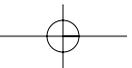
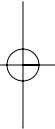
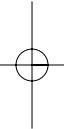


TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 27

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NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH



TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 27

GENERAL EDITOR: DONALD J. WISEMAN

NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

DAVID W. BAKER



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CONTENTS

General preface	7
Author's preface	9
Chief abbreviations	11
Select bibliographies	13

NAHUM

Introduction	17
The man	17
The time	18
The book and its structure	19
The message	21
Analysis	23
Commentary	25
Additional note	
Rhetorical questions	28

HABAKKUK

Introduction	41
The man	41
The times	42

The book	43
The message	45
Analysis	47
Commentary	49

ZEPHANIAH

Introduction	77
The times and peoples	77
The man	80
The message	80
The book	83
Analysis	87
Commentary	89

GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, as it was in the companion volumes on the New Testament, is to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary on each book, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Major critical questions are discussed in the introductions and additional notes, while undue technicalities have been avoided.

In this series individual authors are, of course, free to make their own distinct contributions and express their own point of view on all debated issues. Within the necessary limits of space they frequently draw attention to interpretations which they themselves do not hold but which represent the stated conclusions of sincere fellow Christians.

The books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah cover an important but turbulent epoch in the history of Israel in which prophets warned of coming judgment if Israel refused to turn back to God from her apostasy and to practise effective social justice. This culminated in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and in the exile in Babylon.

In the Old Testament in particular no single English translation is adequate to reflect the original text. The version on which these three commentaries are based is the New International Version, but other translations are frequently referred to as well, and on occasion the author supplies his own. Where necessary, words are transliterated in order to help the reader who is unfamiliar with Hebrew to identify the precise word under discussion.

It is assumed throughout that the reader will have ready access to one or more reliable renderings of the Bible in English.

Interest in the meaning and message of the Old Testament continues undiminished and it is hoped that this series will thus further the systematic study of the revelation of God and his will and ways as seen in these records. It is the prayer of the editor and publisher, as of the authors, that these books will help many to understand, and to respond to, the Word of God today.

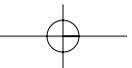
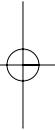
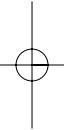
D. J. Wiseman

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When travelling westwards across the American Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains in the far distance seem relatively minor and insignificant. As one eventually enters them, however, one is confronted at every turn with the power and beauty of these masterpieces of God's handiwork. The same experience of wonder and majesty is felt in approaching the 'minor' prophets, which are only minor in word count, but are often 'major' in literary quality and theological relevance. As one can only hope to enjoy a fraction of the alpine splendour, so one realizes that much of the potential of the prophets will also lie untapped. In both cases, one hopes at least to have touched on the most meaningful and exciting vistas of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

For the privilege of making this journey I thank Professor D. J. Wiseman. His willingness to let me make the trip and his guidance along the way are much appreciated. For patient editorial leading I thank the Inter-Varsity Press and its staff. My deepest appreciation and love go to Morven for her constant support and encouragement. Little did she realize when she repeated Ruth's vow to accompany Naomi what paths God had in store.

David W. Baker



CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

Bible translations and versions

AV	Authorized Version (King James), 1611.
<i>BHS</i>	A. Alt et al. (eds.), <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (Deutsche Bibelstiftung Stuttgart, 1967/77).
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls.
JB	Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
LXX	The Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament).
MT	Massoretic Text.
NEB	New English Bible, 1970.
NIV	New International Version, 1973, 1978, 1984.
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible, 1985.
RSV	Revised Standard Version, 1952.
Syr.	Syriac.
Vulg.	Vulgate.

Other reference works

<i>ANET</i>	J. B. Pritchard, <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> (Princeton University Press, ² 1955; ³ 1969).
<i>BDB</i>	F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Clarendon Press, 1906).

- G-K Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, ET, 1910.
 IBD J. D. Douglas et al. (eds.), *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 vols. (IVP, 1980).
 IDBS K. Crim et al. (eds.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary volume (Abingdon Press, 1976).
 NBD J. D. Douglas et al. (eds.), *The New Bible Dictionary* (IVP, 2nd 1982).
 POTT D. J. Wiseman (ed.), *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

Journals

- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.
 JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*.
 JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.
 JR *Journal of Religion*.
 OTS *Oudtestamentische Studien*.
 VT *Vetus Testamentum*.
 ZAW *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*.

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NAHUM

INTRODUCTION

1. The man

The name 'Nahum' means most probably 'comfort' or 'reassurance'. It occurs only in the first verse of this book and in Luke 3:25 (of an ancestor of Jesus, though different people are meant). It occurs more frequently in extra-biblical sources, and in the Bible the related 'Nehemiah' is common. Nothing is known of the Nahum associated with this prophecy except that he was an Elkoshite, coming from the town or region of Elkosh.

Several suggestions have been made as to the location of Elkosh. One links it to *al-Qash*, 50 km north of modern Mosul. This identification is relatively recent and has not attracted much scholarly support since there is no convincing evidence from within the book itself of an Assyrian origin.¹ Jerome identified Elkosh with a small

1. A. S. van der Woude, in his article 'The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile', *OTS* 20 (1977), pp. 100–127, argues for an Assyrian background to the prophecy.

town in northern Galilee, and a later tradition in the area links Nahum with the 'village of Nahum', Capernaum. A more likely identification is with Beit-Jebrin in Judah. This is preferred since the northern kingdom of Israel was already in exile, effectively precluding an Israelite site, and no message of hope for restoration is given, making an exilic location and date difficult.²

2. The time

There is no explicit date in the book of Nahum, but internal evidence suggests a date in the mid-seventh century BC. The Assyrian empire is strong, which indicates a date prior to 612 BC, when Nineveh fell.³ This fall is the substance of the prophecy. The strength of the Assyrian empire indicates a date prior to the death of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC). Subsequently the nation rapidly declined before the ascendancy of Babylonia.

The clearest historical reference in the book is to the fall of Thebes (modern Karnak or Luxor, some 530 km upstream from Cairo; 3:8), which fell to Assyria in 663 BC. This was in spite of her call to neighbouring countries for assistance against the attacker.⁴ Wellhausen argued that this description must have come soon after the event portrayed.⁵ Within this time period, the harshest Assyrian domination of Judah was under Manasseh (687/6–672 BC), while the Assyrian yoke was dislodged under Josiah (640–609 BC). If the events in 2:2 look forward in time, they would then have occurred in the time of Manasseh, but if they reflect an accomplished event, they would have been penned under Josiah. Confidence in the Assyrian downfall, such as found in this prophecy, could have sparked off Manasseh's rebellion (2 Chr. 33:14–16) of about 652–648

-
2. Rudolph, p. 149, sees a possible Edomite connection in the name being 'ēl qōš, 'the God Qōš', an Edomite deity.
 3. *ANET*, p. 304. For a discussion of the Assyrian capital, see D. J. Wiseman, 'Nineveh', *IBD*, pp. 1089–1092.
 4. See *ANET*, p. 295, ii; J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (SCM Press/Westminster, 1980), p. 311.
 5. Cited by Maier, p. 36.

BC.⁶ The fall of Assyria, and of Nineveh in particular, was brought about by a military coalition of her neighbours, the Babylonians and Medes, starting from the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 BC and culminating with the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC.⁷ Some have proposed a post-612 BC date for Nahum, arguing that it was composed as a liturgical response to Nineveh's fall, but this proposal has not met with much acceptance. However, while not having a cultic origin, the book could well have had a cultic use after the events foretold in it came to pass. It would then serve as a vindication of Yahweh's power and justice.

3. The book and its structure

Nahum is the seventh member of 'the twelve' or the Minor Prophets. All canonical traditions place it before Habakkuk and all place it after Micah, except the LXX, where it follows Jonah.

The book is in the form of an oracle (1:1). The Hebrew word translated 'oracle' (*maššā*) comes from the root *nś*'. It occurs in the Old Testament with two different meanings. Whether the two meanings arose from a common original or whether two originally separate words resulted in the same lexical form is not clear. In several cases the regular meaning of the root as 'lift, carry' is evident in meanings such as 'load, burden' (e.g. 2 Kgs 5:17; 2 Chr. 35:3; Jer. 17:21). This use is extended to include not only physical carrying but any 'hardship' (e.g. Num. 11:11; Deut. 1:12). It has been suggested that it is this connotation of a 'burden' or hardship which is used when the word begins an oracle (cf. AV), usually of judgment. The problem with this is that not every occurrence of the word is in the context of judgment (cf. Zech. 12:1). The interpretation of the word as a homonym with the technical meaning 'oracle, pronouncement' fits better in this prophetic context (cf. e.g. Ezek. 12:10; Hab. 1:1; Zech. 9:1; Mal. 1:1). The fact that there are two

6. For a recent discussion of date, see D. L. Christensen, 'The Acrostic of Nahum Reconsidered', *ZAW* 87 (1975), pp. 27–29, esp. p. 29, for this last point.

7. See *ANET*, pp. 304–305; Bright, *History of Israel*, pp. 315–316.

distinct meanings for the same form explains the punning wordplay found in Jeremiah 23:33–38.⁸

The prophecy concerns the destruction of the Assyrian oppressor and the resulting relief for the oppressed Judah. The literary forms and stylistic devices used to express this message are varied. The first section is a psalm of descriptive praise or a hymn which praises God for his character (1:2–8). There then follows a court scene. Here alternating verdicts of judgment and acquittal are given to Assyria and Judah respectively (1:12 – 2:2). There is vivid description of siege and battle (2:1, 3–10; 3:2–3), as well as a dirge or lament (3:1). The writer uses metaphor and simile in extended passages (2:11–13; 3:4–7, 15–17) as well as in individual verses (e.g. 1:10, 13; 2:7; 3:12, 13). He also uses irony (3:1, 14). All these elements work to bring about the aim of the prophecy that is to cause a change in the hearers. It is doubtful whether the audience was Nineveh herself, since the Old Testament contains only one record of a prophecy actually addressed to people other than Israel (Jon. 3:4). This prophecy was probably given to encourage Judah to believe that the tyranny under which she lived would have an end.

The major literary problem of the book concerns the structure of the hymn in the first chapter. The question turns on the existence and extent of an acrostic, where each line begins with the next letter of the alphabet. Examples of this form are found in the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 119) and Lamentations. Being first suggested during the last century as regards Nahum, it has now become widely accepted that at least some, if not all, of the alphabet is included in the acrostic.⁹ However, in order to present a complete alphabet, verses have to be radically reconstructed, usually without any manuscript or versional evidence. Even the more conservative proposal

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8. See S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2 – 14:23* (CWK Gleerup, 1970), pp. 64–65; W. McKane, 'Massa' in Jeremiah 23, 33–40', in J. A. Emerton (ed.), *Prophecy: Essays Presented to George Fohrer on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday, 6 September, 1980* (W. de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 35–54.
9. See Christensen, 'Acrostic of Nahum', pp. 17–19, for a history of the discussion up to 1975.

that half of the Hebrew alphabet ('-כ) governs the structure of 1:2–8 requires emendations in four of the eleven lines concerned, yet none of these lines are incomprehensible as they now stand. In other words, the only motivation for change is for the text to fit to a pattern which theoretically arose from the text, making the argumentation circular.

The subjective nature of conjectural emendation, even in such a relatively conservative way as proposed by Christensen,¹⁰ is not without its critics. As J. M. P. Smith wrote, 'by proceedings like those, any poem might be transformed into an acrostic',¹¹ while G. A. Smith noted that 'to have produced good or poetical Hebrew is not conclusive proof of having recovered the original'.¹² While originally there might very possibly have been a half acrostic, or even a whole one, we cannot find either in the present text. Whether the acrostic existed or not is of importance for literary form, but not for the meaning and content of the prophecy itself. While its existence could provide objective evidence of a new text section starting in 1:9, this is shown anyway by the change in grammatical form from the third person, talking *about* God in 1:2–8, to the second person, talking *to* someone about God in 1:9–11.

4. The message

The message of Nahum concerns God's character and his relationship to the world, not only to his own people but also to those who do not even acknowledge him. The hymn at the outset of the book (1:2–8) sets the context of the whole prophecy. Yahweh is jealous of his unique position as God and visits judicial vengeance upon those who oppose him and oppress his people (1:2). While he shows patience by at times delaying punishment, he is just and his righteous demands must ultimately be met or judgment will follow (1:3). This does not exclude God's own people, either Israel or the church, from judgment. What God desires is not a position or

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

11. J. M. P. Smith, p. 309.

12. G. A. Smith, p. 82.

relationship which is assumed by some past action on the part of God, whether Sinai or Calvary, but a continued response of trust and reliance on God (1:7).

The author is not expressing some personal feeling of vindication over some hurt by the oppressor, nor even a nationalistic chauvinism that pagan nations must be punished. Rather, Yahweh is applying his universal standard against evil, no matter who is responsible (cf. Amos 1:3 – 2:16). Even though God has chosen Assyria to act as his instrument of punishment against the rebellious and recalcitrant Israel (Isa. 7:17; 10:5–6), he holds that nation corporately responsible for the excesses and atrocities committed in fulfilling this role (Isa. 10:7–19; cf. Zeph. 2:14–15).

There might be concern that Nahum is unfairly one-sided in castigating a foreign power while not censuring the evil of his own people. This is not necessarily the case. In some collections of prophetic oracles the two notes of judgment and hope are preached together (e.g. Isaiah; Hosea). In others either judgment or hope is presented to the virtual exclusion of the other (cf. Obadiah; Amos). Even in this latter case the full counsel of God is often provided by having another, contemporary prophet preach the opposite pole. In the case of Nahum's audience, the word of judgment upon them had only recently been spoken to them by Micah. Their own sins, therefore, are not at all being ignored. Nahum, however, points out the equity of God's justice. Often here, as in other books, the punishment closely fits the crime. God is not capricious, being taken by sudden whims or fancies, but just (see 1:14, 2:1, 7, etc.).

This message of God through Nahum was to encourage God's people. Oppressed by a seemingly invincible foe who had overwhelmed the entire region from the Nile to the Tigris, Israel could not look to her own power, but only to God for deliverance. Yet within a few years, the invincible was no more – vanquished by the hand of God, before whom no nation can stand. The church, also faced with the threats of powers or ideologies, can only stand in the same place as Israel, in reliance on God who is 'great in power' (1:3, NIV).