

Acrostics in the Book of Nahum

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*Dedicated to Prof. Dr. Johannes C. de Moor
on the occasion of his 25th anniversary
as Professor in Kampen*

I

In this article¹ I take up an issue that was already discussed in this journal in 1893 by H. Gunkel and since then by many other authors in this same periodical². It all started with an observation made by G. Frohnmeyer (1813–1880), reverend in Kirchenkirnberg, a small town in Germany. It was reported by F. Delitzsch in his commentary on the acrostic Ps 9–10. In his opinion the poetic form of an alphabetic acrostic should not be underestimated: »Sogar der Prophet verschmäh't es nicht, wie aus Nah 1,3–7 ersichtlich, der Buchstabenfolge einen Einfluß auf

¹ This is a revised version of a paper read at the meeting of »Het oudtestamentische werkgemeenschap in Nederland en België« in Leiden, September 15, 1995. It is one of the results of my research for a commentary on the book Nahum in the series Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, 1997.

Thanks are due to B. S. J. Visschers, M. A. for correcting the English translation.

² H. Gunkel, Nahum 1, ZAW 13 (1893), 223–244; cf. the survey by K. Seybold, ZAW 101 (1989), 71. To this can be added now M. A. Sweeney, Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum, ZAW 104 (1992), 364–377. Cf. also D. L. Christensen, The Book of Nahum: The Question of Authorship within the Canonical Process, JETS 31 (1988), 51–58; D. L. Christensen, The Book of Nahum as a Liturgical Composition: A Prosodic Analysis, JETS 32 (1989), 159–169; D. T. Williams, The Acrostic of Nahum: Call of the Prophet, OTE 4 (1991), 248–256; Th. Hieke, Der Anfang des Buches Nahum, BN 68 (1993), 13–17; 69 (1993), 15–20; J. Nogalski, The Redactional Shaping of Nahum 1 for the Book of the Twelve, in: Among the Prophets, eds. P. R. Davies and D. J. A. Clines, JSOTS 154, 1993, 193–202; J. Nogalski, Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve, BZAW 217, 1993, 37–40; J. Nogalski, Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve, BZAW 218, 1993, 93–117; M. H. Floyd, The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1:2–10, JBL 113 (1994), 421–437. See for the older literature the excellent bibliography by A. J. O. van der Wal, Nahum, Habakkuk. A Classified Bibliography, 1988.

seine Gedankenreihen einzuräumen.«³ This discovery would not have had much impact on the study of the book of Nahum, if it had not been used by G. Bickell as the starting point of an attempt to reconstruct a complete alphabetic acrostic in Nah 1,2–10⁴. To reach his goal he had to emend some words and replace some lines. He also assumed that the letters ם–ן of the alphabetic sequence were not to be found at the beginning of the lines, but were placed after the letters ם–ל. Since he had to invest so much creativity, Bickell's claim that in fact he himself is to be regarded as the discoverer of the alphabetic acrostic⁵ is not completely out of place. His joy over his inventive reconstruction must have been severely toned down by the devastating criticism by Gunkel in the ZAW-article mentioned above. Nevertheless, also Gunkel assumes that the, in his opinion, badly corrupted Masoretic text can be reconstructed to a complete alphabetic acrostic. To his mind it runs until 2,2. He even thinks that he may have found the name of the poet, hidden in the first word of the line following the acrostic: שׁבַּי, *šobay* or *šobî*. In his reaction in 1894 Bickell accepted the new demarcation, but he came with new proposals for emendation. This was not the end of the debate, on the contrary. It appeared to be impossible to reach a consensus. Consequently, the emendations of the Masoretic text became more modest and the acrostic lost more and more of its length. In the second and third edition of the *Biblia Hebraica* the editors, W. Nowack and O. Procksch respectively, only indicated the letters ם–ם⁶. In the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* K. Elliger did not want to go any further than the letter *kaf*. This view, which was already put forward by J. Wellhausen in his short commentary on the Minor Prophets in 1898⁷, represents the *communis opinio* of the last decades. Typical for this situation is the remark by S. J. de Vries that »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 *kaph*«⁸.

³ Biblischer Kommentar über die Psalmen, 2. Auflage 1867, 106 f. Cf. K. Seybold, *Profane Prophetie. Studien zum Buch Nahum*, SBS 135, 1989, 74, n. 1, for more information on Gottlieb Frohn Meyer.

⁴ ZDMG 34 (1880), 559–560.

⁵ Das Alphabetische Lied in Nahum I 2–II 3, SAWW.PH, Abh. 5, 1894, 2.

⁶ In his *Die Kleinen Propheten* published in 1897 W. Nowack still attempted to restore a complete acrostic. In the second edition of 1903 he stopped at v. 8. In the next edition (1922) he extended it again to v. 10.

⁷ *Die Kleinen Propheten*, 3. Auflage 1898 (= 4. Auflage 1963), 159; cf. also P. Humbert, ZAW 44 (1926), 267.

⁸ VT 16 (1966), 477 f.; cf. also W. Rudolph, *Micha-Nahum-Habakuk-Zephania*, KAT XIII, 3, 1975, 153, who calls the attempt to find a complete acrostic »verlorene Liebesmühe.« An exception is M. Krieg, *Todesbilder im Alten Testament*, 1988, 518 f., with a rehabilitation of Gunkel's theory.

In this new contribution I hope to demonstrate that the order of De Vries does not have a sound basis. The discussion about the alphabetic sequence discovered by Frohnmeyer may have been dominated too much by Bickell's hypothesis of a complete alphabetic acrostic. Although his view has been modified, it still has its influence upon the way commentators look at the text. A fresh and different approach, which is not primarily focused upon an alphabetic acrostic, may appear to be more fruitful.

II

There has always been a minority of scholars questioning the theory of an alphabetic acrostic in Nah 1. A. B. Davidson called for more reticence: »even if it should be assumed that an alphabetical poem lurks under ch. 1, the attempt to restore it (...) can never be more than an academic exercise«⁹. S. R. Driver did not want to go beyond the possibility already expressed by Delitzsch that »the author allowed himself here and there, perhaps accidentally, to follow the alphabetic order«¹⁰. According to W. A. Maier »no satisfactory explanation is given for the incredible circumstance that the Hebrew copyist did not recognize the alphabetism which modern interpreters easily discern; no justification has been offered for the incomplete arrangement«¹¹. More recently this position was forcefully defended by M. H. Floyd. On textcritical and formcritical grounds he comes to the conclusion that »the hypothesis of an alphabetic acrostic here should now be laid to rest«¹². His arguments are that there is no support at all from the Versions of Hebrew manuscripts for the proposed emendations. One does not need any textual emendation to understand the present text. In his opinion vv. 9–10 cannot be separated from vv. 2–8. He interprets this unit as a »prophetic interrogation« and regards this as another argument against the supposed acrostic, which according to him, is only used with hymns. B. Becking agrees with Floyd that the first part of the book of Nahum is not written in the form of an acrostic¹³. He does not subscribe, however,

⁹ Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah, 1896, 20.

¹⁰ ET 9 (1897 f.), 119; cf. also C. J. Goslinga, *Nahums godsspraak tegen Ninevé*, 1923, 100; and from quite a different angle H. Schulz, *Das Buch Nahum. Eine Redaktionskritische Untersuchung*, BZAW 129, 1973, 11, who speaks of a »nicht konsequenter Versuch alphabetischer Anordnung.«

¹¹ *The Book of Nahum*, 1959, 60; cf. also A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum*, 1947, 24; R. B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, 1990, 165; and O. P. Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, NICOT, 1990, 57 f.

¹² JBL 113 (1994), 437.

¹³ *Passion, Power and Protection. Interpreting the God of Nahum, Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes*, eds. B. Becking and M. Dijkstra, 1995, 2–20, esp. 4 ff.

to his formcritical remarks. The hymn is a rather vague category of poetic texts and from Mesopotamian literature we know that acrostics occur in all sorts of texts. One can also question Floyd's subdivision of the text. The unity and structure of the book of Nahum are a matter of ongoing debate¹⁴. The division of the text suggested by Floyd is also found with other scholars¹⁵. However, defending the integrity of the Masoretic text, but not following its subdivision by the *Setuma* placed after v. 11 is inconsistent.

According to Floyd, the sequence noticed by Frohnmeyer is probably pure coincidence. He tries to prove his point by playing around with a number of English poems. He would have been more convincing, if he had been able to point to similar cases of coincidence in the Hebrew bible. Although his critical remarks on the hypothesis of an alphabetic acrostic are not unfounded, his critical attitude may have lead him too far here. He should at least have considered some other possible explanations. Patterson and Travers suggest that the acrostic arrangement was not entirely dependent upon the first letter of the first word: the prescribed letter only had to occur within the line¹⁶. In several cases one notices a deliberate repetition of the letter in question. Only in v. 4b it would be necessary to emend the text to get the expected *dalet*. Another explanation of the partial alphabetic sequence in Nah 1 was offered in 1901 by W. R. Arnold¹⁷. He argues that the loss of the acrostic should not be ascribed to later scribal errors in the transmission of the text, but to a rather clumsy redactor. In editing the prophetic vision of Nahum he not only gave it the title, but he also prefixed an appropriate introduction. For this purpose he used an existing poem, which he quoted by heart. Apparently he did not remember all of it and he had also forgotten that it was an alphabetic acrostic. Because of the fascinating speculations Arnold's theory is often mentioned, but it is – probably for the same reason – hardly followed. The basic idea, however, returned more modestly in the work of J. Jeremias and K. Seybold, who maintain that

¹⁴ Cf. K. Spronk, Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to the Book of Nahum, in: Synchronic or Diachronic: a Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis, ed. J. C. de Moor, OTS 34, 1995, 159–186. A new study, not mentioned in this survey and with very different conclusions, is T. Lescow, Die Komposition der Bücher Nahum und Habakuk, BN 77 (1995), 59–85.

¹⁵ Cf. D. L. Christensen, The Acrostic of Nahum Once Again. A Prosodic Analysis of Nahum 1,1–10, ZAW 99 (1987), 409–415; R. D. Patterson and M. E. Travers, Literary Analysis and the Unity of Nahum, GTJ 9 (1988), 45–58.

¹⁶ GTJ 9 (1988), 57. A similar approach can already be found with J. D. Davis in his article on Nahum in The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, 1911 (reprinted in 1944), 416f. In this way, Davis is able to complete the alphabet, 1,9–2,1 containing the remaining letters ט–ת.

¹⁷ The Composition of Nahum 1–2:3, ZAW 21 (1901), 225–265.

vv. 2b–3a can be ascribed to a redactor inserting his comment on the central message of the poem placed by him at the beginning of the prophetic speeches¹⁸. With J. Nogalski this explanation about the irregularities of the acrostic plays a prominent part in his theory about the formation of the book of the Minor Prophets¹⁹. He not only regards vv. 2b–3a, but also the problematic verses 4b (the missing *dalet*) and 6a (the added לפני before the *zain*-word) as deliberate alterations to an existing poem. In this way the initial chapter of Nahum would have been linked to Mi 7, the final chapter of the preceding book. According to Nogalski, the reference to YHWH in v. 2b as »slow in anger« introduces the idea of a temporal delay of the judgement. He relates this to the delay of the salvation of YHWH's people in Mi 7,18–20. These expanded lines would also quote and adapt Joel 2,13 and 4,21. They would have been added as part of a redaction inspired by the book of Joel as this completed the book of the Minor Prophets. Nogalski assumes that v. 4 was changed by the redactor to relate it to Mi 7,14, because this verse also mentions Bashan and Carmel. Finally, the change of the original *zain*-line would have been due to the insertion in the preceding line of the words »all its inhabitants«, which were taken from Mi 7,13. לפני which originally followed ותכל was now placed at the beginning of the next line and slightly changed into לפני.

In Nogalski's theory much depends on the interpretation of vv. 2b–3a. Does this assumed addition really represent a different view on YHWH's judgement than v. 2a? A closer look will show that vv. 2–3 are much more coherent than suggested by Nogalski. Vv. 2b–3a can be regarded as a conscious expansion of v. 2a and in particular of the central words נָקָם יְהוָה. The first word, »avenger« is taken up in v. 2b, which clarifies the object of this avenger: it concerns his enemies. V. 3a takes up the name of YHWH by citing a traditional confession from Ex 34,6 f., that in the same context also speaks of YHWH as אֵל קָנָא (34,14; cf. Nah 1,2a)²⁰. Contrary to Nogalski's opinion the reference to YHWH being »slow to anger« appears to be mentioned here only to be modified by the following words: »and great of strength« (וְגִדּוֹל-כֹּחַ), which replace the traditional »rich in faithfulness« (רַב-חֶסֶד). This remarkable variation reminds us of the expression used in describing YHWH leading his people out of Egypt »with great power and a mighty hand« (Ex

¹⁸ J. Jeremias, Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit Israels, WMANT 35, 1970, 17 f.; Seybold, Profane Prophetie, 76; cf. also B. Renaud, ZAW 99 (1987), 208 ff.

¹⁹ See his studies mentioned in n. 2.

²⁰ Cf. J. Scharbert, Formgeschichte und Exegese von Ex 34,6 f. und seiner Parallelen, Bib. 38 (1957), 130–150, and H. Spieckermann, »Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr ...«, ZAW 102 (1990), 1–18.

32,11; Deut 4,37; 9,29; II Reg 17,36). The words בכח גדל seem to have been transformed in Nah 1,3 according to the construction of רב חסד (cf. also the »mixed« construction in the later Ps 148,5: ארך אפים (וגדל-חסד)). This can only lead to the conclusion that Nah 1,3a is a »vengeful reapplication« of Ex 34,6 f.²¹ and perfectly in line with v. 2a.

Nogalski's suggestion that the break of the acrostic pattern in v. 4b was due to a redactor stitching it together with the book of Micah (esp. Mi 7,14) is not convincing either. There is a far better parallel to Nah 1,4 in Isa 33,9. This verse was also noted in this connection by Nogalski, but he failed to take into account that there are more parallels to be found between the book of Nahum and this passage in Isa 33: Isa 33,1/ Nah 3,7; 33,2//1,8; 33,4//3,15; 33,7//2,1.14; 33,11 f.//1,10²². It can be concluded that this verse is by no means a »Fremdkörper« in the book of Nahum. The same can be said about v. 5b. There are no compelling reasons to regard וכל-ישבי בה as a later insertion. Moreover, there is a clear parallel in Ps 98,7 mentioning »the world and its inhabitants« in a similar context.

III

Having rejected the theory of a complete alphabetic acrostic hidden in the text, and not being convinced by the theory that there was no acrostic at all, nor by the theory of a later redaction, we now turn to the suggestion that the prophet himself adapted an existing alphabetic acrostic and used it to introduce the oracle and vision. According to C. von Orelli, the prophet may have used one of his own hymns²³, but it is usually assumed that he worked with an older composition from a different hand²⁴. In this connection one comes across very different answers to the question why the prophet did not completely preserve the alphabetic sequence. According to Van Selms the acrostic may have been intentionally destroyed by the prophet »in order to prevent any

²¹ M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 1985, 347; cf. also Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, 168, and G. H. Johnston, *A Rhetorical Analysis of the Book of Nahum*, Diss. Dallas Theol. Sem., 1992, 320–329.

²² Cf. K. Spronk and N. H. Ridderbos, *Worstelen met een wrekende God. De uitleg van het boek Nahum*, 1995, 49 f.

²³ Die zwölf kleinen Propheten, 3. Auflage 1908, 132: »Möglich wäre auch, daß er eines seiner Lieder nur soweit als Präludium seines Orakels vorgesetzt hätte, als es dienstlich schien. So würden sich die Störungen und die Erweiterung der 8-Strophe am leichtesten erklären.«

²⁴ Cf. F. H. Woods and F. E. Powell, *The Hebrew Prophets*, 1910, 16; N. H. Ridderbos, *Worstelen met een wrekende God*, 38; A. van Selms, *The Alphabetic Hymn in Nahum 1*, *Biblical Essays* 1969, ed. A. H. van Zyl, OTWSA 12, 1969, 33–45; E. Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 1986, 6; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 1991, 48; H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, OTS 31, 1995, 202 f.

magical associations with the alphabet»²⁵. D. T. Williams tried to demonstrate that the prophet deliberately deviated from the expected pattern to call up the attention of the readers. The sudden closure after the first half would be a reference to the call of the prophet: his message was needed to reach completion²⁶. G. H. Johnston thinks of a reference to the unexpected and seemingly premature ending of the Assyrian empire²⁷. Others state that the prophet ended his alphabetic introduction with a *kaf*-line because this contains the keyword of his prophecy: כלה, referring to the destruction by YHWH²⁸. These are all no more than speculations without a convincing textual basis. An interesting attempt to find a clue in the text itself was made by A. S. van der Woude. In his opinion the prophet replaced the original alphabetic acrostic by a sentence-acrostic in vv. 2–8:

אני בנאה ולפני חטִיךְ

»I am the Exalted One and confronting them who commit sin against you«²⁹.

This suggestion was taken over and expanded by D. L. Christensen. In the initial letters and words of vv. 2–10 he found the following »essential message of the book of Nahum in summary fashion«:

אני יהוה גאה ולפני חטִיךְ (י) בשטף עבר כלה מלא

»I am the exalted YHWH and (I am) in the presence of sin. In a flood (I am) bringing a full end completely«³⁰.

The problem with these suggestions is that for unclear reasons the acrostic is not only built up of initial letters, but also of one or more words at the beginning of the lines. There are no parallels for this in the literature of the ancient Near East. One can also doubt whether these lines really contain the central message of the book. Since there have been found no other clear examples of name- or sentence-acrostics in the Old Testament until now, it comes as no surprise that these suggestions have been rejected or simply ignored by other scholars³¹. There may be, how-

²⁵ Van Selms, *The Alphabetic Hymn*, 42. He also speculates about the original hymn having mentioned the wrong sanctuaries and deities in the second half.

²⁶ See his article mentioned in n. 2.

²⁷ *A Rhetorical Analysis*, 87.

²⁸ Cf. amongst others H. Junker, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*, 1938, 15.

²⁹ *OTS* 20 (1977), 123.

³⁰ *JETS* 31 (1988), 55.

³¹ Cf. Seybold, *Profane Prophetie*, 74, n. 3; W. Dietrich, *TRE* 23, 1994, 738. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, *JSOT.S* 26, 1986, 192, n. 92, lists all (in his opinion not convincing) attempts to detect such acrostics, but he does not mention the article of Van der Woude. The reference to S. Bergler's study on Lam 5 should be *VT* 27 (1977), 304–320.

ever, a kernel of truth in these admittedly bold theories. It is hardly a coincidence that the initial letters of the first three lines form the word יָנִי. As has been demonstrated above, in the discussion with Nogalski, these lines are closely connected. We should also note the clear parallel with some Mesopotamian acrostics³². The acrostic of the »Babylonian Theodicy« from the first half of the eighth century B. C. E.³³ reads: »I (*anaku*) am Saggilkinamubbib, the incantationpriest, who greets with blessing the god and the king.« The prayer of Ashurbanipal to Marduk from the seventh century B. C. E.³⁴ also mentions in a sentence-acrostic the name of the (alleged) author: »I (*anaku*) am Ashurbanipal, who calls thee. Grant me life, Marduk, and I will sing the praise.« These parallels date from approximately the same period as the prophecy of Nahum and come from the region to which Nahum addresses his oracle. This can be regarded as one of the many indications that the prophet was familiar with Mesopotamian literature. He appears to have deliberately used a number of standard Akkadian phrases and images to formulate his message against Nineveh³⁵. Could he not also have taken over this poetic device and is there perhaps not also an indication to be found of the author after the initial יָנִי? Both Van der Woude and Christensen assume that there is a reference to YHWH. This is not unlikely, because it is YHWH who is speaking according to 1,12; 2,14 and 3,5. He is the one who gave the vision to the prophet. According to Van der Woude, his name is not explicitly mentioned in the acrostic. Christensen is forced to assume that the complete first word of v. 3b is part of the acrostic. They overlooked the fact that the name of YHWH is incorporated in a different way: not at the beginning, but at the end of the lines. When the final letters of the first four lines are put next to each other, we read יְהוָה!³⁶ This is a so-called telestic, which is also found in Mesopotamian texts. It is used there too in combination with acrostics³⁷. In two first millennium prayers to Marduk the acrostic identifies the author: »of Nabu-ušēbši, the exorcist«. The telestic describes him as »the servant

³² Cf. the surveys by W. M. Soll, *Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics*, Bib. 69 (1988), 305–323, and J. F. Brug, *Biblical Acrostics and their Relationship to other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics*, in: *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature, Scripture in Context 3*, eds. W. Hallo a.o., 1990, 283–304.

³³ Cf. TUAT III/1, 143–157.

³⁴ Cf. TUAT II/5, 765–768.

³⁵ Johnston, *A Rhetorical Analysis*, 330–398, lists no less than thirty nine common motifs. Cf. also K. J. Cathcart, *Treaty-Curses and the Book of Nahum*, CBQ 34 (1973), 179–187; P. Machinist, *JAOS* 103 (1983), 735 f.; Spronk, *Worstelen met een wrekende God*, 45.

³⁶ This surprising observation was made by Prof. Dr. C. J. Labuschagne during the meeting mentioned in n. 1.

³⁷ Cf. Soll, *Babylonian and Biblical Acrostics*, 309 f.

who proclaims your supremacy« and »the servant given to prayer who worships you.« In a prayer to Nabu the acrostic and telestic form the same sentence: »(...) that I found myself in distress.«

The acrostic and telestic of Nah 1 form the well known formula **אני יהוה**, »I am YHWH«, that functions as a subscription: it is YHWH who is speaking here and who is giving the vision mentioned in v. 1 to the prophet (cf. Hos 12,10f.). As in the Mesopotamian parallels it is placed at the beginning of the poem. It is important to note that in this way the superscript is connected to the following text. Usually Nah 1,1 is regarded as a later addition like the headings of most prophetic books. In the book of Nahum, however, the initial verse differs from the common headings, because it contains no reference to the date of the prophecy³⁸. The telestic in Nah 1,1–3 can be regarded as an extra argument supporting the structural analysis that takes vv. 1–3 as a canticle consisting of three strophes like most canticles in this book³⁹. It is also noteworthy in this connection that the last word, the reference to the unknown city Elkosh, can be related to first word of the next verse. **אלקש** can be translated as »God is severe.« This forms a parallel pair with **אל קנא**, »God is jealous«, as can be illustrated by Cant 8,6: »jealousy is as severe as Sheol.«

IV

The new findings mentioned above also have their impact on the study of the traces in the following verses of an alphabetic sequence. The very critical and sometimes even negative attitude towards the Masoretic text since the studies of Bickell and Gunkel appear to be unfounded. One should be very careful in assuming redactional activities. Even the theory that the prophet himself adapted an existing poem seems to be contradicted by the beautiful structure of vv. 1–3, because this does not look like a medley of phrases from different origins. Therefore, the next lines deserve a positive approach as well. The first thing we note is that the name of YHWH seems to have been added at the beginning of the *bet*-line (v. 3b). In this way v. 3 seems to have been stitched to the previous line, which also begins with the name of YHWH in *casus pendens*⁴⁰. This special function of the name of YHWH is underlined by the fact that both v. 3aA and v. 3bA are extra long. The initial word can easily be left out. This puts extra emphasis on the following words. In v. 3a the next two words begin with the letter *alef*,

³⁸ Cf. the survey by H.-M. Wahl, *Die Überschriften der Prophetenbücher*, *ETHL* 70 (1994), 91–104.

³⁹ Cf. Spronk, *OTS* 34, 169–181.

⁴⁰ Cf. P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew II*, 1991, 586.

in v. 3b with the letter *bet*. This makes it very likely that the alphabetic sequence does not begin in v. 2, but in v. 3⁴¹. So it is not necessary to assume that the sentence-acrostic in vv. 1–3 was intended as an adaptation of an original alphabetic acrostic. Apparently the beginning of the book of Nahum is built up of a sentence-acrostic/telestic followed by an alphabetic acrostic with an overlap in v. 3a. This link looks like the way in which vv. 2–3 were connected with v. 1 by the telestic. In v. 3 the overlapping is marked by the repeated name of YHWH, which also indicates the theme of the following alphabetic acrostic: it is a poem about YHWH and it works out a well known confession quoted in the first line (v. 3a). As was indicated above, there is an important variation compared to the traditional words we know from Ex 34,6 f. Precisely this phrase speaking of YHWH's »great power« seems to have been elaborated in the next verses.

There is a regular alphabetic sequence until the letter *tet* (v. 7a). A *yod*- and *kaf*-line can only be reconstructed by forcing the text into a strained structure⁴². Without the wish to lengthen the acrostic, the arrangement as indicated in the Masoretic text is much more plausible. Vv. 7 f. have to be taken as two tricola:

Good is YHWH,
indeed, a shelter in the day of distress
and knowing those who seek refuge in Him.
And with an overwhelming flood
He makes an end to her place
and pursues his enemies into darkness.

These two extra long strophes mark the beginning of a new canticle (vv. 7–21)⁴³. The view that there is an important division in the text between v. 6 and v. 7 is only found with commentators from the time before the discovery of the alphabetic sequence⁴⁴ and among some of those who deny the presence of an acrostic⁴⁵. The wish to extend the

⁴¹ This was also suggested by Christensen, ZAW 99 (1987), 412. Unfortunately and for unclear reasons he seems to have dropped this proposal in his later studies.

⁴² Here I agree with Floyd, JBL 113 (1994), 425 f., and Lescow, BN 77 (1995), 68 f. I have to retract my earlier interpretation of this passage in OTS 34, 178.

⁴³ See on this function of the tricolon Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry, 183. Cf. Spronk, OTS 34, 170; v. 9 should now be read in my opinion as a monocolon followed by a bicolon.

⁴⁴ Cf. H. Ewald, Die Propheten des Alten Bundes II, 1840, 354; F. W. C. Umbreit, Praktischer Commentar über die kleinen Propheten, 1844, 258; O. Strauss, Nahumi de Nino vaticinium, 1853, 22; M. Breitenicher, Ninive und Nahum, 1861, 49; P. Kleinert, Obadjah-Zephanjah, 1868, 107.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. A. Smith, The Book of the Twelve Prophets, 1898, 93; G. L. Robinson, The Twelve Minor Prophets, 1926, 112; Chisholm, Interpreting the Minor Prophets, 166; Robertson, NICOT, 69; and Floyd, JBL 113 (1994), 427 f.

alphabetic acrostic until at least v. 8 seems to have obscured the obvious division of the text. Just as in v. 3 the two units appear to be overlapping. The beginning of the new canticle in v. 7 is also the ending of the alphabetic acrostic. In v. 3 this overlapping was underlined by the repetition of the name of YHWH. It is certainly no coincidence that this name now also appears at this new connecting point: **טוב יהוה**. There is no need to look for more lines in this alphabetic sequence, because this constitutes a perfect ending. This is not only indicated by the structure of the poem, but also by the fact that the *tet* is in the alphabet the letter preceding the *yod*, the first letter of **יהוה**. The form and length of this partial alphabetic acrostic suit the contents well. As is indicated, at its beginning and end the acrostic is about YHWH and especially about his great power. The closest parallel to this poetic form is the praise of a capable wife in Prov 31,10–31, which is also an enumeration of virtues in the form of an alphabetic acrostic.

V

Until now we have found no compelling reasons to emend the Masoretic text. The theory outlined above about an alphabetic acrostic in vv. 3–7, from *alef* to *tet*, makes it necessary to look again at the places where the sequence is broken. In v. 4b the line begins with **אמלל** in the place where we would expect a word beginning with *dalet*. **אמלל** is repeated at the end of the line. In the LXX we find different verbs here. This can be interpreted as an indication that the original Hebrew text also used different verbs. Yet this argument is not conclusive, because both Greek words are used in other places as translations of forms of the Hebrew **אמלל**. It cannot be excluded that the Greek translator used equivalents for the same Hebrew word⁴⁶. The same can be said of the Peshitta⁴⁷. The most likely proposal is that the original text read **דלל** from the verb **דלל**, »to become weak, small«⁴⁸. This can be based on the occurrence next to each other of the verb **חרב** and **דלל** in Isa 19,6 in the context of an oracle against Egypt announcing that the Nile shall dry up and that the vegetation shall wither away. In an early stage of the transmission of the text the *dalet* may have been confused with an *alef*. In the ancient Hebrew script these letters closely resemble each other⁴⁹. It is also possible that the uncommon use of **דלל** was no longer understood and that the verb was replaced by **אמלל**, because the scribe probably felt this to be the safest solution. He did not have to think of

⁴⁶ Cf. C. R. Harrison, BIOSCS 21 (1988), 58.

⁴⁷ Cf. A. Gelson, The Peshitta of the Twelve Prophets, 1987, 139 f.

⁴⁸ Cf. B. Duhm, ZAW 31 (1911), 101; accepted by many others, cf. BHS and HAL.

⁴⁹ Cf. Renaud, ZAW 99 (1987), 201, n. 9.

a new word. Moreover, the repetition of the same word within a short range seems to be typical of the poet's style⁵⁰. Apparently he was unaware of the fact that now the alphabetic sequence was disturbed.

Something similar has to be assumed for v. 6a. Again, there is no support from the Versions or Hebrew manuscripts for an emendation of the text. It seems more likely that the original line was זעמו מי מעמוד לפניו⁵¹. Apparently a scribe did no longer understand why the attention of the reader should be drawn by the *casus pendens* to »his anger«, whereas the emphasis is in fact to the repeated question »who?«. The acrostic can be the only reason. Being unaware of this the scribe felt free to »improve« the text by slightly changing the word order and deleting the final *waw* of לפניו. The normal phrase would have been מי יעמד לפני זעמו (cf. Prov 27,4). The scribe turned the words around in order to get a more clear chiasitic structure like v. 2a and v. 4b: בחרון אפו // לפני זעמו // מי יקם // מי יעמוד.

VI

The author of the book of Nahum is praised by nearly all commentators for his beautiful style and many word-plays. He related the name of the prophet, which is derived from the verb נחם, »to comfort«, to his message in 3,7: »Where can I find comforters (מנחמים) for you (Nineveh)?« He also connected, as was demonstrated above, the name of his birthplace Elkosh to the beginning of his message in 1,2. He is fond of alliteration, as is demonstrated, for instance, by the repetition of the letters *nun* and *qof* in 1,2. One also comes across sequences of the same initial letters of cola: in 2,3 (three times *kaf*); 2,6 (three times *yod*); and of bicola in 2,12 f. (three times *alef*)⁵². If ever anyone from the ancient Hebrew poets was expected to produce acrostics, it was the one writing under the name of Nahum. He has no problem with using a poetic device more than once, as can be derived from the many chiasitic structures and from, for instance, the repeated use of very short lines (cf.

⁵⁰ In OTS 34, 183 I used this as an argument in favour of the Masoretic text, but I could not give a good motive for a deliberate change of the text. Lescow, BN 77 (1995), 68, assumes that the poet intended the break of the alphabetic acrostic to emphasize this line. He would have related it to this verse line by the initial *alef*. As all this is not convincing, a fault in the transmission of the text is the best option.

⁵¹ Cf. BHS and Rudolph, KAT XIII, 3, 152.

⁵² See in general on the poetry of the book of Nahum O. T. Allis, Nahum, Nineveh, Elkosh, EvQ 27 (1955), 67–80, esp. 73 ff.; R. D. Patterson and M. E. Travers, Nahum: Poet Laureate of the Minor Prophets, JETS 33 (1990), 437–444; and the attempt at an exhausting survey by Johnston, Rhetorical Analysis, 216–287. The clear name derivations in the book of Nahum were overlooked by M. Garsiel, Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns, 1991.

2,2.10; 3,2 f.). Did he also use the device of the acrostic more often? Van der Woude and Christensen are not the only scholars who claim to have found name- or sentence-acrostics in the book of Nahum. Already Bickell reports of his own attempt, »worin ich (...) die Stichenanfänge zwischen Alef und Beth das Akrostichon נִנּוּא (Ninua, Ninive) enthalten ließ«⁵³. Later he dropped this suggestion based on the emended text of vv. 2–3a. Nearly a century later Krieg noticed that the final three lines of the complete alphabetic acrostic (2,1) as reconstructed by Gunkel⁵⁴ can also be regarded as an acrostic reference to רֶשֶׁת, that is: to the »net« from which YHWH saves his people. He admits, however, that this was hardly intended by the poet⁵⁵. A more convincing suggestion came in 1938 from J. Reider with regard to 1,12⁵⁶. He noted that the initial letters of אֶם-שְׁלָמִים וְכֵן רַבִּים yield the name Asshur. This could explain why it is so difficult to translate this phrase⁵⁷. Apparently the grammatical structure was subordinate to the wish of the poet to insert a name-acrostic⁵⁸. Without going into detail or trying to solve all philological problems, it can safely be concluded that the words refer to Asshur being unharmed and still mighty until now. It is also important to look at the place of this acrostic within the book of Nahum as a whole. It is found at the beginning of the second major part, as is indicated in the Masoretic text by the *Setuma* after v. 11⁵⁹. This can be compared to the place of the acrostic/telestic in 1,1–3 at the beginning of the first part. Whereas the initial acrostic points at YHWH as the one who is speaking here, the acrostic in 1,12 reveals the name of the addressee.

The prophet seems to have hidden a final name-acrostic in 3,18, at the end of his book. In 1,1–3 he used verse-lines, in 1,12 words, here the acrostic is based on cola. Nah 3,18 consists of two bicola. The initial letters of the four cola form the word נִנּוּ. Despite the missing *he* at the

⁵³ Das Alphabetische Lied, 3.

⁵⁴ ZAW 13 (1893), 242.

⁵⁵ Todesbilder, 519, n. 33.

⁵⁶ The Name Ashur in the Initials of a Difficult Phrase in the Bible, JAOS 58 (1938), 153–155.

⁵⁷ Cf. the problems noted in the BHS to relate the old translations to the Hebrew text. Already in 1959 Maier, The Book of Nahum, 203 f., listed thirteen »substitute readings«.

⁵⁸ Another example of this kind of acrostic may be found in Ps 96,11, where the initial letters of the seven words read יְהוָה יְהוָה. However, with these letters found so often at the beginning of a word this could be »ascribed to the accidents of language«, as is rightly remarked by G. R. Driver, Semitic Writing, rev. edition 1976, 208 f. An important argument in favour of the suggested acrostic is that it fits the context: all are called up to say that YHWH is king (v. 10). The acrostic in v. 11 could be interpreted as an indication of heaven and earth doing so.

⁵⁹ Cf. OTS 34, 179 f.

end this can be regarded as a reference to Nineveh. As in the previous acrostics, it fits the contents, because it is part of a strophe describing the misery of Nineveh's inhabitants. It is also connected to the acrostic in 1,12 by the name of Asshur appearing only here and in this acrostic, and just as the book of Nahum was opened with an acrostic there is an acrostic at the end repeating the name of Nineveh mentioned in the heading.

In summary, the author of the book of Nahum used the poetic device of the acrostic in four different ways: a sentence-acrostic/telestic in 1,1–3, reading **אֲנִי יְהוָה**; a partial alphabetic acrostic in 1,3–7; a name-acrostic formed by the initial letters of four words in 1,12, reading **אֲשׁוּר**; and a name-acrostic formed by the initial letters of four cola in 3,18, reading **נִינּוּ**. They point to YHWH as the origin of the oracle and to Nineveh, the capital of Asshur, as the addressee. The alphabetic sequence emphasizes the enumeration of examples of YHWH's power that is going to be used against the Assyrians. These acrostics are found at the beginning, at the end and at the major break of the book and can be regarded as an indication of a carefully considered structure and as a mark of the unity of the book.

Ein kurzer Überblick über die Geschichte der Interpretation von Nah 1 zeigt, daß die heutige von vielen unterschriebene Auffassung von 1,2–8 als einem alphabetischen Lied keineswegs gesichert ist. Auch die Theorie, daß ein Redaktor hier ein Akrostichon bearbeitet hat, läßt viele Fragen offen. Ein neuer Ansatz, der nicht von Anfang an das alphabetische Akrostichon im Blick hat und der ausgeht von der Glaubwürdigkeit des Masoretischen Textes, erbringt neue Resultate. Nah 1,1–3 enthält ein Satzakrostichon: **אֲנִי יְהוָה**. Ein ganz regelmäßiges alphabetisches Akrostichon ist zu finden in 1,3–7 (mit Emendationen in 1,4 und 1,6). Dazu kommen auch zwei Namenakrosticha in 1,12 als ein wichtiger Neueinsatz im Text (**אֲשׁוּר**) und in 3,18 am Ende des Buches (**נִינּוּ**).