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LORD OF COVENANT VENGEANCE:
NAHUM 1:2 AND NEO-ASSYRIAN CURSES

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Robert Lowth famously said about the obscure and oft-neglected prophet, Nahum: *Ex omnibus minoribus prophetis nemo videtur aequare sublimitatem, ardorem et audaces spiritus Nahumi.*¹ Most of biblical scholarship, since the sire of modern Hebrew poetics penned these words, have been concerned primarily with the artistic skill and vivid imagery of Nahum's short but powerful poetry.² The prophet frequently utilizes shocking and disorienting language showing the impending disaster coming on Nineveh.³ Aesthetically, he holds a high place above the rest of the Twelve.

Scholars are universally agreed on the literary quality of Nahum. It seems that there is where consensus ends. On matters of interpretation, date, theological import, and form each commentator brings a new opinion to be tested and rejected by the scholarly community.⁴ Many obsess over the idea of partial- or imperfect acrostic in the opening hymn.⁵ Some accuse Nahum

¹ "Out of all the minor prophets, no one is seen to equal the beauty, strength, and bravery of the spirit of Nahum." Quoted in Richard Duane Patterson, and Michael E Travers, "Literary analysis and the unity of Nahum." *GTJ* 9, (1988): 46.

² See Richard Duane Patterson and Michael E Travers, "Nahum: poet laureate of the minor prophets," *JETS* 33, no. 4 (December 1990): 437-444.

³ "The unsuspecting reader of 'the book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite' will be surprised by its literary beauty, the exuberant wealth of word plays and nicely worked out metaphors." Klaas Spronk, "Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to the Book of Nahum," in *Synchronic or Diachronic: A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis*, ed. J. C. de Moor; OTS 34 Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995), 159.

⁴ Bob Becking, "Divine Wrath and the Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Nahum," *SJOT* 9, no. 2 (1995): 277-28; Aron Pinker, "Nahum: the prophet and his message," *JBQ* 33, no. 2 (April 2005): 82; Walter A. Maier, *Nahum* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 71; John Merlin Powis Smith, William Hayes Ward, and Julius A. Bewer, *Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 268-181.

⁵ See Duane L. Christensen, "Acrostic of Nahum reconsidered," *ZAW* 87, no. 1 (1975): 17-30; *idem*, "The acrostic of Nahum once again: a prosodic analysis of Nahum 1:1-10," *ZAW* 99, no. 3 (1987): 409-415; *idem*, "The book of Nahum as a liturgical composition: a prosodic analysis," *JETS* 32, no. 2 (June 1989): 159-169.

of “incipient Judaism,”⁶ presuming on Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. Others see a spirit of false prophetism, proclaiming favor upon a cursed and arrogant people.⁷ All of these critical suggestions fall flat against close and careful analysis. In the words of Walter Maier: “he is rather a seer of God who declares that the haughty city has decreed its own destruction because of its moral corruption, its oppression of Judah and other nations, its violence, bloodshed, lies, deceits, and, above all, its rejection of God.”⁸

One prevailing question is how the opening hymn connects to the rest of the book. Questions of unity, style, and form all come into play. Technical critiques are leveled against the text while others rightly see thematic unity through the whole. Very little, though, has been written on the concept of “covenant” in the book of Nahum. Some seem to suggest that because ברית does not appear in Nahum, it cannot be considered.⁹ Nevertheless, the “covenant” concept weaves throughout the entire book of Nahum as shown by the work of Gordon H. Jonston and Kevin Cathcart.

Looking at the appearances of the Neo-Assyrian treaty curses in Nahum, we will Nahum as having a covenantal motif running throughout the work. Playing off of the elements of Neo-Assyrian treaty curses, Nahum 1:2 serves as a covenantal introduction to Yahweh, the Lord of Covenant vengeance, showing that all nations are ultimately responsible and subservient to Him.

⁶ Maier, *Nahum*, 74.

⁷ See esp. Smith, Ward, and Bewer, *Micah*, 181: “In Nahum, a representative of the old, narrow and shallow prophetism finds its place in the Canon of Scripture. His point of view is essentially one with that of such men as Hananiah (Jer. 28), the four hundred prophets in opposition to Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kgs. 22), and the so-called ‘false prophets’ in general. For such prophets, the relation between Yahweh was indissoluble.”

⁸ Maier, *Nahum*, 74.

⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 23.

A jealous God and an avenger is Yahweh
Yahweh is an avenger and lord of
wrath.
Yahweh is an avenger against his foes,
and he maintains [wrath] against his
enemies.

1:2a אֵל קַנּוּא וְנָקָם יְהוָה נָקָם יְהוָה וּבְעַל חֲמָה

1:2b נָקָם יְהוָה לְצַרֵּיו וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לֹא יִכְבֹּד

Dating Nahum

Before moving forward, I must first establish the dating of Nahum and briefly summarize the nature of debate surrounding the issue. Nahum's date and *sitz im leben* will greatly determine the viability of the thesis. It will be seen that the most likely date for Nahum is mid-7th century during the reign of Ashurbanipal of Babylonia (668-627 B. C.) and Manasseh of Judah (696-642 B. C.).¹⁰

The book of Nahum was sometime penned between 663 B. C., the fall of Thebes (Nah. 3:8), a 612 B. C., the destruction of Nineveh.¹¹ There is almost universal agreement on the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* dates. Any attempt to date it after 612 B. C. falls flat. Evidence suggests a date much closer to the fall of Thebes. If Nahum prophesied shortly before the fall of Nineveh, the picture of Assyria in full strength would not have made sense for the reader.¹² By 612 B. C., Ashurbanipal had already died and crippled the Babylonian capital. The other problem with dating is Nahum's lack of addressing Israel's sin. Is he a nationalist? Ignorant of Yahweh's imprecations upon His chosen people? VanGemeren takes this omission as evidence that Nahum wrote under Josiah, c. 630 B. C., and encouraged his reforms.¹³ While

¹⁰ William VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 162.

¹¹ Spronk, *Nahum*, 11.

¹² Ibid, *Nahum*, 12.

¹³ VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 164.

certainly a possibility, the international climate surrounding Josiah saw Babylonia weakening while Nahum shows Assyria at the height of her power.¹⁴

So when is a probable date that agrees with both internal testimony and external historical circumstances? First, the prevalence of Mesopotamian and Assyrian literary and cultural influences on Nahum leave no room for doubt that Nahum wrote at a time when Assyrian cultural would have been known, studied, and expressed in various artistic means.¹⁵ The opening hymn contains certain elements that resemble Babylonian poetry, particularly a prayer by Ashurbanipal to Marduk.¹⁶ Second, the comparison to the fall of Thebes (Nah. 3:8) suggests an earlier date.¹⁷ Spronk writes that “the Egyptian campaign of Ashurbanipal with its bitter consequences for Judah was still fresh in the minds; secondly, a comparison with Thebes would not have made much sense after c. 650 when Egyptian power and independence had clearly risen again.”¹⁸ The fall of Thebes (No-Amon in MT) is a poignant and evocative image of destruction for Nahum. By comparing Nineveh to Thebes, Nahum points back to a proximate destruction in order to comfort Israel and to ensure Nineveh of what will happen.

Thus, the most likely date for Nahum is ca. 654, following the fall of Thebes and during the height of Assyria’s power.¹⁹ One very important implication for this date is the concurrent reign of Manasseh: This is not a representation of Judah after the death of Ashurbanipal, in the

¹⁴ Spronk, *Nahum*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, *Nahum*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, *Nahum*, 25.

¹⁷ Spronk, *Nahum*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, *Nahum*, 13.

¹⁹ Maier, *Nahum*, 37.

reign of king Josiah, when the Assyrian pressure was removed, but the picture of Judah during the days of Manasseh (698-643 B. C.), who paid tribute to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal and who was taken into captivity.”²⁰

Nahum and Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses

Manasseh’s kingship is crucial to this thesis. Manasseh was a vassal of Assyria who eventually rebelled against the suzerain and was subsequently annexed from his throne because of infidelity (2 Chron. 33:1-20). If Nahum composed his prophecy ca. 654, during the reign of Manasseh, the elements of his dependence to Assyria may play a role in Nahum’s condemnation of Assyria.

It is commonly accepted that the prophets all reference ancient Near Eastern treaty-curses in their judgments and indictments.²¹ Gordon H. Johnston explains this: ““The Hebrew prophets drew on the ancient treaty-curse genre to express judgment. Treaty-curse imagery was an appropriate model for oracles of judgment: just as human suzerains cursed vassals who violated their treaties, Yahweh, the Divine suzerain, judged His vassals when they violated his covenant.”²² Nahum in particular shows remarkable similarities to a particular treaty: The vassal treaty of Esarhaddon. Manasseh would have been included in this covenant as he ruled under the Assyrian king. These treaties included treat curses which were seen as promises of divine judgment upon the unfaithful vassal: “The gods are seen as acting on behalf of the earthly

²⁰ Ibid, *Nahum*, 37; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 7.

²¹ See esp. Kevin J. Cathcart, "Treaty-curses and the book of Nahum," *CBQ* 35, no. 2 (April 1973): 179-187; Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's rhetorical allusions to Neo-Assyrian treaty curses," *BiblioSacra* 158, no. 632 (October 2001): 415-436. See material cited there.

²² Johnston, "Neo-Assyrian treaty curses," 419.

sovereign; because it is believed that they will execute the judgment provoked by the trespasses of the vassal. In the vassal-treaties, royal and divine-wrath are two sides of the same coin.”²³

Gordon H. Johnston has done a thorough and fruitful study on Nahum’s use of allusion.²⁴ Looking at various different texts and original sources, Johnston has shown convincingly that Nahum relief heavily upon Neo-Assyrian ideology to give shape to his curse on Nineveh. Nahum’s originality and artistic ability integrated Esarhaddon’s own culture and imprecations to flip the script on the Babylonian power. A brief summary of his work appears below. As Yahweh reflects Assyria’s own covenant curses back upon them, he does so as the covenantal Lord not only of Israel but of the nations.

Nahum is unique among the prophets. While most of the prophets have covenant curse language, Nahum’s curses “are more closely aligned to the Neo-Assyrian treaty curses than to the curses of the Mosaic Covenant.”²⁵ The language, the specificity, and the illustration of the curses found in Nahum is very similar to the style of Neo-Assyrian treaty curses that existed contemporaneously with Nahum. Gordon Johnston finds twelve direct allusions to these curses in the book of Nahum.²⁶ Cathcart found his own parallels off of which Johnston built. The evidence and his presentation are compelling. While each of the following curses appear in various Semitic treaties, they are most commonly found Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties. Johnston’s appellations for the curses are used:

²³ Becking, “Divine Wrath,” 292.

²⁴ See Gordon H. Johnston, “Nahum's rhetorical allusions to the Neo-Assyrian lion motif,” *BibSacra* 158, no. 631: 287-307; *idem*, Johnston, “Neo-Assyrian Treaty curses,” 415-436; *idem*, Johnston, Gordon H. “Nahum's rhetorical allusions to Neo-Assyrian conquest metaphors,” *BibSacra* 159, no. 633 (January 2002): 21-45.

²⁵ *Ibid*, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 418.

²⁶ For a brief explanation on what constitutes an allusion v. a “stereotypical reference,” and how these function in literature, see Johnston, “Neo-Assyrian lion motif,” 287-290.

- (i) The Curse of Darkness and Nah. 1:8, “He will pursue his enemies into darkness.”
- (ii) The Curse of the Seed and Nah. 1:14, “No more shall your name be perpetuated.”
- (iii) The Burning of Chariots and Nah. 2:13, “I will burn your chariots in smoke.”
- (iv) The Punishment of Prostitutes and Nah. 3:5-7, “I will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame” (v.5).
- (v) Warriors acting like fearful women and Nah. 3:13, “Behold, your troops are women in your midst.”
- (vi) The Locust Plague and Nah.3:15-17, “It will devour you like locust” (v.15).²⁷
- (vii) The Incurable Wound and Nah. 3:19, “There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous.”²⁸
- (viii) The Overwhelming flood and Nah. 1:8, “But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end to his adversaries.”
- (ix) Drying Up water sources and Nah. 1:4, “He rebukes the sea and makes it dry.”²⁹
- (x) Skin changing color and Nah. 2:10, “All faces grow pale!”³⁰
- (xi) Silencing One’s voice and Nah. 2:13, “The voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard.”
- (xii) Retaliation by the Avenger and Nah. 1:2, “Yahweh is a jealous and avenging God.”³¹

Parallels are everywhere in Nahum. The curses of the Neo-Assyrian empire became the curses that Yahweh implement against this very nation. Nahum has weaved a tapestry that portrays Yahweh’s covenantal justice that is coming down from heaven. Because of their crimes, Nineveh

²⁷ “Although the locust curse was not limited to Neo-Assyrian texts, Hillers and Catchcart both note that it was not used elsewhere to the same extent. This makes it all the more ironic that Nahum, who was prophesying about the imminent destruct of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, would employ the well-known Assyrian locust curse (Nah. 3:15-17). Just as locusts devour crops, so the sword would devour the Ninevites (v. 15)...This locust curse is also reflected in several other biblical announcements of judgment (Deut. 28:8; Joel 1:4; 2:25; Amos 4:9).” Ibid, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 429.

²⁸ “The curse of an incurable wound appears in seventh- and eighth-century Hebrew prophets, reflecting contemporary Neo-Assyrian treaty-curses (Isa. 1:5-6; Jer. 8:22; 10:19; 14:17, 19; 15:18; 30:12-15; 46:11; 51:8-9; Ezek. 20:31; Hos. 5:13; Mic. 1:9). This curse is reversed in announcements of deliverance by Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 58:8; Jer. 30:17; 33:6).” Ibid, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 430.

²⁹ ““Similarly Nahum 1:4 depicts the divine Warrior uttering a battle cry that ‘dries up the water and makes the rivers run dry.’ While this might simply reflect the motif of God’s cosmological battle against chaotic waters, which he defeated at Creation and holds in check throughout history (Pss. 18:15; 29:10; 46:3; 77:16; Isa. 51:10; Hab. 3:10), the prevalence of the Neo-Assyrian treaty-cruse drying up water sources might be present here.” Ibid, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 432. Several commentators agree that this is most likely a reference to the Exodus and Yahweh’s judgment on Egypt based on a similar passage in Ps. 106:9 and the other Exodus references in 1:2-3a. One does not necessarily negate the other, though.

³⁰ “Nahum’s expression of judgment is without parallel in the Old Testament, and its only ancient Near Eastern parallel appears in the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon with Manasseh and other Syro-Palestinian states.” Ibid, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 432.

³¹ Ibid, “Neo-Assyrian treaty curses,” 423-433.

will be laid bare and desolate. But this is not unexpected. Yahweh extended an invitation of repentance and mercy to the people of Nineveh through the prophet Jonah. Whatever effect that may have had has long gone. Their sins have caught up them and Yahweh is no longer restraining himself. Jonah lamented Nineveh's exculpation because of Yahweh's nature: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (Jon. 4:2). Now Nahum proclaims Nineveh's desecration: "Yahweh is slow to anger, but great of strength; he will be no means clear the guilty" (Nah. 1:3a).

1:2a אֵל קְנוּא וְנִקְמָה יְהוָה נִקְמָה יְהוָה וּבְעַל חַמָּה

Yahweh as the avenger (Nah. 1:2) predicates the covenantal structure and coloration of Nahum. In the appropriation of various Neo-Assyrian treaty curses, Yahweh the avenger, נִקְמָה יְהוָה, predicates the rest of his action. In the introduction of the hymn of vengeance (1:2-8), Nahum's vision of Yahweh becomes the basis by which his covenantal action against Nineveh may stand as just and righteous. Nahum does not submit an "apology" or a disputation against the readers hoping to prove that Yahweh is king.³² Apologetics has no place in the covenant Lord's declaration of judgment. He has no reason to defend himself. The vassal is under the sovereign's wrath if the vassal is unfaithful to his master.

The opening line of the introduction emphatically declares Yahweh as the avenging and jealous God. They each serve almost as epithets, tying Yahweh back to his covenantal identity, not just who he is in some abstracted universal way. This is important to see in the book of Nahum: Yahweh acts on the basis of the covenant he has made with his people.

³² See Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 2, ed. by David W. Cotter, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 421, 422.

The first attribution of Nahum shows God's zeal: אֵל קַנּוּא וְנִקְמָה יְהוָה, "A jealous God and an avenger is Yahweh." The Hebrew is much more poetic than the English can be. אֵל קַנּוּא forms a chiasmus with יְהוָה וְנִקְמָה.³³ Both of these are covenantal ascriptions of Yahweh that occur throughout the Old Testament. First, "אל קנא or אל קנא is an important designation of YHWH in the OT. It only appears with his name. his characteristic jealousy has its place within the context of the covenant between YHWH and the people of Israel. YHWH cannot stand it when his people do not listen to Him or worship other gods."³⁴ This appellation of Yahweh as אל קנא or אל קנא occurs in several different places but notably Ex. 20:5, יהוה אל קנא; 34:14, יהוה אל קנא; Deut. 4:24, קנא שמו אל קנא הוא; 5:9, אֵל קַנּוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנּוּא; 6:15, אֵל קַנּוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנּוּא; and Josh. 24:19, יהוה כִּי־אֱלֹהִים קֹדְשִׁים הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ. Yahweh is a jealous God because he is a God who covenants with his people. Modern notions of "jealousy" are unfit for Yahweh in his zeal for his people. He is not insecure but works to save, to disciple, and to restore what is rightfully his. The covenantal ascription of אל קנא informs and strengthens the second covenantal title, נִקְמָה יְהוָה. Yahweh as the avenger (qal participle) parallels אֵל קַנּוּא and finds its basis in Lev. 26:25, וְהֵבֵאתִי עָלֵיכֶם חֶרֶב וְקָמְתָה נִקְמַת נְקָמ־בְּרִית, ("And I will bring a sword upon you avenging the vengeance of the covenant", author's translation).³⁵ Ps. 79:5f and Isa. 59:17 both contain Yahweh as a covenant avenger.³⁶

The idea of Yahweh's vengeance in these passages is tied directly to Yahweh as both judge and protector.³⁷ "As such the message of Nahum is part of the good tiding to the powerless

³³ Spronk, Nahum, 33.

³⁴ Spronk, Nahum, 34.

³⁵ Spronk, *Nahum*, 35.

³⁶ *Ibid*, *Nahum*, 34.

³⁷ *Ibid*, *Nahum*, 15

who are oppressed by seemingly invincible forces of evil: there will be an end to evil.”³⁸ This covenantal loyalty as judge and protector is essential to who God is. Harking back to Yahweh’s redemption of Israel and his codification of their relationship, Nahum establishes Yahweh, first and foremost, as the *covenant* avenger. This happens in two ways: first, he acts as the protector, vindicating and redeeming those who are enduring hardships; second, he judges peoples who have broken covenant stipulations.

The two ideas of Yahweh’s covenantal jealousy and vengeance provide the soil for the rest of the book. Nahum bases all of the following imprecations and promises on Yahweh’s relationship to his people: ““Not only is the 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.”³⁹

Flowing from this is God’s wrath because he is בעל חמה, the “lord of wrath” (*BDB*, 127). Becking notes a chiastic relation between this phrase and the two prior, אל קנוא and בקם יהוה.⁴⁰ The Old Testament Scriptures frequently bring together Yahweh’s wrath and his vengeance, the one being the external action of other’s internal state: Deut. 6:15; Prov. 27:4; Ez. 5:13; 16:38, 42; 23:25; 36:6; Zech. 8:2. This is not some arbitrary wrath which Yahweh dispenses whenever he is offended like a capricious despot, as Becking writes, “Speaking about divine wrath and the depiction of God as a ‘furious master’ can be misleading. This conceit is possible when we bring in twentieth century connotations on ‘wrath’ and then look at God as a power driven by

³⁸ Spronk, *Nahum*, 21.

³⁹ Patterson and Travers, “Literary analysis,” 56.

⁴⁰ Becking, “Divine Wrath,” 286.

passionate temper and acting with arbitrary highhandedness.”⁴¹ Read in the context of Jonah, God’s wrath is anything but temperamental and arbitrary. He has waited long for these people to repent, a people whose evil has been witnessed by every nation (Nah. 3:19), and now the time to dispense has come. Becking sets the wrath of God as a response to covenantal infractions:

As regards the Old Testament, I would like to recall the view of E. Johnson. According to him, the notion of the divine wrath should be interpreted within the framework of the idea of the covenant between YHWH and the people of Israel. The kindling of divine wrath, then, does not rest on furious arbitrariness, but has been provoked by the people which did not observe its covenantal obligations.⁴²

God’s wrath is tied most explicitly to Israel, and particularly to a rebellious people. The wrath of God in Nahum, though, is not directed towards Israel or Judah. Yahweh is a בעל חמה only towards Nineveh, the Assyrian suzerain over Manasseh and the people of Israel at the time Nahum prophesied. Still, Yahweh’s wrath comes back to his people: “The fury of YHWH should be interpreted as a provoked fury. Divine reaction is rooted in human conduct which is interpreted in the framework of the covenant.”⁴³

Nahum ends 1:2 and the first section with a third ascription to Yahweh as נקם יהוה, the avenger who “maintains [wrath] against his enemies.”⁴⁴ The triplicated vengeance of Yahweh shows him as the perfect avenger. He will let no man go free; he will not leave the guilty unpunished. Isaiah ascribed to the Lord the perfection of Holiness: קדוש קדוש קדוש יהוה צבאות. Nahum, however, does not see the Lord of Hosts seated on the throne but coming to battle in

⁴¹ Becking, “Divine Wrath,” 286.

⁴² Becking, “Divine Wrath,” 288.

⁴³ Becking, “Divine Wrath,” 289.

⁴⁴ There is an interesting parallel between the last clause of 2b and 3a. There is an ideological anadiplosis in Yahweh’s maintenance of wrath and his being slow to anger: יהוה ארך אפים וגדול-כח while 3a reads והוא לאט-ביר.

wrath (אָהַב).⁴⁵ Walter Maier uses this as evidence to argue that 1:2 serves as the foundation for the rest of the book of Nahum:

“It has been overlooked, especially by those who say that the opening verses have nothing to do with Nahum’s prediction of Nineveh’s end, that this verse, in its threefold emphasis on divine vengeance, actually presents the theme of the book: the atrocities committed by the Assyrian capital are to be avenged—and avenged when Nineveh is made to suffer the agony, disgrace, and destruction she has inflicted others.”⁴⁶

Divine Wrath in the Old Testament

As shown above, Nahum’s portrayal of God is one of avenging wrath. Throughout the rest of the book, Nahum proclaims the outworking of this wrath. And this is “good news” (1:15, 2:1 MT). The indictments of the prophet are often seen as sadistic. For many, this is the main critique of many scholars reading through Nahum.⁴⁷ This is an imperfect vision of the justice of God.

Nahum is not concerned a neutral god who acts against a nation. His action is predicated on his covenant with his people; his fury is maintained and directed by his love. Power politics and geo-national boundaries are not the root issue: “Contrary to the opinion of most of Nahum's critics, his condemnation of Nineveh grows out of a moral and ethical concept of God.”⁴⁸

In his landmark study on Divine vengeance, George Mendenhall explored the concept of Yahweh’s אָהַב and the Old Testament foundations for such an idea.⁴⁹ While exploring various ideas and concepts related to אָהַב, Mendenhall argues that vengeance of God is first and foremost grounded in this moral and ethical conception of Yahweh:

⁴⁵ “The thought of Yahweh’s vengeance upon his foes was a favorite one from the time of Jeremiah on to the end; e.g. Jer. 11:20; 51:11; Ez. 25:14; Deut. 32:55; Isa. 61:2; 63:4; Ps. 94:1; cf. Rom. 12:19.” Smith, Ward, and Bewer, *Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Joel*, 289.

⁴⁶ Maier, *Nahum*, 152

⁴⁷ Joseph L. Mihelic, “The concept of God in the book of Nahum,” *Int* 2, no. 2 (April 1948): 199.

⁴⁸ Mihelic, “The concept of God,” 200.

⁴⁹ George E. Mendenhall, “The ‘Vengeance of Yahweh,’ *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 69-104.

Always, it is the legitimate sovereignty of God which is the starting point for the word usage: his power to act, which is then often ‘identified’ with historical events, particularly in war, but also in calamities past or future that, under the covenant, are punitive executive actions of God that must take place if God is to be not merely a symbol of the usual heathen interest groups: power and wealth.⁵⁰

Early on in Israel’s law code, the office of the blood redeemer was acknowledged as a legal position for murders and cases of manslaughter. Mendenhall makes the interesting connection for those people who have no blood redeemer and the נקם of Yahweh. He notes that “in such cases, the executive authority of Yahweh Himself is the basis for community action against the slave-owner [in this situation the murderer], but only after the necessary court inquiry.”⁵¹ Who is it who then fulfills the responsibilities for the blood redeemer? It is the community itself under the authority of Yahweh who take vengeance for those without a redeemer. Just as the community is responsible for vengeance, should they fail to implement justice, they become objects of Yahweh’s נקם because of their failure to fulfill the covenant: “Under the covenant, for the community to fail to take action against a murderer is for all to assume the burden of guilt for conspiring at and condoning an act of murder. All, therefore, risk the consequences of the wrath of God under the curse formulas of the covenant.”⁵² In both cases, Yahweh is the one who acts in vengeance because of the legal obligations he holds over people.

The concept of נקם is vital to understanding how God acts against the Ninevites. The wrath of Yahweh does not come against the Ninevites because of emotional zeal or frenzy. He is not a bipolar God who acts on apoplexy. Instead, “This execution of justice...is not be explained

⁵⁰ Ibid, “‘Vengeance’ of Yahweh,” 96.

⁵¹ Ibid, “‘Vengeance’ of Yahweh,” 90.

⁵² Ibid, “‘Vengeance’ of Yahweh,” 91.

as the expression of an unrestrained human passion, but as the predetermined payment which the Almighty demands for every unforgiven infraction of His law.”⁵³

The Lord of Covenant Vengeance

Above we saw that Nahum, prophesying during the time of King Manasseh, a vassal under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, relied heavily upon the Neo-Assyrian curses that Ashurbanipal established against Israel. Yahweh reverses the intentions of Assyria, showing that he is the one who enacts the curse towards those who deal in wickedness and practice evil. Nahum’s intention all along is to show Yahweh as the one who is the covenant avenger.

The introduction of Nahum’s vengeance hymn, 1:2, introduces Yahweh as this covenant avenger. He is not just coming to destroy Nineveh as nationalist deity fighting against other kingdoms. Yahweh is dealing with the sins of his people, but he is also coming to bring justice to the one who has no other redeemer. Assyria may stand as suzerain over Manasseh, but it is Nineveh who proves herself an unfaithful vassal.

The church does well to read Nahum 1:2 and meditate on it. First, Yahweh is coming to avenge the wrongs done against His people, both internally and externally. Nahum does not just speak against the enemies of the covenant community but against anyone who brings charges against God’s elect. Nothing moves outside of the scope of Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness. Second, we learn to find repose in Yahweh’s actions. Vengeance is his (Rom. 12:19). Nahum three times proclaims that Yahweh is the avenger. He and he alone is נקם יהוה.

⁵³ Maier, *Nahum*, 150.

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