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The Kurdish Prophet Nahum and His Attitude Towards Nineveh

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Abstract

Naḥūm was a Kurdish Jewish prophet who lived in northern Syria in the period of the Assyrian conquests and internecine wars over 2,500 years ago. Part of Naḥūm's long poem, which is in the Kurdish-Persian genre Shāhnāma has since been included in the canonized Hebrew Bible. The first chapter of the Book of Naḥūm, henceforth Section I is a song of praise (panegyric) introducing the main protagonist – in this case HaShem. Section II and Section III of Naḥūm's Book carry on with narrative still in the genre Kurdish Shāhnāma. However, instead of an ensuing lengthy tale, Section III winds up with a few lines of "conclusion," written by another hand.

**Keywords:** Book of Nahum, biblical prophet, Kurdish prophet, Kurdish Shahnama, Assyrian conquests, fall of Nineveh

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## MOTTO

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;  
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,  
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.*

- Lord Byron (George Gordon)<sup>2</sup>

*First published in 1815*

## INTRODUCTION

The present study through close scrutiny of Sections II and III attempts to divine Naḥūm's attitude towards the Assyrian capital Nineveh, the city whose downfall *HaShem* has decreed.<sup>3</sup> Section II commences with vocabulary that immediately reveals Naḥūm's north Syrian Kurdish origins:<sup>4</sup>

2:1 Here on the mountains are messengers (רַגְלֵי מְבַשְׂרִים) with tidings of peace, pilgrims (תְּקֵי) from Judah; (now for) your sacrifice feast fulfilment of your vow since there will be no more passing [conquests and deportations] among you, ineffectual (בְּלִיעֵל) all of it will cease.<sup>5</sup>

In the above lines, Naḥūm informs us about his own location, the traditional place of Kurdish spirituality, and the place he corresponds with, the spiritual center of the Israelite tribes. Messengers have arrived from the Israelite Kingdom of Judah. Naḥūm's language reinforces the notion that he himself is situated in the north of Syria and is in fact a Kurdish Jew.<sup>6</sup> The pilgrims as 'messengers on foot' are described as רַגְלֵי, equivalent to the Arabic رَجُل; the word for people on pilgrimage תְּקֵי, is equivalent to the Arabic حَجَّ. The notion that Naḥūm speaks Kurmanji Kurdish is reinforced by his use of the word בְּלִיעֵל *balīyya'al* (ineffectual), which is a compound word in the manner of especially early Kurdish vocabulary building before

<sup>2</sup> First stanza of Lord Byron's poem *The Destruction of Sennacherib*.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43827/the-destruction-of-sennacherib>

<sup>3</sup> For a relevant study on Section I of Naḥūm's Book, see Karacan, H. and A. Butt (2021), *The Antiquity of Kurmanji Kurdish and the Biblical Book of Nahum*, *Prizren Social Science Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 1. The customary stand-in for the name of the Holy One, *HaShem* (The Name) is used in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Enclaves in Northern Syria were at the time under Persian dominion.

<sup>5</sup> All biblical text is from the Torah Database: <https://mechon-mamre.org/c/ct/c0.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Being a prophet, Naḥūm would have had considerable standing in his community. It is probable that the messengers were from the city of Jerusalem.

grammatical affixes came into use.<sup>7</sup> Hebrew as we know it would be בלי תועלת *bālī to 'elet* (without benefit, to no avail), two separate words.

## SECTION II THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Using the same poetical devices as with Section I, Naḥūm goes on to tell threatened communities what to do to ensure that the prophetic message of doom for Nineveh is fulfilled. In the same breath, he tells them that resistance against the Assyrians must be done wholeheartedly:

2:2 Say a deportation [מִפְּיָן: literally “dispersal.”] confronts you; let us keep watch at the ramparts. Gird your loins, be strong . . . very confident:

2:3 Since *HaShem* shall restore the majesty of Jacob, likewise the majesty of Israel  
Since they are being destroyed and their memory distorted:

In 2:4, the heavenly Chariot (*ha-rehev* הֶרֶבֶב) with the martyred dead passes through the veil of Heaven and the cypress below is no longer visible. Naḥūm lapses into a nice bit of surrealistic writing portraying at first the confused state-of-mind of the onlooker, and then the confusion of the defeated Assyrians:

2:4 The shields of the valiant of them bloodied, the forces crimson consumed in the Chariot's flames on its set day; and the cypress is veiled:

2:5 Outdoors cavalry (הֶרֶבֶב) pound streets that look like lanterns; like lightening they [the cavalry] dash about:

In 2:4, the Hebrew word *ha-rehev* הֶרֶבֶב is the heavenly Chariot, but in 2:5 the same word is used to mean the cavalry (*ha-rehev* הֶרֶבֶב), riders on horses. The ancient Assyrians mastered the art of riding horses. In retrospect, from 2:4 we become aware of Naḥūm's personal reaction as to a nightmare! He reminds the Kurdish communities that the price for succumbing to the Assyrians is high: they will be “destroyed and their memory distorted.” Addressing the Kurdish Jewish communities, Naḥūm prophesies that the great reward for success would be that “*HaShem* shall restore the majesty of Jacob, likewise the majesty of Israel.” The next lines tell us of the nightmare and horror the Assyrians would face. In

<sup>7</sup> Edith Gerson-Kiwi tells us that “Kurdish (Kurmanji) [is used] for the folk tradition of heroic epics, ballads, and dances of the rural milieu”—see the Encyclopaedia Judaica entry “Kurdistan” (The Gale Group, 2008).

Section I, he has already explained exactly why *HaShem* has decreed their destruction. Nahūm compares the Assyrians, not to wolves as does Lord Byron, an English poet of the School of Romanticism, but rather to lions. With empathy and a nice bit of surrealistic writing, Nahūm portrays the confused state-of-mind of defeated Assyrians:

2:6 Its [Nineveh's] nobles remember their failed advance; they speed to the city wall and the defense shelter readied:

2:7 The gates of the rivers have opened and the palaces have[seemingly] dissolved:

2:8 And Huzzab [Huzzab: metaphorically speaking, Nineveh] is snatched away, sacrificed; her slaves [female] lament, the sound of pigeons beating against their hearts:<sup>8</sup>

2:9 And Nineveh is as if a pool of water from the days of . . .<sup>9</sup> and they flee, all comes [literally “both come”] to a standstill but there is no turning back:

“And Nineveh is as if a pool of water” (וְיִינְנָה כְּבַרְכַּת־מַיִם מִיְמֵי הָיָא): In the Hebrew הִיא (she / it) also indicates the end of the clause and points back to “Nineveh.” Paul Haupt in his article *The Book of Nahum* (1907) mentions that “Nineveh was situated in a plain enclosed by four rivers, viz. Tigris, Upper Zab, Khizir, and Gomel.” He maintains that the Tigris could not have caused such a flood unless combined with all the above rivers.<sup>10</sup> With the next clause “And they flee, both come to a standstill but there is no turning back” (וְהָמָּה נָסִים עֲמָדוֹ עֲמָדוֹ וְאֵין) (מִפְּנֵה:), the Hebrew עֲמָדוֹ (both), is a compound word (עַם “with” plus דו “two”) in the manner of early Kurmanji word formation. עֲמָדוֹ עֲמָדוֹ (both come to a standstill) is a melodious sort of *rubato* emphasizing by slowing the rhythm, done with two words unrelated grammatically and meaning something different, but having three seemingly root letters in common, ‘ayin / mem / dalet (עמד stand still). Nahūm is a skilled poet! And then, he goes on to describe what would be expected after the battle and the shock at the fate of Nineveh; the villages roundabout remained, notably al-Qosh:

2:10 Loot silver, loot gold! And there is no end to the treasures, a wealth of every desired article:

<sup>8</sup> Pigeons call to mind floods and the biblical stories of Noah and Jonah. Nineveh did not heed the warning.

<sup>9</sup> The pool of water seems to remain from the great flood in Noah's times. Nahūm shudders and does not utter the dread name of Noah, the ancestral father of the Assyrians. The two dots ( . ) in the text indicate avoidance of uttering Noah's name.

<sup>10</sup> See the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 1: pp. 1-53.

2:11 She [Nineveh] is emptiness and void and waste; and hearts are faint, and knees shake, and panic is in all loins, and all countenances are dark.

The words “emptiness and void and waste” (בוֹקָה וּמְבוֹקָה וּמְבֻלָּקָה) yield a melodious sort of *rubato*; words that emphasize by slowing the rhythm by means of three words with consonants and one vowel in common; “waste” מְבֻלָּקָה adds an additional doubled consonant. Both 2:11 and 2:9 use the *rubato*, a sound device that absolutely demands an oral reading.

Then with the words “lion’s whelp” (גִּיּוֹר אַרְיֵה), Nahūm compares the Assyrians to a “den of lions,” and indicates that the situation will be reversed. He points to Genesis 49:9:

ט גִּיּוֹר אַרְיֵה יְהוּדָה מִטְרַף בְּנֵי עֲלִית פֶּרַע רָבִץ פֶּאֲרֵיָה וְקָלְבִּיא מִי יְקִימֶנּוּ:

Judah is a lion’s whelp, from [being] prey my son you rose up;

He crouched, lay down like a lion and who shall rouse an old lion!

2:12 Where is (that) den of lions? It is pasture for the villages where a lion would bring a lion’s whelp, without fear:

2:13 A lion takes prey sufficient for his whelps and strangles for his lionesses; and he fills his holes with prey and his dens with ravin:

יד הִנְנִי אֵלֶיךָ נְאֻם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְהִבְעַרְתִּי בְּעֵשֶׂן רֶכֶבָהּ וּכְפִירֶיהָ תֹאכַל תָּרַב וְהִכְרַתִּי מֵאַרְצְךָ טְרָפֶיךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע עוֹד קוֹל מְלֶאכְכָּה:

2:14 Behold I am here (as) an utterance for you. *HaShem!* Hosts (of angels)! And I shall make its [Nineveh’s] cavalry vanish in smoke; and I shall uproot (you) from the land of your prey. The sound of your deputation shall no more be heard:

In the above lines, Nahūm as narrator brings the main protagonist *HaShem* together with His heavenly hosts from the background into the foreground of this dramatic narrative. Then we hear the Divine utterance. The words “vanish in smoke” refer to the smoke of Heaven, and point to Isaiah 51:6:

שִׂאוּ לְשָׁמַיִם עֵינֵיכֶם וְהִבִּיטוּ אֶל־הַאָרֶץ מִמַּחַת כִּי־שָׁמַיִם בְּעֵשֶׂן נִמְלָחוּ וְהָאָרֶץ כִּבְגֵד תִּבְלֶה וְיִשְׁבְּיָהּ כְּמוֹ־כֶן יְמוֹתָיו וְיִשְׁוּעָתִי לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה וְצַדִּיקוֹתַי לֹא תִקָּחַת:

Lift your eyes to the heavens and look below towards the earth . . . the heavens shall vanish like smoke . . .

Thus, with Section II we see that plans were made for resistance against Assyrian aggression. Naḥūm presents the communities roundabout with warfare's paradigm for then and now in a situation where a militaristic nation attacks civilian populations. In his role as prophet, he also informs the Jewish communities that *HaShem* has granted them reprieve, and *HaShem* will annihilate Nineveh.

### SECTION III THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Paul Haupt in his article *The Book of Nahum* (1907) says: "The Book of Nahum is not a prophecy, but a liturgical collection of four poems. . . . the last two were written by a Hebrew poet who saw the fall of Nineveh in 606 B.C. [pp. 1-2]." He supports his viewpoint by saying that "Nahum's poem on the fall of Nineveh is the description of a contemporary, if not an eye-witness." The majority of scholars consider Nineveh's destruction to be around a hundred years after Naḥūm's demise, but let us bear in mind Haupt's opinion when looking at Section III. In Section III, Naḥūm starts out describing in detail exactly how Nineveh offends:

3:1 Alas, a bloodstained city all of it deceit; a crossroads, it does not feel for its prey:

3:2 The sound of a whip, and the loud sound of rattling wheels and galloping horses, and a chariot capers:

3:3 The horsemen are roused; then the sword's flame and the javelin's glitter; then lots of space but laden with carcasses; and there is no end to the corpses, they stumble on their corpses:

The poet describes the manner of an Assyrian attack. He may have seen such skirmishes more than once, be it sooner or later. However what is different in his description, contrary to Haupt's portrayal of Naḥūm as a mere poet, is Naḥūm's prophetic portrayal of the tragedy of existence and the tragedy in the fulfilment of *HaShem*'s utterance: "space but laden with carcasses . . . they stumble on their [own] corpses." The word for carcasses (פְּגָרָה) means dead animals, and also metaphorically-speaking means dead wicked people! Naḥūm goes on to say that Nineveh the great city has attractions, but betrays those who succumb:

3:4 [All this] due to the depravity of a harlot who charms, has magic, [but] who betrays nations with her harlotry, and tribes with her magic:

3:5 Behold I am here, (as) an utterance for you. *HaShem!* Hosts (of angels)! And I shall reveal your limits to your face, and I will show the nations (you in) your nakedness, and the kingdoms your disgrace:

3:6 And I will cast swarms over you, and you will decay, and I will turn you into ordure:<sup>11</sup>

3:7 And it shall come to pass that all who look upon you shall flee from you, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will lament her, where shall I seek (those) to console you:

In 3:7 above, Naḥūm takes it upon himself to find people to console Nineveh (מְנַחֵמִים). It could be that the name of the poet “Naḥūm” is based on this line, that is, the poet’s real name is unknown. In any case, Naḥūm was right and moral in his attitude – Isaiah 40:1: Comfort ye my people . . . (בְּנַחֲמוּ וּבְנַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יְאֹמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:). In the next lines, Naḥūm directly addresses Nineveh, comparing Nineveh to the great city of Thebes, today an archaeological site in the vicinity of the Egyptian city of Luxor. Thebes was on the Nile River and was about 500 miles from the Mediterranean Sea.

3:8 Are you better off than Thebes [No-Amon] located on water-courses [the Nile], around it a powerful sea, her wall, sea:<sup>12</sup>

3:9 Cush [ancient Ethiopia] was her strength and Egypt, and there was no border; Phut [Somalia?] and Lubim [Libya?] were on call [presumably as trading partners and allies בְּצִוְרָתָךְ]:

The Hebrew of the 3:10 and 3:11 is as follows:

י גַּם־הִיא לַגֹּלֶה הַלְכָה בְּשִׁבִי גַם עָלְתִּיהָ יִרְטָשׁוּ בְּרֹאשׁ כָּל־חֻצוֹת וְעַל־נִכְבְּדֶיהָ יָדוּ גֹרְלָהּ וְכָל־גְּדֹלְתֶיהָ רָתְקוּ בְּזָקִים:  
יֵא גַם־אֶת תַּשְׁכָּרֵי תְהִי בַעֲלָמָה

Depending on the translation, 3:10 might or might not uphold Haupt’s viewpoint that the poet was in fact a spectator, on the scene when Nineveh was flooded out. I see the word גַּם (*gam*) at the beginning of both 3:10 and 3:11 as being a poetic device to link the two verses; that is,

<sup>11</sup> \*Two meanings for ordure: something vile, hated / manure, excrement of animals. That is, the city will decay.

<sup>12</sup> On No-Amon / Thebes, see the 2006 *Jewish Encyclopedia*:  
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11569-no-amon>.

the word under question undergoes a shift-in-meaning, and it is by analogy that Naḥūm depicts Nineveh's fate:

3:10 Moreover (גַּם-הִיא), she [Thebes] went into exile captive; her infants too were crushed at every entrance; then they cast lots for her notables, and all her great men were bound in chains:

3:11 Also you (גַּם-אַתָּה) shall be intoxicated [as did your ancestor Noah], you shall indeed vanish; you too shall seek shelter [alternative reading: pray for strength מְעִיז מִבְּקֹשֶׁי מְעִיז] because of an enemy:

3:12 All your fortifications shall be fig-trees with first-ripe fruit; if shaken, they shall fall into an eater's mouth:

3:13 Behold, your nation are the women in your midst. . in your midst as your enemy; the gates of your land shall indeed open for your enemies, a fire shall devour your escapees:

The words “in your midst” (בְּקִרְבְּךָ) act as a pivot; they are a sort of enjambment in the middle of the first hemistich. This again creates a slow-down in the rhythm and emphasizes the content.<sup>13</sup> It is also clear proof that the poet conceived of the verse as having two hemistiches. Paul Haupt demonstrates that Naḥūm's poem was initially composed in bi-stiches and had syllabic metre. He tries to show this through his own translation, from which I quote a few lines, as follows:

Art thou better than No  
     on the banks of the Nile,  
 Whose rampart the River,  
     whose wall the water ? [p. 11]

Haupt's analysis was a considerable contribution to the biblical scholarship of his times, but he did not go so far as to equate his findings with the genre *Kurdish Shāḥnāma*.

3:14 Draw water for the siege, strengthen your fortifications; bring clay,<sup>14</sup> tread the mortar that you will strengthen the brick-kiln:

<sup>13</sup> To show this enjambment, the translator / reader has repeated the pivotal word. The original text does not.

<sup>14</sup> Bring clay (בָּאֵי בְּטִיט): In the biblical text, the simple imperfect (*pa'al*) is sometimes used where Modern Hebrew would use the causative conjugation (*hif'il*).

3:15 There fire will devour you, the sword will destroy you, as if a grasshopper (קִלְקִלִּים) is destroying you, Nineveh [the text says “it” (fem.)] will harden like phosphorus [assuming that a second meaning for קִלְקִלִּים is “phosphorus”]; you will become heavy as if (a swarm of) desert locusts [אַרְבֵּבָה]:<sup>15</sup>

### THE FINAL VERSES OF SECTION III

Verses 3:16-19, a Coda winding up the *Book of Nahūm* were written by a poet other than Nahūm. Nahūm’s otherwise long poem in the genre *Shāḥnāma* needed to be brought to an end. It is possible that the lengthy original poem and its variations were lost by the time the Hebrew Bible was canonized. The Coda ceases to have the former poetical subtleties, originality, and indications of contact with Kurmanji *Shāḥnāma*, since it was written after the fall of Nineveh.

3:16 Your merchants became more than the stars in the heavens; the grasshopper spreads (his wings) and flies away:<sup>16</sup>

3:17 Your patron gods (מְנַרְנְרֵי) are like locusts, and your dignitaries like swarms of locusts that camp on hedges on a cold day; the sun rises and they wander off, and their whereabouts are unknown:

These lines further condemn Nineveh in language that jeers. The poet says that Nineveh’s religion and advisories are / were of no use. It was common practise to steal the statue patron gods in warfare, so they too “wander off.” The statues were often huge and impressive.

3:18 Your shepherds will rest, O King of Assyria, your mighty men settle down; your nation will recuperate on the mountains, but no-one will assemble them:

3:19 There is no cure for your destruction, defeat is your legacy; for always, anyone hearing about you will swear [take an oath] that if your wickedness does not afflict:

An oath in those times was made by saying what will afflict the person who takes the oath if he does not keep his word. Nineveh will be remembered by people wishing to take an oath!

<sup>15</sup> Phosphorus can be found in the human body and in grasshoppers. What is heavy will sink into the earth! Nahum says the “loss” of the Assyrian conqueror is a good thing like the loss of a plague of locusts. A locust is a kind of grasshopper.

<sup>16</sup> Became more (הִרְבִּיתָ): cf. the word “to be more” (הִרְבִּיתָ) to the word for “desert locusts” (אַרְבֵּבָה); the sound of the two words draws a comparison.

**CONCLUSION**

Paul Haupt's article written more than a century ago is a maze of scholarly complications. However, he understands prophecy in an overly simplistic way, as a prediction of the future. That is to say, he is unaware of Jewish and Islamic traditions regarding the nature of "prophecy," and does not acknowledge Naḥūm's prophetic outpourings as being just that. He chooses to ignore the inclusion of Naḥūm's Book in the Hebrew Bible in the section entitled "Prophets" (נביאים). Although he is aware and even knowledgeable about geopolitics, he is unaware of demographics in the north of Syria in ancient times. As with others of his generation, he relies on etymologies of words, and does not look at linguistic structures in the text and so is unaware of being off-track.

Naḥūm's attitude towards Nineveh was decidedly enlightened. As the *Book of Naḥūm* unfolds, the personality of this great prophet is revealed. It becomes obvious why the spiritual leadership of the Israelite tribes would entrust him with their message: Here on the mountains are messengers with tidings of peace, pilgrims from Judah . . . (2:1). He could be trusted to address the communities in his surrounds with a rational basis and explanation for *HaShem's* decree and the need for courageous and unified action on the battlefield. It becomes clear that he was venerated both in his lifetime and thereafter. He is compassionate both towards the Kurdish Jews and other communities in his region, and towards the Assyrians whose gods have deserted them; he tries to console whenever possible. In the Section I, he prophesies the fall of Nineveh and says:

1:14 *And HaShem commanded concerning you, let your name be sown no more, from the house of your gods I shall excise sculptures and images; I shall prepare your grave since I despise you [an alternate reading: for easing (these events) for you]:*

The alternate reading of 1:14 telling of Nineveh's hard to reckon with fate, nevertheless consoles. That Naḥūm, a beloved prophet, a poet for all eternity could ever die seems unbelievable. The conclusion of Naḥūm's Book brings tears to my eyes now nearly 3,000 years later.

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