

NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND MALACHI

Graham S. Ogden

Readings Readings Readings Readings Readings Readings



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Readings, A New Biblical Commentary

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Graham S. Ogden



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*This volume is dedicated to my wife, Lois,
whose unwavering love and support over
these many years has sustained our family
and made work such as this possible.*

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This commentary on the books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Malachi has been sparked by a growing sense of the importance for ancient Israel's story of the period just prior to the end of Assyrian power in c. 612 BCE, through the years of the Babylonian Empire (611–538 BCE), and into the Medo-Persian period that replaced the Babylonian. The so-called prophetic books that witness to this period each give some insight into the changes that evolved in so many areas of Israel's life—theological challenges, social changes, linguistic revolution, political developments, religious upheavals, and national identity tension—all were in flux. In the collection of materials that comprised the Scroll of the Twelve, or Minor Prophets, the very nature and definition of a 'prophet' is seen to be evolving, as a book like Jonah, a narrative built around a figure from the past, challenges the more traditional notion of prophecy as reported prophetic speeches. These three 'books' that have been written into the Scroll of the Twelve are important witnesses to the changes that were taking place.

The period in which the three books are assumed to locate was one of growing diversity of theological view, though still dominated by that of the Deuteronomic cohort. The hard line or narrow view of those who believed in blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, such as Haggai, was challenged by those who were less inclined to see life as so simply argued—men like Zerubbabel, and the Sages. For Nahum the Visionary his personal testimony and insights present the first challenge to the issue of prophetic identity. In the case of Habakkuk and Malachi, it is evident how foreign influence, due to extended residence in Babylonia and accommodation to Persian interests, led to a broader perspective on one's identity and beliefs. The loss of a royal tradition and a democratization of kingship was replaced by a more secular administration, and resulted in a more diversified leadership.

The three books, Nahum, Habakkuk and Malachi, are each identified as a *Massa*—normally translated as 'Oracle'—as are two chapters of Zechariah, 9.1 and 12.1. This same descriptor is applied to speeches directed

against foreign nations in Isa. 13.1; 15.1 and 17.1, as well as to Wisdom materials in Prov. 30.1 and 31.1. One of our tasks in this commentary is to seek a definition of the *Massa* 'term that matches its use, with the suggestion that it not only indicates a new emerging literary trope, but along with that, it demonstrates a shift in the very nature of 'prophecy' as it merges with the teaching mission of the Sage.

On Translating and Interpreting Biblical Texts

Reading these three books closely has raised again for this reader some interesting practical questions that during years spent as a UBS Translation Consultant were always front of mind. A little like the chicken-and-egg conundrum, the relationship between a translator's theological starting point or ideology and the translation arrived at is always fraught. Which is prior—the theological and cultural assumptions of the translator, or the translation decided upon that then determines or influences the interpretation adopted? The specific term chosen to include in the translation, especially when the Hebrew noun or verb is multivalent, is not always an objective decision but one influenced by other factors such as the translator's personal preference, the potential for an audience to reject one's translation if a reader's favourite word is not used—think of the great debate over the use of 'young woman' in lieu of KJV's 'virgin' in Isa. 7.14—along with socio-cultural or nationalistic pressures, such as deciding in Song 1.5 whether the girl is 'black and beautiful' or 'black but beautiful'. (The *waw* that joins the two adjectives here can have either function, but which rendering of this tiny particle should be used becomes a serious matter for the interpreter and the audience.) Whatever term is chosen by the translator, it becomes one marker in the task of interpreting the text, and one that may have undue influence on the interpretation of the book overall. Assuming that the three books to be considered here represent the words of traditional prophets concerned about the future will influence how some of the verbs are rendered in translation and shape the readers' general approach to their interpretation.

The adage, '*What one says is not necessarily what one means*', needs to be recognized as a cornerstone of much social interaction. Rhetorical Questions and Hyperbole are just some elements in the communication toolbox. So much of spoken and written communication depends on being sensitive to what is intended in a form of words, in order to be able to correctly 'read' or 'hear' what is being communicated. Misunderstandings are always possible, and across the English-speaking world, for example,

are very common when other national traits enter the communication, especially when using comedy and irony—they rarely translate across the Atlantic! Appreciating language within its cultural setting is essential to understanding the message that is being sent. Reading figurative or metaphorical language as literally so, being unaware of a localized idiomatic expression, or questioning the honesty in the highly formalized wording required in some honourific languages that sound elitist, will inevitably lead to unusual and inappropriate conclusions about what a speaker/writer intends. A translator or participant in a conversation must recognize, then interpret, what is meant, often despite the specific words that are used to convey that meaning.

Unfortunately, many readers and commentators on the text of Scripture seem to be able to read only the surface words and read them as literal truths or as actual fact. Such a reading, perhaps based on a theological notion regarding the words of Scripture, fails to ‘hear’ what is being said or written. Appreciating that every language and culture has its way of using the range of its rhetorical features to convey its message, interpreters of the ancient OT text must take great care to avoid literal readings and translations, along with attendant interpretations, when hyperbole, metaphor and figurative language are clearly involved.

These are some of the issues that have engaged this writer now that Israel’s oral traditions were put into written form in the traditional Hebrew language while the community in general had moved to the new *lingua franca* of Aramaic. As a result, many Judaeans in the late exilic and postexilic periods did not have access to materials in Hebrew, whether oral or written. There will always remain the question as to how widespread was knowledge of, and access to, this written material within the community. With all materials hand-written, both the number of copies available and their distribution was severely limited; few could read and write and so most were dependent on hearing the stories, and where available, on having documents read to them. Modern readers who begin with a complete, re-ordered, sixty-six book canon called a Bible can easily make assumptions about these ancient materials that are very far from the reality faced by those for whom it was a living experience. The reading being offered here aims to read and understand these three small ‘books’ in a manner that acknowledges their ancient cultural, linguistic and religious context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Sheffield Phoenix Press for another opportunity to contribute to the Readings series. This volume is offered in the sincere hope that readers will find it a challenging, yet fruitful, perspective on what these three books can offer our understanding of the period without having to wade through some of the distracting minutiae found in many commentaries.

I would also wish to acknowledge with gratitude my many former colleagues in the United Bible Societies' Translation Programme for insights, friendships, fun and great collegiality.

*Graham Ogden
Ballarat, Vic., Australia
September 2022*

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ANE	Ancient Near East
BDB	F. Brown S.R. Driver, and C. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, repr. 1957)
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1968–77)
<i>BT</i>	<i>Bible Translator</i>
DH	Deuteronomic History
<i>IB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Bible</i>
ITC	International Theological Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (ed. G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry; trans. D. Green <i>et al.</i> ; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–98)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

NAHUM: A COMMENTARY

Introduction

The book of Nahum is the seventh book in the Hebrew Bible's *Scroll of the Twelve*, otherwise known as the Minor Prophets. The Superscription or Title identifies it as a '*Massa*' of Nineveh', normally translated as 'An oracle concerning Nineveh'. It is then subtitled, 'the Book of the Vision of Nahum of Elkosh', an introduction to an OT text unlike most others included in the Scroll; it makes no reference to a specific occasion upon which Nahum received a vision, nor circumstances surrounding it. It makes no reference to a regnal period in Israel, nor to the claim that it is a 'word of the Lord' that came to Nahum. It is unique in that it is described as a 'book' (Heb. *sepher*), when it contains only 48 verses now copied onto the middle of the Scroll. Even more important to note is that Nahum is never identified as a Prophet (Heb. *nabi*). There is much about Nahum the book that makes it stand out for special attention, not least of which is to seek a reason for its inclusion in the so-called Minor Prophets scroll rather than in some other part of the collection.

Nahum the book presents itself as the report of a vision that one man had for the people of Judah regarding the city of Nineveh and the Assyrians more generally. Nahum was an individual with a vision for his people over against the dominant and fearsome power of the Assyrian Empire.

The Book of Nahum in its current form witnesses to the relationship between Israelites and Assyrians in the period of Assyria's late revival that began under Adad-Nirari III (810–783 BCE). His son Tiglath-Pileser III (747–727) led the last great stage of Assyrian domination, expanding territory into Syria, Phoenicia and southern Palestine as far as Gaza. Once established, Tiglath-Pileser III set about dispersing captured peoples throughout the Empire. His successor, Shalmaneser V (726–722 BCE) laid siege to Samaria, the northern Israelite capital that was captured in 721 BCE by Sargon II (722–705), deporting large numbers of the population, and settling non-Israelite tribal peoples in their place. Sargon built a new capital north of Nineveh, but it was soon abandoned. However, the following king, Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) re-established Nineveh as the capital, bridging the Tigris river, built an elaborate system of canals

to water the city and its extensive gardens. Despite these achievements he was brutally murdered by his sons. Esarhaddon (680–669) was followed by Assurbanipal (668–627) who waged successful battles against Egypt, but constant rebellion in the Babylonian province weakened the vast Empire and led finally to the demise of both Nineveh and Assur in around 612 BCE. It is against this background that the prophet Nahum is said to have spoken of Nineveh and of Assyria's power.

Contents and Structure

1.1	Title
1.2-6	YHWH's character
1.7-11	Plot against YHWH?
1.12-15 (2.1)	Relief for Judah
2.2-9	Assyria Under Threat
	2.10 central verse
2.11-13	Against Assyria
3.1-7	Woe to Nineveh
3.8-13	Nineveh Will be Devastated
3.14-19	Assyria's End

The above outline is based on literary or rhetorical criteria that are specific to each section of text (see more below). The book as a whole is marked by abrupt changes of subject, pronoun references are vague, there are many changes of imagery and some grammatical oddities suggesting that the work is a composite one, put together using terse poetic language. The suggestion that 1.2-8 is part of an acrostic has been widely accepted, though that thesis is here disputed as it involves a high degree of imagination, emendation and flexibility of definition, in contrast to the strictly formal acrostics such as Psalm 119.

One structural feature that is recognized here is the insertion of the numerically central verse, 2.10 (11)—see also Obadiah v. 11, and Joel 2.17.

Massa'—an Oracle?

Each of the three books in this commentary is classified as *massa'*, usually rendered as 'Oracle'.

Apart from its use as a personal name (Gen. 25.14), the Hebrew nominal form *massa'*, has traditionally been thought to derive from the