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Is God Revengeful?

The History of Interpretation—A Less Welcome Aspect of the Image of God in the Book of Nahum

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Paul's quotation of Deut. 32:35 urging the reader to leave vengeance to God (Rom. 12:9) fits well to those who prefer reading the Bible as supporting peacemakers. However, at the same time it emphasizes a less welcome aspect of the God of Israel. Most readers of the Bible prefer the image of God as formulated, for instance, by Jonathan Sacks: 'The God of Abraham is a God of love, not war; forgiveness, not revenge; humility, not arrogance; hospitality, not hostility'.[1] Inevitably, reading and interpreting biblical texts about a violent God or about violence in the name of God is influenced by the context of the reader. Not only the attitude as believer or non-believer towards God and towards Jewish and Christian tradition is of influence, also and even more the social and historical context of the reader plays an important role in the interpretation and use of relevant biblical texts. As will be demonstrated in the following contribution about the history of interpretation of 'violent' biblical texts, it makes a big difference whether the reader has experienced violence him/herself, whether or not he/she knows feelings of revenge because of these experiences, and whether or not he/she has the opportunity to do something about it. We will first point to some different aspects of the problem of how to deal with biblical texts about violence with some examples from a distant past and from an actual situation. After that we will focus on the prophecy of Nahum as a specific text about God as an avenger.

Judging and Welcoming God as an Avenger

In the context of the struggles in the young Christian church in the second century about the best way how to relate the Christian faith to its roots in the Jewish tradition the influential church leader Marcion defended the radical solution not to relate Christian faith to the Jewish tradition at all. In his opinion the father of Jesus Christ should be distinguished from the creator god of the Hebrew Bible. He could use the texts about violence in the name of the Hebrew god as an argument supporting this. In his 'antitheses' he pointed to the differences between the two gods, for instance, by opposing the killing of the 42 children who had offended the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:23–25) to the story of Jesus and the children (Matt. 18:1–6): 'Christ loves the little ones, teaching that those who want to be greater ought to be such as these. But the creator let loose bears against boys, taking vengeance for the insults the prophet Elisha suffered from them.'[2]

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[1] Jonathan Sacks, 'I am a religious fundamentalist and very proud of it', Moral Voice, 3 August 2004, https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/i-am-a-religious-fundamentalist-and-very-proud-of-it/. Also published in Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas. Words of Faith and Wisdom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021).

[2] Cf. E. R. Scherbenske, 'Marcion's Antitheses and the Isagogic Genre', *Vigiliae Christianae* 64, no. 3 (2010): 255–79; text quoted on p. 269.

Marcion finds another telling example of the vengefulness related to the god of the Old Testament in the story of the conquest of the Promised Land, when according to Josh. 10 this god performs a great miracle, just to promote the killing of the enemy: 'The prophet of the creator stopped the sun so that it would not set before the people had revenged their enemies; the Lord says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26).' [3]

In his refutation Tertullian points to the bigger picture in the Old Testament.[4] In his Adversus Marcionem 4.22 he explains the killing of the boys (not: little children) according to the story in 2 Kings as a rightful act of a just god demanding honour to old age. In the history of interpretation, the basic argument in defending God's vengeance is to see it as something positive: as an aspect of his acting as a rightful judge. In his monograph on the vengeance of God, Eric Peels emphasizes that Old Testament texts speaking of God as an avenger are part of the image of God acting as a king and as a judge. Instead of blaming him as being vindictive one should respect his holiness and see his avenging as something done out of love, pursuing justice.[5]

In line with Tertullian pointing out against Marcion that a god 'can only be completely good if he is the enemy of the bad' (Adv.Marc. 1.26), harsh actions in the name of God are also made acceptable by demonizing the Canaanites and other enemies of Israel. It is a line of reasoning that can still be found with modern scholars, as is illustrated by the recent defence by Paul Copan of what many modern readers would call genocide according to the story of the occupation of the Promised Land in the book of Joshua:

> To acquire land to live as a theocracy and eventually to pave the way for a coming Redeemer-Messiah, warfare (as a form of judgment on fully ripened sin) was involved. God used Israel to neutralize Canaanite military strongholds and drive out a people who were morally and spiritually corrupt-beyond redemption. The Canaanites had sunk below the hope of moral return, although God wouldn't turn away those who recognized God's justice and his power in delivering Israel from Egypt (such as Rahab and her family).[6]

In general, people have little difficulty with the idea of vengeance, as long as it is part of a framework in which there is a clear division between good and bad. As I was working on this chapter, in the spring of 2022, the news was dominated by reports from the war in the Ukraine. My colleagues from a related theological institution in the Ukraine had no problem whatsoever with pleading for vengeance against the Russians after reports about atrocities committed by Russian soldiers. This judgment included Russian-orthodox patriarch Kirill who had taken sides with Putin and therefore unmistakably deserved to be punished severely. In his daily speeches Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, was also not reluctant in referring to God as avenging the evil deeds of the Russian invaders. On 3 March he said:

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[3] Cf. H. Räisänen, 'Marcion', in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'*, edited by A. Marjanen and P. Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 100–24; text quoted on p. 108.
[4] Cf. J. M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 282.
[5] H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 276–94.
[6] P. Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2011), p. 66.

> Russia targeted yesterday at the Assumption Cathedral in Kharkiv. One of the oldest Orthodox monuments of the city, monuments of Ukraine. During the war, the cathedral was a shelter for Kharkiv residents. Shelter for all people: believers and non-believers. For everyone, because everyone is equal. A holy place. Now—beaten by war. They do not fear even that! They are taking advantage of the fact that God does not give an instant rebuff. But He is watching. And He responds. And you will not hide from His response . . . we will not forget those who died. We are with God.[7]

Three days later, on the so-called Shrove Sunday, that is, Forgiveness Sunday, he challenged the basics of the ritual of forgiveness:

> Today is a day when we have always asked for forgiveness to each other, to all people, to God. But today, it seems, many have not mentioned this day at all. I have not mentioned the traditional words 'forgive me' and 'as God forgives, so I forgive'. These words seem to have lost their meaning today, at least in part, after all we have been through (. . .) We will not forgive the shooting of unarmed people, the destruction of infrastructure, hundreds of victims, thousands and thousands of sufferings, and God will not forgive—today, tomorrow or ever. And instead of forgiveness there will be a doomsday, I'm sure of it.[8]

It can be noted that Zelensky does not explicitly use the term vengeance when he expresses his hope or conviction that God will punish evil. He may have been reluctant in using this term in relation to God, but when said of God, not forgetting and not forgiving are closely related to avenging.

Generally speaking, vengeance does not have to be taken as a negative action. It is often distinguished from revenge, which can be defined as seeking retribution for oneself and which is associated with an ongoing circle of violence. With Friedrich Nietzsche one could relate one's hope for a peaceful future with the hope for the end of revenge.[9] Instead, the ideal of rightful vengeance is that of a powerful avenger bringing justice on behalf of somebody else, preferably someone who lacks the power to defend oneself against a mighty evil opponent. This is well illustrated by the popular genre of avenging movies and taken to the extreme in the comic The Avengers (also turned into a series of movies). Things become complicated when it is difficult to separate the good from the bad.

The Hymn in Nah. 1

In the case of the role of YHWH according to the book of Nahum things seem to be relatively simple. It describes the demise of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were feared all over the ancient Near East as ruthless conquerors, responsible for enormous bloodshed. It is no more than justified that a god who is believed to have brought them down or

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[7] This quotation is taken from the 'Letters from Attacked Ukraine' by Halyna Pastushuk, available from https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1r78aCGQDPZeZW5C63oMUiY7ynXnwJVSL?usp=sharing, LeFrAtUk Letter 33_9, accessed 12 June 2023.

[8] Pastushuk, LeFrAtUk Letter 35_11, accessed 12 June 2023.

[9] 'Daß der Mensch erlöst werde von der Rache: das ist mir die Brücke zur höchsten Hoffnung und ein Regenbogen nach langen Unwettern' ('For that mankind be redeemed from revenge: that to me is The bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long thunderstorms'). F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen, Zweiter Teil*, trans. Adrian del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 77.

who is expected to do so is praised as good. Nevertheless, even among readers of the Bible who have a positive opinion about the god it describes, and who are standing in a Jewish or Christian tradition, one still finds different views. As will be demonstrated below, much depends on their context.

Before going into more detail about the history of interpretation, it is useful to first take a closer look at the biblical text within its original context. The prophet Nahum—or the author who is hiding behind this meaningful name 'comforter'—has no problem at all in relating YHWH to the idea of vengeance. He starts with a threefold praise of YHWH as an avenger.

> A pronouncement about Nineveh:
>
> the writing of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.(י)
>
> (א)A jealous and avenging God is YHWH,
>
> avenging is YHWH and a lord of wrath.(ה)
>
> (נ)Avenging is YHWH against his adversaries
>
> and reserving (his wrath) is he for his enemies.(ו)
>
> (י)YHWH, he is slow in anger, great in power
>
> and he certainly does not leave unpunished.(ה) (Nah. 1:1–3)

Within the same hymn YHWH is also called good, but this concerns only those who are faithful to him:

> (ט)Good is YHWH,
>
> indeed, a shelter in the day of distress
>
> and knowing those who seek refuge in Him. (Nah. 1:7)

This confession is not only emphasized by its prominent place at the beginning of the book, it is also underlined by its remarkable literary structure. As I have demonstrated elsewhere[10] it is no coincidence that the first letters of the second, third, and fourth verse line after the heading form the Hebrew first person singular pronoun אני and that the final letters of the first four verse lines form the divine name יהוה. Together they form the well-known phrase *ani YHWH*, 'I am YHWH', often used also in other prophetic texts, especially in the books of Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel. A very interesting parallel, with a combination of many of the same words used in Nah. 1, is Ezek. 5:13:

> And my anger shall be spent,

[10] Cf. K. Spronk, 'Acrostics in the Book of Nahum', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 110 (1998): 209–22; Klaas Spronk, *Nahum* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament) (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997), pp. 22–26; Klaas Spronk, 'The Line-Acrostic in Nahum 1: New Evidence from Ancient Greek Manuscripts and from the Literary Analysis of the Hebrew Text', in *The Impact of Unit Delimitation on Exegesis*, edited by R. de Hoop, M. C. A. Korpel, and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 228–40.

and I will cause my wrath to rest upon them,

and I will be avenged;

and they shall know that I am YHWH,

I have spoken in my jealousy,

when I have spent my wrath upon them.

The combination of the final letters in Nah. 1:1–3 forming a word is an example of a so-called telestic. Both a word acrostic and a telestic are unique in the Hebrew Bible, but they have parallels in Assyrian royal texts in which the king is presenting himself in the same way by a combination of an acrostic and a telestic as the author of the text. It indicates that YHWH is pictured in the opening lines of the book of Nahum in more than one way as the opponent of the ruler of Nineveh. Just as the prophecy announced that Nineveh will fall under the same violence as it has used itself, the author of the prophetic text uses similar literary devices as his Assyrian counterparts.

The connection between YHWH as an avenger (vv. 2–3) and YHWH being good (v. 7) is underlined in a similar way. A partial alphabetic acrostic runs from the two words following the name of YHWH beginning with the letter *aleph* in v. 3, the two words beginning with the letter *bet* following the name of YHWH in the next line, and the letter *gimel* at the beginning of the following line, until the letter *tet* in v. 7 as the first letter of the word טוב, 'good', preceding the name of YHWH. In his recent commentary Thomas Renz accepts this analysis and remarks that doubting the existence of an acrostic 'asks for too much coincidence',[11] but the discussion about the literary features of the text is far from settled.[12] According to Michael Floyd, the whole idea of an acrostic is no more than a chimeric and 'the whole idea should therefore be abandoned, so that the interpretation of Nahum can begin to take a potentially more fruitful turn'.[13] Realistic as this may seem in the eyes of scholars afraid of speculation, it could very well miss exactly the point the prophet wanted to make, namely emphasizing the central role of YHWH and that especially in his role as avenger YHWH should be called good.

There is more consensus among scholars[14] about the way the prophet used the famous confession of Ex. 34:6–7, in which YHWH describes himself:

YHWH, YHWH, God, merciful and gracious,

slow in anger and abounding in goodness and truth,

keeping mercy for thousands,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

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[11] T. Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (The New International Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), p. 65.

[12] Cf. M. Weigl, 'Current Research on the Book of Nahum: Exegetical Methodologies in Turmoil?', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001): 81–130, especially pp. 83–87.

[13] M. H. Floyd, 'The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1:2–10', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113, no. 3 (1994): 421–37, especially p. 437.

[14] Cf. Especially H. Spieckermann, '"Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr . . . "', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102, no. 1 (1990): 1–18.

> and the guilty he certainly does not leave unpunished,
>
> visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children
>
> and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

This is quoted many times in the Hebrew Bible. It is striking that in Nah. 1:3a similar words are used, but that the very positive characterization of YHWH as the merciful and gracious god is left out and that in this way the text of Ex. 34 is 'vengefully reapplied'.[15] Within the context of the Assyrian oppression the emphasis of the trust in YHWH is not on his mercy but on the confidence that he will not leave evil, no matter how powerful the evildoer may be, unpunished.

God as Avenger in the History of Interpretation

The image of the Assyrians as imperialistic and cruel is generally accepted. It is not only found in the way the Assyrians are pictured by others, but it is also maintained by their own royal texts and supported by the reliefs adorning their palaces (and today one of the highlights in the British Museum). So here we can easily make a clear distinction between the bad aggressors and their innocent victims, making God's vengeance not just acceptable but even praiseworthy. However, not every reader of the Bible will agree to this view. Should God not be above this all too human simplification of matters? Is the prophet inspired by divine insight or has he projected his own judgment on God making him also complicit in his unholy glee over the downfall of the city of Nineveh and the sad fate of its inhabitants? Could Nahum then be ranked under the false prophets mentioned by someone like Jeremiah accusing them of uncritically looking at their own people and not realizing that the enemy can also be used by God to punish them? Nahum looks like Jonah, who is eagerly awaiting the destruction of Nineveh and not open to the view that its habitants could repent and thus escape their downfall. Should he not at least leave open the possibility of a different outcome? With these questions in mind, we now turn to the history of interpretation.

Jewish Commentaries

The oldest known commentary of the book of Nahum is the one found in a cave near Qumran. It was probably written in the last century BCE. The commentator explains Nah. 1 as a prophecy of God making an end to the Roman occupation of Israel. It indicates that one had no problem whatsoever with God acting as an avenger, just hoping that he would repeat his actions against the new representatives of evil. In the Damascus Document, which is also attested in the caves of Qumran and was previously known from the Genizah of Cairo, Nah. 1:2 is quoted next to Lev. 19:17–18 in the rule that one should reprove fellow members in front of witnesses on the same day as a misdeed occurs (CD 9.5–8):[16]

> Is it not perhaps written that only 'he (God) avenges himself and bears resentment against his enemies'? (Nah. 1:2) If he kept silent about him from one day to the other, or accused him of a capital offence, he has witnessed against himself, for he did not fulfil

[15] M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), p. 347, note 79.

[16] Cf. Charlotte Hempel, *The Damascus Texts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 37.

> the commandment of God which tells him: 'You shall reproach your fellow so as not to incur sin because of him' (Lev. 19:17).[17]

In this way the seeming contradiction between God being called an avenger with God's own command in Lev. 19:18 not to take vengeance can be taken away. In later rabbinic traditions other seemingly conflicting statements that have to be explained are found in Nah. 1:2 and Isa. 27:4:

> R. Hama b. Hanina pointed to another contradiction: Scripture says, 'Fury is not in me' (Isa. 27:4). Yet it also says 'The Lord revengeth and is furious' (Nah. 1:2). But there is really no contradiction: the former refers to Israel, the latter to idolaters. (Talmud Avoda Zara 4a)[18]

Similar explanations can be found in Midrash Rabba Qoh. 8.4:1 and Midrash Rabba Gen. 55:3. It is also noted that one should distinguish between human vengeance and God avenging evil:

> Rabbi said: A human being is mastered by his anger, but the Holy One, blessed be He, masters anger, as it says, The Lord avengeth and mastereth wrath. Rabbi Jonathan said: A human being is mastered by his jealousy, but the Holy One, blessed be He, masters his jealousy, as it says, the Lord is God over jealousy and vengeance. (Midrash Rabba Gen. 49:8)

In his letter to the Rom. 12:19, referred to in the opening line of this article, Paul expresses a similar view. He does not explicitly cite from Nahum, but he uses the keywords: 'Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.' Human vengeance is bound to get trapped in a never-ending cycle of violence, whereas God's vengeance gives hope to the oppressed. This is in line the remark by rabbi David Qimchi (or: Redaq) that the description of God in Nah. 1:3 shows that his 'outstanding trait is that He is slow to anger, and He is great in power to hold back his anger, not vent his rage immediately'.[19] The difference between God and man is also expressed in the elaborate expositions on Num. 4:18 ('Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites') in Midrash Rabbah:

> This bears on the Scriptural text: The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble (Nahum I, 7). The ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, are not like those of mortals. A mortal king against whom a country rebels punishes indiscriminately and kills the good with the bad. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so. When a generation acts provocatively against Him He rescues the righteous and destroys the wicked. When the

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[17] Translation by Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 40. See on this text also Michael Fishbane, 'Use, Authority and Interpretation of Mikra at Qumran', in *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, edited by M. J. Mulder (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), pp. 339–77, especially pp. 354–55.

[18] Cf. Rimon Kasher, 'The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature', in *Mikra*, pp. 547–94, especially p. 558.

[19] W. Windfuhr, ed., *Rabbinische Übungstexte, Heft 1: Der Kommentar des David Qimchi zum Propheten Nahum* (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1927), p. 5. Translation by A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets. A New Translation of the Text, Rashi and a Commentary Digest*, vol. 2 (New York: Judaica Press, 1988), p. 239.

> generation of Enoch sinned He destroyed them and saved Enoch, as is proved by the text: And Enoch walked with God (Gen. v, 24). Why? In the day of trouble He knoweth them that take refuge in Him (Nahum, loc. cit.). (Midrash Rabbah Numbers 5.3)[20]

Next to the story about Enoch, God's saving action as expressed in Nah. 1:7 is also related to the saving of Lot from Sodom according to Gen. 19, the Israelites from Egypt according to Ex. 10, and the Levites from the deadly punishment after the sin with the golden calf according to Ex. 32. In his remarks on Nah. 1:7 Rashi again notes the difference between God and man:

> Even when He inflicts retribution upon His enemies, His mercies do not cease to do good to those who fear Him. [This ability is] unlike the trait of [a man of] flesh and blood, who when he is busy with one thing, is not free to [simultaneously] do another thing, as the matter is stated (Ex. 15:3): "The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is His Name."[21]

What is meant in the reference to Ex. 15:3 is that while God wages war he is still also YHWH, a name denoting him as a god of mercy. This appears to be characteristic of all commentaries on God being called an avenger: do not forget that he is also merciful.

Christian Commentaries

In his commentary written in 393 CE Jerome also appears to have problems in relating vengeance to God. In his remarks to 1:2 he emphasizes the reference to God as being jealous as a positive quality of God: 'For zeal can be understood in a good way, as Paul the apostle shows, saying: "be zealous for the better gifts," (1 Cor. 12:31) and he says in another place: "For I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God" (2 Cor. 11:2).'[22]

Only extreme circumstances can force God to vengeance, which in normal situations is more something one would associate with the devil:

> when iniquity has multiplied, and the love of many has grown cold, then the jealous Lord comes for vengeance, not because he himself is an enemy and avenger, which are names for the devil, but because his vengeance is inimical, and, as a fire it consumes the wood, hay and stubble, so that the pure gold and silver may remain.[23]

The latter is clearly referring to the final judgment. This interpretation of the text in Nah. 1 about God as an avenger is found in the commentaries on Nahum of Theodoret of Cyrus[24] and Cyrill of Alexandria[25] as well. According to Cyril the hidden meaning of Nah. 1:3 is that it points to 'the incarnation of the only-begotten Word' and to the defeat of the devil, death, and sin.[26]

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[20] Translation by Judah J. Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah. Numbers*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1939), p. 145.
[21] Translation by Rosenberg, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, p. 240.
[22] Translation by Thomas P. Scheck, *Jerome. Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (Ancient Christian Texts) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), p. 2.
[23] Scheck, *Jerome*, pp. 2–3.
[24] Cf. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae. Series Graeca-Latina* (Paris, 1859), pp. 1787–808.
[25] Cf. Migne, *Patrologiae*, pp. 71, 775–844.
[26] Cf. Hauna T. Ondrey, *The Minor Prophets as Christian Scripture in the Commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 172.

Jerome also indicates that God's punishment is intended as a way of healing, and designed to give the sinners a chance to convert.[27] A similar comment is given, again, by Cyril of Alexandria.[28] Against critics like Marcion who doubt God's goodness as mentioned in v. 7 because of the cruel punishments for sin, Jerome maintains that God will not punish post-mortem those who already have been punished during their lives, like the Sodomites and the Egyptians. Jerome bases this view, influenced by Origen, on Nah. 1:9 ('there will not arise a double tribulation').

In the commentaries on Nahum in the Middle Ages the emphasis is on reading the texts as prefiguring the work of Jesus Christ and as referring to the judgment over the sinners in the eschaton.[29] In his commentary on Nah. 1:1–4 Julian of Toledo (end of the seventh century CE) distinguishes between four different aspects of the text:

> According to the historical sense, he speaks of the destruction of Nineveh, its capital; in the allegorical sense, of the world's being laid waste; in the mystical sense, of the restoration of the human race through Christ; in the moral sense, of the restoring to his first dignified state, or to yet greater glory, of the sinner fallen into wickedness.[30]

Because of this emphasis on the message of salvation through Christ, commentators like Julian of Toledo seem to have had no problem at all with possible negative aspects of God being called an avenger. In his notes to the Twelve Prophets Haymo of Auxerre (ninth century) finds the deeper meaning of the comfort Nahum has given in the message that at the end of this world God shall free the saints from the yoke of their enemies: 'everything said to Nineveh is going to happen in the judgment on the devil and his associates'.[31]

Martin Luther points to the fact that Nahum's prophecy must have been difficult to accept for the people of Judah and ridiculous in the eyes of the Assyrians. What is most important of this text is thus the call to put one's belief in God's power and in the conviction that your enemies are also God's enemies. This is also how the ancient prophecy can be applied to the situation of the reader in the time of the Reformation.

> All the words and promises of God are of such character that they clearly surpass all understanding and all reason, so that the flesh cannot but laugh at them and hold them in contempt. Faith alone believes all these things, all such faith only a very few had, such as pious King Hezekiah and a few others, who threw themselves on this kind of promise of the Lord. We too, would rightly understand those promises if we would be in the same straits as they then were, straits for which those promises were made—if the pope and

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[27] Cf. Yves-Marie Duval, 'Jérôme et Origène avant la querell origéniste. La cure et la guérison ultime du monde et du diable dans l'In Nahum', *Augustinianum* 24 (1984): 471–94; Yves-Marie Duval, 'Jérôme et les prophètes. Histoire, prophétie, actualité et actualisation dans les commentaires de Nahum, Michée, Abdias et Joël', in *Congress Volume. Salamanca 1983*, edited by J. A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 108–31, especially pp. 110–14.

[28] Cf. Ondrey, *The Minor Prophets as Christian Scripture in the Commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 129.

[29] An overview of the interpretation of the book of Nahum in this period is given by Edward Ball, '"When the Towers Fall": Interpreting Nahum as Christian Scripture', in *In Search of True Wisdom. Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, edited by E. Ball (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 211–30, especially pp. 211–15.

[30] Migne, *Patrologiae. Commentarius in Nahum Prophetam*, pp. 96, 705–58, especially p. 705.

[31] Migne, *Patrologiae. Commentarius in Nahum Prophetam*, pp. 117, 9–294, especially p. 175.

> princes would rage against us and come with a very powerful army to destroy us, etc. Then we would understand the functions und power of these comforting words.[32]

Instead of attempting to make the reference to God as an avenger acceptable, Luther pays attention to those who will be disappointed that God does not act right away and postpones the deliverance of the persecuted, because 'the Lord is slow to anger' (Nah. 1:3). Again, Luther calls for faith. He also points to the tactics behind this delay.

> Thus He allows the wicked to come right up to us, that they may fall with a greater crash. All these ideas describe beautifully the nature of God and of His Works that we may not lose faith regardless of what great difficulty embraces us we may trust that God will the more quickly be at hand when we completely despair of being able to escape the peril that threatens us. He acts this way that we may believe at the Lord will finally take vengeance on our—no, on His—enemies, for that's what the Lord calls them. But it is a weakness of ours that we want the Lord to take vengeance right now. When His vengeance is not immediate, we think it's all over with us.[33]

One can note here the similarity with Zelensky's speech quoted above in which he states that Ukraine's enemy is God's enemy and he will not forget the horrible actions of this enemy.

In his extensive commentary on the book of Nahum published in 1534 Theodor Bibliander pays much attention to philological matters, often in discussion with the work of Jerome.[34] From a theological point of view he emphasizes divine mercy, which is not restricted to Christians alone. Nevertheless, in the comments on Nah. 1:2 he warns against a tendency to picture God as indifferent to sin. Like Jerome, he connects this primarily not to God as avenger but on him being called jealous.

> Those who deny that God can be jealous create for themselves the God of the fig tree, free from all sense of irascibility, who content in inestimable happiness cares little for the affairs of mortals. This god is not angered by sins, but considers it childish trifles that men are set against the divine law. (. . .) For those Marcionites and diabolical non-Origenenians preparing poultices for their disturbing lusts and being accustomed to little pillows under every side, dispute violently that there is neither rage nor any kind of harshness in God, who is wholly goodness itself, so that even evil spirits and the most lost men might be saved.[35]

In the end the positive message of salvation is dominant. Bibliander devotes much attention to explain God's goodness as mentioned in Nah. 1:7. When it comes to God as an avenger the words in the first verses are read in the light of God being 'slow in anger'. On the one hand God

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[32] H. J. Grimm and H. T. Lehmann, eds., *Martin Luther, Works*, vol. 18 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), p. 284.

[33] Grimm and Lehmann, eds., *Martin Luther*, p. 286.

[34] Cf. Bruce Gordon, "'Christo testimonium reddunt omnes scripturae": Theodor Bibliander's Oration on Isaiah (1532) and Commentary on Nahum (1534)', in *Shaping the Bible in the Reformation: Books, Scholars, and Their Readers in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bruce Gordon and Matthew McLean (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 107–41, especially pp. 122–41.

[35] Gordon, 'Christo testimonium reddunt omnes scripturae', p. 132.

will punish those who take advantage of his delay in judgement, on the other hand it shows that God is generous, enticing sinners to return from their sins.

In his commentary on the book of Nahum Calvin indicates why it is important that the prophet starts with general remarks, which he took from Ex. 34, about the nature of God and then combines this with the way this works out in the case of Nineveh.

> Nahum begins with the nature of God, that what he afterwards subjoins respecting the destruction of Nineveh might be more weighty, and produce a greater impression on the hearers. The preface is general, but the Prophet afterwards applies it to a special purpose. If he had only spoken of what God is, it would have been frigid, at least it would have been less efficacious; but when he connects both together, then his doctrine carries its own force and power. We now apprehend the design of the Prophet. He might indeed have spoken of the fall of the city Nineveh: but if he has referred to this abruptly, profane men might have regarded him with disdain; and even the Israelites would have been perhaps less affected. This is the reason why he shows, in a general way, what sort of Being God is.[36]

Calvin seems to wish to make the 'awful description' of God as an avenger acceptable. In his opinion it is necessary as an assurance to the Israelites suffering under the pressure of the Assyrians that God has not forgotten them.

> And this awful description of God is to be applied to the present case, for he says that he proclaims war against the Ninevites, because they had unjustly distressed the Church of God: it is for this reason that he says, that God is jealous, that God is an avenger; and he confirms this three times, that the Israelites might feel assured that this calamity was seriously announced; for had not this representation been set before them, they might have thus reasoned with themselves—"We are indeed cruelly harassed by our enemies; but who can think that God cares any thing for our miseries, since he allows them so long to be unavenged?" It was therefore necessary that the Prophet should obviate such thoughts, as he does here. We now more fully understand why he begins in a language so vehement, und calls God a jealous God, and an avenger.[37]

Modern Research

The relatively positive reception of the book of Nahum and its message of God's revenge changed with the rise of historical criticism. Much attention was paid now to the dating of the book and tracing stages of literary growth with possible different historical contexts of the responsible authors and editors. It became clear that Nah. 3:8 referred to the fall of the Egyptian capitol Thebes in 663 BCE. This could now function as the terminus post quem. Serious doubts were cast on 612 BCE, the year of the fall of Nineveh, as the terminus ad quem. According to some scholars the prophecy of the downfall of Nineveh was written after it had happened: a vaticinium ex eventu. The prophet would have been a contemporary of prophets like Jeremiah and could be associated with the prophets attacked by Jeremiah because of their nationalism and false message of hope. Many scholars assume that the hymn at the beginning of the book

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[36] Translation by John Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets by John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 419.

[37] Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets by John Calvin*, p. 420.

was added in a later stage. All this had its impact on the way the theological message of the book of Nahum was evaluated. If indeed the book had to be dated in the period of Jeremiah, the contrast with the message of the latter was revealing. It led Willy Staerk to his judgment that the book of Nahum is characterized by hatred and malicious delight and that the prophet Nahum should be considered as an example of the nationalist prophets opposed by Jeremiah.[38]

In his ICC commentary John Merlin Powis Smith comes to a similar verdict: 'In Nahum, a representative of the old, narrow and shallow prophetism finds its place in the Canon of Scripture. His point of view is essentially one with that of (. . .) the so-called "false prophets".'[39] This represents a quite common view in the first part of the twentieth century. In his commentary published in 1959 Walter Maier, who prefers the more positive traditional opinion about Nahum, feels compelled to defend the prophet against the charges 'that Nahum ignores Israel's sin', 'that Nahum shows gloating hatred and malicious joy', 'that Nahum is the prophet of incipient Judaism', 'that Nahum is a false prophet', 'that Nahum is opposed to other prophets', and 'that Nahum reflects Pan-Babylonian eschatology'.[40] His basic argument of defence is the fact, which is noted by many scholars as well, that Nahum has many similarities with the book of Isaiah.

Although the negative scholarly evaluations of the message of Nahum have not completely ceased,[41] the observation that there is little difference between the prophecy of Nahum and the oracles against the nations found with Isaiah and Jeremiah led to a more positive view. According to Gary Smith the sayings of Nahum can be regarded as reinterpretations of words of Isaiah. Some may have doubted the words about Assyria spoken by this Jerusalem prophet at the end of the eighth century, but now they are reinforced.[42]

Edward Ball also notes the parallels between Nahum and Isaiah, but states that it is impossible to come to a convincing historical reconstruction of the relation.[43] The link concerning the

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[38] 'Aus Haß und wilder Schadenfreude ist die ganze Dichtung, in | der wir ein charakteristisches Zeugnis des von Jeremja so scharf bekämpften nationalen Prophetentums haben, geboren'; W. Staerk, *Das assyrische Weltreich im Urteil der Propheten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1908), pp. 179–80. He may have been inspired here by the similar verdict by Karl Marti, *Das Dodekapropheton. Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1904), p. 306: 'Nahum ist ein Vorläufer jener "falschen" patriotischen Propheten, die Jeremia nachher so heftig bekämpfte, auch darin mit ihnen verwandt, dass er von sittlichen Schäden im Volke nichts zu sagen weiss. Seine Ideen lassen sich somit sehr wohl aus der Zeit nach der Reform Josias Verstehen. Auf den höhen poetischen Schwung dieser ersten uns erhaltenen, allein auf ein fremdes Volk sich beziehenden Prophetie sei hier noch ausdrücklich hingewiesen. Die Freude über den Untergang des feindlichen Reiches hat dem Dichter die Flügel geschwellt.'

[39] J. M. P. Smith, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), p. 281.

[40] W. A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum. A Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 70–84.

[41] See, for instance, the remark on p. 54 in the Book List of the SOTS 1988, by R. A. Mason: 'Will any of us ever have the courage to admit in a popular commentary that the book really is rather a disgrace to the two religious communities of whose canonical Scriptures it forms so unwelcome a part?'

[42] G. V. Smith, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets. The Prophets as Preachers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Homan Publishers, 1994), pp. 159–60.

[43] This is well illustrated by the overview of research by Weigl, 'Current Research on the Book of Nahum', of the scholarly publications between 1985 and 2000. The past two decades do not show significant changes in this matter.

portrayal of Nineveh as Judah's opponent is in the first place literary.[44] In Ball's view relativizing the importance of a precise historical setting leaves room for a more theological approach, including a Christian approach, to the interpretation of Nahum. The same goes for the ambiguity Ball notes in some parts of the book of Nahum where it is not clear who is addressed, which leaves open, for instance, the identity of the inhabitants of the 'city of blood' (Nah. 3:1). In his view a fitting Christian theological interpretation

> will both read the text as speaking of the God of Israel who is also confessed by Christians as the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and allow its distinctive features and particularities to act in critique of, for example, neatly systematized views of the nature of God's involvement with the world and theology's ever-present temptation to speak clearly and unambiguously of that.[45]

When it comes to the 'obvious question which Christian theological engagement with the book must raise (. . .) whether God's only way of dealing with oppression is by destroying its perpetrators, and perpetuating the vicious and terrible cycle of violence in the world',[46] Ball finds a solution within the canonical approach, noting the different possibilities for Nineveh and Assyria mentioned in Isaiah and the book of the Twelve, especially Jonah. To this Ball adds the possibility of an eschatological reading, as was proposed already by some of the church fathers mentioned above. Nowadays it is not only found with exegetes who want to positively handle Nahum as Christian scripture, like Julie Woods, who states: 'Nahum has eschatological overtones, especially when seen as part of the Book of the Twelve, whose major theme is the Day of the LORD. Nineveh is a picture of the ultimate evil that will be destroyed in a final time',[47] but also with scholars advocating a strict historical critical approach. These latter scholars attribute this eschatological aspect to the final redaction adding the hymn about YHWH as avenger as a theological introduction to the visions about the destruction of Nineveh. According to Heinz-Josef Fabry this adds a universal aspect to the words originally threatening only the Assyrians. It makes, in his opinion, also the image of God as avenger more acceptable. Instead of an aspect of nationalistic hate sermons it becomes a cosmological announcement of salvation. Vengeance is part of God bringing justice.[48] Fabry assumes a development in time, in which God's vengeance was no longer associated with a human cycle of violence but had become a metaphor for his saving actions.[49]

A similar view can be found with Jörg Jeremias in his recent commentary. He dates the hymn of chapter 1 in the late Persian or in the Hellenistic period. In his opinion this means that we are

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[44] Ball, 'When the Towers Fall', pp. 223–24.
[45] Ball, 'When the Towers Fall', p. 226.
[46] Ball, 'When the Towers Fall', p. 229.
[47] Julie Woods, 'The West as Nineveh: How Does Nahum's Message of Judgment Apply Today?', *Themelios* 31, no. 1 (2005), pp. 7–37, especially p. 28
[48] H.-J. Fabry, *Nahum* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament) (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), p. 38: 'Allgemein zeigt sich die Tendenz, Nah 1,2–8 nicht mehr als nationalistische Hasspredigt, sondern als Einführung in die Theologie des gesamten Buches, in eine kosmologisch und geschichtstheologisch begriindete Heilsansage für Israel-Juda zu verstehen. Es geht dem Buch um die Vergeltung, nicht im Sinne der Rache, sondern als Form der Schaffung von Recht.'
[49] Fabry, *Nahum*, p. 133: 'Nah 1,2 steht schon am Ende der Entwicklung, in der die Rache den Charakter einer selbstverantworteten Privatstrafe verloren hatte und—ganz auf Gott übertragen—zur Metapher für sein rettendes Eingreifen (vgl. Jes 61,2) geworden war.'

dealing here with prophecy in the proper sense of the word, that is, a pronouncement of something that still lies in the future. What happened to Nineveh is a paradigm for what can be expected of God. The prophecy has an eschatological perspective.[50] He suggests that the reference to God's vengeance can be compared to the way it is described in Isa. 59:15b-20 and that as in this text, which must be dated after the Babylonian exile, also in Nah. 1:2 God's vengeance is part of his purification of Israel and not exclusively as an act against Israel's enemy.[51]

When it comes to the dating of the book of Nahum the view of scholars like Fabry and Jeremias remains debatable. With Thomas Renz in his commentary published in 2021 one can maintain that 'there is no reason not to take the rhetoric at face value'[52] and accept that the material now collected in the book of Nahum, including the hymn in the first chapter, originated before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. Instead of taking the visions as vaticinium ex eventu or even accusing Nahum of being a false prophet, we can see the book of Nahum as a perfect example of true prophecy. Like Jeremias one can see it as 'real' prophecy about something which lies in the future, but only of the first readers. For later readers the downfall of Nineveh in 612 BCE proves that the words written down some fifty years earlier were divinely inspired, perfectly fitting the criterion formulated in the book of Deuteronomy: a prophet has rightly spoken in the name of YHWH when his word comes true (Deut. 18:21–22). This puts the image of God as avenger in a more historical and less eschatological perspective. When the entire book of Nahum is dated in this period of Assyrian dominance, in which there were no signs of weakness of the oppressor, it testifies of firm trust in YHWH and courage to predict openly the downfall of those who probably also had the power to silence this insubordination. This may very well have been the reason for the prophet to hide behind the pseudonym Nahum, 'comforter' (explained in the rhetorical question in Nah. 3:7 'where can I find comforters for you?').

Conclusion

Summing up, one notes in the history of interpretation a tendency to tone down the image of God as avenger. In a way this can be seen as redressing the balance disturbed by Nahum when he emphasizes the negative part of the confession about God in Ex. 34:6–7. When applying the text to the situation of later readers most attention was devoted to relating Nineveh and the Assyrians to one's own enemies. As long as it is possible to strictly distinguish between good and bad, the idea of revenge was perfectly acceptable, just as in modern movies. Things became more problematic in the historical critical approach to the text. Differentiating between the text of the author(s) and the time described in the text puts the motives of the assumed author(s) into other perspectives, leading to other views about who is good and who is bad. It led especially at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century to a remarkable shift in the scholarly judgment about Nahum's moral values, sometimes even questioning his

[50] J. Jeremias, *Nahum* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament XIV/5.1) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019), pp. 27–28: 'Ganz anders liest man das Buch unter der Annahme, dass Kap. 1 in (spät-persischer oder eher) hellenistischer Zeit verfasst worden ist. Dann handelt es sich beim Buch Nahum um Prophetie im wahren Sinn des | Wortes, d.h. um eine zur Zeit der Niederschrift noch unerfüllte Sicht der Zukunft, für die der Fall Ninives als Paradigma des Handeln Gottes steht. Ja mehr noch: Es handelt sich—anders als bei den Einzelworten in Nah 2–3—um Prophetie mit eschatologischer Perspektive.'

[51] Jeremias, *Nahum*, p. 70.

[52] Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, p. 47.

rightful place in the Jewish and Christian canon. In recent literature Nahum receives more respect. It can be noted, however, that this usually not concerns the text in itself. Its message is relativized by reading it as part of book of the Twelve and by taking the image of God as avenger as an aspect of God as a judge. The problem of application is solved by postponing the divine judgment, euphemistically indicated as the eschatological perspective.

It comes as no surprise that the overview of the history of interpretation teaches us not only a lot about the different aspects of the biblical text but also, and sometimes even more, about the influence of the context of the interpreter on the interpretation. Especially when it comes to experiences of suffering under seemingly unassailable oppressors, using their power only for their own benefit. When you, like the present author of this article, are lucky enough never to have had these experiences, you may underestimate the significance of belief in God as avenger. In the wake of the Second World War Joseph Mihelič reacted against scholars like Smith mentioned above criticizing Nahum's theology:

> if the critics of Nahum had lived in the last decade and witnessed the brutality that had been visited upon the helpless people in the European and Asiatic concentration camps, that they would rather have joined their voices with Nahum in his joy over the fall of the 'bloody city', than have condemned his righteous indignation in the comfort and the security of their ivory towers.[53]

Unfortunately, many new examples can be added of atrocities, many of which are unavenged.[54] In this light the idea of God as an avenger can be seen as a sign of hope, courage, and perseverance. It also incites interpreters not to be reluctant in unmasking evildoers and confronting them. Sometimes there is a limit to nuancing.

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[53] J. L. Mihelič, 'The Concept of God in the Book of Nahum', *Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (1948): 199–207, especially pp. 199–200.

[54] Cf. Renz, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, pp. 57–8, mentioning this in his discussion of 'Nahum's place in the church today'.

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