

LITERARY ANALYSIS AND THE UNITY OF NAHUM

RICHARD D. PATTERSON and MICHAEL E. TRAVERS

Exegesis that includes careful attention to internal matters-- theme and development, structure, and features of literary style--can help resolve perennial problems of interpretation. One such difficulty involves the unity and authorship of the book of Nahum. Conclusions reached from the shared contributions of biblical and literary data argue strongly for the unity of the whole prophecy that bears Nahum's name. The literary devices are so demonstrably a necessary and integral part of the theme and structure of the work that this book is best viewed as the production of a single author whose literary skill and artistry rival those of any of the OT prophets.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

Most modern higher critical interpreters conclude that of Nahum's forty-seven verses, at least one-third are spurious. Critics are generally agreed in denying Nahum's authorship of parts of the title, the "acrostic poem" at 1:2-10,¹ the "hopeful sayings" of 1:12-13; 2:1, 3, and the closing dirge at 3:18-19.² Thus, literary analysis of Nahum has often been attended by the uniform denial of the unity of the book.³

Although conservative scholars have defended the disputed portions of the book,⁴ little has been done to demonstrate its essential

¹ All textual references follow the standard English format rather than MT which renders 1:15 as the first verse of chapter two, making fourteen verses in the Hebrew rather than the thirteen of the English editions.

² For details, see J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) 147; and J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum* (ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) 268-70.

³ See, for example, R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1941) 594-95; and G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1929), 2:81-88.

⁴ In addition to the various conservative commentaries, note the discussion in R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969)

unity on purely internal grounds.⁵ By focusing primarily on the literary aspects of Nahum's prophecy--its theme and development, its basic structure, and its stylistic features--it will be shown that Nahum is the work of a single author. The appropriateness of such a point of inquiry, besides being a natural part of the investigative process, is underscored by Nahum's generally recognized high literary artistry. Thus Bewer remarks: "Nahum was a great poet. His word-pictures are superb, his rhetorical skill is beyond praise. . ."⁶, and J. M. P. Smith points out,

Though the rhythm and metre of Nahum are not so smooth and regular as is the case with some Heb. prophets, yet in some respects the poetry of Nahum is unsurpassed in the OT. His excellence is not in sublimity of thought, depth of feeling, purity of motive, or insight into truth and life. It is rather in his descriptive powers. He has an unexcelled capacity to bring a situation vividly before the mind's eye. . . . Accurate and detailed observation assists in giving his pictures verisimilitude. Lowth rightly said, "Ex omnibus minoribus prophetis nemo videtur aequare sublimitatem, ardorem et audaces spiritus Nahumi . . ." ⁷

Although these remarks refer to the portions of Nahum considered to be authentic, this same high literary quality characterizes the entire book.

THEME AND DEVELOPMENT

A casual reading of the prophecy reveals that Nahum deals with the destruction of Nineveh. Yet behind the opening pronouncement and subsequent shifting scenes of Nineveh's doom, lies a deeper, double truth: God is the sovereign judge (ch. 1) and controller (chs.

928-30; P. A. Verhoef, "Nahum, Book of," *ZPEB*, 4:356; and C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 218-21.

⁵ Note, however, the helpful observations of H. D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979) 339-42; C. E. Armerding, *Nahum* (EBC, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:453; and R. J. Coggins, *Israel Among the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 6-8.

⁶ Bewer, *Literature*, 148.

⁷ J. M. P. Smith, *Nahum*, 273-74. See also P. C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 2:59, who affirms that the author of Nahum was a "poet of considerable ability and originality"; and Hummel, *Word*, 339, who observes, "It is everywhere agreed that stylistically Nahum easily heads the list of the minor prophets, excelling even Amos, and himself excelled in all Biblical literature only by Isaiah. Many of his deft, vivid, word-pictures are fully worthy of Isaiah himself. Some of their forcefulness is evident, even in translation, but much is inevitably also lost. Pfeiffer calls Nahum, 'the last of the great classical Hebrew poets,' and G. A. Smith observes that his rhythm 'rumbles and rolls, leaps and flashes, like the horsemen and chariots that he describes.' Similar encomiums could easily be multiplied."

2-3) of the destiny of earth's peoples. The book of Nahum deals with not only the doom of Nineveh at the hands of a just judge (ch. 1), but with a prophetic description of that city's destruction resulting from the operation of the divine government presided over by a wise controller of the affairs of mankind (chs. 2-3). Several subthemes also reinforce the purpose of the main theme, such as the revelation of the many facets of God's character, and the salvation and restoration of God's people Israel.

Chapter One centers on the declaration of Nineveh's doom while calling attention to God himself as a sovereign and just judge. The theme of the chapter is stated in the threefold repetition of the name Yahweh in the four lines of affirmation concerning God's avenging wrath. The reader's attention is thus drawn to a sovereign and just God who deals in judgment with the ungodly (1:2). This clear delineation of the theme of the first section of the book (ch. 1) is subsequently qualified in a twofold hymn to Yahweh (see Literary Features below) concerning the character and work of God: (1) although the Lord is long suffering he will assuredly judge the guilty with all the force that a sovereign God can muster (1:3-6); and (2) although the Lord is good and he tenderly cares for the righteous (particularly in times of affliction), he will destroy those who plot against him (1:7-10). These general remarks concerning the character and work of God are then applied directly to the current situation; Nineveh, the plotter and afflicter of God's people, will experience the just judgment of God, while a previously punished Judah will know relief from affliction and be restored to peace and joy (1:11-15).

The second section immediately repeats the theme of the judgment of Nineveh and the restoration of God's people (2:1-2). But in doing so, it is clear that the primary focus will be on a description of the actual siege and destruction of the doomed city. That theme is immediately carried forward in a visionary rehearsal of the actual attack against Nineveh (2:3-10), closed by a taunt song in which Assyria is compared to a lion trapped in Nineveh, its own den (2:11-13). The theme is developed further in a second description of the fall of Nineveh (given in the form of a pronouncement of woe), but with distinctive emphasis upon the reasons for Nineveh's fall, particularly its rapacity (3:1-7). This section, too, is closed by a taunt song in which Nineveh is declared to be no better than mighty Thebes. She had counted on the same basic defensive features that Nineveh boasts; yet her recent fall is known to all. Nineveh's fate is certain: a sovereign God is about to judge the Assyrians and Nineveh for their boundless cruelty (3:8-19).

A proper reading of Nahum, then, shows that there is an essential unity to the entire book. Indeed, as C. Hassell Bullock affirms,

even the highly disputed "acrostic portion" of the first chapter "certainly is in harmony with the tenor of the book, and it beautifully prepares the stage for the major theme of the book."⁸ Our discussion of the theme and development of the two major sections of Nahum has also shown that the author displays considerable art in the arrangement of his prophecies, a literary skill that makes the underlying structure readily discernible.

BASIC STRUCTURE

The analysis of the theme and development of Nahum makes certain that the chapters fall into two distinct sections (1 and 2-3) in which the theme is first stated in each portion (1:2; 2:1-2), and then developed in distinct major units (1:3-10, 11-15; 2:3-10, 11-13; 3:1-7, 8-19). Both sections end with a report going forth. In 1:15 the word about Nineveh's fall is brought by a messenger bearing the good news; in 3:19 the news is received with rejoicing. A pattern of theme, development, and reaction marks each major section. The image of scattering marks the beginning and end of the second section (שֶׁפֵּץ/ 'scatterer,' 2:1; and the scattered refugees from Nineveh, 3:18-19).⁹ Other organizational devices in chapters 2-3 include the aforementioned closing of each unit (2, 3) with a taunt song (2:11-13; 3:8-19), and the inactivity/activity of messengers (2:13b; 3:19). The book of Nahum, therefore, is arranged in a basic bifid structure: 1:2-15; 2:1-3:19.¹⁰ The resultant structural scheme may be outlined as follows:

Superscription 1:1

The Doom of Nineveh
Declared (1:2-15)

Theme:

God is a God of Justice who will

The Demise of Nineveh
Described (2:1-3:19)

Theme:

God is a Just Governor of the

⁸ Bullock, *Prophetic Books*, 220. C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 2:4 maintains that all three chapters are genuine and contain "one extended prophecy concerning Nineveh," which is "depicted with pictorial liveliness and perspicuity."

⁹ The principle of literary bookending as a compilational technique is well attested in the Scriptures. One may note, for example, Ezekiel's dumbness that encloses Ezekiel 3-24, the heading and colophon that encase Genesis 10, and the inclusion formed by the references to Jeremiah's birth (Jer 1:5; 20:18). Indeed, the principle of bookending forms an integral part of the formal literary architecture of the book of Jeremiah, a subject that will be addressed by R. D. Patterson in a forthcoming article in WTJ.

¹⁰ The concept of bifid structure as a compositional technique has been ably defended by W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1964) 236-59.

punish the wicked and avenge his own (1:2).

1. A Hymn to the Sovereign and Just God (1:2-10)
 - a. who defeats his foes (1:2-6)
 - b. who destroys the plotters (1:7-10)
2. Application of the Hymn to Nineveh and Judah (1:11-15)

N.B. The messenger of Good News for Judah (1:15)

nations who will punish wicked Nineveh and restore his own (2:1-2).

1. First description of Nineveh's demise (2:3-13)
 - a. Rehearsal of the attack vs. Nineveh (2:3-10)
 - b. Taunt song: the discredited city (2:11-13)
2. Second description of Nineveh's demise (3:1-19)
 - a. Reasons for the attack vs. Nineveh (3:1-7)
 - b. Taunt Song: the defenseless citadel (3:8-19)

N.B. The message of Good News for all (3:18-19)

D. W. Gooding affirms that such types of clear organizational structure argue for an original authorial intention, rather than for being the work of a later editorial redactor.¹¹

Additional confirmation of original authorial intent may be seen in the demonstrable thematic and verbal hooks that link the various smaller units.¹² Thus, the opening statement of theme (1:2) is hooked to the following thematic development via the catchword "Lord" and the theme of divine wrath (1:3-10); the idea of plotting links 1:3-10 with 1:11-15, and destroying binds 1:11-15 and 2:1-2. Other hooks link the following units: attacking (2:1-2; 2:3-10), plundering (2:3-10;

¹¹ D. W. Gooding, "The Literary Structure of Daniel and Its Implications," *TB* 32 (1982) 43-79.

¹² For the principle of literary hooks, see H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Transitional Techniques in the Bible," *JBL* 102 (1983) 530-32; John Bright, *Jeremiah* (AB; Garden City; Doubleday, 1956) lxxiv; and W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 1: lxxxiv. Called also a link (Parunak), catchword (Bright), or stitchword (McKane), the point is, as U. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973) 1:228, points out, that hooking was a common compilational principle by which sections were arranged "on the basis of the association of ideas or words." Cassuto himself has demonstrated the widespread use of this technique by illustrating its employment in Leviticus, Numbers, Canticles, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets.

2:11-13), 'chariots' and the phrase "I am against you" (2:11-13; 3:1-7), and death and destruction (3:1-7; 3:8-19). Still further, the important word הִנֵּה / 'behold' punctuates the book at crucial points in the individual units (1:15; 2:13; 3:5, 13). All of this suggests an essential unity for the whole book of Nahum.

LITERARY FEATURES

Further evidence for authorial intention and the essential unity of the book of Nahum is the careful use of literary devices.¹³ Not only is there a thematic and topical structure to the book, as the preceding data suggest, but there is also a literary richness to this short prophecy.

In Nahum, there are two literary genres, in addition to the oracular nature of the piece as a whole, that affect the presentation of the material of the book: the narrative and the poetic. Each genre has its own particular conventions which both writer and reader accept. Accordingly, each genre establishes certain expectations in the reader as to how the material within that genre is developed.¹⁴ Narrative, for instance, turns on the cause/effect relationships between events in time, thereby establishing the later event as the result of the earlier event. The most directly narrative portion of the book of Nahum is the author's narrative of the destruction of Nineveh chronicled in 2:1-10. In this section, the reader anticipates a series of events, each of which adds to the cumulative effect (in this case) of the utter desolation of Nineveh. Poetry, on the other hand, turns on the intense and often elliptical relationships of words, images, tropes and rhythms. Poetry intensifies emotion and underscores the totality of our humanness in response to a given word picture. The most obviously poetical sections of Nahum are the opening hymn depicting God as an avenger (1:1-10) and the final section of the piece, Nahum's "taunt song" of 3:8-19. In these sections, the writer affects his reader's emotions most directly, thereby involving the whole humanness of the reader in a response to the oracle against Nineveh.

In the first major unit of the book, the introductory Hymn of Praise to God (1:1-10), Nahum employs a wide variety of tropes to

¹³ The issue of authorial intention and the possibility of a reader obtaining an objective interpretation of a text is a vexed one today both in biblical hermeneutics and in literary criticism. For the classic defense of meaning as authorial intention, see E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 27, 32, 44-46, 127ff., 164ff., 209-12, 217, 224ff. For an important further consideration of the issue as it relates to biblical hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 10-17, 145, 303, 315.

¹⁴ For a full defense of the influence of genre in literature, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) 13, 95-99, 111, 246-326.

develop two specific pictures of God, one *vis a vis* Nineveh and one for Judah. Since this hymn is a poem, extensive use of tropological language is expected. Nahum's first trope is a metaphor: "His (God's) way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet" (1:3b). This is a graphic picture of God's invincible power, his omnipotence; who can withstand a whirlwind, i.e., a tornado? God's power is further suggested by the comparison of clouds to the mere dust of his feet; he is indeed strong beyond imagination. The reference to storms is appropriate in two ways. First, Yahweh is the God of the storm; second, the association of Yahweh with the storm may also be an attack on Baal, the Canaanite god of the storm, and on Hadad, the Assyrian god of the storm. Israel's praise of Yahweh as the One who controls nature is a source of terror to Nineveh, whose god Hadad is shown thereby to be impotent.

The terror of God's angry approach is underscored by the image of 1:5:

The mountains quake before him
and the hills melt away.
The earth trembles at his presence,
the world and all who live in it.

Here is a vivid picture of the only possible response to God's anger. The earth--even the mountains, a symbol of great strength--shakes before the mere presence of God's anger, much less the execution of his indignation. What can a mere city, in this case Nineveh, do to withstand such a force?

To complete this first picture of God's anger, Nahum compares God's wrath to a fire in a simile: "His wrath is poured out like fire,¹⁵ the rocks are shattered before him" (1:6b). As with a whirlwind, who can withstand a fire so hot that it bursts rocks apart? God's anger is "poured out," like a liquid fire, like molten lava that consumes everything in its path. The whole city, not just its inhabitants, appears to be in danger of complete annihilation. It is through such tropes as the metaphor, image and simile that Nahum establishes the thorough destructiveness, the utter terror of God's wrath: who can withstand him?

In a dramatic shift, Nahum the poet moves from God's wrath against Nineveh to his compassion for Judah. In a one verse contrasting portrait, Nahum uses a metaphor to compare the God of

¹⁵ The importance of "fire" as a key word (cf. 1:6; 2:4; 3:13, 15) is emphasized by C. Armerding, EBC 7:451-52. Armerding suggests that "fire" and key words such as "consume" / "devour" (1:10; 2:13; 3:12-13, 15^{bis}), and "destroy" / "cut down" (1:14-15; 2:13; 3:15), as well as about a dozen strands of motifs that run through the course of the book, argue strongly for the thematic unity of the book.

Judah to a refuge (1:7). While this is a typical OT and especially Davidic metaphor for God's protection (cf. Ps 37:37-40), it takes on particular poignancy in its context here. All around this picture, Nahum portrays the complete impending destruction of Nineveh in the most vivid manner. Yet here he speaks of a refuge for Judah specifically for the "times of trouble." What comfort to Judah! What amplified terror to Nineveh, to know that, since they have never sought God, their destruction is specific and local--their own judgment! Israel is a literary foil to Nineveh--blessed so bountifully as to underscore Nineveh's judgment in a poignant contrast.

Building on this contrast, Nahum returns to the destruction of Nineveh, now however focusing on the inhabitants of the city (his foes) rather than on the might of God. In an image, the author depicts the Ninevites as impotent and frustrated on every hand

They will be entangled among thorns
and drunk from their wine;
they will be consumed like dry stubble. (1:10)

Rendered defenseless because of their inebriation, the Ninevites are compared to dry stubble, burned immediately upon contact with any fire and absolutely annihilated by the lava-like fire of God's wrath. The metaphor within the image intensifies the pathos of the destruction of human beings: Nineveh is not just bricks and mortar, it is a city of people about to be killed (a motif to which Nahum will return later, the innocent and the guilty).

In the second unit of the chapter (1:11-15), Nahum quotes the Lord in address to Judah. This is a brief passage of comfort for Judah in the face of God's anger against Nineveh. It is an assurance that he will not extend his wrath against Judah itself. Curiously, there is but one trope in this short speech, a typical metaphor comparing the unjust oppression of Judah by Nineveh to a yoke and shackles (1:13). These the Lord will break and tear away. The metaphor is both agrarian (yoke) and urban (shackles, as in a prison), but otherwise it is quite conventional. Once again, Israel is a foil to Nineveh, comforted in the face of their terror. Nahum suggests in this conventional trope that God is self-consistent, a judge of the unrighteousness of Nineveh and a blessing to Judah/Israel.

In the third unit of the book, Nahum details the destruction of Nineveh (2:1-10). This portion is narrative in genre and therefore chronological in organization. However, there are a number of similes in this account, as well as various other tropes, which underscore the emotion and pathos of God's judgment and attack. Nahum begins in verses 3-6 with a most graphic image of the actual attackers. The shields are red; warriors are covered in scarlet (both presumably with

blood); chariots "flash" and "storm." It is a picture of the frenzy of battle. Within the image of 2:3-6, Nahum incorporates a simile comparing the rapid motion of the chariots to "flaming torches" and "lightning" (2:4). Not only does the simile point out the chariots' speed and power for destruction, but it is also consistent with the earlier motif of God's wrath as fire. Here is one of the agents of God's fiery wrath, the attackers' chariots.

It is in this narrative unit that Nahum creates one of his most pathetic scenes, that of the terror of the innocent people of Nineveh. In a simile, Nahum depicts the anguish of the innocent slave girls of the city as the moan of doves (2:7). The slave girls are helpless victims of their masters demise. The simile evokes pathos, compassion for the slaves' imminent deaths. In a related device, a synecdoche, Nahum shows the people of Nineveh as absolutely terrified: "Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale" (2:10b). Again, the attention here to the civilians, not the soldiers, is particularly pathetic, though God's judgment is complete. Perhaps two effects result from depicting civilians in terror: first, Nineveh is further terrorized; second, Judah is comforted beyond measure.

The climax of the narrative of Nineveh's destruction is the metaphor of the lions' den in 2:11-13. Nineveh, whose insignia was a lion, is compared ironically to a lions' den. This den, however, is no longer a refuge for its cubs, no longer the lair of the powerful predator. God will attack the very home of the Ninevite plunderers, repaying in kind their earlier cruelty to their victims. The irony underlying this metaphor allows Nahum to use it as a little "Taunt Song" to flaunt Nineveh's complete demise.

Immediately following the narrative of Nineveh's destruction, Nahum pronounces a series of woes upon the doomed city (3:1-7). This unit eludes final generic classification, though it is closer to poetry than to narrative. Because of the frequent ellipses in the first part of this section (vv 1-4), the pronounced woes are particularly intense while the emotion increases.

In the first three verses of chapter three, the writer portrays a number of graphic images of the impending military destruction. In the first image, whips crack, wheels clatter, horses gallop, and chariots jolt (3:2). This opening image draws the reader's attention to the machines of war. The poet uses this picture to heighten the terror which he shows most graphically in the next image. Nahum moves from a scene depicting the charging chariots to a second image, a terrifying view of the people involved in the conflict. This image in 3:3 is itself bifid in structure, just as the book of Nahum at large is. The first scene is that of the attacking cavalry, swords flashing and spears glittering. The attention here is on the weapons, surely a means of

underscoring the imminent death to the Ninevites. The second scene in the verse is a picture of the genocide itself: the dead are piled, bodies are without number, so much so that the Ninevites cannot escape without stumbling over their fallen friends. The effect of this image is poignant: the attackers are merciless, and the victims are utterly annihilated. Intensifying the emotional impact of this complete military rout is the ellipsis maintained throughout the two verses. The lack of connectives increases the tempo of the scene, thereby suggesting the irresistible force of the attacker.

In the concluding verses of the unit of woes, Nahum uses an extended simile to portray the extreme shame that Nineveh will experience as a result of God's judgment. He compares Nineveh to a harlot and a "mistress of sorceries." Guilty of spiritual prostitution and witchcraft, she will be utterly exposed to the contempt of the nations. Stripped and pelted with filth, she, not Israel, will be a spectacle (cf. Deut 28:37). Everyone will desert her. There is no need of a homily here; the intense shame and final degradation that is presented in the picture of Nineveh as an exposed harlot is enough. Nahum then carries over the emotions of shame and contempt, though not the metaphor, into his final section, the concluding Taunt Song.

In the final Taunt Song (3:8-19), Nahum flaunts the utter helplessness of the Ninevites. In this unit, he employs a series of brief tropes to finally impress Nineveh that all is indeed lost; God's judgment is irresistible and irrevocable. Curiously, Nahum relies most on the simile, the weakest of tropes, perhaps to suggest that all he can do is approximate the absolute terror and helplessness that will affect Nineveh. Words fail him. In 3:12, Nahum compares the Ninevite fortress to a ripe fig tree, readily dropping its fruit into the attackers' mouths. Nahum has not emphasized the plunder of gold and silver in the book; rather, the plunder in Nahum's account is people--innocent and guilty Ninevites alike. What horror this brief simile evokes!

Nahum underscores the futility of Nineveh's attempts to defend themselves with a series of references to locusts.¹⁶ Locusts, able to strip a field entirely of its grain, leaving the people destitute of both food and livelihood, are a conventional engine of divine judgment. Egypt in Moses' time is perhaps the most obvious recipient of this particular plague. Here Nahum doubles the plague of locusts in that he finds them inside Nineveh as well as outside. The fire and sword of the attackers are compared to locusts (3:15), a typical use of the plague of locusts coming upon the victims from the outside. But

¹⁶ See Joel 2:4-9 and the remarks of R. D. Patterson in EBC 7:248. For locusts themselves, see the helpful excursus of S. R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos* (Cambridge: University Press, 1915) 84-92; and J. D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," *National Geographic Magazine* 28 (1915) 518-50.

Nahum compares some Ninevites themselves to locusts. In 3:16 the merchants of the city are like locusts, having robbed the city of its money and then fleeing, treacherously deserting the city in its final hour. Likewise the guards--and even the civic officials--flee like the locusts in the noon heat. No defense and no government! Stripped within and under siege from without, Nineveh stands defenseless. Nahum emphasizes the absolute vulnerability of Nineveh with these few brief similes. It is too late for Jonah's invitation to repentance. Literary features abound in this short prophecy. Two of the more important include Nahum's use of chiasmus and an acrostic poem. The chiasmus opens his prophecy:

a A jealous God	אֵל קַנּוּא
b and an avenger is Yahweh	וְנָקָם יְהוָה
b' Yahweh is an avenger	נָקָם יְהוָה
a' and Lord of wrath.	וַיְבַעַל חַמָּה

That a chiasmus¹⁷ is intended is obvious from the familiar parallels in the first and fourth lines: God (אֵל)/Baal, jealous/wrath. The first parallel pair is a common one throughout northwest Semitic literature; the second is particularly apropos of the relationship between God and Israel. Taken into formal union via the Sinaitic Covenant, Israel knew God's love as his special people. That love of God is often depicted as that of a husband jealously guarding his wife (Isa 54:5). Unfortunately, in her continued idolatry, Israel had proven herself an unfaithful and unrepentant wife (Jer 2:1-3; 5), who must accordingly face the righteous wrath of Yahweh (cf. Ezek 16:35-42). Thankfully, because God is a merciful God, when the deserved punishment has run its course, God will restore his repentant wife (cf. Hos 1-3) and turn his righteous wrath to those unbelieving nations whom he had used to chastise Israel/Judah (Ezek 36:6-7; 38:18-19).

A further nuance in the chiastic structure may lie in the use of **בַּעַל**, with **חַמָּה** / 'wrath'. In addition to being the name of the Canaanite storm god, the noun *ba'al* may refer to an owner (Exod 22:7), master (Isa 1:3), ruler (Isa 16:8), or husband (Deut 24:4). All of these meanings may be felt here. Because Yahweh is Israel's owner, master, and husband, his wrath can either be spent against her or extended on her behalf. By the word *ba'al*, Nahum could also perhaps be reporting that despite the rampant idolatry initiated by King Manasseh, Yahweh (not Ba'al) is the true Lord of the universe (cf. vv. 3b-5) who will deal in righteous wrath with sin and rebellion. It may also be a veiled attack on Hadad, the Assyrian storm god.

¹⁷ For chiasmatic structure, see R. L. Alden, "Chiastic Psalms: A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 1-50," *JETS* 17 (1974) 11-28.

As a further expansion in 1:2b demonstrates, the assertion that God is an avenger is the center of focus in Nahum's chiasmus. As a God of holiness and justice, God reserves the right of vengeance to himself (Deut 32:35, 41; Rom 12:19). However the course of history might seem to be unfolding, God will take proper vengeance on all nature of sin (Isa 63:1-4). Not only will he punish his covenant breaking people (Lev 26:24-25), but he will punish all his foes, particularly those who have dealt harshly with his chastised and repentant people (Isa 34:8; 61:2). Thus, the four lines are unmistakably chiasmatic.

But this is no mere indication of Nahum's artistry; the chiasmus is meaningfully designed to arrest the reader's attention at the outset. The three figures treated in this short chiasmus, jealousy, wrath, and vengeance, set the theme of the book before its readers: (1) As a jealous God, Yahweh demands the absolute devotion that only the true and sovereign God deserves. (2) In his righteous wrath Yahweh alone can and will deal justly with all who sin as his justice dictates. (3) As an avenging God, Yahweh will discipline, defend, or deliver as his holiness demands. If indeed God's people Israel experience God's chastisement, how much more an unbelieving, arrogant Assyria/ Nineveh? Not only is this chiasmus the key to the hymn that continues through verse 10, but to the whole prophecy. All that follows in both halves (1 and 2-3) of the book flows from it, a fact that argues further for the unity and single authorship of the book.

Critical scholars generally have recognized in the majestic hymn to Yahweh (1:2-10) the skeleton of an acrostic poem, which they assume was added by a later editor, but in the course of its transmission, has suffered some corruption and displacement. The varying results arrived at by the individual scholars¹⁸ have caused most conservative commentators to reject the theory altogether.¹⁹ However, the hymnic nature of verses 2-10 is undeniable and while it may be impossible to recover the "lost acrostic" with demonstrable certainty, the task may not be totally without merit. Thus Hummel remarks,

Efforts to recover the original form of the acrostic poem have proved entirely futile, and some deny the existence of such an underlying pattern altogether. However, it does appear that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be followed fairly accurately down to lamedh.²⁰

¹⁸ See the discussion in J. M. P. Smith, *Nahum*, 295-97.

¹⁹ Note, for example, Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 353. See also Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 52-62.

²⁰ H. D. Hummel, *Word*, 339.

TABLE I

Verses	Letter	Lines	Occurrences
1-3a	aleph	6 (+) 2	6 (+) 2
3b	beth	2	3
4a	gimel	2	1
4b	daleth	2	(1)*
5a	he	2	3
5b	waw	2	4
6a	zayin	2	1
6b	heth	2	1
7a	teth	2	1
7b-8a	yodh	2	1
8b-10	kaph	8	7

* Accomplished via text critical methods.

If, then, rather than resorting to wild emendations and wholesale transpositions, one views the beginning and ending of the canonical poem to be deliberately weighted so as to form a distinct frame for the psalm, a fairly consistent picture emerges: aleph, six lines (vv. 2-3a), beth-yodh, two lines each, and eight lines of kaph (perhaps to balance the six lines of aleph plus the two lines of superscription). The point would be that in Nahum's acrostic arrangement, the prescribed letter of the alphabet need only occur within (not necessarily only as the first letter of the first word; cf. zayin and yodh lines) the line, although in several cases there is a deliberate concatenation of the letter in question in the line(s) devoted to it.²¹ Table I illustrates the data.

Applying these parameters to the acrostic poem, the only significant problems occur at verses 4 and 7b-8a. The former is the major crux because no daleth occurs in MT. As the verse now reads, it begins and ends with אָמַלְל "be withered." That it originally was written as some adequate parallel root such as דָּלַל or דָּמָלְל rests upon not only the needs of the acrostic pattern, but the fact that the ancient versions uniformly used two different words to express the Hebrew word(s) in question.²²

As for verses 7b-8a, it seems clear that the two lines are designed to complement the length (3/2) and structure of the teth lines:

Good (better) is Yahweh as (than) a fortress	טוֹב יְהוָה לְמַעוֹז
in the day of distress	בְּיוֹם צָרָה

²¹ Nahum's literary style displays a tendency to heap up numbers within a short space, for example: n/q (1:2-3a), g (1:5), s (1:15; 2:1), h (2:1), k (2:5), and m (2:1).

²² For details, see J. M. P. Smith, *Nahum*, 298. For the existence of Pu'lal forms in Hebrew, see GKC ¶55d.

And he knows those who seek refuge in him
in the overwhelming flood.

וַיֵּדַע חֲסִי בּוֹ
וּבְשֹׁטֶף עֵבֶר

It is evident, then, that an acrostic poem may be seen in these verses.²³ However, in the absence of further evidence in the Hebrew manuscript tradition, the case for an unbroken acrostic must remain unproven due to the absence of a dalet in verse four. Still, the presence of some acrostic elements does further illustrate Nahum's literary abilities.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Though a myriad of other devices can be found in the book of Nahum, among them the use of picturesque brevity, rhetorical questions, irony, and synecdoche, these examples support two theses: there was a single author to the book, one who was conscious of his use of genre and literary devices; and Nahum used literary devices to accomplish certain effects, not just to decorate an otherwise plain statement of God's judgment. The tropes emphasize the terror to Nineveh and accentuate the blessings upon Judah; they evoke an emotional experience of the judgment of God to supplement the intellectual understanding that the book contains. Not only do the literary devices assist and enrich the understanding of the meaning of the text, they are the very form and context in which the meaning is apprehended.²⁵ Finally, the literary devices in the book are patterned to reflect the bifid thematic structure suggested earlier.

In short, the literary devices are a necessary and integral part of the theme and structure of the book of Nahum, not merely a means of enhancing an otherwise mundane propositional statement. Because they are basic to the expression of Nahum's message, they demand that the reader respond in his totality as a human being, not just intellectually.

²³ That there are copyists' errors in MT is certain, as recognized by biblical scholars of all persuasions. See, for example, J. Barton Payne, "The Validity of Numbers in Chronicles," *JNEAS* 11 (1978) 5-58; and E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 105-10. However, no essential doctrine is in any way impaired by these relatively few examples of textual corruption, and the essential trustworthiness of the Scriptures remains unassailable!

²⁴ One may hold that Nahum himself may have composed the hymn of praise or may have adapted it from earlier material.

²⁵ For the statement that metaphor, as an example of a trope, constitutes meaning, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 141-57. Ricoeur's thesis is that metaphor creates meaning, rather than embellishing it.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary

200 Seminary Dr.

Winona Lake, IN 46590

www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu