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## **VOLUME 6, ARTICLE 8**

### **ARON PINKER, NAHUM AND THE GREEK TRADITION ON NINEVEH'S FALL**

## NAHUM AND THE GREEK TRADITION ON NINEVEH'S FALL

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nahum scholars routinely aver that some unusual flood, as indicated in classical sources, contributed to Nineveh's fall, and that Nah 2:7 – 14 should be understood within this conceptual framework. Already Botta advanced the notion that as much as twenty furlongs (roughly two-and-one-half miles) of wall may have been swept away.<sup>1</sup> A century later Wiseman suggested that breaches in Nineveh's wall may well have been due to an unusually high tide of the Tigris.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars note the prevalent understanding that the fall of Nineveh was related to the effects of flooding, and incorporate this view in their framework of events that led to Nineveh's fall.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Saggs says, "Greek tradition and the Bible (Nah 1:8) join in reporting that the capture of Nineveh, with its enormously powerful defences, was made possible by flooding – probably not by the Tigris but by the tributary known as Khosr. The flooding of the Khosr, which ran through the city, swept away a section of its defences and admitted the besiegers."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle* (BM No. 21,901) tells:

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<sup>1</sup> Botta, P.E. *The Buried City of the East: Nineveh*. London: Off. of the Nat. Ill. Lib (1851) 37.

<sup>2</sup> Wiseman, D.J. *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum*. London: Trustees of the British Museum (1961) 17.

<sup>3</sup> Haupt, P. *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) 7; Pereman, J. *Sepher Nahum*. Tel Aviv: Ancient Near-East Studies (1956) 49; Bolle, M. *Sepher Nahum*, in *Tere Asar im Perush Daat Mikra*, Vol. II. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook (1970) 11; Stronach, D. and Lumsden, S. "UC Berkley's Excavation at Nineveh." *BA* 55 (1922) 232; Gadd, C.J. *The Fall of Nineveh: The Newly Discovered Babylonian Chronicle, No. 21,901, in the British Museum*. London: Trustees of the British Museum (1923) 17-18; Cathcart, K.J. "Nahum in the Light of Northwest Semitic Studies." *BibOr* 26 (1973) 95-96; Huddleston, J.R. "Nahum, Nineveh, and the Nile: The description of Thebes in Nahum 3:8-9." *JNES* 62,2 (2003) 106-7; etc.

<sup>4</sup> Saggs, H. W. F. *The Might that was Assyria*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson (1984) 120.

The fourteenth year [612-611 BCE]: The king of Babylonia mustered his army and marched to [lacuna]. The king of the Medes marched towards the king of Babylonia. [lacuna] they met one another. The king of Babylonia [lacuna] Cyaxares [lacuna] brought across and they marched along the bank of the Tigris. [lacuna] they encamped against Nineveh. From the month Šimannu [June] until the month Abu [August] -for three months- they subjected the city to a heavy siege. On the [lacuna] day of the month Abu they inflicted a major defeat upon a great people. At that time Sin-šar-iškun, king of Assyria, died. [lacuna] They carried off the vast booty of the city and the temple and turned the city into a ruin heap [lacuna] of Assyria escaped from the enemy and [lacuna] the king of Babylonia [lacuna].<sup>5</sup>

The Hillah Inscription of Nabonid (col. II, 3-19) notes that Nabopolassar did not take part in the destruction of Nineveh, though he helped in the conquest of Assyria, and that Nineveh was captured by the Ummân-Manda (Scythians), the northeastern barbarians. However, Nabonid (555-538 BCE), as *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*, does not mention any flooding of Nineveh though it could have been construed a retribution for Sennacherib's devastation of Babylon.<sup>6</sup>

While the Babylonian sources provide some information on the fall of Nineveh in Nabopolassar's time much is left unsaid and unknown to us. We learn that Assyria was attacked by a coalition of forces, but perhaps not all of them partook in the attack on Nineveh. The city was apparently captured rather quickly, but we are not told how this was achieved. In particular, from the biblical exegesis perspective we would have liked to know whether some kind of a flood was a major factor in breaching Nineveh's walls, or the city fell as a consequence of normal siege operations. The purpose of this paper is to examine the strength of the claim that Nineveh fell as a result of an unusual inundation, whether caused by man or nature.

The Greek tradition consists of two sources: Xenophon's *Anabasis*, iii 4:7, and Diodorus' *History* 2.26-27. At the outset it should be recognized that these sources hardly merit as *bona fide* historical data. As will be shown, they are too confused and unreliable, drawing on hearsay rather than personal observation, reliable witnesses, or documentation. Thus the question is not of whether they should be accepted as sources of historical information but whether some elements of their reports reflect historicity. I will analyze each of these sources in some detail.

## 2. XENOPHON

Xenophon (ca. 427-355 BCE) of Athens, was a soldier and mercenary, known for his writings on the history of his time, the sayings of

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<sup>5</sup> Grayson, A.K. *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles. Texts from Cuneiform Source No. 5*. Locust Valley, N.Y.: J.J. Augustine (1975) 94 lines 43-45.26.

<sup>6</sup> Langdon, S. *Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*. Leipzig: Hinrichs (1912) 273. Gadd avers that col. II, 3-19 of The Hillah Inscription of Nabonid has been misinterpreted, and that the passage does not refer to the fall of Nineveh (Gadd, C.J. *The Fall of Nineveh*. The Newly Discovered Babylonian Chronicle, No. 21,901, in the British Museum. London: Trustees of the British Museum [1923] 14-15).

Socrates, and the life of Greece. In 401 BCE he took part in the expedition that Cyrus the Younger led against emperor Artaxerxes II of Persia, his older brother. Xenophon's record of the entire expedition against the Persians and the journey home was titled *Anabasis*. In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, iii 4:7 we read:

So fared the foe and so fell back; but the Hellenes, continuing their march in safety for the rest of that day, reached the river Tigris. Here they came upon a large deserted city, the name of which was Larissa: a place inhabited by the Medes in days of old; the breadth of its walls was twenty-five feet, and the height of them a hundred, and the circuit of the whole two parasangs. It was built of clay-bricks, supported on a stone basis twenty feet high. This city the king of the Persians besieged, what time the Persians strove to snatch their empire from the Medes, but he could in no wise take it; then a cloud hid the face of the sun and blotted out the light thereof, until the inhabitants were gone out of the city, and so it was taken. By the side of this city there was a stone pyramid in breadth a hundred feet, and in height two hundred feet; in it were many of the barbarians who had fled for refuge from the neighbouring villages. From this place they marched one stage of six parasangs (about 20 miles) to a great deserted fortress [which lay over against the city], and the name of that city was Mespila. The Medes once dwelt in it. The basement was made of polished stone full of shells; fifty feet was the breadth of it, and fifty feet the height; and on this basement was reared a wall of brick, the breadth whereof was fifty feet and the height thereof four hundred; and the circuit of the wall was six parasangs. Hither, as the story goes, Medea, the king's wife, betook herself in flight what time the Medes lost their empire at the hands of the Persians. To this city also the king of the Persians laid siege, but could not take it either by length of days or strength of hand. But Zeus sent amazement on the inhabitants thereof, and so it was taken.<sup>7</sup>

Already a century ago Haupt noted that "this account is somewhat inaccurate" but still insisted that "it is possible to discern the historical nucleus."<sup>8</sup> Haupt argued that the nationalities Medes, Persians, Assyrians, and Babylonians were often confused, and one should replace Assyrians for Medes and Medes for Persians. However, his examples are relatively late and do not include a case in which Medes and Assyrian are confused for one another.

Haupt also noted that Xenophon's account never mentions Nineveh, but rather Larissa and Mespila. It has been suggested that Larissa is a corruption of Biblical Resen, between Calah and Nineveh. However, again, Haupt believes that confusion was at work and Xenophon refers here to Calah, present Nimrud. As to Mespila, it is certainly inconceivable to construe it as a corruption of Nineveh. Haupt

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<sup>7</sup> Xenophon. *The Persian Expedition* (trans. Warner, R.). With an introduction and notes by George Cawkwell. New York, NY: Penguin Books (1949). Merchant translates the last line: *Zeus terrified the inhabitants by thunder, and it was conquered* (Merchant, E.C. [ed.] *Xenophontis Opera Omnia. III. Expeditio Cyri*. Oxford (1904) 4:12).

<sup>8</sup> Haupt, P. "Xenophon's Account of the Fall of Nineveh." *JAOS* 28 (1907) 100.

says, “I believe that *Mespila* represents an Assyrian noun *mušpīlu* derived from *pīlu* or *pīlu*, which has passed into Greek as *poros*. Greek denotes a tufaceous limestone resembling marble.”<sup>9</sup> Assyrian *mušpīlu* may, consequently mean “a place where shell-limestone is found,” i.e., Nineveh, the *kreepis* (“foundation”) of which consisted of shell-limestone. Yet, Nineveh existed for thousands of years and was known around the world by this name. How did she become known suddenly as the “place where shell-limestone is found,” though later she is again called Nineveh by Diodorus? Was the shell-limestone only found after the *kreepis* was constructed and of such import that it replaced her ancient name? Why did no one else use *Mespila* for Nineveh? While Haupt’s etymological insights regarding *mušpīlu* may be correct, the final conclusion that *Mespila* is Nineveh defies logic.

According to the story that Xenophon heard, capture of Mespila was difficult. Neither long siege nor direct assault led to capture of the city. Only when Zeus intervened was the city taken. However, nothing is said about the nature of Zeus’ intervention. We have only the enigmatic statement “But Zeus sent amazement on the inhabitants thereof, and so it was taken.” Haupt felt that the inhabitants of Mespila were terrified by a thunderstorm, though nothing about that is said *per se*. The “amazement” sent by Zeus conjures more of a psychological than physical effect, with consequent disabling of the defenders’ resistance. Thus, even if it is assumed that Mespila is Nineveh nothing in Xenophon compels accepting the notion that inundation was the undoing of Nineveh.

Xenophon’s confusion of actors, irregular naming of places, and absence of detail force the conclusion that nothing definitive can be extracted from his story with respect to the causes for Nineveh’s fall. Xenophon tells about Zeus’ intervention, but tells nothing about inundation. Machinist says, “the fact remains that the Xenophon passage is not clear, and so cannot in the first instance be used in a discussion of the ancient sources on Nineveh’s fall.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3. DIODORUS

Xenophon lived about two centuries after the fall of Nineveh. The second ancient source of interest to us, Diodorus Siculus, lived at a much later time, about five centuries after the event. Diodorus Siculus (ca. 90 BCE – ca. 30 BCE) was a Greek historian from Sicily, who devoted thirty years to the composition of his history, *Bibliotheca historia*, an enterprise that uncritically drew from many sources. Diodorus does not display any of the critical faculties expected of a historian. His narrative frequently contains conflation, errors, and contradictions.

Book II of the *Bibliotheca historia* describes the history and culture of Mesopotamia, India, Scythia, and Arabia. It is there that Diodorus mentions the conquest of Nineveh and the prophecy about the rivers, which was handed down from king to king. He says, “Now he had an

<sup>9</sup> Haupt, Xenophon, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Machinist, P. “The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective.” In *Assyria 1995* (eds. Parpola, S. and Whiting, R.M.). Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (1997) 190.

oracle handed down from his ancestors that none should capture Nineveh by force of arms unless the river first become an enemy to the city” (Diod. II 26:9). Diodorus claims that Nineveh’s siege lasted for three years rather than three months, as in *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*. Perhaps, he could not imagine that a city such a Nineveh would fall so quickly and therefore “corrected” the datum “months” into “years.”<sup>11</sup> He says,

The rebels, encouraged by their advantages, pressed the siege, but were foiled by the strength of the walls from harming the defenders, for in those days, artillery, defenses for sappers, or battering-rams had not been invented. Moreover, there was great abundance of all provisions for those in the city, as the king had attended to this beforehand. Consequently the siege dragged on for two years, assaults were continually made upon the walls, and the occupants were cut off from egress to the country, but in the third year, a succession of heavy downpours swelled the Euphrates, flooded part of the city, and cast down the wall to a length of 20 stades. Thereupon the king realized that the oracle had been fulfilled, and that the river had manifestly declared war upon the city. Despairing of his fate, but resolved not to fall into the hands of his enemies, he prepared a gigantic pyre in the royal precincts, heaped up all his gold and silver and his kingly raiment as well upon it, shut up his concubines and eunuchs in the chamber he had made in the midst of the pyre, and burnt himself and the palace together with all of them. The rebels, hearing of the end of Sardanapallus, burst into the city where the wall was down and captured it, then arrayed Arbakes in the royal robe, saluted him king, and invested him with supreme authority (Diod. II 27: 1-3).

Scurlock notes that “Generally speaking, the account of Diodorus Siculus of the end of the Assyrian empire is not highly regarded as an independent source of information.”<sup>12</sup> While Diodorus’ report must be treated with great caution, it cannot be entirely dismissed. Obviously, Diodorus erred in the name of the river Euphrates, the length of the siege, and names of the protagonists. The river may have been one of the tributaries of the Tigris; the bed of the Tigris is too deep to make flooding possible. Sieges were very expansive, and normally could not last for such long periods as years. However, he is correct in stating that the Babylonian and Median kings joined forces against Assyria. It is also possible that the Assyrian put much trust in the water obstacles around Nineveh and from this developed the legend that Diodorus mentions. Indeed, Nahum too addressed this aspect of Assyria’s sense of invulnerability by comparing it with Thebes (Nah 3:8).

The water system of Nineveh could fail it by scarcity or overabundance. Eph’al notes that in siege operations, blockade of water

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<sup>11</sup> Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 17. Gadd tends to accept the three years in Diodorus’ account as correct. He says that it is “probably better to accept the three years as correct, on the understanding that the war was by no means continuous; indeed, the account of Diodorus seems to fall into two parts, marked first by the failure and then by the success of the attack.”

<sup>12</sup> Scurlock, J. “The Euphrates Flood and the Ashes of Nineveh (Diod. II 27.1-28.7).” *Historia* 39 (1990) 382-384.

supply has the most rapid effect on the defenders.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Diodorus reports that it was overabundance of waters, caused by a river swelled with runoff water that collapsed walls weakened by constant heavy rain. Some biblical scholars accept Diodorus' report as factual, finding confluence between it and Nah 1:8 and 2:7. However, as Kleinert noted, the sources used by Diodorus (Ctesias) may have been influenced by Jews knowledgeable of Nahum, undermining the perceived confluence of his report with Nahum's prophecy.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, MacGinnis raised the possibility that Diodorus presents a report incorporating extraneous particulars that can be traced to an earlier siege and fall of Babylon (650-648 BCE). He concludes that "It is transparent that much of the story of the fall of Nineveh of both Ctesias and other classical writers is fantasy, but it may well be that it was not invented by the authors but records the tale as current in Babylon at the time. At any rate there is no reason to doubt that a tradition that included much fantasy and may well be derived directly from the popular fabulosity could have included in its handling of the fall of Nineveh memorable details from an earlier war specifically, the type of synthesis outlined above would suggest that-at any rate for his history of the end of the Assyrian empire-Ctesias relied mainly on oral tradition. Inasmuch, then, as he failed to correct this tradition through his use of the cuneiform sources, Sayce's judgement that Ctesias was 'devoid of critical power' must be considered exact."<sup>15</sup> Such telescoping of events in Mesopotamian folklore has been detected in other cases, making the utility of Diodorus' (via Ctesias) report rather tentative.

Ashurbanipal, reporting on the necessary repairs carried out during his rule, says, "At that time the wall, inside the city of Nineveh, which Sennacherib (...) had built, whose foundation had given way and its turrets fallen, on account of the abundant showers and heavy rains which, which Adad had yearly sent upon my land."<sup>16</sup> Over time, weather has its damaging effect on any structure. The Assyrian was well aware of it and dutifully managed such repairs, since the strength of a wall was as good as its weakest part. Surely, the walls of Nineveh were in good repair and could withstand a seasonal rain.

Even if it is assumed that Diodorus' report of Nineveh's flooding is assumed valid, Scurlock reached the conclusion that it could not have been a natural phenomenon, because the Tigris is not in flood at the time that Nineveh fell (the month Abu [August]).<sup>17</sup> Seasonal flooding of the Tigris occurs in April/May, reaching a maximum level in April.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eph'al, I. "Ways and Means to Conquer a City." In *Assyria 1995* (eds. Parpola, S. and Whiting, R.M.). Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (1997) 307-324.

<sup>14</sup> Kleinert, P. "Nahum und der Fall Ninives." *ThStKr* 83 (1910) 524f.

<sup>15</sup> MacGinnis, J.D.A. "Ctesias and the Fall of Nineveh." *Sumer* 45 (1987-8) 40 and 42.

<sup>16</sup> Luckenbill, D.D. *Ancient Records of Assyria and Mesopotamia*, Vol. II: Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End. Chicago (1927) 342, 345.

<sup>17</sup> Scurlock, 382.

<sup>18</sup> Luckenbill, D.D. *The Annals of Sennacherib*. OIP 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1924) 104:70. One of Sennacherib's inscriptions reads: "In

Moreover, the chances for an unexpected flood outside the seasonal period are very remote.<sup>19</sup> According to *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle* the siege started well after the seasonal flooding, allowing convenient crossing of water obstacles and enough of summer time for siege operations. Nineveh fell when the Tigris and Khosr were approaching their low.<sup>20</sup>

While Scurlock rejects the possibility of a natural inundation of Nineveh, she finds it plausible that Nineveh was flooded through deliberate manipulation of the irrigation system. The catalyst for her opinion is the unusual fact that the *Babylonian Chronicle* mentions the capture of a rather small city (Tarbitzu) that was very close to one of Sennacherib canal projects for supplying Nineveh's environs with irrigation water. Scurlock says, "If the Medes and Babylonians controlled both the Tarbitzu and Khosr canal systems by 612 B.C., it is conceivable that they could have been able to generate enough water flow even at low river to do some damage to the fortifications of Nineveh. The Khosr system runs directly through the city and part of it had, before Sennacherib rerouting, damaged the foundations of the old palace."<sup>21</sup>

Spronk rightly says, "It is hardly conceivable, however, how attackers opening such sluice-gates could cause a flood strong enough to breach walls and make a palace, as a rule built on high ground, collapse."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, most of the temples and palaces in Nineveh were on top of the mound Kuyunjik, now rising steeply to a height of 43 feet above the plain. The potential for applying pressure on a besieged city by manipulating a river that crosses it was well known to the Assyrian. Sennacherib used this tactic against Babylon in 689 BCE, when he diverted the water of the Arahtu canal.<sup>23</sup> It would seem inconceivable that Sennacherib was unaware of the vulnerabilities introduced by the construction of the canal into Nineveh and did not take proper actions to obviate them in time of siege.

Luckenbill observes that indeed Sennacherib was well aware of the potential danger from flooding of the Khosr River and Tebiltu River, and took strong preventative measures.<sup>24</sup> There is actually evidence that Sennacherib strengthened the walls of the Khosr in the area of the mound Kuyunjik. He also created near the Ajilah gorge a swamp, which apparently served as a kind of wetlands habitat, intended among other functions "to arrest the flow" of the Khosr. Finally, Stronach draws attention to the wide, shallow depression just outside the mid-point of Nineveh's long east wall. He says, "Given the nature of Sennacherib's

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Ayyaru the regular time of the spring flood."

<sup>19</sup> Ionides, M.G. *The Régime of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris*. E. & F.N. Spon (1937) 250-1.

<sup>20</sup> Ionides, 114. During the period 1919-1932 the Tigris at Mosul reached maxima in February, March, or April, with April was the most frequent month. The minima were in August, September, or October, with October the most frequent month.

<sup>21</sup> Scurlock, 383-4.

<sup>22</sup> Spronk, K. *Nabum*. Kampen: Kok Pharos (1997) 95.

<sup>23</sup> Luckenbill, OIP 2, 84:51-53.

<sup>24</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, 99-100.



other precautions along so much of the line of the Khosr, it is tempting to suppose that this basin was deliberately excavated in order to create a lake that would constitute a last line of protection against the effects of a sudden flood.”<sup>25</sup> We can reasonably assume that equal attention was given to the control of other water elements in Nineveh.

Nineveh must have had a drainage system for disposing the difference between the excess flow in its water system and normal flow. Moreover, Nineveh’s walls were impressive. If Xenophon can be trusted, its *kerēpis* was of polished shell-limestone, 50 feet wide and 50 feet high, and over it was a brick wall 50 feet wide and 100 feet high. It would take considerable force to make a quarter mile breach in such a wall. The prevalent view now is that two walls encircled Nineveh. The main wall was about 15-meter thick and 20-meter high.<sup>26</sup> It was made of sun-dried bricks, baked bricks being rarely used in Assyria. In the edifices of Assyria reeds and bitumen were not used, as was the case in Babylon, to cement the layers of bricks, although both materials are found in abundance in the country. Tenacious clay, moistened and mixed with a little chopped straw, was used for mortar. While the material of which the walls were made was not as sturdy and hard as rocks, the wall width, height, and defenses combined into creating a formidable obstacle. Archaeology attests that these simple materials have successfully resisted the ravages of time. Adjoining the main wall’s forward edge, often at a distance of more than 4 meters, was a lower stone curtain wall (חיל? Nah 3:8). This wall had a rough stone core and a well-dressed limestone masonry facade, regular projecting towers, and continuous crenellations.<sup>27</sup> The lower wall was 4-6 meter high, and its top served as a road or walkway. Again, it is hard to imagine that an overflow of the Khosr would have had the power to cause a breach of such two-wall system. Stronach concludes: “it would seem that the shortness of the siege of Nineveh was not necessarily linked to a hostile manipulation of the waters of the Khosr (or those of any other relatively depleted, high-summer stream).”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, had an event such as Diodorus describes really happened, or were the attackers able to accomplish such a feat as Scurlock suggests, we would have very likely found a reference to it in the *Chronicles*. It is even likely that the redactor of Nahum living closer to the time that it happened would have found a way to include it in the book, making Nahum’s prophecy that more accurate. Instead of וְהָיָה כִּלְכִּל וְנִמּוּג, which was not detrimental to Nineveh’s defense, he may have edited it, making an orthographically minor change, to read וְהָיָה חוּמָה וְנִמּוּגָה. J.M.P. Smith says, “when Yahweh co-operates with his people against the enemy in storm and flood, as this view would involve, instead of leaving his part in the victory to be inferred, as would be the

<sup>25</sup> Stronach, D. “Notes on the Fall of Nineveh.” In *Assyria 1995* (eds. Parpola, S. and Whiting, R.M.). Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (1997) 321.

<sup>26</sup> Madhloom, T. and Mahdi, A.M. *Nineveh* (Historical Monuments in Iraq 4). Baghdad (1976) 55.

<sup>27</sup> Madhloom and Mahdi, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Stronach, 321.

case if this interpretation were correct, the prophets always emphasize the fact of Yahweh's aid and give it a large place."<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. NAHUM

Some scholars have found a confluence between the biblical text (Nah 1:8 and Nah 2:7) and the reports of Xenophon and Diodorus. For instance, Charles contends that "the mention in 1:8 of an 'over-running flood' and 'devastation,' in addition to 'pools of water' and 'fleeing' in 2:9, would indicate that here we are not merely dealing with a literary metaphor, or with ancient Near East chaos-symbolism, but rather a literal flooding of the canal-gates of the Tigris. Xenophon and Diodorus Siculus each confirm the flooding based on traditions they received." Charles concludes that "There can be little doubt that the 'gates of the rivers' (ת'שערי הנהרו) refer not to the gates to the city, rather to the 'water- or canal-gates'."<sup>30</sup>

How compelling is the understanding of the biblical verses in Nahum as a depiction of actual flooding?

**Nahum 1:8** -- The relevant colon in Nah 1:8, part of a theophanic hymn, states **ובשטף עבר כלה יעשה מקומה**. The critical phrase is **ובשטף עבר**, which was subjected to considerable analysis, motivated by metric considerations and acrostic needs. Many drop the **ו** of **ובשטף** as dittography of the preceding **ו** and attach the phrase **ובשטף עבר** to the preceding verse obtaining the **י** – line of the acrostic **יודע [יהוה]** **ובשטף עבר** and a **כ** – line that starts with **כלה**. In this case **ובשטף עבר** could mean "with an overrunning flood." I prefer to read **ובשטף עבר** where **וב** is an abbreviation for **ובא**; i.e., *He cares for those who shelter in Him, [as comes] an overflowing torrent*.<sup>31</sup> Even if in these readings **ובשטף עבר** is construed an actual flood or torrent, it is doubtful that any historical specifics could be read into it, because the phrase is part of a general theophanic hymn, having the character of a wisdom literature truism.

It is possible to view **ובשטף** as the consequence of a **ב/כ** confusion, which is well attested in the Hebrew.<sup>32</sup> In this case the simile

<sup>29</sup> Smith, J.M.P., Ward, W.H., Bewer, J.H. *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*. Edinburg: T. & T. Clark (1985) 318.

<sup>30</sup> Charles, J. D. "Plundering the Lion's Den? A Portrait of Divine Fury (Nahum 2:3-11)." *GTJ* 10.2 (1989) 194.

<sup>31</sup> After the exile of Judah, Aramaic became popular among the exiled, and the Aramaic script officially replaced the paleoscript. Tur-Sinai claims that from Aramaic, in which abbreviations are frequent, the Israelites learned to do likewise in the Hebrew Bible. The Massorettes eventually replaced these abbreviations with the corresponding words. However, in some places they apparently did not recognize the abbreviation or mistook a legitimate word for an abbreviation. Tur-Sinai points to a number of such instances (Tur-Sinai, N.H. *Mishle Shelomoh*. Tel Aviv: Yavneh (1947) 73ff.) See also Naor, M. **קצורים** **וראשי-תבות בכתובים כפולי-גירסא**. In *Sepher Tur – Sinai* (eds. Haran, M. and Luria, B.). Jerusalem: Kiriat Sepher (1960) 104); and, Perles, F. *Analekten zur Textkritik des Alten Testaments, neue Folge*. Leipzig: G. Engel (1922).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, 1Sam 11:6 -- **בשמעו** (ketib) but **כשמעו** (qere); Job 21:13 -- **יכלו** (ketib) but **יבין** (qere); Prov 21:29 -- **יבין** (ketib) but **יבין** (qere); etc.

“as an overrunning flood” is obtained, and the emendation also provides a כ– line necessary for the acrostic. Such a simile would be in line with similar usage in ancient Near Eastern texts. Assyrian kings repeatedly used the simile “like a flood” to describe their capture of cities. For instance, Sargon II describes taking of Hamat by saying that he “as if he were a god, completely brought down the city like a flood” (TUAT I/4, p. 385). He describes the subduing of the Chaldeans by saying, “the Chaldean I overwhelmed like a deluge to his utmost bounds.”<sup>33</sup> Ashurbanipal tells about the conquest of Thebes that he “smashed (it as if by) a floodstream” (ANET, 297). The Hillah Inscription of Nabonid (col. II, 3-19) states that a king of the Ummân-Manda (Scythians) “overwhelmed like a deluge” the temples of the gods of Subartu. It seems that the poet of the theophany in Nahum used with respect to God a simile that was frequently used to describe the magnificent achievements of the great Assyrian kings.

Clearly, there is nothing obvious that would compel us to associate שטף עבר with Nineveh’s demise. Certainly, Nahum chose to include verses 1:2-8 for a reason. Since the rest of the prophecy deals exclusively with Assyria and Nineveh, his reason may well have been related to them. However, nothing in the text of Nah 1:2-8 allows determination of Nahum’s motivation for selecting this material, nor would it be prudent to see in any word associations with specific events.

**Nahum 2:7** -- While Nineveh is not mentioned in Nahum 1 it is mentioned in Nahum 2. Consequently many assumed that שַׁעֲרֵי נַמּוּגָה וְהַיְחַלּוּ וְהַיְחַלּוּ in Nah 2:7 refers to Nineveh, and in particular to opening the sluices of the Khosr River and destruction of the palace by inundation. Understanding שַׁעֲרֵי as “sluice gates of” rests to a large measure on Sennacherib’s Bavian Inscription (1.30), where he says, “the river-gate (bâb nâri) ... and the nar pasu opened of itself.”<sup>34</sup> This led to the interpretation of שַׁעֲרֵי נַהֲרוֹת as the lexical equivalent of Akkadian bâb nâri, “door of the river,” the sluice gates through which waters from the river were let into the canal.

However, the MT speaks about the plural “rivers” not a single river (Khosr?). The Targum understands שַׁעֲרֵי as “bridges” (גְּשָׁרִי), perhaps considering them as more appropriate for the following “rivers.” For a city such as Nineveh, on the banks of the Tigris River and through which a river flowed, the bridges were in reality the gates of the city. Indeed, the Septuagint considers the gates to be those of the city rather than rivers, reading “the gates of the cities”, and the Peshitta has “the gates of the city.” Only the Vulgate connect the gates with the rivers, rendering “the gates of the rivers”.

Rashi and Metzudot understand תַּהֲרוֹ שַׁעֲרֵי הַנָּהָר as the gates of Nineveh that faced the rivers. Kimchi takes תַּהֲרוֹ שַׁעֲרֵי הַנָּהָר as the gates of the state that led to the rivers. Haupt tried to explain the plural הַנַּהֲרוֹת as due to the preceding שַׁעֲרֵי.<sup>35</sup> This is hard to accept if the

<sup>33</sup> Gadd, C.J. “Inscribed Prisms of Sargon II from Nimrud.” *Iraq* 16 (1954) 186.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobsen, T. and Lloyd, S. *Sennacherib’s Aqueduct at Jerwan*. OIP 24. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1935) 31-43.

<sup>35</sup> Haupt, P. *Nabum*, 44.

author's focus was on the particular river Khosr and because it required writing extra characters. Bolle accommodates the plural הנהרות by taking it as referring to the canals system that Sennacherib built.<sup>36</sup> However, these canals and moats were outside the walls of the city. נהר usually designates major rivers and neither the Khosr nor its canals could be considered to fall onto this category. It is not altogether clear that נהר ever means in the Hebrew Bible "canal." BDB points only to Ex 7:19, 8:1, and to Nah 2:7 as a 'possible.' However, see Rashi on Ex 7:19.

Inner intertextuality supports the view that רשע in 2:7 refers to an entry point in Nineveh's environs. The key terms פתח and שער are used both in 2:7 and in 3:13, clearly indicates that in both places the gates of the city are referred to, many of them at the bridges over the rivers in Nineveh's environs. The gates on the bridges were the weak points in Nineveh's defense, because they enabled access to battering rams and putting the gates on fire. While special strategies were developed for protecting such entry points and they could have been defended for some time even against a powerful army, Nahum foresees that these gates became open as if on their own.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the Targum is pointing in the right direction, and the rivers referred here are the Tigris, Greater Zab, Khosr and Gômel. These rivers formed significant external obstacles for an attacker and the major defense for Nineveh. Such attackers could come from the west and north of the Greater Zab River. Nineveh's main military concern was the area formed by the bend of the Greater Zab River, and that is where it probably trained to send its chariots, which formed its rapid response force. Thus ת הרו-שערי הנ should be considered the gates at the crossings of the rivers around Nineveh.

The idea of Nineveh's flooding is also incompatible with Nahum's reference to ההיכל "the palace, the temple." While it is possible that a palace or temple stood on the banks of the Khosr, it must have been a minor structure, the major palace and temple were on top of mound Kuyunjik. Stronach says, "'dissolving of the palace' (a vivid image best taken to refer to rather less-vaunted public structures at the level of the plan)."<sup>38</sup> Yet, use of the article in ההיכל shows that Nahum refers to a major and well-known entity, which affected by flooding, would have a grave effect on the defense of the city. This would aptly apply to Sennacherb's "Palace without Rival" that he built on the southwest corner of Kuyunjik. The dissolution of some minor palace would certainly make little impression.

This difficulty may have prompted Haupt to take the singular היכל as collective, denoting the royal palaces in Nineveh.<sup>39</sup> Such use of היכל is not attested in the Hebrew Bible, the article of ההיכל militates against it, and would be realistically improbable. Ehrlich seems to have adopted Haupt's view, suggesting that it is not the king's palace that

<sup>36</sup> Bolle, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Yadin, Y. *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson (1963) 21-22.

<sup>38</sup> Stronach, 321.

<sup>39</sup> Haupt, *Nahum*, 44.

Nahum talks about, but the palaces of each of the dignitaries in Nineveh.<sup>40</sup> However, this distinction is of no significance. The Targum's, **ומלכא בהיכליה** ("the king in his palace"), treats **ההיכל** as virtual metonymy for "king," thereby balancing the reference to the queen in the following verse. Bolle, perhaps under the influence of the Targum, understands **ההיכל** here in a twofold sense: the structure and metonymically the royalty.<sup>41</sup> Archaeological findings show that the palace was destroyed and burned but not dissolved. Seeing Nineveh's defensive strategy falling apart it is no wonder that the court was agitated and shaken up.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it seems likely that using **ההיכל** Nahum refers to the "court," rather than the physical edifice.

Understanding Nah 2:7 as referring to some flooding has been also influenced by Nahum's use of **נמוג**, the Niphal perfect 3<sup>rd</sup> masculine (singular) of **מוג**, which often means "melt away." For instance, Roberts notes, "one cannot rule out the possibility that the verb was chosen because of the prophet's view that flooding would contribute to the downfall of Nineveh."<sup>43</sup> However, the versions have not assigned **נמוג** this meaning here. The Septuagint translates **נמוג** "have fallen in ruin," Targum has "trembles" and so does the Peshitta, and the Vulgate has "to the ground is demolished." It seems that the version were influenced by inner intertextuality in which **מוג** | **רעש** (Nah 1:5).

Similarly, Rashi renders **נמוג**, "shook, trembled," from the force of the rocks (**בומ"א** = "bom[bard]e") hurled at the palace walls. Greenberg notes that the word **בומ"א** is obviously from the Latin *bombus* "a dull sound."<sup>44</sup> The French *bombarde* fits Rashi's definition though it is not probably Rashi's. Ibn Ezra interprets **ג נמו** as "captured" (**פסנת**). Metzudot gives **נמוג** here the borrowed sense of "crushed."

Ewald rendered **ג נמו** "is in commotion."<sup>45</sup> Cathcart observes that it is difficult to decide on the right nuance for this term.<sup>46</sup> **ג נמו** can connote "melting away (in fear)" as in Isa 14: 31, it might mean "is in commotion" as in 1Sam 14:16, or that the palace "is melting" in the mud and water from the flood. He settles on the last possibility. Spronk considers **וההיכל נמוג** "a local repetition of the primordial flood. ... In 1:5 it was used to denote the moving of the hills, now it is said of the palace standing on one of the hills of the city."<sup>47</sup> However, the theophany in Nahum does not contain any inundation, to the contrary, the sea and rivers are dried up.

<sup>40</sup> Ehrlich, A.B. *Mikra ki-Pschuto*. New York: Ktav (1969) 446.

<sup>41</sup> Bolle, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Pinker, A. "Nineveh's Defensive Strategy and Nahum 2-3." *ZAW* 119,1 (2007).

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, J.J.M. *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press (1991) 60.

<sup>44</sup> Greenberg, J. *Foreign Words in the Bible Commentary of Rashi*. Jerusalem: Self Published (n.d.) 171.

<sup>45</sup> Ewald, G.H.A. *Commentary on the Books of Nahum, Ssephanya, Habacqquq, "Zakbarya" XII.-XIV., Yerehya* (trans. Smith, J.F.). London: William and Norgate (1878) 9.

<sup>46</sup> Cathcart, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Spronk, K. *Nahum*. Kampen: Kok Pharos (1997) 96.

The root **מוג** is typically used for describing the effects of the Divine Warrior (Ex 15:15-16, Jos 2:9, 1Sam 14:16, Isa 14:31, Jer 49:23, Ez 21:20).<sup>48</sup> It can be used figuratively for “being helpless, disorganized,” particularly because of terror (Ex 15:15, Jos 2:9, 24, 1Sam 14:16, Jer 49:23, Ps 75:4). In Nah 2:7 such a figurative interpretation would seem most appropriate. It describes the despondence (**ג נמו**) befalling the “court” (**היכל**), when it became clear to the leadership that the fortified bridges across the Zab and Khosr rivers (**ת הרוֹ-שערי הנ**) were taken and are open (**תחוֹ-נפת**) to the fast moving enemy forces, precluding deployment of the chariotry garrisoned in Nineveh.

**Contextual Scheme** -- It was shown that the figurative interpretation Nah 1:8 is in accord with the modes of expression used by Assyrian and Babylonian kings in their annals. It is an example of phraseology used for describing royal campaigns that naturally found its way into theophanies.

I have discussed the difficult text of Nah 2:9 in a previous publication.<sup>49</sup> I proposed reading **מימיה אי** instead of **מימי היא** and the entire hemistich as **כברכת מים מימיה ונינוה אי** in the sense “its waters are as a pool, and Nineveh is an isle.” The verse conveys the impression formed by the disparate water bodies around Nineveh, that Nineveh is as an isle in a pool. Nahum could not have thought of Nineveh being a pool and its people trying to escape.

Finally, Nah 2:7 finds a natural place within the framework of Nineveh’s defensive strategy. Nineveh relied on the posts at the bridges for holding back and delaying an enemy’s advance, and thus providing strategic warning for mobilization and deployment. Quick capture of these crossings meant fall of the city. This disastrous situation called for a drastic appeal to Ishtar (or Inanna), the protecting goddess of Nineveh, and the goddess of love and war. The following verse (Nah 2:8) describes the extraordinary measures that were taken. The goddess was put up (**ב-והצ**) perhaps outside the temple, she was unveiled (**תה־לִג**), and its priestesses appealed to her, crying and beating on their breasts.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation provides a logical framework for explaining the events that led to Nineveh’s fall, without becoming entangled in an impossible to rationalize flood. The contextual scheme is,

(2:2) -- The defenders mobilize, beef up their defenses, and intelligence services.

(2:4) -- Infantry and chariotry are marshaled and start deployment.

(2:5) -- Chariotry has deployment problems. The narrowed gates, from 7.00 meters to 2.00 meters, do not allow rapid deployment. The chariots in the rear look for alternate routes.

(2:7) -- The court receives information that the crossings over the rivers have been taken, and becomes despondent. From the

<sup>48</sup> McCarthy, D.J. “Some Holy War Vocabulary in Joshua 2.” *CBQ* 33 (1971) 230.

<sup>49</sup> Pinker, A. “Nineveh—An Isle is She.” *ZAW* 116 (2004) 402-5.

<sup>50</sup> Pinker, A. “Descent of the goddess Ishtar to the Netherworld and Nahum 2:8.” *V/T* 55,1 (2005) 89-100.

commanding position of “the palace” on top of mound Kuyunjik the court can see that the situation is quickly deteriorating.

(2:8) -- An urgent and desperate appeal is made to the goddess Ishtar, protector of the city.

(2:6) -- Belatedly the leadership turns to the defense of the very long walls of the city. However, enemy sappers are already working at the wall’s base.

(2:9) -- Panic breaks out. People in an irrational effort are trying to escape. But Nineveh’s water obstacles preclude any such possibility.

(2:10) -- Nineveh’s riches have no attraction.

(2:11) -- Terror strikes all.

(2:12-13) -- In particular, the royal house, which in the past lead with courage and determination on numerous campaigns, is not there to take command and lead.

(2:14) -- God’s fury has been unleashed against Nineveh, and it will destroy its implements of imperialism forever.

This scheme assumes that the situation described is that of Nineveh as the enemy approaches and attacks the city.

## 5. NEW IDEAS

Recent scholarship tends to down play the role of inundation in the fall of Nineveh. I have already mentioned and discussed Scurlock’s view that control of both the Tarbitzu and Khosr canal systems could have enabled the Medes and Babylonians to generate enough water flow “to do some damage to the fortifications of Nineveh.”

Machinist suggested that verses 2:7 – 14 should be viewed as describing the post-capture stage.<sup>51</sup> He says, “if there is a basis to the Biblical and Greek notices about Nineveh’s fall, it is not a massive flooding as these notices appear to indicate, but, I would propose, a more limited one, involving the Khosr and deliberately induced by the conquerors after the city had been taken. It would thus have been a ritual act to seal the destruction of Nineveh, carried out especially by the Babylonian conquerors, apart of whom, the *Babylonian Chronicle* informs us, remained in Nineveh headed by their king, Nabopolassar, for a time after the capture. The ‘flooding,’ in short, would have been intended symbolically, recalling, we may well suppose, Sennacherib’s own symbol-filled destruction of Babylon almost 70 years before, which his Bavian inscription indicates was also perpetrated after his capture of the city. And that this flooding of Nineveh manipulated the waterworks that Sennacherib himself had constructed or renovated could only have given ironic satisfaction.” Such a comprehensive inundation would have probably included both the waters of the Khosr (which could have been duly released at various points upstream and then effectively dammed within the limits of the city) and the collective discharge of a number of Nineveh’s still operative irrigation canals.<sup>52</sup>

As has been shown, the MT could not have referred to a “physical dissolution” by water of “the palace,” Nahum being fully aware that

<sup>51</sup> Machinist, 194. Stronach adopts Machinist’s proposition (Stronach, 321-323).

<sup>52</sup> Stronach, 322.

topography does not permit it, even if the Khosr is completely dammed. If Machinist is right in his dating of Nahum as a post-event description why is this tit-for-tat flooding not mentioned in the MT? <sup>53</sup> The retributive nature of the act would have certainly dovetailed with **על מי לא עברה רעתך תמיד** in Nah 3:19. Since the Greek sources, if at all acceptable, refer to pre-capture flooding, and the MT cannot possibly refer to flooding, what remains at the basis for Machinist's suggestion for a post-capture flooding? Machinist also mentions three ritual acts (taking of ashes, mutilation of reliefs, and decapitation of a statue) from which he extrapolates that some flooding occurred as a ritual act.<sup>54</sup> This cannot be disproved.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "our earliest and best authority for the events in question," *The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*, says nothing of such an extraordinary event as capturing Nineveh by means of flooding.<sup>55</sup> Neither Xenophon nor Diodorus provide any consistent and reliable evidence that flooding played a major role in Nineveh's fall. Archaeological excavations at Nineveh have not so far produced any evidence in support of such notion. Indeed, Nineveh's topography precludes the possibility of significant flooding by Khosr.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, Sennacherib's Palace on top of Kuyunjik could not have been dissolved by flooding of the Khosr, whether by manipulation of its flow or damming.

The various verses in Nahum that have been construed as supporting flooding in Nineveh find a reasonable figurative interpretation within a contextual scheme that does not involve flooding. Indeed, Nahum contains at least as many verses suggesting a fiery end to Nineveh (1:6, 10, 2:14, 3:13, 15) as those alluding to a flooding being the cause for Nineveh's demise. Stronach says, "it would seem that the shortness of the siege of Nineveh was not necessarily linked to a hostile manipulation of the waters of the Khosr (or those of any other relatively depleted, high-summer stream). Instead, it is preferable to suppose that the best efforts of the hard-pressed defenders were undercut by a combination of factors, ... . In this context it is relevant to point to the unusually elongated shape of the site, the sheer length of the walls that had to be manned, ... and, perhaps most critically, the fact that the city's numerous gates were not really in condition – notwithstanding the introduction of various detectable emergency measures – to resist a series of determined assaults."<sup>57</sup> This would fully agree with Nah 3:13.

The notion that Nineveh was captured through flooding, whether natural or manipulated by man, should be discarded.

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<sup>53</sup> Machinist, 181. He says, "Nahum should date after, but probably not too long after, the actual conquest of Nineveh in 612 BC."

<sup>54</sup> Machinist, 194-195.

<sup>55</sup> Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Machinist, 193 notes 56 and 57.

<sup>57</sup> Stronach, 321.