kind of care for the innocent, the guilty, and the penitent. In paragraph 15, the document urges church officers to take note of God's patience as well as his righteousness, calling upon them to minister to the repentant with eagerness and compassion, for those who do not demonstrate such pastoral discernment may end up destroying "the Lord's flock" and dishonoring the name of God (ANF 7: 402). Theodoret reads verse 3 as an affirmation of God's patience manifested by the delay of punishment, since God "does not suddenly and all at once inflict punishment, but only after exercising extreme longsuffering" (2006: 179). However, Theodoret refuses to water down the demands of justice in the name of mercy. He believes that reprieve for the wicked is only temporary; God does not let the guilty go unpunished, for "after putting up with people's wickedness for a long time, [God] is accustomed to inflict punishment on the unrepentant" (ibid.). A nineteenth-century American educator, Tayler Lewis (1802–77), continues the same line of interpretation, finding in Nah. 1:3 "the awful equilibrium of the Divine character maintained, and apparently opposing attributes of God boldly set forth in the same verse" (1850: 39).

Verse 3b portrays God whose way is revealed in the natural phenomena of wind, storm, and clouds. In the Midrashic traditions, the whirlwind is called "God's horse" (*Exodus Rabbah* 8.1), which transported Elijah to God (*Numbers Rabbah* 14.3). In 1703/4, an Anglican preacher, Samuel Prat (ca. 1659–1723), preached a sermon based on Nah. 1:3 during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) after a storm, which he takes as a sign of something more terrible yet to come, but stressing that the Lord will show mercy in the midst of any tempest (1703/04: 19).

The striking expression "the dust of God's feet" in the last half of verse 3b prompted the rabbis to imagine God walking barefoot like a human king grieving for the death of his child (*Lamentations Rabbah* 1.1; 3.9).

1:4. The prophet describes God, who rebukes the sea and causes it to dry up (cf. Isa. 50:2; 51:10; Ps. 106:9, etc.), as the Divine Warrior going into battle with the sea (Christensen 2009: 181–2). In biblical tradition, the sea often represents

the power of chaos, which the Lord alone can subdue (Job 9:8, 13; 26:12; Pss. 74:13; 89:9–10; 93:4; 107:29, etc.), as one can observe in the tradition of the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14–15; Pss. 66:6; 77:16–20; Isa. 63:11–14, etc.). The prophetic vision of God unleashing the same power against God's enemies in Nah. 1:4 is capitalized on by the Qumran *peshet* commentator (4QpNah [4Q169], fragments 1 and 2, cited in Berrin 2004: 77). *Exodus Rabbah* (24.1) also associates God's "rebuken" of the sea in Nah. 1:4 with the crossing of the Red Sea, where God "rebuked" the "Prince Sea" that tried to drown the children of Israel.

The theme of God's triumph over the sea is appropriated in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' walking on water (Matt. 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; Luke 8:22–5; John 6:16–21). The same motif may be found in the scenes of the baptism of Jesus that, from the fifth century on, depict a mysterious figure, half-submerged in the river. The baptism represents Christ's triumph over the power of watery chaos (Jensen 1993: 34–41, 54–5; Ferguson 2009: 129).

Tertullian reiterates Nahum's portrayal of a sea-rebuking God in his diatribe against Marcion, the heretic who sought to separate the God of love of the New Testament from the Creator God of the Old Testament. Tertullian charges Marcion with deposing the Creator in favor of Christ, "the new master and proprietor of the elements" (cf. Luke 8:25). Arguing his case with a legion of citations from Exodus, Psalms, and Habakkuk, as well as Nahum, Tertullian insists that, when Jesus calmed the sea, the waters were obeying their Maker (ANF 3: 378–80).

In *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 8.2.6–7, a Christological prayer for the healing of the possessed contains a petition that God may "rebuken the unclean and wicked spirits" through Christ, "who threatens the sea, and dries it up, and makes all the rivers as desert, and the clouds are the dust of his feet; who walks upon the sea as upon the firm ground" (ANF 7: 483–4).

The Lord's rebuke of the sea and the rivers in verse 4a profoundly affects the regions of Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon "proverbial for fertility and foliage" (v. 4b; Gordon 1952: 564). Cyril of Alexandria describes Bashan and the area bordering the mountains as "home to terrible and warlike races and 'offspring of giants'" and saw in the verse certain confirmation of the impending fall of Nineveh: God destroyed these "countries once teeming with fearsome and warlike men, and luxuriant warriors like many forests, [and they] disappeared and were plundered with the loss of their inhabitations" (FC 116, Cyril of Alexandria 2007–8, 2: 289–90; cf. Deut. 1:28 LXX). So will Nineveh be destroyed. Midrashic commentaries blame the fading of the blossom of Lebanon on Manasseh, the impious king who built an idol in the Temple and incurred divine punishment (*Numbers Rabbah* 12.4; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 3.10).

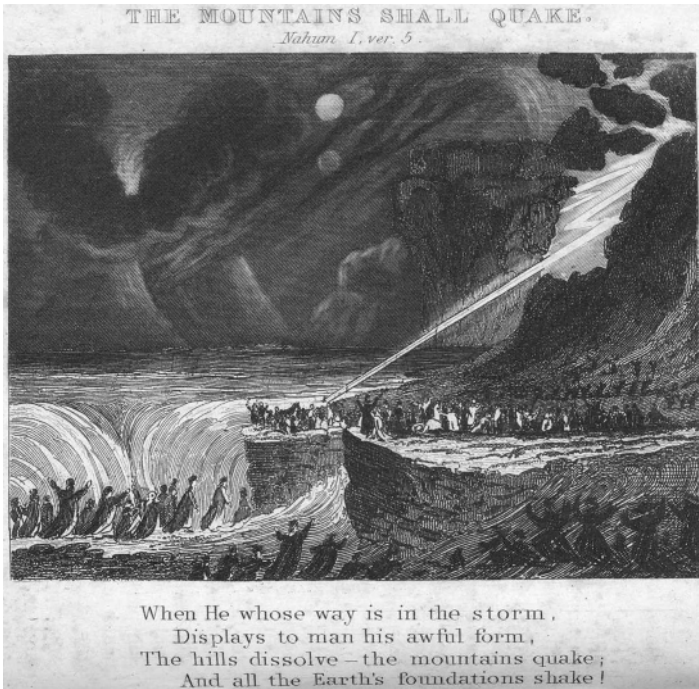


Figure 5 “The mountains shall quake” (Nah. 1:5), from Alexander Fletcher, *Scripture History, Designed for the Improvement of Youth* (1839).

1:5. The prophet continues to speak of God’s power, using traditional images of theophany, such as the quaking of the mountains and the melting of the hills (cf. Exod. 19:18; 20:18; Ps. 68:8; Isa. 13:13, etc.). The English verb “to heave” in verse 5b (NRSV) suggests that the translators regarded the root of the Hebrew verb *wattiššā*’ as *ns*’ “lift up.” The verb “heave” reads smoothly, while the transitive verb “to lift up” invites the question as to what the object of the verb is. The Septuagint sidesteps the problem by using the passive form of the verb (*anestale* “the earth is raised up” or “rolled up”). The seismic metaphors give the passage an apocalyptic note, and the Vulgate preserves the same flavor, translating *contremuit* (“trembled”). Kimḥi and Ibn Ezra use a homonym *ns*’ meaning “ignite.” They use this construal elsewhere to resolve a troublesome issue in the text. In 2 Sam. 5:21, David and his men “carry away” (*ns*’) the idols of the Philistines they have repelled, which raises the question of the violation of the ban (Heb. *herem*; cf. Deut. 7:5, 25). David does not incur any sanction, however, and is able to repel the subsequent invasion of the Philistines with no

sign of God's displeasure (2 Sam. 5:22–5). Kimḥi removes the difficulty by reading the verb as “to burn” and achieves agreement with 1 Chr. 14:12 (Fishbane 1996: 42). For Kimḥi, the same verb in Nah. 1:5b completes the picture of theophany with earthquake and fire. His suggestion found its way into the Authorized Version of 1611: “the mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein.”

1:6. Nahum sums up the awe-inspiring scene with rhetorical questions: “Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?” According to Theodore of Mopsuestia, the prophet offers proof that divine judgment “is quite able to smash and utterly destroy both those in position of great influence and those invested with great power” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 253). This interpretation is consistent with the Septuagint translation of verse 6b, which describes how God's wrath makes *archas* (“ruling powers, dominions”) melt and shatters the rocks.

1:7. The Lord, who vanquishes chaos and inspires nature to respond in awe, provides protection for those who seek refuge in God. Citing this verse, the Midrash states that God will separate the righteous from the wicked on the day of wrath, in contrast to a human king who may execute the good along with the bad (*Numbers Rabbah* 5.3). Another Midrashic interpretation interprets Nah. 1:7 as declaring that, “even if the entire generation angers him, and there is only a single righteous one, God delivers him or her” (Tanḥuma Noah 18). Cyprian uses verses 6–7 to contrast God's anger against the guilty with God's deliverance, which is available to those who trust in God during troubling times (*Treatise 12: Three Books of Testimonies against the Jews* 3.21; ANF 5: 541; but this may be an interpolation [see Fahey 1971: 248]).

1:8. The prophet's message of deliverance in verse 7 is followed by that of God's victory over enemies in verse 8. According to the Hebrew text, Nahum said, “[The LORD] will make a full end of her place.” The context contains no suitable antecedent for the genitive adjective “her.” Different versions offer a way to circumvent this problem. The Septuagint removes ambiguity by translating “those who are stirred up” (*tous epegeiromenous*). The Targum constructs two phrases out of the Hebrew word *mqwmh*: “that rose up” (*dqmw*) and “his temple” (Heb. *mqwmh*), and translates, “But in fierce anger and in great wrath he shall make an end of the nations which rose up and utterly destroyed the Sanctuary” (Cathcart and Gordon 1989: 132–3). In the NRSV, the prophet says, “He will make a full end of his adversaries, and will pursue his enemies

into darkness.” This modern translation seems to conflate various exegetical traditions, for it contains the third person pronoun (MT), the plural noun (LXX), and the lexical meaning of “adversary” (Targum, as well as the implied meaning in the LXX).

1:9. The prophet reinforces verse 8, pointing out the futility of resistance against God, for “no adversary will rise up twice” against the Lord. The phrase “not twice” at the end of verse 9 has yielded rich interpretive traditions. The Targum applies it to the nations that attacked Israel in the past and declares that God will not twice provide them with comfort and restoration as God would for the house of Israel (cf. Gordon 1994: 41). The Talmud explains that storms do not last more than two hours because adversity does not rise twice, recalling Nah. 1:9 (*b. Berakot* 59a). Among the church fathers, Theodore of Mopsuestia regards the phrase “not twice” as a declaration that God’s justice is so swift that it does not “need a second strike, achieving your sudden ruin at the first blow” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 254), but most other interpreters take it as a prohibition against double jeopardy. Citing the Greek translation, Origen declares that the death penalty resolves guilt, for God does not exact justice from the offenders twice (*Homilies on Leviticus* 11.5). *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* refers to this verse to determine the appropriate punishment for guilty clergy: “Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who is taken in fornication, or perjury, or stealing, be deprived, but not suspended; for the Scripture says: ‘Thou shall not avenge twice for the same crime by affliction’” (ANF 7: 501). The document does not specify the details involved in “deprivation” and “suspension,” but the rule would permit the offenders to plead *autrefois convict* (French “previously convicted”). Jerome speaks against punishing twice for the same offense in a number of contexts. He points out that God did not hand over Judah to Assyria “in the way that he had given the ten tribes and Samaria into their hands” because God does not doubly punish (CCSL 76A, Jerome 1970; cf. FC 48, Jerome 1964–6, 1: 368; *Letter* 68.1). For Jerome, Sodom has a chance of ultimate salvation, for it was already punished (see Matt. 11:23–4). In the same way, Lazarus is “in the bosom of Abraham” because God does not punish twice (FC 57, Jerome 1964–6, 2: 11–12; see Luke 16:19–31). The verse is cited in a similar context by Peter Damian (ca. 1007–72; see 2005: 291) and in one of the annotations in the sixteenth-century Antwerp Polyglot Bible (Gordon 1994: 43). Cassiodorus (ca. 490–ca. 585), in a comment on Ps. 38:2 (37:3 LXX), applies it to the Last Judgment, expressing the belief that the psalmist would be spared from further torments at the Last Judgment (ACW 51, Cassiodorus 1990–1, 1: 378). The late seventh-century Bible commentary by Theodore and Hadrian of the Canterbury school uses the notion of “not twice” to explain that Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:32) “were kept living in their

tents beneath the earth” until the Last Judgment, because “the Lord does not avenge himself twice on the same [person]” (Bischoff and Lapidge 1994: 379).

1:10. This difficult verse, “the climax of the opening canto, the hymn of theophany in Nah. 1:10” (Christensen 2009: 204), taunts God’s enemies as drunkards. This image led Japheth ben Ali to see a correlation between the crime and the punishment, reading the verse as saying that God will make Nineveh drink the “cup of intoxication” that it has given to other nations (1911: 35). The stupor of drunkenness as the backdrop of the fall of Nineveh had already been popularized by the Greek writer Diodorus Siculus (ca. 90–ca. 30 BCE), who described the last days of Nineveh under King Sardanapalus (*Bibliotheca historica* 2.23–7). *The Pictorial Bible* (Kitto 1856) offers a lengthy note originally written by John Kitto. The only note for the entire chapter, it explains how the king of Assyria,

elated by former successes, abandoned himself to his revelry and sloth, and was chiefly intent on preparing wine and victuals in abundance to feast his army. The allied revolters being apprised by deserters of the intemperance and security of the adverse army, attacked their camp suddenly, in the night, in the midst of revelry and drunkenness; and being in excellent order, while the camp was in the most disordered and helpless condition imaginable, and altogether unprovided for defence, they easily broke into the camp, and made a prodigious slaughter of the Assyrians. (1856: 676–7)

In his tirade against drinking in the Victorian era, Pusey interprets the verse literally, attributing the fall of Nineveh to physical drunkenness and portraying the eve of Nineveh’s capture as a time of listless surfeit intoxicated by success; Nineveh met its demise when “the whole army was negligent and drunken” (1860: 377).

1:11. It is not clear whether God is speaking to Nineveh or to Judah here. Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi suggest that the appellative refers to Sennacherib, the Assyrian king (Schapiro 1995/5796: 684; cf. 2 Kgs. 18–19), while Luther compares the verse with Isa. 49:17 and declares that the Assyrian king was “a worthless fellow, a good-for-nothing” (1975: 292–3).

1:12–13. The prophet anticipates that the Lord will set Judah free, using motifs also found in Isaiah (10:27; 14:24–7; Roberts 1991: 54). Luther observes that the prophet was encouraging Judeans who faced an enemy superior in armor and number (1975: 293), recalling 1 John 4:4 (“the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world”). The oppressor’s power, whether on earth or in heaven, constitutes no cause for panic. Calvin also uses verses 12–13

to comfort believers in times of hardship: just as the Assyrian invasion was a temporary scourge, so is “God’s displeasure with his elect people and his Church” (1984–6, 3: 441–4).

1:14. The verse sentences to death the Assyrian king or “the Assyrian power personified as a single man” (Keil 1949: 16). Augustine understands verses 14–15 as containing God’s *ipsissima verba* fulfilled by the gospel of Christ, for Christ saved the believers from “the carved image and the cast image” (CG 18: 31, Augustine 1998: 862; cf. 1 Cor. 12:2; 1 Thess. 1:9). The medieval *Biblia Pauperum* (for example, the thirteenth-century Codex Vindobonensis 1198, folio 2v) uses Nah. 1:14 along with Zeph. 2:11 and Zech. 13:2 (see commentary) as prophetic texts for God’s judgment of idols on a page that illustrates the incident of the golden calf (Exod. 32), the fall of the Egyptian idols (Pseudo-Matthew 23:1), and the fall of Dagon (1 Kgs. 5:1–5).

1:15. The condemnation of Nineveh calls for celebration. A messenger is dispatched to spread the good news, thereby, as Calvin points out, subverting the Assyrian policy of depriving “Israelites of the freedom of speech” (1984, 3: 449–50). Nahum’s messenger of good tidings (lit. “tidings of peace”) in verse 15a is also found in Isa. 52:7 (cf. 40:9; 41:27). Nahum’s proclamation of deliverance must have resonated with Second Isaiah, who envisioned the imminent end of the Babylonian exile. In Rom. 10:15, the only clear case of quotation from the book of Nahum in the New Testament (Christensen 1996: 188), Paul appropriates the motif of the messenger of good tidings, alluding to Nah. 1:15 (cf. Isa. 52:7), when he features plural messengers (i.e., Christian apostles and preachers) and assigns them a critical role in the chain of commission, proclamation, reception, profession, and deliverance of the gospel (Rom. 10:14–15). In chapter 86 of *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (extant in an Armenian version), Irenaeus also refers to the exultation in Nah. 1:15 as a prophecy fulfilled in the coming of the Son of God and the apostolic preaching: “How beautiful are the feet of them that bring good tidings of peace, and that bring good tidings of good things” (ACW 16, Irenaeus 1952: 101). Irenaeus attributes this declaration to “the prophets,” which may suggest either that he has both Isa. 52:7 and Nah. 1:15 in mind (ibid, 211 n. 346), or that he is quoting Rom. 10:15 (Moyise 2009: 110). Tertullian, preserving the singular in the original text, makes the Christological reference more explicit than Irenaeus did. In *Against Marcion* 4:13, Tertullian discusses “Christ’s connection with the creator,” linking the verse (along with Isa. 52:7) to the gospel account of Jesus ascending the mountain to pray (cf. Luke 9:28). Tertullian believes that Nahum’s prophecy discloses the Word of God in Christ as “one that brings good tidings of peace ... one that publishes good tidings of good” (ANF 3: 364–5). In his

Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron (12.6), which Syrian Christians called “the gospel of the mixed (*euangelion da-mehalletē*),” Ephrem Syrus (ca. 306–73) too identifies Jesus with the one who proclaims peace and deduces the Gentile mission in the same verse, asking “To whom, if not to the Gentiles?”

Nahum 1:15b is prominently featured in the festal letters which the bishops of Alexandria sent to the churches soon after Epiphany to inform them of the beginning of Lent and the date of Easter in the year. In such a festal letter, dated 334 CE, Athanasius calls the verse a directive on the celebration of Easter, pointing out that the prophet's words present God as one who loves the feast of the faithful. He declares that one should look forward to celebrating the resurrection of Christ, not with carelessness but with eagerness, “so that having begun joyfully here, we may also receive an earnest of that heavenly feast” (*Festal Letter* 6, *NPNF*² 4: 519). For Athanasius, the celebratory mood of the verse anticipates the messianic banquet with the risen Lord. Cyril of Alexandria, too, in his festal letter of 414 appealed to verse 15b in order to delineate the proper mode of celebrating Easter:

Let us therefore show God the Jew who is hidden and the circumcision which is hidden, circumcising all vice from our hearts, that it may be right that we should hear, “Celebrate your feasts, Judah, and offer to the Lord God your prayers.” (FC 118, Cyril of Alexandria 2009: 37)

Nahum 1:15 has also been employed to suggest divine sanction for events in the political sphere. Nicholas Brady (1659–1726), an Anglican clergyman and poet, chose this verse as the central text of a sermon he delivered in 1713 on the day of public thanksgiving appointed by Queen Anne to mark the Peace of Utrecht. In this sermon, sold at threepence (about £1.50 today), Brady describes the feast as “a Testimony of our Gratitude, with Devotion toward *him* our *prime Benefactor*,” and the ensuing sentence seems to direct as much attention to the Queen as to God: “from thence let us turn our Eyes upon *our Gracious Sovereign*, the Blessed Chief Instrument of our Quiet and Tranquility” (1713: 16–17; italics in the original).

Most English Bibles follow the Vulgate in taking Nah. 1:15 as the last verse in chapter 1, but the Hebrew text and the Septuagint make it the beginning of the following chapter. While chapter and verse divisions are occasionally arbitrary, the competing traditions on the verse's location suggest different ways of analyzing its literary context. While the versions seldom divulge a clue to the basis of their chapter divisions, the Vulgate's arrangement suggests that peace is being proclaimed on the basis of the avenging God of 1:2–14. By contrast, when the same verse is placed at the top of the next chapter, it showcases “one who brings good tidings” and announces a new oracle in chapter 2 (cf. Roberts 1991: 54).

Nahum 2: Destruction of Nineveh

The Fall of Nineveh (2:1–13)

2:1. Nahum 2 portrays the horrific devastation of Nineveh. The first half of verse 1 describes the agent of destruction, one “who dashes in pieces” (AV), “a shatterer” (RSV, NRSV). The word could be construed as “hammer” – an epithet that has been applied to such historical figures as Judas Maccabeus and Charles Martel – suggesting that it may refer to the historical enemies, the Medes under Cyaxares who laid siege to the city in 625 BCE (Lehrman 1948: 199). Rashi and Ibn Ezra say it refers to Nebuchadnezzar.

The Septuagint, with which church fathers worked, offers a significantly different reading: “one who breathes on your face.” Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–87), for example, argues that the prophecy in verse 1 refers to Jesus breathing upon the apostles and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22–3). Cyril argues that this event represents the restoration of creation after the first breathing of the Spirit, which was marred by Adam’s disobedience (*Catechesis* 17.12; FC 64, Cyril of Jerusalem 1969–70, 2: 104). Using the characteristic Antiochene exegetical method, Theodoret calls the fall of Assyria a “type” of the defeat of “the devil’s tyranny brought to an end through Christ the Lord” (2006: 182).

2:2. The verse is placed in parentheses in the NRSV, indicating that it is only tenuously connected with the surrounding verses (cf. J. J. M. Roberts 1991: 64). It speaks of the restoration of the northern kingdom of Israel (Jacob), which had been destroyed by the Assyrians in 722–721 BCE. The prophet uses “Israel” to include Judah, and the vine whose branches were “ruined” serves as “a proud symbol of majesty, restored to a flourishing condition” for united Israel (Murphy 1968: 294; cf. Isa. 5:1–7; Ps. 80:8–13).

2:3. Nahum’s oracle pictures the shatterer’s warriors at the gates of Nineveh, dressed in red and carrying “red” shields. The color “red” has been interpreted in various ways: stained with blood, as an apotropaic measure, or as a kind of psychological warfare to boost the morale of the troops and cause panic among the enemy (Rudolph 1975: 170). *Genesis Rabbah* associates the color with Esau, stating that everything about him was red: the porridge he ate was red, his land was red, indeed he himself was red (63.12; 75.4; cf. Gen. 25:30; 32:3–4 [32:4–5 MT] with a play on the word “Edom” [Heb. *ʾādōm* “red”] in 25:25 and 30). Theodore of Mopsuestia suggests that the warriors’ shields were red because

they “were exceptionally strong, and had no qualms about risking even fire” on the battlefield (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 256).

2:4–5. The attack on Nineveh is launched, and the city is thrown into chaos. Theodore of Mopsuestia finds the prophet taunting the Assyrians, whose chariots race through the streets of Nineveh and crash into each other as they flee in panic. Theodore argues that the similes in verse 4b (“like torches ... like lightning”) also ridicule the Assyrians. It was as if God were saying, “You thought yourselves no different from lightning bolts and fire, resplendent in your weapons and attacking the enemy with great ferocity” (ibid.). The poetic irony is that the Assyrians who used to attack their enemies with lightning quickness are now fleeing “like lightning” as their attackers speedily assault Nineveh. Curiously, the Midrashic traditions turn away from the scene of the invasion of Nineveh and interpret the “torches” and “lightning” as referring to students of the Torah, who may look unappealing as a result of the deprivations resulting from strenuous study, but who in due time will shine like “torches” and “lightning” (*Leviticus Rabbah* 19.3; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 5.11.5).

2:6. The besieged city collapses “for all its military defensive precautions” (Murphy 1968: 294; cf. Jer. 6:1–5; 46:3–11), and Nineveh’s fate is sealed as “the river gates are opened.” Ancient Greek writers mention flood damage to Nineveh the impregnable city (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.26–7; cf. Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 3.4.7–9; see also *The Lives of the Prophets* 11:2; OTP 2: 303), but here the scene of flooding may also be metaphorical, conjuring a spectacle of chaos overwhelming the city as enemy troops rush into the city like water. The palace that “trembles” has a double meaning, referring both to the literal collapse of the walls of Nineveh and to the will of the Assyrian rulers to fight the shatterer’s forces (cf. J. J. M. Roberts 1991: 66).

2:7. Now Nineveh goes into exile. The first word of 2:7 (Heb. *huṣṣab*) has been a Gordian knot for translators: English versions include “Huzzab” (AV), “its mistress” (RSV), “it is decreed” (NRSV; NIV), and “train of captives” (NEB; REB; see G.R. Driver 1964: 296–8). The Septuagint has the “substructure (*hypostasis*) has been uncovered” (NETS). The Vulgate has “the soldier has been led away captive” (*miles captivus abductus est*). The Targum, Rashi, and other medieval Jewish commentators read “the queen,” and this seems to be the origin of Luther’s “resplendent in her royal garb ... taken prisoner” (1975: 302–3). The Authorized Version also takes the word as the name of a queen or a noble lady, and translates, “and Huzzab shall be led away captive, she shall be brought up, and her maids shall lead her as with the voice of doves, tabering (Heb. lit. “beat a drum,” related to the nouns “tabor, tambourine,” and the rare verb in Ps. 68:25

[MT 68:26] “tabor,” to beat on a drum) upon their breasts.” However, no queen is known by that name, though the word may have been an epithet for a queen.

The Septuagint’s choice of *hypostasis* (Lat. *substantia* Vulg.) brings the verse into the Christological debate of the early church. Ambrose points to Nah. 2:6–7a as a key passage about Christ’s “substance”: “the gates of the cities are broken down, the mountains are fallen, and his substance is revealed.” In other words, gates and mountains had to be brought down to reveal a Christ who is of one substance with God the Father (*Christian Faith* 3.14.115–19; *NPNF*² 10: 258).

2:8. For the first time in the book, the prophet mentions Nineveh by name. Nineveh’s “mighty streams once inundated Israel and Judah ... like the unruly waters of chaos” (Roberts 1991: 66). The bloody city is being dissolved into a watery city (Sherwood 2000: 239; cf. Nah. 3:1; Zeph. 2:13–15). Now the walls of the pool are broken, the water is unstoppable.

2:9. The NRSV places this verse in quotation marks to indicate a change of the speaker, and it repeats the words of the victor who sacks the city. Concerning the wealth (Heb. *kābōd*, usually meaning “glory, honor”) being plundered, *Genesis Rabbah* finds clarification of the Hebrew word in Gen. 31:1 where it appears in the sense of “abundance” (“wealth” NRSV; 73.12). Theodoret reads the verse as meaning that “what [Nineveh] had wrongly amassed ... will be handed over to others” (2006: 184).

2:10. The prophet then resorts to dramatic sound effects to describe the havoc wreaked upon the plundered city (v.10). Translators are clearly struggling to mirror the shape of the Hebrew original (*būqā ūmēbūqā ūmēbullāqā!*), when they suggest “devastation, desolation, and destruction!” (NRSV); *ektinagmos kai anatinagmos kai ekbrasmo* (LXX); *dissipata et scissa et dilacerata* (Vulg.); *pillé, dépouillé, pilonné* (French); *O Wust, o Wüste und Verwüstung* (German); and *¡Desolación, devastación y destrucción!* (Spanish). A well-known parallel to this prophetic onomatopoeia may be found in Isa. 24:17, in which the prophet cries, *pahad wāpaht wāpāh* (“terror, and the pit, and the snare!”).

2:11–12. Here follows a dirge over the destroyed city, comparing it to a lion’s den that has been ruined. Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi found in this passage a comment on the Assyrian Empire’s predatory behavior (Schapiro 1995/5796: 690). Theodore of Mopsuestia took Nahum’s imagery as a mockery that declares an end to Assyria (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 258). The Midrash identifies the lion with Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer. 4:7) and attributes the devastation of his “den” to the offense of burning down the Temple, destroying the southern kingdom of Judah, and taking Israel into exile (*Exodus Rabbah* 29.9). The Qumran *pesher*

commentary seems to read a singular “den” in verse 12 for the Hebrew text’s plural (QpNah 3-4 i 6; Doudna 2001: 132), suggesting that the commentator was thinking of Jerusalem or the Temple occupied by corrupt priests (Brooke 1987: 89).

2:13. The chapter on Nineveh’s destruction concludes in verse 13 with a judgment speech that echoes verse 3 with its scene of frantic chariots. The Hebrew text indicates a second person feminine singular interlocutor in the phrase “your young lions,” probably in reference to the city of Nineveh. The biblical text in the Qumran *peshar* commentary, however, has masculine pronouns, and the commentary refers to “his lions” (4QpNah 3-4 i 10), apparently applying the image of the predators to the contemporary nemesis of the community (Brooke 1987: 90). The Qumran community’s appropriation is comparable to that of later interpreters who believe that “the sack of Nineveh is at the same time the defeat of evil itself” (Christensen 2009: 327).

Nahum 3: Woe Oracle against the City of Bloodshed

An Oracle against Nineveh (3:1-17)

3:1. The last chapter of Nahum does not let up. It begins with a woe oracle against “the city,” charging it with bloodshed. The “city of bloodshed” deviously enriched itself by plundering other nations like a beastly predator. Although the city is not named, the context in the book of Nahum and a reference to the king of Assyria in verse 18 make it clear that it is to be identified as Nineveh, whose past acts of violence described in the following verses function as the basis for God’s just judgment (cf. House 2000: 138; cf. Ezek. 22:2).

The Septuagint version of verse 1 ends with a cryptic sentence (“prey shall not be groped for” NETS). The Greek verb (*psēlaphaō* “to touch”) is often used to describe the groping of the blind (Gen. 27:12, 21, 22; Deut. 28:29; Judg. 16:26; Isa. 59:10) or the effort to find one’s way through deep darkness (Job 5:14, 12:25). Based on this Greek text, Theodore of Mopsuestia constructed a scene of utter futility for the former predator. Nineveh will “no longer have the opportunity of snaring prey, and though trying hard [it] will be unable to achieve anything” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 259).

3:2-3. In these two verses, “Nahum switches to a series of quick word pictures that portray the attack on Nineveh and the city’s fall” (Roberts 1991: 72). A mass of corpses in Nineveh was the subject matter of Barry Moser’s illustration of Nahum (see p. 14).

3:4. The battlefield filled with corpses in verses 2–3 is followed by a no less gruesome spectacle of sexual violence in verses 4–6. In verse 4, the prophet portrays Assyria as a seductive prostitute and sorceress, casting “her” in the most negative way possible (cf. Bellis 1994: 178). The rhetoric of terror feminizes the enemy city (cf. 2:1, 13 [2:2, 14 MT] where the Hebrew pronoun refers to the city as it faces violent punishment, and “her” body is laid bare before the invader (3:5–7). Citing this passage, Rashi condemns Assyria as a harlot who seduces other nations with an offer of friendship, only to destroy them (Schapiro 1995/5796: 691). One of “the countless debaucheries of the prostitute” is “sorcery” (Gk. *pharmakon*; cf. Exod. 7:11; 9:11; 22:18; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kgs. 9:22; Mic. 5:12; Mal. 3:5, etc.). *Pharmakon* may refer to either good medicines or harmful poisons, depending on whether they bring health or hurt (cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 4.230; 10.213, 236, 287), and Assyria “the mistress of sorcery” offered *pharmakon* which promised healing but delivered death.

3:5. The indictment of Nineveh for its moral and religious pollution is followed by a humiliating punishment. The Septuagint refers to the exposure of the hind parts (*ta opisō*), candidly reproduced by Theodore of Mopsuestia as follows: “Lo, I am against you, says the Lord God almighty. I shall expose your rear as your face, I shall reveal to the nations your shame, and to kingdoms your dishonor” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 260).

3:6. The spectacle of naked horror is followed by the defilement of “filth” (NRSV) or “loathsome things” (JPS), which can also be translated as “excrement” (Lehrman 1948: 204). Nineveh’s punishment contains a series of disturbing images of sexual violence used to describe Nineveh the prostitute’s “punishment by a vengeful God” (Koperski 2002: 473). Nahum’s portrayal of a deity who punishes by means of sexual violence against a target likened to a prostitute has evoked strong criticism from contemporary interpreters, especially feminists and those sympathetic to their approaches (Magdalene 1995: 326–52; cf. Bail 1998a: 356). Sherwood comments bluntly on the brutal scene: “Nineveh-as-woman is raped” (2000: 125). The passage, read in the context of similar images in other prophetic books (Jer. 13:22–7; Ezek. 16; Hos. 2:13), seems to portray God “as a male who proves his manhood and superiority through violent and sexual retaliation against women” (Sanderson 1998: 233–6). Some critics warn against using the text to legitimize and even promote sexual violence (Baumann 1998: 351), and others go as far as to say there is “no alternative but to condemn YHWH’s character in Nahum and the text’s relentless celebration of both sexual and other violence” (Carden 2006: 473). Another feminist reading strategy is to reassess the prophet’s vision of terror and deconstruct the shame it seeks to engender. Borrowing a term from novelist Toni Morrison, the

proposal is to subvert the Nahum text by using it as a “patriarchal fishbowl” for teaching purposes (O’Brien 2002: 102–3).

3:7. Nineveh’s humiliation creates a paradoxical situation. Nineveh will continue to make other nations cringe and flee (“shrink from you” NRSV), but this time the reason is not the terror of Assyria’s might, but the horror of its plight. Cyril of Alexandria imagines that the prophet asks who will lament Nineveh, “as though there were no one, or no survivor, capable even of contemplating it” (FC 116, Cyril of Alexandria 2007–8, 2: 320). The prophet wonders, “Where shall I seek comforters for you?” Cyril explains, Nineveh “has ... been totally captured and totally plundered, and everyone in her has been lost, for the devastation is so thorough that no consolation can be found” (ibid.).

3:8. Nineveh’s demise is compared with the fall of another powerful ancient city, Thebes. Thebes was also known by its Egyptian name No-Amon or No; hence, “populous No” in the AV. *Genesis Rabbah* (1.1) indicates that “Amon” can also be construed as “great,” reporting that Nah. 3:8 is translated in Aramaic as “Were you any better than the great Alexandria that is situated among the rivers?” (Shuchat 2002: 2). The Targum identifies Thebes with Alexandria (Cathcart and Gordon 1989: 140). The Vulgate also translates No-Amon in the Hebrew text as Alexandria, but Theodore of Mopsuestia dismisses such a view as ruins “a vain display at appearing to identify obscure places” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 261).

3:9. The list of Thebes’ allies in verse 9 is headed by Ethiopia (“Cush” in the Hebrew Bible; Holter 1997: 335). Ethiopia was one of the strongest military powers in antiquity (Mveng 1972: 23–39; Lavik 2001: 45; cf. Ezek. 38:5), and the view that it was one of the despised nations has been criticized as a case of traditional Eurocentrism that “has generally marginalized the African presence in the Old Testament” (Holter 2000: 576–7).

3:10. In spite of the strong support of its allies, Thebes went into exile. The prophet describes the fall of once mighty powers with gruesome imagery (“even her babies were dashed in pieces”), which it shares with other parts of the Old Testament (2 Kgs. 8:12; Isa. 13:16; Hos. 10:14; 13:16; Ps. 137:9; cf. Isa. 14:21). This monstrous image has been perceived by some as a way to vocalize unspeakable perturbation, for “how else can the powerless be rid of the poison of anger and hate, the frustrated wish for revenge, if not by giving verbal expression to it?” (Brenner 2003: 87–8). Whether such rhetoric produces relief or promotes further violence is a question with which readers of Nahum will continue to wrestle.

Ethiopia was defeated, and its ruling class was taken into captivity. The prophet describes the finality of their fate with the image of casting lots (v. 10b).

3:11. The same irreparable misfortune will strike Assyria. Nineveh's helpless state is compared to "drunkenness" (cf. 1:10 and commentary). Cyril of Alexandria reads Nineveh's "drunkenness" allegorically as "ignorance of what is proper" (FC 116, Cyril of Alexandria 2007–8, 2: 322). In a dazed state of "stupefaction caused by calamity" (Christensen 2009: 361), the Ninevites will be forced to "seek a refuge from the enemy." The Qumran *peshar* commentary inserts the word "city" (4QpNah 3–4 iv 7), recalling the tradition of the city of refuge (Num. 35; Josh. 20–1; cf. *b. Makkot* 11a). The commentator's interest in this sanctuary tradition may point to the Qumran community's quest for a place of safety, but the additional word does not drastically change the meaning of the text, for the Hebrew word for "refuge" or "stronghold" alone can refer to a city of refuge or an asylum (Judg. 6:26; Pss. 27:1; 28:8; 31:2–4; 37:39, etc.; cf. Brooke 1987: 86).

3:12. The destruction of Nineveh is as inevitable as the fall of ripe figs (v. 12; cf. Mic. 7:1). Rashi and Kimḥi explain the simile as meaning simply that the attackers will easily overcome Nineveh (Schapiro 1995/5796: 693). Assyria's "hopeless strength" will spell "an easy victory" for Babylonian forces (Luther 1975: 311), and the futility of human strength will vanish before God's design (Calvin 1984, 3: 496).

3:13. The inevitability of Nineveh's collapse is visible in its lack of preparedness to engage the enemy. This verse describes Nineveh's troops as "women" incapable of repelling the invaders. This conventional censure (cf. 2 Sam. 3:29; Isa. 19:16; Jer. 50:37; 51:30) is also attested in the Assyrian king Esarhaddon's succession treaty: "May all the gods who are called by name in this treaty tablet spin you around like a spindle-whorl, may they make you like a woman before your enemy" (Haddox 2006: 188–9). In feminist exegesis, the prophet's image of effeminate troops has been called "one of the most insulting threats or curses that could be made" (Sanderson 2000b: 353), and the gates flung wide open may intimate sexual violation (O'Brien 2004: 53).

3:14. The continuing sarcasm in the imperatives can hardly be missed. The imperatives "Draw water for the siege, strengthen your forts; trample the clay, tread the mortar, take hold of the brick mold!" are addressed to women (Heb. second person feminine plural) and intended to be derisive. Luther joins in the mockery of the Assyrian forces: "hiding forever within your walls, trying everything like women" (1985: 311–12).

3:15–17. The city so weakly defended is heading for conflagration and desolation. The sentence in verse 15 begins with an adverb of place (Heb. *šām* “there”), “as if the prophet pointed at the doomed city, and by this little word declared the certainty of her overthrow” (Gandell 1876: 647). The prophet’s catalogue of instruments of execution includes not only the fire and sword already mentioned in the book (cf. 2:3, 13), but also locusts, which devastate the land (cf. Joel 1:4; 2:25). Theodore of Mopsuestia observes that locusts play different roles in verses 15 and 17. In the former, they are agents of destruction, whom Theodore associates with mercenary forces “herded together from all quarters to increase power” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 264). In the latter, these locusts, frozen to the rampart, are the subjugated people unable to move under Assyria’s imperial domination, but now they can fly and “relish their separation from [Assyria]” (FC 108, Theodore 2004: 264–5). In his nineteenth-century pictorial Bible, Kitto offers a detailed comment on Nahum’s locusts, describing how they cause ruinous destruction in every stage of their life cycle:

Their formal and wholesale ravages begin before they are in a condition for flight; and are then indeed far more ruinous than those of the winged invaders. When they leave their native hedges, they march along, as it were, in battalions, devouring every leaf and bud as they pass, and not sparing even the bark of the trees. ... At last, when the sun has waxed warm, about the end of June, they acquire their perfect condition by the development of their wings, and “flee away” [Nah. 3:16], to inflict on other places the desolation to which they have reduced the places of their birth. (1856: 679)

His entomological description reflects the encyclopedic interests displayed in nineteenth-century editions of the Bible.

An Oracle against the King of Assyria (3:18–19)

3:18. Nahum’s oracle against Nineveh is followed by the denunciation of the king of Assyria and his nobles, compared to shepherds. “Shepherds” may also refer to the royal family (cf. 2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chr. 11:2; Ezek. 37:24), and their slumber, to their death (Roberts 1991: 77). With the demise of the noble and the royal alike, Assyria is undone.

3:19. Nineveh’s fall is terminal. Nineveh’s misfortune becomes an occasion of jubilation for “all who hear the news.” They will celebrate the oppressor’s demise by clapping their hands (cf. Ps. 47:1). They are rejoicing because Assyria’s “endless cruelty” is finally over. The book of Nahum ends with a question, as does the book of Jonah. Paradoxically, however, a major difference

makes the two prophets complement each other. The book of Jonah ends with God's poignant rhetorical question as to why compassion is a divine necessity. By contrast, the book of Nahum concludes on a note of sarcasm disguised in the interrogative, pursuing to the end its celebration of the raw justice meted out to the empire that ignored divine care and left scars of violence in its wake. The sequence of books in the Septuagint that placed Nahum right after Jonah was, after all, iconic. God's offer of mercy in Jonah was ignored. The consequence is what we see in Nahum.

The Lord's patience is great.
So is God's strength.
But the Lord will never let the guilty go unpunished.
(Nah. 1:3a, author's translation)