



Keeping Company with Nahum: Reading the Oracles against the Nations as Scripture

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CONTINUED READING OF THE ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS¹ CAN BE JUSTIFIED Only if God continues to kill and make alive. The oracles against the nations are not safe to read, and no amount of *explanation* can make them so.

What possible justification is there for subjecting one's imagination to such literature, apart from the continued reality and presence of the God of whom these texts speak? Reading the oracles against the nations must have something to do with the word of God for contemporary readers.

How will we prepare an (our) audience to read the oracles against the nations? That question is important, but within it lurks the presumption that we are not the final audience but only interpreters for another audience. Yet, interpreters are not merely a third party; they are readers as well, that is, addressees. As an addressee I have found it useful to work with the metaphor provided by Wayne Booth in his book *The Company We Keep*.² The oracles against the nations pay us a visit when we read or interpret them. We keep company with them. When we lead

¹"Oracles against the nations" is the standard term used to designate most of the content of Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 25-32, Amos 1-2, and the books of Nahum and Obadiah. Smaller segments found elsewhere have also been so designated (e.g., Zeph 2:5-15).

²*The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

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others in reading these texts, we set a table. We prepare for a visit. But *we* sit down at the table as well. Interpreters are also visited.

I. AN EMBARRASSED CONSENSUS

What kind of table we set for the company we will be keeping depends on whom we expect. Who is it that is coming? A rough scholarly consensus has emerged in recent decades, asserting that the oracles against the nations originated in war settings. Curses against enemies were used to strengthen the resolve of the troops. Subsequently, the oracles/curses were incorporated in a somewhat stylized fashion into (1) the royal court to declare victory over the king's enemies during, say, enthronement festivals and (2) cultic settings in which the oracles against the nations may have served to announce salvation to a lamenting community. The latter observation receives corroboration from the editorial pattern of Isaiah, Jeremiah (as attested in the Old Greek translation), and Ezekiel, namely, judgment against Israel/Judah, followed by judgment against the nations, followed in turn by promises of restoration and return for Israel/Judah. Amos marks yet another adaptation, for in chapters one and two the list of God's enemies is expanded to include Israel and Judah. Subsequent canonical prophets often threaten their audiences with words very similar to those directed against other nations. Later still, the oracles against the nations take on a more eschatological character, with the concern for Israel's future extending well beyond the immediate issues of restoration and survival. Finally, the oracles against the nations are adapted into apocalyptic visions regarding the great and final "day of the Lord." Throughout all these phases the oracles against the nations were primarily for an internal audience, i.e., Israel and Judah; the foreign nations addressed in the oracles were not the actual audience.

With such information we may have biographically introduced the company we will keep. But such information is as enlivening as an obituary. Scholars inevitably say more. Are we preparing for a good visitor or do we have reservations? Biographies rarely just describe; they usually characterize as well. How do scholars characterize our visitor, the oracles against the nations?

Except for interpreters who understand prophecy primarily along predictive lines, the characterization is overwhelmingly negative. At the very least, the discussions have a tone of apology, often suggesting that the oracles against the nations are understandable and excusable because of their exilic setting (compare our common apology for the last sentence of Psalm 137).

Most interpreters are embarrassed by the presence of the oracles against the nations in the Bible, particularly their presence in the books of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. The oracles are regarded as xenophobic and nationalistic diatribes, as self-serving—a form of cheap grace. They only give assurance, lacking the moral and ethical demands that many consider the distinctive feature of the canonical prophets. In addition, nations are threatened with retribution for their treatment of Israel, but two wrongs don't make a right; the oracles remain distastefully violent and abusive, hardly befitting the great canonical prophets. Others

note the repeated, almost stereotypical character of the oracles and conclude that the material is secondary and not authentically that of the great prophets. The oracles against the nations are regarded as interlopers, much like in-laws at a family reunion. The eschatological, even apocalyptic character of many of the oracles has been cited as additional reason for terming the material secondary and less interesting. Prophets were termed “forthtellers,” while the oracles against the nations seemed more like apocalyptic “foretellers.” The prophets were understood to be champions of social and political justice, while the apocalyptic-like oracles against the nations seemed impractical and out of touch with justice issues, if not a bit weird. Judging by their handbooks, commentaries, introductions, and Bible dictionaries, most interpreters regard the oracles against the nations to be poor company.

II. CHALLENGING THE CONSENSUS

This characterization has been challenged from a number of angles. Paul Noble has argued for the integration of all the oracles in Amos 1:3-3:2 into one sharp challenge to the people of God; it is unnecessary to suppose they reflect breached treaties between the nations cited. G. R. Hamborg has claimed that the oracles against the nations in Isaiah were an integral part of Isaiah’s message of judgment on Israel, not a part of a supposed salvation theology. Thomas Smothers, reviewing Jeremiah 46-49, has argued that, since the nations mentioned there are not accused of abusing Israel/Judah, the oracles are neither retributive nor nationalistic. In addition, he argued, they are not salvation oracles for a lamenting Israel/Judah, and they are not filled with hatred, because the destruction is described in a matter-of-fact manner. He argued instead that Jeremiah 46-49 reflects the “historical realities” of the Babylonian empire; resistance to Nebuchadnezzar was resistance to God and, therefore, the resisting nations were subject to the same condemnation as resistant and rebellious Judah.³

The book of Nahum, long regarded as the worst example of self-serving, violent pronouncements (has Nahum never heard of Jonah?), has been reinterpreted as challenging a Judean audience rather than comforting it. Marvin Sweeney has argued that Nahum argued against those who doubted God’s capacity to deliver, and Michael Floyd has suggested that Nahum was interrogating his Judean audience, accusing them of plotting against God.⁴

An interpretive shift is noticeable, even if one does not agree with all of these proposals. Rather than words of comfort to Israel/Judah, the oracles against the

³Paul Noble, “Israel Among the Nations,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 15 (1993) 56-82; G. R. Hamborg, “Reasons for Judgment in the Oracles against the Nations of the Prophet Isaiah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981) 145-159; and Thomas Smothers, “A Lawsuit against the Nations: Reflections on the Oracles against the Nations in Jeremiah,” *Review and Expositor* 85 (1988) 545-554.

⁴Marvin Sweeney, “Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 194 (1992) 364-377; and Michael Floyd, “The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1:2-10,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994) 421-437. Neither the previous note nor this one is exhaustive.

nations are seen to be consistent with the image of the prophets as preachers of hard words. Once the “hardness” is recognized, it seems easier to find a role for these oracles in the actual, historic ministries of the various canonical prophets. These proposals are not all necessarily interested in proving the historicity of the oracles against the nations as the very words of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Nahum. They are, however, interested in their historical role—if not in the historic ministry of each prophet, then in the composition of each prophetic book. They seek to *explain* the historical role of the oracles and they do so in a fashion that changes the prior negative characterization.

Why should we care if the role of the oracles against the nations was one we would approve of or one we would not approve of? We are not living in Amos’ or Jeremiah’s world. What difference does it make for our visit with these texts? These are crucial questions in a community that reads these text *as scripture*. We are not reading these texts as a jury, simply to render a verdict on whether or not they are guilty of violating our rules and standards. The recent studies cited above reopen the question of whether or not the oracles against the nations were comforting or condemning to Israelite/Judean audiences, but they could be the spent voice of the past either way. One might think it more befitting a true prophet to be condemnatory than comforting, but the question of why (or how) one should keep company with these texts remains.

We will, of course, continue to keep company with these texts historically. New readers are helped by learning what historians have discovered. For example, proper names such as Thebes, Bashan, Put, etc., have been given meaning by the labors of historians. While reading Nahum, why wouldn’t one want to know that Thebes fell in 663 (referred to in 3:8)? And new information may help even practiced, scholastic readers. Who knows what interesting data might be available to enliven our reading of Nahum if someone were successful in identifying Elkosh, his hometown?

But the descriptive goal of the historian’s craft is not enough. We can, with varying degrees of confidence and consensus, describe the rootage of many texts, define the sources from which they borrowed—military preparations, cultic celebrations, curses in treaty documents—but these institutions and practices have been extinct for a long time, and still the words of the oracles against the nations have been and are read *as scripture*. Secondly, the question of whether or not this material is helpful or harmful to contemporary readers is not dependent on its origin. Treaty language may have been sexist and any “borrower” of that language would not be exempted from responsibility just because ancient politicians originated the terms/metaphors.

III. “REDEEMING” THE TEXTS

A second move seeks to justify or “redeem” the texts. To “redeem” a text usually means to make it palatable, either by making it read less offensively or by excusing its objectionable character because of the circumstances under which it was produced. One example would be emphasizing that the oracles against the

nations are not xenophobic because they are in fact directed against Israel, not against its enemies, whether real or imagined. But removal of the charge of xenophobia hardly solves the intra-communal problems raised by the language of these texts. Another example would be highlighting the passages which extend mercy to foreign nations. Isa 19:16-24 envisions a restored future for Egypt and Assyria as well as Israel. Jer 48:31-33 expresses Yahweh's sorrow for Moab. The question ending the book of Jonah expresses a high value for Nineveh, in apparent stark contrast to Nahum. Pitting the "positive" passages against the "negative" ones, however, does not alter the problems raised by the presence of the "negative" passages in scripture. Another move is to stress the paucity of references to any gain for Judah/Israel (Isa 14:2 and Jer 49:2 are exceptions) or calls to arms (Mic 4:11-13 is an exception). One can note the lack of promises of victory because Israel/Judah does not battle; the texts do not call for recruits. But the paucity of such references does not necessarily help—any at all is a problem. Yet another move is to laud the poetry and artistic quality of the texts, while attempting to sidestep issues of content. And finally, one can provide a context that makes the emotions understandable, even though not commendable. The argument goes, if such and such happened to you, you can understand why such and such would be the reaction. These interpretations read the oracles against the nations as if they were something like Naboth's voice from the grave, anticipating the demise of Ahab and Jezebel.

Notice again the emphasis on the past. Attempts to "redeem" the oracles against the nations seek to render a positive verdict with regard to the past conduct of our biblical predecessors. When ethical evaluation occurs in the context of an interpretative method that centers on historical reconstruction, the reader is reduced to a member of a jury. A jury member is supposed to remain detached, ever an observer. One is not to become a participant in the lives of the witnesses, defendant(s) or plaintiff(s). The Bible *as scripture*, however, seeks to enlist one in participation. The reader is not limited to the role of a juror. The Bible as scripture seeks to shape the present, not simply inform the reader regarding the past.

IV. THE ORACLES AS SCRIPTURE

I suggest that we begin at a different point in our reading of the oracles against the nations. Ask instead about the echoes that are "heard" in the reading of a text—echoes that may or may not have been heard by the "original" listeners. How is the reader positioned before the living God? For example, Nah 1:12: "Thus says the Lord, 'Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut off and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more.'" Now consider biblical phrases such as "be fruitful and multiply," "as many as the sands of the sea," or "as many as the stars of the heavens." Then add the boast of the speakers in Ezek 33:24: "Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given to us to possess." Contrast that with Isa 51:2: "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many." When these biblical

echoes are heard or revived, Nahum's terms "full strength" and "many" reverberate in a manner that draws Israel/Judah into the critique; the words are not reducible to an attack on Nineveh alone. Such echoes may seem impressionistic, but that may be the best way to read in order to enliven our imaginations for entry into the dichotomies and dialectics that the Bible holds together – dichotomies and dialectics that are too frequently and reductionistically separated in our interpretations. These echoes prepare us for a visit with the oracles against the nations that will be hard and complex – and maybe even interesting.

Follow this mode of interpretation with other segments of Nahum 1: "A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger but great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty" (1:2-3). A quick reading conveniently finds these words comforting – as long as readers assume they are not Nineveh, the "enemy" of God. An initial echo might recognize that "slow to anger" is not followed by the usual "and abounding in steadfast love," and thus there is no slack cut for Nineveh. But let the words echo for a while longer. "A jealous God" is a phrase embedded in the ten commandments, as is the expression "will by no means clear the guilty." The latter phrase is particularly double-edged when readers recall the stories of the golden calf (Exodus 32-34) and the return of the spies (Numbers 13-14), stories in which God is also characterized as "slow to anger."

The opening words of Nahum, when allowed to echo, are not words of facile comfort. They are hard words, words filled with biblical memory that recollects Israel/Judah's own unfaithful past (and likely future?). Readers are not invited simply to be cheerleaders at the scene of Nineveh's demise. This point is made directly by the latter part of verse 12: "Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more." Nahum depicts the reader as afflicted by God – this is hardly a position of privilege. The text of Nahum scripts its contemporary readers as ones afflicted specifically by God. The text does not speak of victimization in general and therefore does not permit a superficial claim to being "afflicted." "Afflicted by God" – that is how the text designates the "you" to whom the promise of no more affliction is directed. The hard words that the book of Nahum directs against Nineveh/Assyria are introduced by words that firmly position the readers as ones who are also in a turbulent relationship with God.

The hard words to Nineveh/Assyria have been or will be directed to Israel/Judah, that is, to the readers. This includes the most abrasive words in Nahum. Nah 2:13 asserts: "I am against you [Nineveh], says the Lord of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions." Compare Ezek 5:8: "Therefore thus says the Lord God: I, I myself, am coming against you [Jerusalem]; I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations"; or Jer 21:5: "I myself will fight against you [Jerusalem] with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath"; or Isa 63:10: "But they [the pre-exilic community] rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them."

The double-edged, reverberating character of the threats in Nahum extends to even the most gruesome images. Assyria/Nineveh will suffer what happened to Thebes: “[S]he became an exile, she went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street” (3:10). Compare Hos 10:14-15: “Mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus it will be done to you at Bethel because of your great wickedness.” Again, Nah 3:5 threatens Nineveh: “I...will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame.” Similar words are directed against Jerusalem in Jer 13:26: “I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen.”⁵

In the context of these echoes, the final question of the book also takes on more than one dimension: “Who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?” On a purely historical level, the “your” refers to Assyria/Nineveh, but the “your” can escape the specific historical context and accuse subsequent readers. A prime example is the effect the next book in the Bible has on Nahum’s question. Hab 1:3 speaks of Judah’s wrong-doing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, and contention. If there is no assuaging Assyria/Nineveh’s punishing wound because of its endless cruelty, what might Judah expect for its own evil? When Nahum is read in its context in the canon, the words against Assyria/Nineveh slide into words against Judah. At the very least, the words against Assyria/Nineveh are not restricted in their effect to their historical point of origin.

It is not surprising, then, that “the world and all who live in it” heave before the Lord (Nah 1:5). Thus the questions of verse 6 also become multi-dimensional: “Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?” Historical Israel/Judah and the contemporary reader are not exempt from the thrust of the questions. Verse 7 asserts that “the Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him.” But from what is God to protect the refuge-taker? God’s own indignation and anger! Thus, the central interpretative issue becomes directly theological.

Nahum reads not as a simple book of comfort. The judgment announced against Assyria/Nineveh is addressed to those who did and can experience the same judgment against themselves. We are accustomed to reading prophets in solidarity with the poor. Our reading of Nahum suggests that we should shift that phrase to state that we should read the oracles against the nations *in solidarity with those who stand under the judgment of God*.

Nahum presumes not to come as a solo visitor, but to bring God along.

⁵Obviously, the issues of child abuse and sexual violence arise when the verses quoted in this paragraph are heard or read. These issues must be acknowledged and discussed; they may even preclude the use of these passages in some (or many) contexts. However, the prophets do insist that God’s “no” takes concrete shape. We can reshape the character of the prophetic “no” (e.g., using language of disease rather than sexual violence), but we cannot finally make the “no” become unobjectionable in every respect. Does God cause bad things? The question is perennial, and the book of Job stands in the way of any facile answer. We should note, however, that in the Bible even the withdrawal of God (“hiding his face”) is greatly feared. God’s abandonment of the human community to its own evil deeds is, ironically, regarded as a very aggressive divine act.

Nahum seeks to rescript our world. Nahum seeks to introduce us to God—God who kills and makes alive. That could be very interesting company to keep.

Keeping company with the oracles against the nations will raise theological questions. We will not be able simply to render judgment on the acceptability of these texts. Should we attempt to read them only historically, I think it best simply to declare their obituary. At a strictly historical level, these texts either concern me not at all or they awaken only a disturbing and harmful imagination and should, therefore, be archived. Read theologically, it is quite a different matter. The oracles against the nations draw us into an experience of the indignation and anger of God. We can no longer use historical readings to protect ourselves from such anger. God's indignation and anger are not just against the other communities; the comforted community also stands before the same God. Thus, to read the oracles against the nations theologically is to read them in solidarity with the judged. When the oracles against nations come for a visit, we will be keeping company with a judging and comforting God. Most interesting company indeed! ⊕