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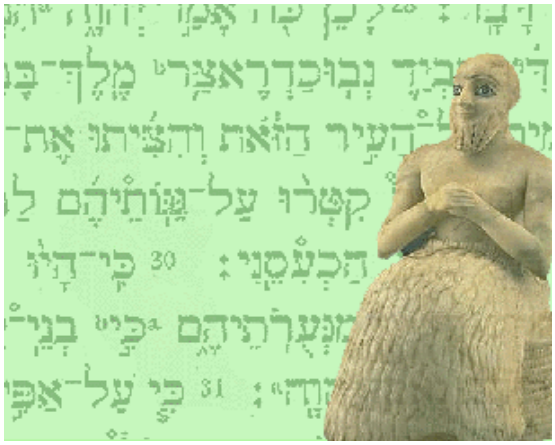

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THOMAS RENZ,
A PERFECTLY BROKEN ACROSTIC IN NAHUM 1?

A PERFECTLY BROKEN ACROSTIC IN NAHUM 1?[1]

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ST MICHAEL'S HIGHGATE, LONDON

INTRODUCTION

The poetic features of Nahum 1 have long been a bone of contention. Many readers detect a tendency towards an acrostic composition in the first half of the chapter, while others deny the existence of an acrostic in view of the many clear deviations from it. The following essay argues that it is possible to understand both the acrostic pattern and the deviations from it as part of a single design. I suggest that the deliberate juxtaposition of acrostic and anti-acrostic features is for rhetorical effect and conveys a message of disrupted order. Readers and listeners are expected to pick up both the poem's acrostic features and the fact that the acrostic is incomplete and imperfect.

It is possible that this rhetorical effect was created secondarily by the transformation of earlier material, if the core of the opening poem and the bulk of the remainder of the book do not have the same origin.[2] But even if the link between the poem and the remainder of Nahum were secondary, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between the opening stanza and the remainder of the book, as a redactor may well have sought to provide greater cohesion to the Nahum material, whether or not with a view to integrating it with other prophetic writings in a larger composition.

The case for authorial unity of broken acrostic and subsequent poems may, however, be stronger than commonly acknowledged. If it is likely that Hebrew alphabetic acrostics were first composed

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[1] I want to express my gratitude to Professor Robert Gordon whose invitation to read a paper to the Cambridge Old Testament Seminar in April 2008 gave the impetus for this essay and to Chris Lowe, my research assistant at Oak Hill College in 2008, who did work on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] The author of the book of Nahum might have used an already existing alphabetic poem for the opening of his work or a later redactor might have reconfigured the Nahum corpus.

by Judean scribes who had knowledge of Akkadian name and sentence acrostics,[3] it is noteworthy that several words and phrases in Nahum suggest that its author had knowledge of Akkadian terms and traditions, and thus may have been familiar with Akkadian writings.[4] In other words, the poet who is responsible for the compositions later in Nahum is a good candidate for authorship of the acrostic. In addition, the exquisite poetry elsewhere in the book suggests a poet sophisticated enough to make use of an acrostic in surprising ways. Differences in genre and style need not point to a different author, given the particular role of the opening poem in the book. Language and theophanic motifs allow for a sufficiently early date for the poem. Indeed, van Selms claims that בעל would not have been used with YHWH (cf. Hos 2:18 [ET, 2:16]) at a later time, as in the phrase בעל חמה (v 2).[5] He also points out that the geographical allusions are all northern and claims that they would not have raised as much interest in Persian times.[6] While we need not rule out the possibility of later editorial work or mistakes in the transmission of the text, we should allow for the possibility of the

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[3] K.C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics: A Form Critical Study" (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1984), 416–20. Of the five Akkadian acrostics for which dates have been suggested all but one are dated earlier than the fall of Nineveh, see B.R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian* Literature (3rd ed., Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2005); W.M. Soll, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," *Bib* 69 (1988), 305–23; J.F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," W.W. Hallo et al. (eds), *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ANETS, 8; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990), 283–304.

[4] K.J. Cathcart, "Treaty-Curses and the Book of Nahum," *CBQ* 35 (1973), 179–87, and *Nahum in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (BeO, 26; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973); B. Becking, "A Judge in History: Notes on Nahum 3,7 and Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty Paragraph 47:457," *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte*, 1 (1995), 111–16; K. Spronk, *Nahum* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997); G.H. Johnston, "Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses," *BibSac* 158 (2001), 415–36, and "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to the Neo-Assyrian Lion Motif," *BibSac* 158 (2001), 287–307.

[5] A. van Selms, "The Alphabetic Hymn in Nahum 1," *OTWSA* 12 (1969), 33–45 (40).

[6] Van Selms, "Alphabetic Hymn," 41. Hanson seeks to counter this by claiming, wrongly in my view, that "northern geographical allusions are common to the genre of epiphany and thus may be stereotypes of the genre." He refers to Deut 33:22 (epiphany?); Isa 63:1 (Edom!); Ps 29:6 (Lebanon, in geographical merism with Kadesh in v 8?) and 68:16 (Bashan envious of Zion but the actual epiphany is from Sinai, v 9!). Note the opposite claim in J.D. Nogalski, "The Redactional Shaping of Nahum 1 for the Book of the Twelve," P.R. Davies and D.J.A. Clines (eds), *Among the Prophets* (JSOTSup, 144; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 193–202 (200).

composition of a broken acrostic early on in the development of the Nahum tradition.

The essay will proceed as follows. A brief history of research highlights the main options for interpreting the acrostic features of the opening poem and thus brings into relief my own proposal. I will substantiate my proposal in two steps. First, I will explore what an alphabetic acrostic underlying Nahum 1 might have looked like, and defend the idea that there are genuinely acrostic features in Nahum 1 in the light of recent arguments to the contrary. Second, I will offer an exposition of the interrelationship between acrostic and anti-acrostic features in the text. The concluding part of the essay will then explore how the opening poem relates to the remainder of the book of Nahum.

NAHUM'S ACROSTIC FEATURES IN THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH

We do not know how early acrostic features in Nahum were noticed. Lack of evidence is no certain indicator of lack of awareness. In the manuscripts themselves acrostics were often not intentionally written as such, although Klaas Spronk argues that the paragraphing in certain Greek manuscripts (Alexandrinus, Marchalianus) suggests recognition of a line-acrostic in Nahum 1.[7] Paul W. Gaebelein observes that the Aleppo Codex put the acrostic letter at the beginning of a line in Ps 34:9–23; 119; 145 and Prov 31:10–31 but that no such systematic effort was made in the case of Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34:2–8; 37; 111; 112.[8] The same inconsistency is reflected already in the biblical manuscripts found at Qumran.[9] This suggests that we cannot conclude from the manuscript evidence whether a poem was recognized as acrostic or not. Similarly, while it is true that Kimchi's commentary makes no reference to acrostic features in Nahum,[10] neither does he remark on acrostic features in his commentary on Psalms 9 and 10.[11] Rashi, also, does not invariably

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[7] K. Spronk, "The Line-Acrostic in Nahum 1: New Evidence from Ancient Greek Manuscripts and from the Literary Analysis of the Hebrew Text," R. de Hoop, M.C.A. Korpel, and S.E. Porter (eds), *The Impact of Unit Delimitation on Exegesis* (Pericope: Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity, 7; Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2009), 228–40.

[8] P.W. Gaebelein, Jr., "Psalm 34 and Other Biblical Acrostics: Evidence from the Aleppo Codex," *Maarav* 5–6 (1990), 127–43.

[9] G.W. Nebe offers an overview ("Alphabets," in *Encylopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* 1:18–20).

[10] W. Windfuhr (ed.), *Rabbinische Übungstexte 1: Der Kommentar des David Qimchi zum Propheten Nahum* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1927).

[11] *The Longer Commentary of R. David Kimhi on the First Book of the Psalms* (transl. R.G. Finch with an introduction by G.H. Box; London: SPCK, 1919). This includes exposition of Psalms 1–10, 15–17, 19, 22, 24. It is of course possible for someone to be aware of an acrostic without making reference to it. Jerome did not mention the acrostic nature of Ps 111 in

refer to acrostic features. While he points out the acrostics of Psalms 111 and 112 at the beginning of Psalm 111 and discusses the absence of a נ line in (his text of) Psalm 145, he makes no reference to acrostic features in his comments on a number of other psalms, e.g., Psalm 34 whose acrostic nature surely did not escape his notice.[12]

The earliest known reference to the influence of the alphabet on the poem in Nahum 1 (vv 3–7) is found in remarks by Franz Delitzsch on Psalm 9 in the second edition of his Psalms commentary (1867).[13] He credited Lutheran pastor G. Frohnmeyer (1813–1880) with the observation.

Gustav Bickell was the first to offer an ingenious reconstruction of the entire alphabet in Nah 1:2–10, finding a sequence running from א to מ at the beginning of lines in vv 2–10, and the remainder of the alphabet within the line.[14] This was challenged by Hermann Gunkel who offered his own proposal for an acrostic poem extending to 2:3 (ET, 2:2).[15] These and one or two similar attempts to reconstruct a full alphabetical sequence have produced neither agreement nor widespread acceptance.[16]

Paul Haupt, who suggested that the book of Nahum was compiled in Maccabean times for a liturgical celebration of Nika-

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his homily on that psalm but referred to it in his homily on Ps 112. See *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1: *1–59 on the Psalms* (transl. M.L. Ewald; FCNT, 48; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 280–85. His homily on Psalms 9–10 (35–37) only deals with the superscription.

[12] See the text of Radak's commentary on Psalms in *The Bar Ilan University Responsa*.

[13] F. Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar über die Psalmen* (Leipzig: Dörflin & Franke, 1867), 107.

[14] G. Bickell, "Die hebräische Metrik," *ZDMG* 34 (1880), 557–63, 559–60. His proposal was modified several times, not least in response to Gunkel. See finally "Beiträge zur Semitischen Metrik I: Das alphabetische Lied in Nah i 2–ii 3," *Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Classe* 131/V (Wien, 1894), 1–12.

[15] H. Gunkel, "Nahum 1," *ZAW* 11 (1893), 223–44. Cf. the extended footnote in Gunkel's *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895), transl. K.W. Whitney, Jr. as *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 315.

[16] Cf. O. Happel, *Der Psalm Nahums kritisch untersucht* (Würzburg: Andreas Göbel, 1900) for 1:2–15. W.R. Arnold, designated the traditional text a "distorted fragment of an alphabetical poem" ("The Composition of Nahum 1–2:3," *ZAW* 21 (1901), 225–65, 256). For this and the following see D.L. Christensen, "The Acrostic of Nahum Reconsidered," *ZAW* 87 (1975), 17–30 (18). Klaas Spronk observes that "W. Nowak still attempted to restore a complete acrostic" in the first edition of his *Kleine Propheten* commentary (1897) but in later editions stopped the attempt at v 8 (1903) or v 10 (1922), see "Acrostics in the Book of Nahum," *ZAW* 110 (1998), 209–22 (210).

nor's day, argued that the author cited only part of an acrostic because the last seven lines (from ע onwards) did not suit his purpose.[17] This view, that Nahum only ever reflected the earlier part of an alphabetic acrostic, established itself as the most widely held opinion on the matter.[18] The marginal annotations in *BHK* and *BHS* testify to this consensus. A comparison of *BHK* and *BHS* also reflects a shift from attempts to find an acrostic ending with ס (Otto Proksch in the third edition of *BHK*)[19] to the conclusion that the acrostic does not extend beyond כ (Kurt Elliger in *BHS*).

In the 1960s, Simon J. de Vries claimed: "Two things ought no longer be disputed: (1) Nahum 1 does indeed begin with an acrostic hymn... (2) this hymn reproduces only half the alphabet, ending with the letter כ, and it does this quite freely, without rigid conformance to the usual acrostic pattern."[20] This did not discourage others from seeking to reconstruct an earlier, purer form of the alphabetic sequence. Frequently, appeal was made to editorial activity to explain the divergences of the present text from a neat acrostic sequence.[21] Hence, the brokenness of the acrostic remained an issue, even where its existence and deliberate incompleteness were accepted.

Alongside such explorations, there have always been those who cast doubt on the very existence of acrostic features in Nahum 1.[22] In recent years, these skeptical voices have become louder. Michael H. Floyd presented the most detailed and forceful case against the existence of an acrostic in Nahum 1 and it is his case

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[17] P. Haupt, "The Book of Nahum," *JBL* 26 (1907), 1–53.

[18] Cf. the rejection of more ambitious proposals by J. Wellhausen, *Die Kleinen Propheten übersetzt und erklärt* (3rd ed.; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1898); and see M. Löhr, "Alphabetische und alphabetisierende Lieder im AT," *ZAW* 25 (1905), 173–98; P. Humbert, "Essai d'analyse de Nahoum i 2–ii 3," *ZAW* 44 (1926), 226–80 (267).

[19] A question mark is added to the marginal מ (as well as נ, identified as the second bicolon in v 2). The second edition, for which Walter Nowak was responsible (1913), had additional question marks next to ל and ס and found the latter in סָרִים rather than סָבוּים.

[20] S.J. de Vries, "The Acrostic of Nahum in the Jerusalem Liturgy," *VT* 16 (1966), 476–81, 477–78. Cf. similar remarks by A. van Selms, "The Alphabetic Hymn in Nahum 1," *OTWSA* 12 (1969), 33–45, 33; K. Seybold, "Vormasoretische Randnotizen in Nahum 1," *ZAW* 101 (1989), 71–85, 72.

[21] E.g., J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit Israels* (WMANT, 35; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), 16–19; K. Seybold, *Profane Prophetie: Studien zum Buch Nahum* (SBS, 135; Stuttgart: KBW, 1989), 74–77; Nogalski, "Redactional Shaping." Spronk offers a brief critique of Nogalski's proposal ("Acrostics," 213–14).

[22] E.g., A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum* (Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1947); W.A. Meier, *The Book of Nahum* (St Louis: Concordia, 1959); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

with which I will need to engage in detail later on,[23] even if others have remained convinced that Nahum 1 reflects acrostic features.[24] The above survey of the history of research suggests four main options for interpreting the acrostic or pseudo-acrostic features in Nahum 1:

1. The opening poem was composed under the influence of the alphabet (e.g., Frohnmeyer, Delitzsch).
2. Nahum 1 originally represented a complete alphabetic acrostic which became lost in the process of textual transmission (e.g., Bickell, Gunkel).
3. The author or redactor responsible for what we know as Nahum 1 employed an acrostic poem without making full use of it (e.g., Jeremias, Roberts, Seybold) or composed an incomplete acrostic (e.g., Sellin, Patterson, Perlitt, Longman). In other words, there is a conscious alphabetic design rather than mere influence of the alphabet, and the deviations from the alphabetic sequence cannot be accounted for by appeal to textual corruption alone.
4. The appearance of acrostic features in Nahum 1 is entirely coincidental (e.g., Maier, Robertson, Fabry).

There is no need to engage in detail with the second option. Its plausibility was rarely accepted, even in the days when a low regard for the received text of the Hebrew Bible, and a correspondingly high regard for confident reconstructions of more original forms of the text, was popular.[25]

The first option may appear the safest, in that it allows for the acrostic features to be "accidental" (in the sense of being non-essential for communication) without implying the stronger, and arguably less credible, claim that the signs of an alphabetic sequence at the beginning of lines are the result of mere chance. Its Achilles heel, however, unless it moves in the direction of option three, is its lack of explanatory power. Why would a poet allow the

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[23] M.H. Floyd, "The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1:2–10," *JBL* 113 (1994), 421–37. Other skeptics include B. Becking, "Divine Wrath and the Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Nahum," *SJOT* 9 (1995), 277–96; G. Baumann, *Gottes Gewalt im Wandel: Traditionsgeschichtliche und intertextuelle Studien zu Nahum 1,2–8* (WMANT, 108; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005); H.-J. Fabry, *Nahum* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2006).

[24] E.g., Spronk, "Acrostics."

[25] The Wadi Muraba'at scroll (MurXII) contains essentially the same Hebrew text as found in medieval codices. 4QXII^{g} only offers vv 7–9 from Nahum 1.

order of the alphabet to exert an influence on a composition without the alphabetic sequence being of any real significance?

It may not be fair to accuse the fourth option of lacking explanatory power, for, in the view of scholars defending this view, there is nothing here which needs an explanation. But what is the likelihood of a text approaching an acrostic as closely as our poem by accident? Floyd appeals to similar chance occurrences in English literature. These, however, do not strike me as nearly similar enough to Nahum 1, and thus fail to persuade. If other aspects of his argument can be adequately addressed, the need to appeal to chance disappears. I shall seek to defend the view that the acrostic features are deliberate below but for now a citation from G. B. Gray reminds us how close Nahum comes to representing an alphabetic acrostic. Taking the divine name at the beginning of v 3b to v 3a,[26] he comments:

> As the Hebrew text stands apart from any, even the slightest emendation, the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th, and 9th letters of the Hebrew alphabet … stand separated from one another by precisely the same constant interval which would separate them in an acrostich poem so constructed that two [half-]lines should be given to each successive letter [cf. Psalms 25, 34, 145; Prov 31.10–31]. This single fact, when duly considered, appears to me to necessitate the conclusion that we have in this passage the result of fully conscious design, and in these [half-]lines, as in those that intervene, parts of an acrostich.[27]

The third option embraces a number of views which share the conviction that there are both acrostic and anti-acrostic features and that both are the result of purposeful activity. Most commonly it is argued either that the poet liked the idea of following the sequence of the alphabet but did not sufficiently care for it to actually execute an alphabetic acrostic or cared about producing an alphabetic acrostic but was followed by a redactor who did not. In either case the resulting imperfection represents a lack of desire for producing an actual acrostic rather than a poetic device itself. In other words, what unites these views is the conviction that errors in the process of transmission are not the (sole) reason for the imperfection of the acrostic sequence but the fact of the brokenness of the acrostic is without purpose itself. It is this last point which I want to question. The older majority view was right to affirm that there is an acrostic and that its imperfections cannot be accounted for by

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[26] Cf., e.g., the layout adopted in *BHS*. See also the first word of Ps 25.2 which is also a divine appellation.

[27] G.B. Gray, "The Alphabetic Poem in Nahum," in idem, *The Form of Hebrew Poetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 243–263 (253). The actual essay is from 1898.

textual corruption alone but it failed to allow for the possibility that *the imperfection of the acrostic is to be read as part of its design*.

THE OPENING POEM OF NAHUM: A BROKEN ALPHABETIC ACROSTIC

It is not material to my argument whether the author, or indeed a redactor, of Nahum 1 used an actual alphabetic poem or whether such a perfectly acrostic poem only ever existed as a possibility. Regardless of the precise literary emergence of Nahum 1, there is heuristic value in comparing the received text with a more consistent alphabetic poem.[28] A translation of the acrostic is offered further below.

א	אל קנוא ונקם יהוה	נקם יהוה ובעל חמה
ב	בסופה ובשערה דרכו	וענן אבק רגליו
ג	גוער בים ויבשהו	וכל הנהרות החריב
ד	דללו בשן וכרמל	ופרח לבנון אמלל
ה	הרים רעשו ממנו	והגבעות התמגגו
ו	ותשא הארץ מפניו	ותבל וכל ישבי בה
ז	זעמו מי יעמוד לפניו	ומי יקום בחרון אפו
ח	חמתו נתכה כאש	והצרים נתצו ממנו
ט	טוב יהוה לקוו	ומעוז ביום צרה
י	ידע חסי בו [יהוה]	ובשטף עבר יסתירם
כ	כלה יעשה מקומה	ואיביו ירדף חשך

It would be possible to reconstruct additional bicola opening with ל and מ (and one opening with נ could be taken from v 2). The poet responsible for Nahum 1 appears to play with the idea of an acrostic beyond כ but attempts to reconstruct an acrostic beyond כ seem to me futile.[29] The divine name in brackets in the י

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[28] Cf. the following with, e.g., W. Rudolph, *Micha - Nahum - Habakuk - Zephanja* (KAT, 13/3; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1975), 152. Rudolph suggests a ל instead of a ו at the beginning of the second colon of the ט line.

[29] A later conclusion with מ is implausibly advocated by Loren F. Bliese who believes that "leaving the *n* expected but not realized, serves as a cryptic hint of the theme of NINEVEH for the whole book" ("A Cryptic Chiastic Acrostic: Finding Meaning from Structure in the Poetry of Nahum," *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* 7 (1995), 48–81, 53). He expects the frequent use of נ at the beginning of the poem to fulfill the same function in connection with judicious placement of the divine name which provides the other letters required to form the name Nineveh. (Bliese's מ line is not, as one might expect, in v 9 but in v 11. He takes the מ of v 9 together with the ל which opens the last colon of v 9 and the כ

line is sometimes added to establish greater balance of length. It would also underline the correspondence between the ט and the י lines ("those who wait for him" parallels "those who seek refuge in him" in the first colon and "in the day of distress" parallels "in a sweeping flood" in the second colon). A translation might read as follows:

A zealous and avenging God is YHWH;
avenging is YHWH and Master of rage.
In gale and storm is his way
and clouds are the dust of his feet.
He blasts the sea and dries it up
and all the streams he makes dry.
Thinned out are Bashan and Carmel
and the bud of Lebanon is withered.
Mountains shake because of him
and the hills go to pieces.
And the earth rears before him
and the world and all who inhabit it.
His scorn – who can stand before it?
And who can rise in the heat of his anger?
His rage is poured out like fire
and the rocks are torn asunder because of him.
Good is YHWH to those who wait for him
and a stronghold in the day of distress.
He [YHWH] knows those who seek refuge in him
and in a sweeping flood he protect them.
A full end he makes of resistance
and his enemies he pursues into darkness.

A comparison of the received text with the poem above highlights the following characteristics of Nahum 1:

1. It has additional material relating to Exod. 34:6–7 in vv 2–3.
2. It substitutes אמלל in v 4 for a word-form beginning with ד (here דללו).
3. It reverses the word-order at the beginning of v 6 to זעמו מי יעמוד לפני.
4. Instead of טוב יהוה לקוו (or similar) followed by ומעוז in the next colon, it has טוב יהוה למעוז in v 7a.
5. It adds a ו before the י line in v 7b.

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from the second colon of v 10 to form an allusion to the מלך ["king"] of Assyria.). An earlier conclusion with ט is advocated by Spronk, "Acrostics," 218. He identifies vv 7–8 as two tricola which is plausible but his claim that this is the colometry indicated in the MT is debatable.

6. It divides the lines differently in vv 7–8.
7. It does not have a verb in addition to כלה יעשה in v 8a (here יסתירם).
8. It has a suffix on מקומה.
9. It adds vv 9–10 (and vv 1 and 11).

The hypothetical poem above includes a few features which do not directly affect our discussion of acrostic traits. Directly relevant are the first three features listed, features (5) and (6), and the place of the poem in the book which I have listed as feature (9). The differences between the hypothetical poem and Nahum 1 which are numbered (4) and (7) result from an attempt to establish a better balance between cola in the reconstructed poem. (4) has been adopted because it reflects the LXX rendering (cf. Lam 3:25a).[30] The exact verb supposed in (7) is of course not relevant for the purpose of this discussion. מקומה in the reconstructed poem should be interpreted as a term for "resistance" and read without *mappiq* on the assumption that the poem is read without the superscription in Nah 1:1 which now provides the likely referent of the suffix (Nineveh). I do not think it probable that מקומה ("her/its place") refers to צרה ("distress").[31]

Given these divergences from a "perfect" acrostic, how plausible is it that Nahum 1 has indeed been composed with the alphabetic sequence in mind? In response to Floyd's critique of attempts to highlight acrostic features in Nahum 1, my argument needs to address two distinct issues of plausibility.

First, Floyd argues that *there is no good explanation for the divergences between our hypothetical alphabetical acrostic and the received text*, and that a number of proposals which have been made in the history of research to minimize the differences between the received text and the presumed acrostic are arbitrary. Floyd makes some valid points here, although his argument might be stronger still had he engaged more directly with redaction-critical proposals.[32] Floyd is right to caution us against forcing Nahum 1 into an alphabetic acrostic by means of corrections to the text which have no other justification than making Nahum 1 conform to an acrostic. Nevertheless, I

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[30] Jon D. Levenson suggests that the text originally had למקוו (לְמִקְוֵיו) which was read as לְמָעוֹז by a later scribe who remembered Ps 37:39–40 ("Textual and Semantic Notes on Nah. I 7–8," *VT* 25 [1975], 792–95).

[31] *Pace* Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 428. Ibn Kaspi goes as far back as v 5 and sees a reference to the earth (*Adnei Kesef*, 113).

[32] As I do not argue that the alphabetic sequence starts in v 2, Floyd's objection to irregular intervals as vitiating against the concept of an acrostic ("Chimerical Acrostic," 422) is not relevant here. In fact, irregularities are to be found in a number of biblical as well as later Hebrew acrostics; for the latter see I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (transl. by R.P. Scheindlin; Philadelphia: JPS, 1993), 228.

cannot agree with the claim that "taken just as it stands, the text shows no traces of an alphabetic sequence that might qualify as acrostical."[33] As indicated above, Floyd's parallels from English literature fail to convince me. In the exposition below I seek to show that the divergences between our hypothetical acrostic and the received text are susceptible to an explanation which need not assume a lack of concern for the acrostic.

The second issue of plausibility constitutes Floyd's more fundamental objection. He argues that *it makes no sense to speak of alphabetic-acrostic features in the absence of a full, independent alphabetic poem*. In other words, Floyd seems to suggest that even if there were no divergences between our hypothetical acrostic and the received text, it would still be inappropriate to speak of Nahum 1 as presenting an alphabetic acrostic. There are two concerns here.

First, Floyd is highly skeptical of the idea of *an alphabetic sequence which is incomplete*. He notes that "there are no convincing parallel cases of an alphabetic acrostic covering only half the alphabet."[34] Floyd discounts Psalms 9–10, because "the traces of an alphabetically ordered sequence of lines in Psalms 9–10 constitute the remains of a single, complete alphabetic acrostic."[35] This is likely to be the case, but the fact that a good number of Hebrew acrostics are imperfect in one way or another deserves fuller discussion before the possibility of an alphabetic sequence which is prematurely cut short is discounted. Of the eight acrostic poems in the Psalter only three go from א to ת without missing a letter.[36]

Concerning comparative ANE material, the absence of Assyrian or Babylonian parallels is not of concern, given the non-alphabetic character of Akkadian. Floyd claims that Greco-Roman materials similarly "show nothing resembling a so-called partial acrostic."[37] There are a number of partial acrostics among Greek

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[33] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 429.

[34] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 423. Elbogen notes acrostics which are interrupted and taken up later by the poet (*Jewish Liturgy*, 215). This, however, "was no [read: an] innovation," cf. correctly *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (3rd ed.; Hildesheim: Olms, 1995), 275.

[35] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 423. Contrast van Selms, who is convinced that the difference in content and the abruptness of the transition argue against an original unity of the psalms ("Alphabetic Hymn," 35). Assuming that the alphabetic sequences once were complete, van Selms suspects a case of homoioarkton.

[36] For an argument to suggest that the various deviations from what may be considered the norm are intentional, see R. Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 (2006), Article 5, available at http://www.jhsonline.org

[37] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 423.

papyri, which Floyd does not discuss.[38] But it is reasonable to assume that these partial acrostics were once complete or, if not, were school-exercises which either do not reflect their sources *in toto*, or are *ad hoc* creations. Nevertheless, it deserves to be noted that such documents provide evidence for variations on a straight alphabetic sequence of the sort found in later Hebrew poems, namely the pattern *alpha omega*, *beta psi*, *gamma chi* etc. attested in P.Mich.inv. 4953.[39]

In my view the comparative evidence does not tell us anything beyond what we know already, that those who listen to a poem which employs the sequence of the alphabet would expect the poet to make use of the full alphabet. But poets do not always fulfill the expectations of their audience and we must therefore allow for the possibility of a premature conclusion of an alphabetical sequence which has rhetorical significance.

Caution is certainly warranted when approaching an apparently incomplete acrostic, but maybe not the "considerable skepticism" which Floyd urges.[40] The question is whether the incompleteness is itself poetically significant, or, at least, does not mitigate against the purpose of adopting an alphabetic sequence in this instance. This is a question to which we will return in the exposition below.

Floyd is, second, highly skeptical of the idea of *an alphabetic sequence which is not independent of surrounding material*. He suggests that there are "no convincing parallel cases of a compositional form integrating material that is acrostical with material that is not."[41] But, if a single acrostic poem underlies Psalms 9–10, as Floyd accepts, we either have to reckon with significant textual corruption, especially for Psalm 10, for which there is no evidence, a procedure

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[38] E.g., *Pap.Lugd.Bat*. 25, 16 which presents a "mythological story in 9 sentences forming an alphabetic acrostic (alpha to iota) on Prometheus' creation of mortals, probably meant to be metrical." Citation from the Catalogue of Paraliterary Papyri (http://cpp.arts.kuleuven.be), item record number 0168 (http://tinyurl.com/qexy33). Cf. in the same database items 0298, 0395, 0934 and especially the second column of item 0257 (*P.Tebt.* 02, 278), for which note also the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS) entry at http://tinyurl.com/qefjy4.

[39] See the APIS entry at http://tinyurl.com/o5puqy, cf. http://tinyurl.com/pxomsc. Cf. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 228, for reverse alphabetic acrostics, *atbash* and other variations (with reference to B.Shab. 104a and B.Suk. 52a).

[40] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 423.

[41] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 424. He discounts 11QPs^{a}155 as a possible parallel because it is, at best, "a fragmentary manifestation of an acrostical structure, which does not comprehend the entire poem" (423). Cf. J.D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW, 218; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 102 ("It is highly improbable that a poet would deliberately choose to write a poem which is *almost* acrostic").

Floyd rejects with regard to Nahum 1, or allow that the author(s) of the psalm(s) are indeed "integrating material that is acrostical with material that is not." In the light of recent proposals made by Hurowitz, Prov 24:1–22 and 29:22–27 may also fall in this category.[42] Outside the Bible, Upson-Saia notes that in acrostic Syriac dialogue hymns "the acrostic often commences after the introductory material at the beginning of the debate."[43] Again, it seems to me that if a rationale can be found for the use of acrostic and non-acrostic material, their integration need not be ruled out in principle. This is especially true for prophetic books. Like similar writings, Nahum is arguably not a simple anthology of poetic material but a writing which integrates different kinds of material.

This brings us to the form-critical question. Nah 1:2–8 is sometimes described as a psalm or a hymn. Floyd objects to the latter in particular and is right, if the term hymn is used in its most narrow form-critical sense, as there is no call to a congregation to praise God.[44] It may be safer to speak of a poem. But, Floyd's real objection is to the separating of vv 9–10 from vv 2–8. This has force only on the double assumption that (a) the putative acrostic is limited to vv 2–8, and (b) acrostic and non-acrostic material are never combined. However, I have already questioned the second assumption. In addition, Floyd suggests that vv 2–10 is subdivided into vv 2–6 and 7–10 which have "the same basic compositional form."[45] This is an interesting analysis, but my own exposition has the advantage of taking prosodic considerations more fully into account. Given that acrostics can appear in any sort of poem,[46] the

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[42] Cf. V.A. Hurowitz, "An Often Overlooked Alphabetic Acrostic in Proverbs 24:1–22," *RB* 106 (2000), 526–540; and "Proverbs 29.22–27: Another Unnoticed Alphabetic Acrostic," *JSOT* 92 (2001), 121–125.

[43] K. Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 9/2 (2006), online access at http://tinyurl.com/om49xk hosted by The Catholic University of America.

[44] The term hymn is commonly used more widely, however, and I am not sure that Floyd would object to describing vv 2–8 as a hymn, if v 9 were the beginning of a new section. In his view, the rhetorical question in v 6 has its counterpart in vv 9–10. It is not unknown for rhetorical questions to be used in hymns (see Ps 114:5–6) but it is rare.

[45] Floyd, "Chimerical Acrostic," 433.

[46] See, e.g., W.M. Soll, "Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics," *Bib* 69 (1988), 305–23; J.F. Brug, "Biblical Acrostics and Their Relationship to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics," W.W. Hallo et al. (eds), *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ANETS, 8; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990), 283–304. This point is acknowledged by Floyd ("Chimerical Acrostic," 430). For diversity of genres and the high incidence of acrostics with mixed genres, compare Hanson ("Alphabetic Acrostics"). Hanson seeks to trace a development from the use of acrostics as a stylistic device especially with hymns and complaints to its be-

form-critical question turns on (or into) the question of the literary structure of Nahum 1.

To sum up my response to Floyd's second and fundamental objection, if we allow for the presence of acrostic features to Nahum 1 only on the condition that the full alphabetic sequence is used and the poem is not integrated with non-acrostic material, we certainly cannot accept the presence of such features in Nahum 1. But if, as I have argued, we allow for the possibility that a literary unit in a prophetic book incorporates a poem which makes use of the idea of an acrostic, Nahum 1 is a prime candidate.

NAHUM'S BROKEN ACROSTIC: A SYMMETRICAL DESIGN

The hypothetical acrostic presented above could suggest that the material related to Exod. 34:6–7 forms an extra layer which expands the א line. Hanson assumes such an "hyper-extension of the *'aleph*," which he also observes outside the canon in Psalm 155:1–2 and the Apostrophe of Zion 1.[47] This is possible, but another option suggests itself. In my view, Spronk observes correctly that the alphabetic sequencing does in fact begin in v 3, following the divine name, not in v 2, as previously assumed.[48] If, in addition, we accept the communicative relevance of Spronk's sentence acrostic-telestic (אני יהוה), there is no need to postulate an original alphabetic acrostic which opened with the sequence אל קנוא ונקם יהוה.[49]

The hypothetical acrostic opening with אל קנוא ונקם יהוה has heuristic value in drawing attention to the fact that the received poem does not open with an alphabetic sequence. This is an important datum and prepares us for the possibility that an alphabetic poem was embedded in a larger poetic unit.

There is also no need to assume that the two occurrences of the divine name in v 3 are secondary or misplaced. They stress the theme of the poem and align well with the sentence-acrostic and with the fact that Exod. 34:6–7 is closely linked with the proclamation of the divine name. The double use of א at the beginning of words after the divine name (cf. the double use of ב in the second

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coming a genre in its own right.

[47] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 298. He compares the fourfold emphasis on the first letter in Ps 9:2–3.

[48] Spronk, "Acrostics," 218; cf. D.L. Christensen, "The Acrostic of Nahum Once Again: A Prosodic Analysis of Nahum 1:1–10," *ZAW* 99 (1987), 409–14 (412).

[49] A few scholars have suggested an acrostic-telestic later in the chapter. I would expect it to extend *beyond* the alphabetic acrostic just as the initial sentence acrostic-telestic lead *into* the alphabetic acrostic and propose אל מכם or האל מכם for vv 9–11, whereby מכם is best understood as a *hiphil* participle of נכה with third person suffix, i.e. מַכֵּם "one who smites them (is God)." I am, however, more confident of Spronk's opening sentence acrostic than my supplementary proposal.

half of the verse) facilitates the recognition of the beginning of an alphabetic sequence.

The first two bicola of the alphabet form a quatrain which is rhythmically different from the following verses.[50] They correspond to a quatrain in vv 7–8 which is also rhythmically different and which brings the alphabetic acrostic to a close. Whilst vv 7–8 are often analyzed as tricola, it is possible to scan them as bicola with extra-long cola in the first half, echoing the construction in v 3.[51] Their unusual rhythm compared with the preceding verses is evident either way. Verse 7 also employs the divine name for the first time since v 3. The hypothetical acrostic puts into relief the difference between the rhythm of the received text and conceivable alternatives.

The acrostic ends with the ט line in v 7 but there is a twist. The first half of v 7 appears to be pivot-shaped, highlighting למעוז, and maybe preparing us for the use of the same device in v 8. Any expectation readers might have of a י line is frustrated in v 8, but its first half can be interpreted as pivot-shaped, with the pivot being כלה ("[to make] an end"), hinting at a כ line. As well as representing the last letter of the first half of the alphabet, כלה is of course semantically well suited for bringing an alphabetic acrostic to a premature conclusion. It can be made to stand at the beginning of the line, if the phrase ובשטף עבר ("and/but in an overflowing flood") is taken with the second half of v 7 to form a bicolon with which a י line can be restored easily by deleting the opening ו.[52] In fact, the decision to take ובשטף עבר with the second half of v 7 is made even by one or two commentators who do not allow for changes to the text on the basis of an acrostic; presumably they do so for reasons of rhythm.[53]

Bearing in mind the notable structural similarity of vv 7–8 and v 3, it seems plausible that, also, just as the א and ב in v 3 are slightly obscured (arguably deliberately so), so in vv 7–8 the final

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[50] The rhythmic equivalence of the two halves of the verse leads me to prefer the MT positioning of the second occurrence of the divine name at the beginning of the second bicolon rather than following LXX and many moderns in taking it with the end of the first bicolon. The decision does not greatly affect my consideration of acrostic features in Nahum 1.

[51] I believe that this is how the Masoretes scanned the line, see my *Colometry and Accentuation in Hebrew Prophetic Poetry* (KUSATU, 4; Waltrop: Spenner, 2003) for discussion.

[52] Nogalski comments: "The easiest disruption to explain is … the presence of the ו in the י line. Someone incognizant of the acrostic nature could have added the ו to conform the text to more typical syntax" (*Redactional Processes*, 104). Hanson observes more generally that י and ו are commonly confused and that the addition of ו is common ("Alphabetic Acrostics," 298).

[53] E.g., Cathcart, *Nahum*. This arrangement is reflected in *BHK* and *BHS*.

two letters of this alphabetic sequence, י and כ, are deliberately obscured. If the repetition of א and ב helped to identify the beginning of the alphabetic acrostic in spite of its hidden nature, the repetition of כלה in vv 8–9 may serve a similar function. In this case we should probably resist taking ובשטף עבר with v 7. One of the effects of hiding the end of the acrostic is to bring the ט line into greater prominence, as the line with which the acrostic does and does not end.

If we assume an intentional correspondence between the two bicola in v 3 and the two bicola in vv 7–8, another interesting feature can be observed, namely, that the irregularities of the ד line in v 4 and the ז line in v 6 are in corresponding positions within the acrostic. In other words, there is regularity to the irregularities.[54] We must look at these two lines more closely.

The double use of the *pulal* perfect אמלל ("withered") as the first and last word of the second bicolon in v 4 creates, in my view, a pleasant poetic effect, but it spoils the acrostic, which requires the bicolon to start with a ד.[55] Many assume that "a *daleth* word may safely be posited as being original."[56] Indeed, a ד line can easily be restored by substituting דללו ("thinned out," cf. Isa 19:6) as the first word, a proposal first made by G. B. Gray.[57] We can imagine the following scenario: a manuscript which originally read דללו or דלל was damaged at this point, so that only the presence of לל could be discerned; a scribe then guessed (wrongly) that the word must be אמלל, as found at the end of the verse, thus giving rise to the reading now found in all known Hebrew manuscripts.

The LXX (cf. Vulgate, Peshitta, Targum) provides evidence for a form of the text with two different verbs. Repetition of a verb is found quite regularly in the book of Nahum (see 1:2, 3, 12; 2:3, 9, 10 [ET, 2:2, 8, 9]; 3:13, 14, 15), and the LXX regularly echoes this repetition by using the same Greek verbs to render identical Hebrew verbs.[58] The use of two different Greek verbs here (ὀλιγόω

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[54] Cf. Benun's observation that the three letters in Psalm 37 which introduce a single verse rather than two are placed at strategic points: the fourth letter, the fourth letter from the end, and – not counting the missing ע – the middle letter ("Evil," 16).

[55] In the second instance, a pausal form is used. According to Meyer, the duplication of the third radical of a root with three radicals is found only in the perfect and indicates that the verb is used to identify an attribute (*Grammatik* 2:126).

[56] So Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 298.

[57] Gray, "Alphabetic Poem," 256.

[58] In 3:15 only the repetition of אכל is reflected (κατεσθίω). The repetition of כבד *hithpael* is not reflected in standard editions of LXX which have a shorter text here. 8HevXIIgr apparently reflected the repetition but it is insufficiently preserved for us to draw firm conclusions about what the text read, see *Biblia Qumranica* 3B:122. A fuller examination would, however, need to consider the rest of the Minor Prophets, and maybe

aorist passive and ἐκλείπω aorist active) is therefore significant and suggests that the translator read two different Hebrew verbs. These verbs may well have been דלל and אמלל, although it is surprising that ὀλιγόω is used in first and ἐκλείπω in second position.[59] Thus, the loss ("withering away") of the ד may be the result of an accident in the early transmission of the text rather than a clever move by an author or redactor, but, if so, it ironically reinforces the semantic content of the line.

It must be stressed, however, that the LXX does not provide unambiguous evidence for an original ד line, even if we accept that the two different Greek verbs point to two different Hebrew verbs. If we allow for the possibility of a broken acrostic, rather than force the Greek text to attest to a perfectly acrostic source text, we can account for the LXX evidence better by postulating that אמלל at the beginning of the line is, after all, "original," but that an earlier version of the Hebrew text read דלל at the end of the line.[60] Such an end-positioning of the ד word would have highlighted the fact that the ד line is not missing at the beginning of the line for lack of a suitable word.[61]

So what about the disruption of the acrostic in v 6? Again it can be argued that the disruption is deliberate.[62] For the purposes of the acrostic, זעמו should stand in prominent position at the beginning of the sentence. Removing it from this position makes for a chiastic bicolon, whereby the twofold question *who can stand (up)* is surrounded by prepositional phrases which refer to God's anger. This suggests that those who might dare to oppose YHWH find themselves surrounded by his anger. At the same time, however, this construction keeps the focus on YHWH himself rather than YHWH's scorn. The syntax of the hypothetical version above (*his*

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other parts which are often thought to go back to the same translator (Jeremiah 1–28; Ezekiel 1–27, 40–48).

[59] The verb ὀλιγόω is used in Joel 1:10, 12 to render a form of אמל but elsewhere renders other verbs, although never דלל. The verb ἐκλείπω is used to translate the root דלל in Isa 38:14 (cf. Isa 17:4, which uses the noun ἔκλειψις to render דלל niphal); it is also used in Isa 19:6 in parallel with ξηραίνω, the verb which apparently translates דלל.

[60] Both A.S. van der Woude, "The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile," *OTS* 20 (1977), 108–26, and D.L. Christensen, "The Book of Nahum as a Liturgical Composition: A Prosodic Analysis," *JETS* 32 (1989), 159–69, consider the absence of the ד line as intentional.

[61] Benun argues that there are hints that the absence of the ד line is deliberate in Psalm 9 also ("Evil," 3; cf. 6–7, for an explanation in terms of enacting "the erasing of evil and its memory" to which the preceding verse made reference). Bliese interprets the substitution of an א word for a ד word at the beginning of Nah 1:4 as a covert reference to Assyria ("Cryptic Chiastic Acrostic," 54). This strikes me as rather obscure.

[62] Cf. van Selms, who observes that in the light of the alphabetic sequence "one can hardly maintain that this is a case of an involuntary mistake" ("Alphabetic Hymn," 37).

scorn – who can stand before it?) is comparable to that of the second half of v 3 as interpreted by the Masoretes (*YHWH – in gale and storm is his way*). Such a dislocation of *his scorn* would change the topic from *YHWH* to *his scorn*. The syntax of the text as it stands avoids such a change of topic. Whilst anger is the theme of the verse, with four different Hebrew words used to refer to God's anger, YHWH remains the theme of the poem. We may add that there is something poetically satisfying about the word standing before the acrostic letter being a word for "before."

The ד and ז lines just discussed surround v 5. This verse, like no other, stresses the universal impact of the manifestation of YHWH and his wrath, and so leads into the rhetorical question of v 6. In addition, we note that the final colon of v 5 is the only colon which is syntactically dependent on the preceding colon. All other cola, from v 2 to the difficult v 10, form clauses. This elliptical construction may mark a climax in the poem. Hanson notes that, after three pairs in which the more expansive entity was listed first (sea/rivers; Bashan & Carmel/green of Lebanon; mountains/hills), the order is reversed in this bicolon "for poetic climax: earth/world & inhabitants."[63]

The first half of the poem declares YHWH to be a patient but powerful avenger. Various typical phenomena within creation manifest YHWH's wrath in the world. The second half focuses on the impact on humanity, except for the ח line (v 6), which reintroduces חמה for the first time after v 2. Now YHWH's rage is said to be *poured out like fire*. The expression *poured out like fire* fits with the metaphor of anger as "the heat of a fluid in a container," for which Kruger has identified several expressions in Classical Hebrew.[64] But when not connected with anger, fire is never described as being "poured out." This suggests that it is not the comparison with fire which gives rise to the liquid imagery. Rather, the rage is at the same time liquid and *like fire*.[65] The juxtaposition of

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[63] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostic," 303. Hanson also notes the absence of a verb in the final colon.

[64] P.A. Kruger, "A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Anger in the Hebrew Bible," *JNSL* 26 (2000), 181–91, as cited in Kotzé, "Metaphors," 122. Cf. 2 Chr 12:7, 21, 25; Jer 7:20; 42:18; 44:6 for the same object and verb. I am not sure that the fluid in question would be necessarily liquid in the absence of heat. The verb is used in Ezekiel for the melting process (22:20–22; 24:11), in which it is obviously only the heat of the fire which turns the material into a fluid. (As in English the pouring out need not be a of a liquid, whether in metaphor or for real. Pieces of silver are "poured out" in 2 Kgs 22:9 // 2 Chr 34:17.) חמה is the object of the more common verb for pouring out (שפך), in Ps 79:6; Isa 42:25; Jer 6:11; 10:25; Lam 2:4 ("like fire"); 4:11; Ezek 7:8; 9:8; 14:19; 16:38; 20:8, 13, 21, 33–34; 22:22; 30:15; 36:18.

[65] In other words, the pouring out of fire is metaphorical as well. The expression is thus unlike the references to groaning which is poured out

liquid and fire evokes the ג line with its reference to waters being dried up, even if the verbs in v 4 are never attested with fire as their agent. These echoes of the opening of the poem prepare for its conclusion. The "pouring out" metaphor underscores the comprehensiveness of the destruction. Nothing can withstand or rise up against the heat of such rage or even endure in it, as even *the rocks are torn asunder because of him*.

Now that the body of the poem has expanded on the manifestation of YHWH's wrath, the summary statement about YHWH's character and way in the two opening bicola of the alphabetic acrostic in v 3 can be translated into a summary statement about YHWH's relationships to friends and enemies in vv 7–8, concluding the alphabetic sequence. The thematic bifurcation fits well with what we have observed above about the double conclusion of the sequence. On the one hand, כ signifies the full end made to YHWH's enemies;[66] on the other hand, the hiddenness of י and כ turns the ט line into the last line which transparently belongs to the alphabetic sequence, thus signifying the goodness of YHWH and his reliability as a refuge as another concluding climax.[67]

The final colon of vv 7–8 refers to **איביו** ("his [YHWH's] enemies"), picking up the last word of v 2. Its employment of א and ב makes **איב** poetically the most suitable word for YHWH's antagonists to be used at the end of the alphabetic sequence. But it reminds us that this poem which employs the alphabetic sequence did not open with it. The alphabetic sequence was integrated with introductory verses which, in conjunction with the first line of the alphabetic sequence, spelled **אני יהוה**, leading us to expect a link between YHWH's identity and the (hidden or broken) order represented by the (obscured or broken) acrostic form.[68]

Verse 2 contains two bicola. The first bicolon characterizes YHWH as the avenger and the second spells out the consequences for YHWH's enemies. A similar movement from YHWH to his enemies is found in vv 9–10. Verse 9 challenges with a rhetorical question those who may question YHWH's ability to deal with **צרה** ("distress," echoing **צרוי** "his enemies" in v 2). Verse 10 then offers a characterization of YHWH's enemies which portrays their fate as

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like water (Job 3:24) or Job feeling poured out like milk (Job 10:10).

[66] Note that v 8 is also the only verse in the chapter to end with the letter כ. Cf. Rudolph, *Nahum*, 153.

[67] YHWH's goodness is affirmed also in the ט lines of Psalms 25, 34 and 145; cf. Ps 119:68. Ps 37 uses טוב differently (טוב מעט לצדיק מהמון רשעים רבים, "better the little belonging to a righteous than the abundance of many wicked," v 16); note that it employs מעוזם בעת צרה, "he protects them in the time of distress" in v 39.

[68] At first the acrostic is only hidden (by the divine name in front of both the א and the ב line); with the ד line it is better described as broken. In my reading, the *hidden* divine order *disrupts* the established Assyrian order. See further below.

inescapable. Just as the portrayal of YHWH demands that he deals successfully with his enemies, so the portrayal of his enemies makes their defeat look inevitable.

Verse 9 is the first verse beyond the alphabetic sequence. It does in fact contain all the missing letters of the second half of the alphabet except for ס. ס is then introduced with a vengeance (if this choice of words may be permitted) in v 10, whose first two cola contain a quarter of all occurrences of ס in the book. Quite apart from the statistics, the ס sound is surely noticeable. The verse also contains four א and four ב, both together in each of the two words of the middle colon. The combined total of these first two letters of the alphabet is higher than in any other verse in this chapter; vv 3–4 at the beginning of the alphabetic sequence have seven each and only once are the two letters found in the same word.[69] This encourages us to read vv 9–10 together with the alphabetic acrostic as part of a poem which, just as it did not begin with the alphabetic sequence, does not end with it.

Verse 11 is a prosaic statement which does not belong to the poem proper. Maybe it should be seen as the subscript to the poem which corresponds to the superscription in v 1. In other words, we may think of the (incomplete) alphabetic acrostic in vv 3–8 as part of a poem in vv 2–10 which is in a literary unit consisting of vv 1–11.

THE PURPOSE OF NAHUM'S SYMMETRICALLY BROKEN ACROSTIC

I have argued that the acrostic features in Nahum 1 are there by design, that the alphabetic sequence only covers half the alphabet, that the irregularities are not as haphazard as they seem at first, and that the poem is bigger than the acrostic. We must finally consider the purpose of the use of acrostic features in this way.

There is no reason to think that alphabetic acrostics always fulfill the same function, but I am persuaded that in the Hebrew Bible the alphabetic acrostic is often "a literary device providing a sense of order and structure in a period of social and political turmoil."[70] "The alphabetic acrostic represents proper order – the way the world should be when God is present."[71] Such order can be evident in an acrostic that covers only half the alphabet. If it had been the poet's intention to depict the *totality* of God's wrath and its impact on the world, a full alphabetic sequence would do the

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[69] A higher total (twelve occurrences) is found in 2:14 (ET, v 13). Eight occurrences of א plus one of ב give a higher total also for 2:12 (ET, v 11). Nah 2:3–4 (ET, vv 2–3) each contain a total of eight, as does 2:11 (ET, v 10) which uses ב seven times. Chap. 3 also contains verses with eight or more occurrences (8, 13–15, 17).

[70] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 433.

[71] Benun, "Evil," 6.

job better. But if the poet sought to convey a sense of disrupted order, a half-acrostic is sufficient and may even signal the need for the establishment of order.

It has been observed that "many of the acrostics implicitly or explicitly refer to social and religious antagonism."[72] The same is of course true for Nahum 1. Benun argued that in a number of alphabetic psalms the presence of evil disrupts order.[73] In Nahum the situation is different. It is arguably the presence of YHWH which disrupts order in Nahum 1.

The divine name is part of an orderly sentence acrostic-telestic and so YHWH is at first aligned with order. As the divine name pushes the א and the ב of the alphabetic sequence inside the line, order becomes obscured. Once the poem describes how YHWH's actions dry up vegetation (missing ד) and asserts that nothing can remain in place before his wrath (shift of ז to second position), order is not only hidden but disrupted. At the end of the alphabetic sequence, YHWH's goodness as a refuge is affirmed in alignment with the alphabetic acrostic (ט), thus maybe suggesting that YHWH can indeed be associated with good order. But YHWH's annihilation of enemies ("make an end") disrupts the alphabetic sequence (כ). The ו which precedes and thus obscures the י line makes this double ending possible, as pointed out above. It may also offer a hint of the fact that it is not readily obvious that YHWH knows those who seek refuge in him. It cannot be discerned from nature and history in any straightforward manner. This is because YHWH is slow to deal with evil, due to his patience, as the poem has it at the beginning of the alphabetic sequence. Ironically, then, YHWH's goodness is most evident when his violent actions disrupt order.
Without the acrostic features there would be no poetic communication of the concept of order. Without its irregularities, however, the acrostic might leave a wrong impression, as if the divine order is easily discerned or to be equated with the status quo. Instead the poem conveys a sense of the clash of different political orders and prepares for the celebration of the end of Assyria's oppressive political system later in the book. Given that earlier prophecy seems to have spoken of the Assyrian empire as an instrument in YHWH's hand (cf. Isa 10:5–15), it might have seemed logical for some to conclude that the Assyrian order is in fact the divine order. Others might have wondered whether there is any order at all and a refuge for those who trust YHWH. A broken acrostic is able to reflect a nuanced view, expressed more explicitly in the semantic content of the book.[74] With this we turn to our concluding reflections on the role of the poem within the book.

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[72] Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," 404.

[73] Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order."

[74] Note that 1:12 portrays the Assyrian oppression as an affliction from the hand of YHWH and thus acknowledges the role of Assyria as

THE BROKEN ACROSTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF NAHUM

The citation formula in 1:12 ("Thus said YHWH") is followed by four words whose first letters spell אשור ("Aššur/Assyria").[75] This may well be a happy coincidence, but, in any case, the remainder of the book of Nahum is about the end of the order which the Assyrians had imposed on the Near East. It is often asserted that the opening poem is too different from the remainder of the book of Nahum to be attributed to the same author. Different thematic emphases are thought to indicate a lack of unity. Further, it is sometimes argued that the author of the opening poem is different also from the editor of the book.[76]

We have touched on the question of authorship in the introduction where I suggested the possibility of greater unity than commonly acknowledged. Now we must explore the opening poem's thematic coherence with the rest of the book. Two observations highlight the issue: first, the divine name is absent in much of the remainder of the book; second, Nineveh is absent in the opening poem. As for the first observation, 1:12 opens with a YHWH citation, followed by another one in v 14, and chapters 2 and 3 in their present form are not without reference to YHWH either (2:3, 14 [ET, vv 2, 13]; 3:5), quite apart from "the scatterer" in 2:2 (ET, v 1) who may or may not be YHWH.[77] The important question here is whether the poetic descriptions of the attack and destruction of Nineveh are "secular." But should we really assume that convictions such as those expressed in the opening poem would necessarily translate in a depiction of the fall of Nineveh which includes YHWH as a participant among others or which interleaves the military description with theological commentary? I am not convinced that we can.

As for the absence of Nineveh in the opening poem, this should not be surprising.[78] The poem, with its allusion to the revelation of the significance of the divine name and its use of participial forms, seeks to express truths which transcend the fall of

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YHWH's instrument as well as enemy.

[75] This sequence occurs, in fact, three more times in places where it is surely accidental (Prov 20:12; Isa 2:11; 66:19). For the sake of completeness we may add the observation that the first letters of the cola in 3:18 spell Nineveh without the final ה.

[76] Seybold, *Profane Prophetie*, 74–83.

[77] While פוץ hiphil occurs with human agents (e.g. Jer 23:1–2 and Hab 3:14), it has often YHWH as its subject. See especially Isa 24 which has a number of verbal links with Nahum 2.

[78] In fact, the Hebrew text of Nahum refers to Nineveh only twice in the body of the prophecy (2:9 [ET, v 8] and 3:7), less often and later in the book than we might have expected, prompting some English translations to supply further references to Nineveh in the text (e.g., NIV at 1:8, 11, 14; 2:2 [ET, v 1]; REB at 1:11, 14).

Nineveh. Delayed reference to the Assyrian capital stresses the universal applicability of the truths expressed in the opening poem. In this way the destruction of Nineveh can be read and understood as an instantiation of the general (universal) principle expressed at the beginning of the book.

But what is the function of the northern geographic allusions (1:4) in the context of the book? The Assyrians had brought devastation not only to the northern regions but also to Judah. Even on an early date for the Nahum composition, a largely Judean audience may be presumed, as Israel had already been annexed by the Assyrians. The withering of Carmel, Bashan and Lebanon may have helped to make two points. First, the devastating presence of YHWH extends beyond the borders of the community which worships him in Jerusalem to the place where the Assyrians have by now positioned themselves for further expansion.[79] This prepares for the claim that YHWH is able to orchestrate the fall of the Assyrian empire in the conquest and destruction of Nineveh. Second, the devastation which has already been caused to this territory (by the Assyrians) was not outside YHWH's control. Indeed it is to be considered YHWH's doing. This agrees with the depiction in vv 3–4 of the divine anger as the blast of a hot sirocco which, like the Assyrian armies, comes from the east. A similar rhetorical move can be discerned in 3:8 which among other things is designed to prevent Assyria taking credit for the conquest of Thebes. Assyria's conquests were only successful because YHWH made them so. When he decides that the end of Assyria's order has come, it has come. YHWH makes use of the Assyrian weapon to bring destruction and then destroys the weapon itself (cf. again Isa 10). The poem claims that this is because YHWH's goodness is militant and tolerates evil only for a while.

YHWH's relationship to order and chaos can be explored further in the ambiguity of the phrase **ובשטף עבר** which either refers to an overflowing flood or to YHWH's passing by in/with a flood.[80] Flooding is typically associated with chaos in the ancient Near East. Parallel to "the day of distress" on which YHWH provides a refuge, the "overflowing flood" is often taken with v 7 and read as an evil in the context of which YHWH grants protection. This is also how my translation of the hypothetical acrostic takes it, facilitated by the addition of a verb. Indeed, the two roots are used together in Isa 8:8 where Assyria is said to overflow and pass through (= flood) Judah. But the received text is easier understood

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[79] Nogalski observes that the pairing of Carmel appears "only twice elsewhere (Isa 33:9; Jer 50.19), both in the context of Assyrian oppression" but prefers to ignore this, accentuating the link with Mic 7:14 ("Redactional Shaping," 200).

[80] There is no space for a detailed discussion here. The question is whether the flood is antagonistic to YHWH or caused by him.

as making reference to an overflowing flood as YHWH's instrument for the destruction of antagonists in which case the devastating sirocco of the opening verses has turned into a devastating flood towards the end of the poem, continuing to make YHWH responsible for chaotic circumstances. This prepares for Nahum 2.

In my understanding of Nahum 2, the flooding motif has great ideological significance. It is unlikely that flooding played a role in the actual destruction of Nineveh. The Babylonian record of the campaign makes no reference to flooding and the archaeological data make it unlikely.[81] (That said, we may allow for the possibility that the conquerors enacted a ritual flooding after Nineveh's defeat.) The same applies to Sennacherib's claim to have flooded Babylon which provides the negative counterpart to his construction works at Nineveh and is a literary trope more than historical record.[82] Along with walls and gardens, Sennacherib developed impressive waterworks in and around Nineveh.[83] In addition to their intrinsic usefulness, these water-systems were a sign of *control and victory over chaos*. Nineveh's "flooding" might therefore speak of the destruction of that "order," an order which was, of course, perceived as less than wholesome by those conquered peoples for whom the Assyrian presence brought about a destructive flood rather than life-bringing canals and rivers (cf. again Isa 8:8). On the reading of Nahum's opening poem proposed here, the beginning of the book offers a reflection on order and chaos with the help of the alphabet which coheres with, and prepares well for, the remainder of the book, with its reflection on the fierce challenge to

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[81] For the record of the campaign in the Babylonian Chronicle (BM 21,901, cf. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records*, 417–21), see A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources, 5; Locust Valley, N.Y.: Augustin, 1975), 90–96. For the archaeological evidence, see D. Stronach and S. Lumsden, "UC Berkeley Excavations at Nineveh," *Biblical Archaeologist* 55 (1992) 227–33. Note also the essays by P. Machinist ("The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective," 179–95) and D. Stronach ("Notes on the Fall of Nineveh," 307–24) in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds), *Assyria 1995* (Helsinki: NATCP, 1997). The evidence from later Greek writers is discussed in A. Pinker, "Nahum and the Greek Tradition on Nineveh's Fall," *JHS* 6, article 8, available at http://www/jhsonline.org. The idea that Nineveh's fall was enabled by a manipulation of the water system is still accepted by, e.g., J. A. Scurlock, "The Euphrates Flood and the Ashes of Nineveh (Diod. II 27.1–28.7)," *Historia* 39 (1990) 382–84.

[82] Cf. M. Van de Mieroop, "A Tale of Two Cities: Nineveh and Babylon," *Iraq* 66 (2004), 1–5.

[83] See J.E. Reade, "Studies in Assyrian Geography," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 72 (1978), 47–72, 157–80; J. Ur, "Sennacherib's Northern Assyrian Canals: New Insights from Satellite Imagery and Aerial Photography," *Iraq* 67 (2005), 317–345; cf. S. Dalley, "Nineveh, Babylon and the Hanging Gardens: Cuneiform and Classical Sources Reconciled," *Iraq* 56 (1994), 45–58.

Assyrian order in the conquest and drying up of the water-city Nineveh.