

# NAHUM 1: ACROSTIC AND AUTHORSHIP

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*To Lillian and Oscar Moskowitz z"l in memoriam.*

Since the end of the 19th century, the interpretation of the hymn of theophany in Nahum 1 was dominated by the possibility that it is cast in the form of an alphabetic acrostic. An acrostic is a literary device in which the first letters of words or lines follow the order of the alphabet, or the first letters and/or subsequent letters in some observable order form names, messages, and the like. While the Hebrew Bible contains several alphabetic acrostics in the poetical books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Lamentations (for example, Ps. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, esp. 119; Prov. 31:10-31; Lam. 1-4) no such forms were thought to exist in the prophetic books,<sup>1</sup> although much of prophetic expression is in the form of poetry. The "normal" Hebrew alphabetic acrostic would consist of 22 verses, each beginning with letters that run consecutively from *aleph* to *tav* in the conventional order. However, only Proverbs 31:10-31 and Lamentations 1 are normal in this sense.<sup>2</sup> If indeed Nahum 1 is a partial (or, as some think, a complete) acrostic, then, together with Psalms 9-10, it is the earliest occurrence of this literary form in the Hebrew Bible.

Before we investigate the extent to which an acrostic is featured in Nahum 1, if at all, we must try to answer the question: Why would a poet use an acrostic?

Imposition of an acrostic format on a poetic expression, and in particular a prophetic message, would seem artificial and detract from the message.<sup>3</sup> Among the motives for its use are aesthetics, mnemonics, organization, completeness, and author's prowess.<sup>4</sup> One might suggest that an acrostic adds grace and beauty to a poetic creation, not for their own aesthetic sake but as values that would enhance the prophet's message. If the acrostic format was meant to demonstrate the skill of the writer, it was motivated by a wish to

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create something unique, singular and attractive, because the topic or circumstances so dictated.<sup>5</sup>

Others suggest that the acrostic serves as a mnemonic device that makes it easier to memorize and remember the poetic creation, and hence the message.<sup>6</sup> The irregularities of the acrostics preserved in the Hebrew Bible cast some doubt on the validity of this motive. Indeed, one critic notes that in a number of psalms the acrostic is used actually for introducing order and organization among verses that are not intrinsically related.<sup>7</sup> Another contends that the main reason for the use of an alphabetic acrostic is to highlight the completeness of expression sought by the author, to convey the idea of totality (see TB Sanhedrin 54a, TB Avoda Zara 4a, "from A to Z").<sup>8</sup> This contention has several aspects: All that can be said on any topic, may be implied by an acrostic, or all that is proper to say on a specific topic, can be said by means of words created from the alphabet.<sup>9</sup> In the words of one biblical scholar: "They drew on their stock of divine epithets, lament motives, and other conventional features of religious poetry, which could otherwise be piled on indefinitely."<sup>10</sup> Or, on the contrary, the acrostic alludes to what can be conceived and felt but is essentially ineffable. It cannot be put accurately or entirely into words. Thus, only the letters, the building blocks for the words, are provided. In that case, only fully developed acrostics, subsuming all the letters of the alphabet, would be considered as bona fide examples of this poetic technique. On the other hand, it is also possible that by using an acrostic the poet wishes to state that he is fully capable of expressing himself, yet he places on himself the constraints of the acrostic format.

The problem in Nahum 1 is that it may feature an acrostic, yes, but so mutilated and truncated that the traces of an alphabetic "order" go unnoticed by most readers. Indeed, the alphabetic acrostic in Nahum's hymn remained undiscovered, or was not considered of any significance, until the 19th century.<sup>11</sup> However, once attention was drawn to the possibility, the acrostic became subject to intense scrutiny. One example of such an attempt is that of G. Bickel in 1880: by an ingenious but fanciful method he identified a complete acrostic in verses 1:2-10,<sup>12</sup> not by the initial letters of the verse only but by resorting to the second and third letters of the lines, and even to letters in a single word. The artificiality of his approach kept scholars from adopting Bickel's scheme, and eventually Bickel himself abandoned it.

Other scholars nevertheless followed up the suggestion that the acrostic in Nahum comprised the whole alphabet. A number of scholars use great ingenuity in attempts to reconstruct the first chapter of Nahum in an effort to reveal a complete alphabetic acrostic. Reconstruction demanded revision, reordering of words and phrases, and the like, which, of course, wrenched the passage out of masoretic recognition. Gunkel tried to make 1:2-2:1 of sufficient length to yield 22 lines. To make these lines agree with the acrostic structure, he had to make many radical emendations and several transpositions of lines or parts of lines, especially in 1:10-2:1. In addition, he even assumed that 1:13 and 15 are actually interpolations. With these "heroic measures" he carried the acrostic through Chapter 1 and into the beginning of Chapter 2.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars were more restrained in their seeking an acrostic in Nahum 1. J.M.P. Smith observes:

The acrostic structure of 1:2-10 is too clearly apparent to be a subject of reasonable doubt. Eight of the lines as they stand in MT offer the desired initial letter, while four or five more are easily recovered by slight emendations and transpositions, some of which are necessary apart from all requirements of the acrostic.<sup>14</sup>

In the view of W.R. Arnold,<sup>15</sup> only a fragment of the original acrostic was incorporated in Nahum 1 and it is found in 1:2-10. These are just a few examples of the difficulties that have engaged dozens of scholars who tackle the problem of some sort of acrostic in Nahum 1.

Nevertheless, a few generalized conclusions have emerged. Recent scholarship is comfortable with an abbreviated acrostic. The recurrence of so many successive letters of the alphabet at regular intervals in this abbreviated passage reduces to the vanishing point the possibility of the occurrence being by chance or accident. As S.J. deVries stated, "Two things ought no longer be disputed: (1) Nahum 1 does indeed begin with an acrostic hymn . . .; (2) this hymn reproduces only half of the alphabet, ending with the letter *kaph* [at verse 8 or 9]"<sup>16</sup> This not to say that viewing Nahum 1 as an acrostic hymn had not always had its opponents,<sup>17</sup> though they were usually a minority among the biblical scholars.

It became obvious in my own study of Nahum's text and of the efforts of many scholarly endeavors that some alphabetic ordering is evident in the first

chapter of the Book of Nahum. The following table attempts to identify the elements of one pattern of partial acrostic in Nahum 1 (readers are advised to have the Hebrew text before them):

<u>Verse</u>	<u>Letter</u>	<u>Number of word in verse</u>
1.2	ר	1
1.3	ג	10
1.4	ל	1
[no ט]		
1.5	פ	1
	ל	6
[no ט]		
1.6	פ	9
1.7	ו	1
[no ן]		
1.8	ג	3

Historically, biblical scholarship assumed that Nahum originally contained a full or partial acrostic that became corrupted in transmission. The objective was therefore to reconstruct the original acrostic. Since any reconstruction attempting to fill in the missing letters would necessarily be highly speculative, its value for the understanding of Nahum would consequently be rather limited. It seems more reasonable to address a related but somewhat different question: What was Nahum's sentiment toward expressing himself in the form of an acrostic?

In the first place, the text presents a certain ambiguity of approach to using this poetic technique. Some lines appear as perfect lines of an acrostic (4a, 5a, 5b, 6b, 7a), some have the acrostic word as the second rather than first word (3a, 3b, 6a), and some lines need to be curved out from the MT verses (7-8). From this, we may deduce:

1. Nahum was not averse to the use of the acrostic format. Indeed, the needs of the acrostic played a significant role in the shaping of the hymn. He invested much thought into its formation, shaping it to his liking by balancing between the needs of the acrostic and faithfulness to biblical sources that impressed him.

2. Nevertheless, Nahum did not rigorously adhere to the acrostic structure. He was satisfied when the word for the acrostic was the second in the line. Thus, there is no need to emend Nahum 1:3, 1:6, or delete the first "ל" of לַחֲמַיִם in 1:7.

3. Furthermore, the needs of the acrostic did not overshadow other considerations that he may have had. Nahum did not feel compelled to use a word starting with a "T" in 4b, though many suitable words were available. What may have been his considerations in this case is not clear, but obviously the acrostic, though an important element of technique, did not override all other considerations.

These observations militate against any emendations and reconstruction. It seems best to leave this partial acrostic as it is in the MT, a careful and thoughtful creation in which form is overtaken by ardor, emotion, and tradition. Both artistic elements, form and emotion, are dominant features of the entire book, and characterize Nahum's creative genius.

The question of an acrostic in the first chapter did contribute to positions taken on the book's authorship and its literary unity. To a significant degree, these were shaped by the role of the hymn in the book and its thematic relationship to the rest of the book. The unity of the Book of Nahum was not questioned until Gunkel raised this issue in 1893.<sup>18</sup> Gunkel not only argued that Chapter 1 is an independent unit but also that Nahum did not write it. The acrostic in Nahum, it is to be noted, is the only one found in the prophetic corpus, making it suspect by virtue of its singularity. Furthermore, verse 9 is clearly of a different thematic character from the preceding hymnal lines; the acrostic addresses primarily the Lord's powerful acts, while the verses following verse 9 are addressed to a party that has seemingly sinned against the Lord and His people. Gunkel also pointed out that the writer composed Chapters 2 and 3 in a different tone and style, one befitting a definite and concrete political situation, whereas in the former we have only theological abstractions. Moreover, the artificial acrostic form is out of character with the vigorous and vital style of Nahum. Finally, it is strangely unique: the use of alphabetic acrostics has not turned up elsewhere in ancient Near East poetry, but does appear in Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman poetry. It is possible that the cultured wisdom teachers may have borrowed it from such sources for inclusion in Nahum's book.<sup>19</sup>

Eighty years later, in 1972, G. Fohrer echoed Gunkel's conclusions concerning the doubtful authorship of Chapter 1 by noting its undistinguishable style:

Stylistically it exhibits no idiosyncrasies and no refinements beyond what is usual; it is, however, informed with genuine religious vitality. The reverse is true of Nahum's sayings: there we find marked poetic creativeness placed in the service of ideas that are more political and nationalistic than religious.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, the argument against Nahum's authorship of Chapter 1 rests on the following observations:

1. FORM VS TEMPER DISSONANCE: The acrostic poetic form in which the material is cast seems too mechanical, distant and artificial for a poet of Nahum's vigor and freshness. It appears to be a typical hymn of theophany without any historical situation.

2. LINGUISTIC DISSONANCE: The psalm-like language used in the hymn differs significantly from that in the rest of the book.

3. ABSTRACTION VS CONCRETENESS DISSONANCE: In the hymn, the language of reflection is used. It is theological and abstract in nature and can apply to almost any enemy. The rest of the book is markedly more concrete, imbued with prophetic passion forged in the heat of current political controversy and hope.

4. GEOGRAPHIC DEFOCUSING: In the hymn, God's wrath is directed at Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon without a clear rationale. In the rest of the book the focus and rationale is clear: Nineveh is the sole object of His anger.

5. ESCHATOLOGY VS PROPHECY DISSONANCE: The indefinite and eschatological character of the hymn distinguishes it sharply from genuine prophecy. Says Fohrer:

The prophets almost never anticipated the distant future. What they expected to happen they usually expected to happen imminently -- even the post-exilic prophets. Everything was on the point of taking place, and there was just time to alert men and challenge them to draw the proper conclusions with respect to the present . . . . The prophets' message spoke of imminent events and proximate history. And the only reason it spoke of proximate history was to influence the present. The present in which they lived was the prophets' real concern.<sup>21</sup>

These observations biased biblical scholarship toward denying Nahum authorship of the acrostic. Indeed, the hymn does not reflect any particular historical situation, but rather speaks in general terms of the Lord's vengeance

upon His adversaries, as is appropriate in a hymn. Yet, this fact and the alphabetic form do not per se argue against Nahum's authorship. It is, however, possible that Nahum himself placed the hymn at the beginning of his utterances; the more so because the hymn breaks off at precisely the point where the specific prophetic sayings thematically begin, serving as a theological basis for them.

Though surrounded by scholarly questioning, emendation, reconstruction, and speculation, the Book of Nahum, in its pristine masoretic state, presents us with a powerful message of the condemnation of sin and of hope in God's power and mercy – a message made memorable by no mean poetic ability.

NOTES

1. A. Melitz, "אקרוסטיס בן נחום." *Beit Mikra* 36 (1991) pp. 250-262.
2. V.A. Hurowitz., "An Often Overlooked Alphabetic Acrostic in Proverbs 24:1-22," *Revue Biblique* 106 (2000) pp. 1-15.
3. Y.Z. Moshkovitz., םכ״א, in *Hamesh Megilloth*. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973) p. 6. Moshkovitz makes an effort to show that use of an acrostic did not hamper the poetic flexibility of the author. While this may have been true for some letters, it is certainly not true for the entire alphabet.
4. R. Marcus. "Alphabetic Acrostics in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6 (1947) pp. 109-11.
5. Melitz, p. 261. See also: W.G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Sup 26 (1986) p. 198.
6. N. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954) p. 27.
7. A.R. Ceresko. "The ABCs of Wisdom in Psalm XXXIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985) p. 99-102. Ceresko calls such ordering an application of the Principle of Acrography.
8. Gottwald, p. 27.
9. A. Jeremias. *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des alten Orients; Handbuch zur biblisch-orientalischen Altertumskunde*. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1930) p. 665.
10. W.M. Soll, "Acrostic" in D.N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* I. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 58.
11. F. Delitzsch, *Biblisches Commentar über die Psalmen* (Leipzig: 1867) p. 107. According to Delitzsch the acrostic was first noticed by the pastor G. Frohnmeyer of Lienzingen in Würtemberg.
12. G. Bickell. "Die hebräische Metrik," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 34 (1880) pp. 557-63.
13. H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895) pp. 102f.
14. J.M.P. Smith, "Commentary on the Book of Nahum," in J.M.P. Smith, W.H. Ward, J.A. Bewer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1985) pp. 295-96.

15. W.R. Arnold. "The Composition of Nahum 1-2:3," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 21 (1901) p. 236.
16. S.J. De Vries, "The Acrostic of Nahum in the Jerusalem Liturgy," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966) p. 477f. See also: A. Halder, *Studies in the Book of Nahum*. (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1947) p. 24; W.A.Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) p. 60; M. H. Floyd, "The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1: 2-10," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994) pp. 421-437.
17. Delitzsch, pp. 106-7.
18. Smith, p. 268
19. Marcus, pp. 109-111
20. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 493. See also: Smith, p. 296.
21. G. Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972) p. 272.