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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 **עלה על פניך** as “a scatterer (or, he that dashes to pieces) comes up against you” and as addressed to Nineveh.² Use of the phrase **עלה על פניך** 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 **אמץ**, **חזק**, **צפה**, **נצר** 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.

² So NKJV, Young, NASB, J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.1991) 55; J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit Israels*. (WMANT 35; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verl.; 1970) 25; K. J. Cathcart, *Nahum in the Light of Northwest Semitic Studies* (BibOR 26; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973) 73; K. Spronk, *Nahum*. (Kampen: Kok Pharos; 1997) 83. Many earlier interpreters make Judah the addressee; so, Kimchi, Rashi, Abarbanel, Sanctius, Dathe, Michaelis.

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 [פָּיַץ] 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.

³ J. M. P. Smith, “Commentary on the Book of Nahum,” J.M.P. Smith, W. H. Ward and J. A. Bewer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1985 [1st.published 1911]) 313.

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

⁵ A. S. Van der Woude, “The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile,” Joint British-Dutch Old Testament Conference, (1976: Louvain, Belgium), *Instruction and Interpretation: Studies in Hebrew language, Palestinian Archaeology and Biblical*

4. Already Ehrlich finds מפיץ (he that dashes) incongruous with the following על פניך. He considers פיצ 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 על, which is usually taken as “upon.” Yet, על could also been understood as a poetic shortened עלה, “attacked.” Such sense is attested in the Phoenician inscription of Ahiiram, line 2 that reads מלך במלכם וסכן בס[כ]נם ותא מחנת עלי גבל ואל, “If any king whatever, or any governor whatever, or camp commandant should attack Byblos.” The verb עלי can govern a direct object as also found in the Ras Shamra text RŠ 24.277, הם מת יעל בנש, “or Death will attack man.” Dahood used this evidence from Ugaritic sources to interpret in Ps 35:20 the phrase ועל רגעי ארץ, “but attack the oppressed.” He claims there that “From the point of view of style, consonantal w’l should express a verb antithetic to ‘speak of peace.’ This desideratum can be obtained by pointing we’âlû.”⁷
5. In our verse the first colon of Nah 2:2 can be separated into two cola על המפיץ and על פניך. The phrase על פניך may be a *terminus technicus* akin to the current “frontal attack.” Such understanding perhaps sheds also some light on the

Exegesis: Papers Read at the Joint British-Dutch Old Testament Conference Held at Louvain, 1976, from 30 August to 2 September (OTS 20; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977) 116-117.

⁶ A. B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ki-Pschuto* (New York: Ktav; 1969 [1st. published 1899-1901]) 445.

⁷ M. Dahood, *Psalms I*. (AB 16; Garden City: Doubleday, 1978) 231.

enigmatic מפיץ.⁸ While מפיץ is usually translated “scatterer/shatterer” this sense is not attested in the Hebrew Bible. The only occurrence of מפיץ 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 מפץ, “mace,” is not a great help since a mace is not supposed to advance against a city.⁹ Perhaps, מפיץ 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,

⁸ The Septuagint probably reads מפיש or מפיה by translating מפיץ, “panting.” The Targum renders מפיץ, “and spreading themselves” (ומתבררין) The Peshitta’s מדרבנא (“leaders”) may be an inner corruption of מברנא (“scatterer”). The Vulgate has “scatterer, disperser” (dispergat). BDB suggest reading מפץ, in the sense of “club, hammer” (Prov 25:18, Jer 51:20). Haupt considers “hammer” as the correct translation for מפיץ, 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 מפיץ, “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 פיצ is not attested in the HB. Pereman takes מפיץ = מפציץ, “bombarder” (Pereman, *Nahum*, 47.) While besiegers often used catapults for bombarding a city with heavy rocks or rotting corpses, such meaning for פיפמ is not attested in the HB.

⁹ Van der Woude, “Book of Nahum,” 116.

which is normally not used for frontal attacks against a fortified city, would attack Nineveh.¹⁰ 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 על highlights the attack, shifting from the general to the specific, “The cavalry attacks, attacks your front.” The poetic על (for עלה) has the force of the imperative, in line with such forms in the remaining cola. This understanding of על is supported by the Peshitta’s “against you” and the Nova Vulgata’s “contra te.”¹¹ Yet, while the poetic על (for עלה) occurs for various grammatical forms it is not attested for the *Qal* perfect 3rd masculine (singular) of עלה.

6. It is also possible to emend על to על[ו]. In this verse על is followed by פניך, the פ being very similar to the ך in the paleoscript.¹² Thus, an early drop of the ך in

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 על פניך as does the Septuagint. Note that there are three versions of the Vulgate in print today: *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam* (the official Latin text of the Catholic Church from 1502 to 1979), *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem* (a critical attempt to restore the Vulgate to its original Latin text), and *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 פ and ך in the paleoscript may explain the replacement of the ך-line with a פ-line in the acrostic of Ps 25 and 34. Cf. S. Leeman, “The Atbash-Acrostic.” *JBQ* 24 (1996) 43-45. Leeman explains the replacement of the ך with a פ by an application of the אתבש principle. The פ verse was put at the end because putting it in

על by haplography is quite possible. Perhaps, such a change was even effected intentionally, when the military content of the wording על פניך was not anymore clear. The shift from עלה, the singular standing for the general (*pars pro toto*), to the plural על 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 על[ה] מפּיץ refers to [the] cavalry and על[ן] means “[they] attack,” rather than “upon,” Nah 2:2 would read

עלה מפּיץ על[ן] פניך	<i>Cavalry advances, they attack your front</i>
על[ה] מפּיץ על פניך	<i>Cavalry attacks, attacks your front</i>
נצור מצורה צפה דרך	<i>Guard the rampart, watch the road</i>
חזק מתנים אמץ כח	<i>Brace loins, beef up forces.</i> 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

place of the ך would have violated the integrity of the alphabetic order. However, it is possible that the scarcity of words starting with ך forced the use of words starting with פ, which is very similar to the ך in the paleoscript. Cf. A. Pinker, “Reconstruction of MATZOR: Habakkuk 2:1.” *JBQ* 31 (2003) 164. Consider this possibility for עפלה in Hab 2:4.

¹³ Cf. Num 22:6.

¹⁴ The MT מאד, 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 על-פניך 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 **š** 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 **š** 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.