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Aron Pinker, “Upon an Attack in Nahum 2:2”
Upon an Attack in Nahum 2:2

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1. Nahum 2:2, while apparently out of order in the MT, has not presented to exegetes any insurmountable problems.1 Most commentators have translated טֹּלְהָּ התֹּמֵן הָּ תַּמּוּן as “a scatterer (or, he that dashes to pieces) comes up against you” and as addressed to Nineveh.2 Use of the phrase טֹּלְהָּ התֹּמֵן suggests that the enemy invaded the country but is not yet attacking Nineveh itself. Nahum urges Nineveh to make all the efforts to prepare itself against the approaching siege, while he fully knows that this endeavor is entirely futile. Assyria, or the Assyrian ruler, is called upon to instigate four operations in response to the appearance of an enemy. “Guard the rampart! Watch the road! Brace the loins! Strengthen might to the utmost!” The order of actions אֵלֵּךְ עַל־הַגּוֹאְלָה, אֵלֵּכִי אֲנָחָה, אֵלֵּךְ אָמָן, אָמָן אֱלֹהָי and implies that these are the usual preparations prior to an attacker’s arrival. Smith

1 J. Pereman, [Sefer] Nahum (Tel Aviv: Hotsa’at sefarim be-Yisrael le-mada’e ha-Mizrah he-’atiq, (1956) 47. As part of Pereman’s fundamental reconstruction of the book of Nahum verse 2:4 follows 2:2. Such a reordering seems contextually warranted, because switching places with the verse that follows would put 2:2 at the beginning of a sequence of verses that deal with standard siege operations, and 2:3 in a more appropriate context.

suggested that “The call is not so much for outer preparations as for a keying up of the spirits of the besieged to the highest pitch; they must exhibit both ‘bodily prowess and mental intrepidity’.”3 However, this is highly interpretative. The image conveyed is that of a country putting its forces on high alert in face of an invasion by an enemy, albeit to no avail.

2. As to the identification of this enemy very little specific is provided. The impression from the following verses is that the attacking enemy is more efficient than the defenders. Nahum probably had someone specific in mind. If this prophecy was delivered close to Nineveh’s fall then it was clear that those were the Medes. However, the monumentality of Nahum’s prediction would be hardly marred if the identity of the attacker were left out. Indeed, to Nahum this identity was of no consequence, since anyway the attacker was just an earthly tool for the Lord. Roberts says, “the traditional use of this verb [יָפַל] in descriptions of Yahweh’s march as the divine warrior and the announcement of Yahweh’s hostility toward Assyria in v. 14 [13] suggest that Yahweh is the scatterer. The implication is that the human army soon to attack Nineveh is in Yahweh’s employ.”4

3. Van der Woude understood this verse as clearly referring to the exiles of the Northern Kingdom who will come back to their land. Nahum addresses the people of Judah urging them “Guard attentively! Watch the road! Brace the loins! Strengthen might to the utmost!”5 While this suggestion is very intriguing it remains a curiosity in biblical research.


4 Roberts, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 64.

4. Already Ehrlich finds נפל (he that dashes) incongruous with the following נפל. He considers an intransitive verb (Ex 5:12) translating, “to spread out” (sich verbreiten).\(^6\) Certainly, the prosaic beginning of the verse, consisting of four words while the remaining cola are each of two words, raises the suspicion that two cola have been joined into one colon. Can this colon sensibly subdivided into two cola? The purpose of this note is to show that the answer is “Yes!” The critical word seems to be נפל, which is usually taken as “upon.” Yet, נפל could also been understood as a poetic shortened נפל, “attacked.” Such sense is attested in the Phoenician inscription of Ahiram, line 2 that reads מלך ימלעמע ואשדנ סמלונות ובד נמל נמל נמל נמל נמל נמל, “If any king whatever, or any governor whatever, or camp commandant should attack Byblos.” The verb נפל can govern a direct object as also found in the Ras Shamra text RŠŠ 24.277, נפל הוא המא ימל בשת, “or Death will attack man.” Dahood used this evidence from Ugaritic sources to interpret in Ps 35:20 the phrase נפל רכתי אחר, “but attack the oppressed.” He claims there that “From the point of view of style, consonantal w’il should express a verb antithetic to ‘speak of peace.’ This desideratum can be obtained by pointing we’ālû.”\(^7\)

5. In our verse the first colon of Nah 2:2 can be separated into two cola נפל כרך and נפל כרך. The phrase נפל כרך may be a terminus technicus akin to the current “frontal attack.” Such understanding perhaps sheds also some light on the

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enigmatic מנסק. While מנסק is usually translated “scatterer/shatterer” this sense is not attested in the Hebrew Bible. The only occurrence of מנסק is in Prov 25:18, but there it seems to be a weapon, of the same kind as sword or arrow. Thus “a scatterer/shatterer comes up against you” causes serious difficulties. Van der Woude rightly noted that “scatterer” seems an inadequate designation for the approaching enemy who will destroy and pillage the city. In his view the emendation מוטס, “mace,” is not a great help since a mace is not supposed to advance against a city. Perhaps, מנסק is also a terminus technicus referring to the cavalry force, whose function was to disperse the enemy and then hunt down the individuals or small groups. Nahum is then predicting that a force of cavalry,

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8 The Septuagint probably reads מנסק or מנסק by translating מנסק, “panting.” The Targum renders מנסק, “and spreading themselves” (ומחבזרות) The Peshitta’s מנסק (“leaders”) may be an inner corruption of מנסק (“scatterer”). The Vulgate has “scatterer, disperser” (dispersat). BDB suggest reading מנסק, in the sense of “club, hammer” (Prov 25:18, Jer 51:20). Haupt considers “hammer” as the correct translation for מנסק, and as referring to Judas Maccabæus (P. Haupt, The Book of Nahum: A New Metrical Translation with an Introduction, Restoration of the Hebrew Text and Explanatory and Critical Notes [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1907] 1, 27). However, the sense “a mace/hammer advanced against you” seems inappropriate when applied to a city as Nineveh. Ruben assumed a connection with the inundation described in verse 2:7 and translated מנסק, “he who cause to overflow” (Jer 23:1) (P. Ruben, Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, XX [1898] 176). However, this meaning for the Hiphil participle of מנסק is not attested in the HB. Pereman takes מנסק = מנסק, “bombarder” (Pereman, Nahum, 47.) While besiegers often used catapults for bombarding a city with heavy rocks or rotting corpses, such meaning for מנסק is not attested in the HB.

which is normally not used for frontal attacks against a fortified city, would attack Nineveh. In the historical context the reference to cavalry would best fit the Medes who were known as outstanding horsemen, and perhaps the first to use horsemen in large units akin to later days cavalry. The repetition of \( \text{עָצָמ} \) highlights the attack, shifting from the general to the specific, “The cavalry attacks, attacks your front.” The poetic \( \text{עָצָמ} \) (for \( \text{עָצָא} \)) has the force of the imperative, in line with such forms in the remaining cola. This understanding of \( \text{עָצָמ} \) is supported by the Peshitta’s “against you” and the Nova Vulgata’s “contra te. “ yet, while the poetic \( \text{עָצָמ} \) (for \( \text{עָצָא} \)) occurs for various grammatical forms it is not attested for the \( \text{Qal} \) perfect 3rd masculine (singular) of \( \text{עָצָא} \).

6. It is also possible to emend \( \text{עָצָמ} \) to \( \text{אָצָמ} \). In this verse \( \text{עָצָמ} \) is followed by \( \text{פְּנַי} \), the \( \text{כ} \) being very similar to the \( \text{ג} \) in the paleoscript. Thus, an early drop of the \( \text{ג} \) in

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10 Nahum’s unusual perception of the military milieu with respect to Nineveh’s specific defensive situation I discuss elsewhere, A. Pinker, “Nineveh’s Defensive Strategy and Nahum 2-3,” (forthcoming).

11 The Vulgate has coram te, “in your presence,” for \( \text{עָצָמ} \) as does the Septuagint. Note that there are three versions of the Vulgate in print today: \textit{Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam} (the official Latin text of the Catholic Church from 1502 to 1979), \textit{Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem} (a critical attempt to restore the Vulgate to its original Latin text), and \textit{Bibliorum Sacrorum nova vulgata editio} (the new official Latin text of the Catholic Church, which is based on a critical reconstruction of the original Vulgate text, including emendations in accord with the latest notions of biblical scholarship).

12 The similarity between \( \text{כ} \) and \( \text{ג} \) in the paleoscript may explain the replacement of the \( \text{ה} \)-line with a \( \text{כ} \)-line in the acrostic of Ps 25 and 34. Cf. S. Leeman, “The Atbash-Acrostic.” \textit{JBQ} 24 (1996) 43-45. Leeman explains the replacement of the \( \text{ג} \) with a \( \text{כ} \) by an application of the \( \text{יַבְרָש} \) principle. The \( \text{כ} \) verse was put at the end because putting it in
by haplography is quite possible. Perhaps, such a change was even effected intentionally, when the military content of the wording פָּרָס pro toto was not anymore clear. The shift from הֲלֹהֶל, the singular standing for the general (pars pro toto), to the plural הֲלוֹהֶל may be intended to convey an image of a single entity from a far and a plurality from nearby, depicting Nahum’s unusual poetic prowess.¹³

7. Assuming that הָדָעַל refers to [the] cavalry and {א} הֲלוֹהֶל means “[they] attack,” rather than “upon,” Nah 2:2 would read

| הֲלוֹהֶל מַפְטִירָה | Cavalry advances, they attack your front |
| הֲלֹוָד מַפְטִירָה | Cavalry attacks, attacks your front |
| נֶפֶר מְעָרָה נְפַר דַּרְדַּר | Guard the rampart, watch the road |
| חוֹם מַחְתִיד אָמָן חֲדָה | Brace loins, beef up forces.¹⁴ |

Both possibilities, involving only a single negligible emendation, result in a balanced verse of six two-beat colons, which depicts Nahum’s penchant for using staccato phrases describing in bold strokes a fast developing situation. Each bicolon addresses a specific aspect of the military situation: advance/attack of the enemy, defensive

¹⁴ The MT מָאוֹד, underlining the tenor of irony, may be a later scribal addition. It may have been motivated by a sense of expo facto “gloating,” or need to counterbalance the three-beat opening colon (reading הֲלוֹהֶל מַפְטִירָה as a single word).
operations, and self confidence measures. Each and all are part and parcel of standard military *modus operandi*. Note also the repetition of the consonant 𐤃 and the *kh* sound at the end of each bicolon. These sounds, perhaps, provide the background sound of fast moving cavalry. The *ts* sound of the 𐤃 also introduces a tint of irony.

8. *Summary*: Two options for emending the first prosaic colon of Nah 2:2 into two poetic cola are suggested. This gives all the cola the same poetic structure and perhaps brings out some military nuances of the attack on Nineveh.