

Power, Mercy, and Vengeance: The Thirteen Attributes in Nahum

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Nahum scholars typically interpret the reference to YHWH's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in Nah 1:3a as a re-reading meant to minimize YHWH's mercy and emphasize his wrath. This article shows that the quote originates from Num 14:17–18 while maintaining an allusion to Exod 34:6–7. In this light, Nah 1:3a does not explain YHWH's wrath against Assyria; rather, it explains how YHWH could pardon Judah's apostasy and deliver his people.

KEYWORDS: *Nahum, Exodus 34, Numbers 14, hesed, massa*

While Nahum scholars agree that the book contains “majestic” poetry, they also usually credit it with a simplistic theme.¹ Whether the commentator admires or disdains the content, there is agreement that Nahum uses strikingly descriptive words to pronounce a basic message.² For exam-

1. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (trans. George Gregory; Boston: Crocker & Brewer, 1829), 180. Klaas Spronk correctly observes, “On at least one point all scholars who have studied the book agree: the author was a gifted poet” (*Nahum* [HCOT; Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1997], 12).

2. Examples of scholars who endorse Nahum's message and praise his skill include, Tremper Longman, “Nahum,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (ed. T. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:765–829; O. Allis, “Nahum, Nineveh, Elkosh,” *EvQ* 27 (1955), 67–80; R. Patterson and M. Travers, “Nahum: Poet Laureate of the Minor Prophets,” *JETS* 33 (1990): 437–44. Works critical of Nahum's theology include, J. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Micah, Zephaniah, and Nahum*, (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911); J. Mihelic, “The Concept of God in the Book of Nahum,” *Int* 2 (1948): 199–207; J. Sanderson, “Nahum,” in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. C. Newsom and S. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 217–21; G. Baumann, *Gottes Gewalt im Wandel: Traditionsgeschichtliche und intertextuelle Studien zu Nahum 1,2–8* (WMANT 108; Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2005). For a discussion of Nahum's detractors, see J. O'Brien, *Nahum* (2nd ed.; Readings; London: Sheffield Academic,

ple, “The book of Nahum runs the risk of being monotonous because of the singularity of the author’s purpose and theme. He is intent on saying only one thing: Nineveh shall fall. But the variety of methods which he employs in saying this one thing are quite remarkable and lend great force to his message.”³ In the opinion of this author, the prophet ill-deserves the reputation for theological simplicity. To adequately substantiate that statement would require more space than allotted here. This article only addresses how the presupposition of Nahum’s simplistic theme of vengeance has affected the interpretation of Nah 1:3a: “YHWH is slow to anger and great in power, but he will not leave the guilty unpunished.”⁴ Nahum commentators have reached near consensus that Nah 1:3a adapts YHWH’s revelation of his Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (Exod 34:6–7) in order to mete out vengeance against Assyria. This interpretation, however, misses the subtlety and intricacy of the reference. Specifically, it will be argued that scholars have: (1) failed to recognize that Nahum primarily quotes from Num 14:17–18, (2) misinterpreted Nahum’s inclusion of וגדול־כח (“and great in power”) and (3) misconstrued Nahum’s excision of ורב־חסד (“and great in loving-kindness”).⁵ Because of these errors, commentators have not recognized

2009), 101–20. O’Brien perceptively comments, “Nahum, according to these interpreters, is a violent, nationalistic book, one morally repugnant to modern persons. Its moral inferiority, however, does not mask its literary artistry. Nahum is a bad book written well” (p. 105).

3. P. Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 26. Other expressions of the one-simple-theme theory appear in M. Floyd, “The book of Nahum is largely concerned with a particular historical event: the fall of Nineveh to combined forces of the Babylonian and Medes in 612 BCE” (*Minor Prophets, Part 2* [FOTL 22; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 4); G. Johnston, “God will judge the wicked (both empires and individuals) who inflict military destruction on His people and the world as a whole (Nah. 1:2–8)” (“Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors,” *BSac* 159 [2002]: 22); D. Clark and H. Hatton, “the theme of Nahum’s prophecy is restricted to a single topic, the fall of Nineveh” (*A Translator’s Handbook on the Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* [Helps for Translators; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989], 1). A. George associates the simplicity of Nahum to the structure of the book in *Michée, Sophonie, Nahum* (2nd ed.; Paris: Cerf, 1958), 78.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

5. The deficiency of this translation is acknowledged, per N. Glueck: “חסד cannot be adequately translated in many languages, including English” (*Hesed in the Bible* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967], 267).

that while Nah 1:3a has implications for Nineveh, it primarily refers to Judah's apostasy.

THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES

The account of YHWH's self-revelation on Mount Sinai "is found no less than seven times completely and more than twenty times partly in the Old Testament."⁶ Understandably, scholars therefore assume that Nahum adapts Exod 34:6–7. A typical comment to this effect comes from Marvin Sweeney:

This statement was made by YHWH to Moses at the time that YHWH revealed the divine self to Moses following the Golden Calf incident at Sinai. In the Exodus narrative, it serves as a statement of YHWH's mercy and justice, and thereby explains the capacity for judgment against those in Israel who abandoned YHWH for an idol as well as YHWH's capacity to show fidelity to those who show fidelity to YHWH. The Nahum version of this statement is clearly shortened, and represents an attempt to interpret the statement in relation to the rhetorical needs of Nahum, i.e., it emphasizes YHWH's power and capacity for justice against an enemy but it does not include the statements concerning YHWH's mercy. This is in contrast to the version of the statement that appears in Jon 4:2 which emphasizes YHWH's mercy because divine mercy is a major concern of the book of Jonah. Essentially, Nahum (like Jonah) borrows, rereads, and modifies a well-known statement from tradition to make a point about YHWH's character.⁷

Sweeney represents established opinion in three ways. First, he makes no mention of Num 14:17–18.⁸ Second, Sweeney credits Nahum's revisions

6. Klaas Spronk, "Nahum, and the Book of the Twelve: A Response to Jakob Wöhrle," *JHebS* 9 (2009): 4.

7. Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2000–2001), 2:428. Similarly, Spronk believes, "The poet put his own stamp on the traditional formulae. The original positive message was 'vengefully reapplied' to underline the announcement of YHWH's anger coming upon his enemies" (Spronk, *Nahum*, 36).

8. Almost all commentators attribute this reference to Exod 34. A few of these also note the similarities with Num 14 without making any further note of the Numbers passage. For instance, K. Cathcart links Nah 1:3 and Exod. 34:6 but then adds, "A similar list of

to vengeance against Assyria. Third, he asserts that Nahum edited these words in a manner contrary to the original quote. This article will now examine Nah 1:3a in light of Num 14:17–18 and Exod 34:6–7 and argue that Nahum primarily quotes Num 14. Once this is established, it will be shown that the quote refers more to Judah’s apostasy than Nineveh’s destruction; the quote sets the events of Nahum in the context of Israel’s rebellions in Exod 32 and Num 14.

NUMBERS 14

A comparison of Nah 1:3a, Exod 34:6–7, and Num 14:17–18 yields two conspicuous similarities between Nahum and Numbers not present in Exodus. First, both Nah 1:3 and Num 14:18 begin, יהוה ארך אפים (“YHWH is slow to anger”). Even though the same words are found in Exod 34:6, there the name יהוה is doubled and then אל רחום וחנון (“a compassionate and gracious God”) separates יהוה from ארך אפים. Contrary to Spronk—who notes “the uncommon word order” of יהוה ארך אפים in Nah 1:3 and attributes it to “the fact that the poet wanted to link these lines to previous strophe”—the “uncommon word order” suggests that Nahum begins by quoting Numbers instead of Exodus.⁹

Second, and more importantly, Nah 1:3a contains the phrase וגדל־כח. Almost all scholars treat these words as an original insertion by the prophet, rather than a quotation from Num 14:17. For example,

attributes is found in Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13” (*Nahum in the Light of Northwest Semitic* [BibOr 26; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1973], 45). E. Achtemeier includes, “However, lest the reader of Nahum’s words think God’s hesitancy is due to lack of power, the prophet, in the manner of Numbers 14:17 and Romans 9:22, emphasizes also God’s might” (*Nahum–Malachi* [IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1986], 12). A. Pinker and W. Maier do link Nah 1:3a and Num 14:17–18. Pinker hypothesizes that Nahum quoted Num 14:17–18 instead of Exod 34:6–7 because the wording from Numbers proved more adaptable to the acrostic structure of Nah 1:2–8: “On the Genesis of Nahum 1:3a,” *Hiphil* 4 (2007): 3–4. Maier appears to link וגדל־כח to Num 14:17, in the statement, “For Yahweh is ‘great in power’ (Num 14:17)” (*The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1959; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 156). Unfortunately, he makes no comment clarifying how Nah 1:3 relates to Num 14. R. Patterson remarks upon the similarity to Num 14:17 but sees a stronger tie to Ps 147:5, which reads, גדול אדונינו ורב־כח (“Great is our Lord and great in power”). See R. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Richardson, Tex.: Biblical Studies, 2003), 36.

9. Spronk, *Nahum*, 36.

אֵרֶךְ אַפַּיִם . . . occurs frequently in Scripture (near parallels to this verse are found in Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jer. 15:15; Joel 2:13). In these contexts, however, אֵרֶךְ אַפַּיִם is followed by affirmations of divine love or fealty rather than the affirmation וְגַדְל־כֹּחַ (but of great power). The difference between these usages may be accounted for by the context here being one of judgment.¹⁰

This is understandable if one assumes that Nahum quotes Exod 34, as that passage contains no form of either of these words. However, they do occur in Num 14:17: וְעַתָּה יִגְדַל־נֹא כֹחַ אֲדֹנָי (“And now, please let the power of the Lord be great”). Rather than reinterpreting YHWH’s Attributes, the prophet merely reordered the quotation from Num 14:17–18 by inserting a phrase from verse 17, minus the entreaty נֹא, into the middle of the quotation from verse 18.

Two less pronounced aspects of Nah 1:3 suggest ties to Exod 34:6–7 not present in Num 14:17–18. The quotation in Nah 1:3 begins and ends with יהוה. In Exod 34:6, “the covenant name of God is repeated twice, precisely as in Nahum,” but in Exodus, the name is doubled at the beginning, while in Nahum, יהוה begins and ends the line.¹¹ Also, the beginning of Nah 1:2, אֵל קְנוֹא וְנִקָּם יְהוָה (“YHWH is a jealous and avenging God”), is reminiscent of יהוה קְנוֹא שְׂמוֹ אֵל קְנוֹא הוּא (“YHWH, whose name is jealous, he is a jealous God”) in Exod 34:14. The linguistic comparison suggests that Nahum blended aspects of Num 14 and Exod 34; yet, the syntactic ties to Num 14 are stronger than those to Exod 34.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NAHUM’S VERSION

The understanding that Nahum quoted Num 14 makes the prophet’s editing appear less arbitrary. To demonstrate this, the Hebrew text of both passages appears below, with strikethrough marks across the words that occur in Num 14:17–18, but not in Nah 1:3a.

10. Longman, “Nahum,” 789.

11. Robertson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 63.

יהוה ארך אפים וגדל־כח ונקמה לא ינקה יהוה (Nah 1:3a)

יעתה יגדל־נא כח אדני־כאשר דברת לאמר יהוה ארך אפים ורב־חסד נשא עון
 ופשע ונקמה לא ינקה פקד עון אבות על־בנים על־שלימים ועל־רבעים
 (Num 14:17–18)

This comparison shows that (1) all of the words in Nah 1:3a occur in Num 14:17–18, (2) the quote in Nahum begins and ends with יהוה while Num 14:17–18 names יהוה only once, (3) Nahum includes only select portions of Num 14:17–18, (4) the particle נא has been removed from between יגדל and כח, and (5) וגדל־כח has been inserted between the two clauses from verse 18. The remainder of this article will explore the purpose for these changes.

The above task begins negatively; these changes do not support the belief that the prophet sculpted the quote to excise mention of YHWH’s mercy and to emphasize the vengeance against Assyria, as is typically argued:

In most of these passages the emphasis is upon God’s mercy, his slowness to anger, and his willingness to forgive. Nahum’s emphasis, however, is quite different. While he acknowledges this traditional confession about the nature of Yahweh, he shapes the statement to support his own borrowed portrait of Yahweh as an enraged God of harsh vengeance. In contrast to all the other occurrences of this confessional statement *w^{er}ab ḥesed* or *ûg^edôl ḥāsed*, “and great in loving kindness,” Nahum has *ûg^edôl kôah*, “but great in strength.” This shifts the thought from God’s merciful willingness to forgive back to God’s majesty, and the shift is completed by the following statement that Nahum shares with Ex. 34:7 and Num. 14:18: “And Yahweh will certainly not acquit the guilty.”¹²

This argument fails on both points—neither the excision of ורב־חסד, nor the insertion of וגדל־כח supports this conclusion.

It can be agreed, without controversy, that Nahum pronounces YHWH’s vengeance upon Assyria. According to Nah 1:12–13, 2:1 [1:15 NRSV], and 2:3 [2:2], the restoration of Judah and Jacob provide one motive for this vengeance. With this understanding, however, it cannot

12. J. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 50.

be maintained that Nahum's message of vengeance motivated the removal of *חסד*. Works devoted to the meaning of *חסד* consistently link YHWH's *חסד* to his vengeance against the enemies of his people: "God's might, exercised for the sake of his people, is virtually identical with his *hesed*."¹³ Psalm 136 provides a vivid example of this. The word *חסד* appears in each of the psalm's twenty-six verses. In verses 10–21 it is YHWH's judgment for the sake of his people that demonstrates his *חסד*. Most notably, in Ps 136:10 YHWH showed his *חסד* by killing Egyptian children. Another example comes from Ps 143:12, where the psalmist invoked YHWH's *חסד* as the basis for the annihilation of the psalmist's enemies. "Early commentaries proposed emendations for *hesed* on the ground that extermination and destruction could scarcely be considered an expression of God's mercy. . . . Although God is usually asked in his *hesed* or *'emet* to deliver the psalmist, he is regularly to do this by shaming or destroying the enemy."¹⁴ As often acknowledged, the Hebrew word *חסד* defies translation into English. To render it as loving-kindness, imbue it with the modern idea of loving-kindness, and then deem the word inconsistent with Nahum's message does not do justice to the term or explain its absence from Nahum.¹⁵ The concept of *חסד* matches Nahum's vengeance against Nineveh.

Attributing the addition of *וגדל־כח* merely to vengeance fails for similar reasons. While a few Nahum commentators note a connection to Num 14, none remark upon the significance for interpreting Nahum. In Numbers, Moses interceded for Israel by asking that YHWH's power would be great, enabling his mercy. In a commentary on Numbers, Baruch Levine makes this point and draws the proper correlation to Nahum: "The precise connotation of *kôah* (normally 'strength, power') in this verse requires comment. The sense here is 'forbearance, restraint,' namely, the strength to restrain the use of destructive power. Moses appeals to God, with some indirection, not to unleash his wrath against his people. This nuance is expressed in Nah 1:3: 'YHWH is long tempered and of great forbearance (*ugedol kôah*).'"¹⁶ Timothy Ashley

13. Glueck, *Hesed*, 82.

14. K. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (HSM 17; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1978), 220–21.

15. This is not to dispute the validity of "loving-kindness" as a translation. It is to acknowledge the limitations of the translation and to note that modern conceptions of "loving-kindness" differ from ancient Hebrew ones.

16. B. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 366.

also links YHWH's power to his mercy: "What Moses means is that Yahweh should show his great power by revealing, once again, his heart of mercy and forgiveness."¹⁷ In Num 14:17 the phrase *יגדל־נא כה* has the opposite connotation to the one ascribed by Nahum commentators.

The theory that the prophet shaped his quote to emphasize God's vengeance fails at one more point. The quotation in verse 3 ceases after assuring the reader that YHWH will not acquit the guilty. Therefore, Nahum also lacks the generational curse—"visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the descendants to the third and fourth generations" (Num 14:18)—that both Numbers and Exodus include. Nahum's application of Exod 34 and Num 14 demonstrates more theological nuance than just a vengeful motive.

Having provided evidence against the prevailing opinion, this article now asserts that the prophet knit together the quotation to put the prophecy in the context of the rebellions in the wilderness and at Mount Sinai. The salient similarities between Exod 34, Num 14, and Nahum commend this interpretation. Both Exod 34 and Num 14 follow events where the Israelites offended YHWH so gravely that he vowed to obliterate them. In both cases, Moses immediately interceded and stayed total annihilation. In both instances, God's wrath consumed a multitude, despite Moses' prayer.

Nahum does not use Exod 34 and Num 14 contrary to their original contexts; instead, Nahum crafts the quote to identify the prophecy as a third manifestation of the same circumstance. In Numbers, Exodus, and Nahum, YHWH's covenant people acted faithlessly to the degree that his wrath burned against them, but it did not destroy them. Nahum compares Israel's (2 Kgs 15:19) and Judah's (2 Kgs 16:17) covenants with Assyria to the worshiping of the golden calf in Exod 32 and the rebellion of Num 14. This explains the judgment suffered at the hands of Assyria as well as the deliverance from Assyria.

Since commentators typically miss, or disregard, the reference to Num 14:17, they construe *יגדל־כח* as a statement of wrath. As shown above, this interpretation does not fit with Num 14. It does not fit with Exod 34 either. After the golden calf, Moses also used the phrase *בכה גדול* in the midst of his plea that YHWH not exterminate the Israelites (Exod 32:11). Therefore, in both Num 14 and Exod 32, God's great power is not at odds with his mercy but enables it.

17. T. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 257.

Why then would Nahum remove נָ from the phrase? The word נָ has the context of “entreaty or exhortation.”¹⁸ In Nahum the phrase lacks נָ because it comes in an announcement, not an entreaty. The prophet Nahum heralded YHWH’s deliverance rather than pleading for it.

Therefore, the phrase has developed from Numbers to Nahum. What Moses asked in Numbers happens in Nahum. Nahum announces it as fact. YHWH is גְּדֹלֵי־כֹחַ. Nahum’s poetry proclaims that Moses’s prayer from Num 14:17–19 has crossed centuries to bring about YHWH’s mercy on his rebellious people.

The classification of Nahum as a מִשָּׁא (Nah 1:1) strengthens this hypothesis. In the “seminal work” on the term מִשָּׁא,¹⁹ Richard Weis concludes:

Except for Nahum 1:2–3:19 the exemplars of the genre maśśā’ that survive in the final form of the Hebrew Bible are used to expound the manifestation in human events and affairs of the divine plan/intention revealed in some previously communicated expression of the divine will. This previously communicated revelation is always outside the maśśā’.²⁰

By beginning the prophecy in this way, the book of Nahum removes the need for Weis to qualify his definition. Nahum also “expound[s] the manifestation in human events” of YHWH’s revealed will—to have mercy upon Judah and Jacob, despite their rebellion.²¹

18. “נָ,” *TWOT*, BibleWorks 8.

19. M. Boda, “Freeing the Burden of Prophecy: Maśśā’ and the Legitimacy of Prophecy in Zech 9–14,” *Bib* 87 (2006): 342.

20. R. Weis, “The Genre Maśśā’ in the Hebrew Bible” (PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1986), 273; emphasis his. Endorsements of Weis’s analysis include, D. Christensen, *Nahum: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24F; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 152–53; Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:423; M. Floyd, “The MAŚŚĀ’ (maśśā’) as a Type of Prophetic Book,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 403.

21. Nahum contains other fulfillments of “previously communicated revelation.” Unfortunately, explanation of this is beyond the scope of the present work. The assertion by Spronk that “the words of Nahum can often be read as a reinterpretation of oracles in, for instance, Isa. 5:24–30; 10:5–19; 14:24–27; and 30:27–33” (Spronk, *Nahum*, 7–8) demonstrates that Nahum may be read as a fulfillment of various prophecies regarding Assyria.

This hypothesis counters the widespread belief that “In the three chapters of Nahum there is not a hint of criticism of the Judah of the seventh century BCE, nor a whisper of threat of judgment against the people for their sins (at least in the book as it stands now).”²² Over a hundred years ago, J. M. P. Smith criticized Nahum because, “instead of grieving over the sin of Judah and striving with might and main to warn her of the error of her ways that she herself, might turn and live, Nahum was apparently content to lead her in a jubilant celebration of the approaching death of Assyria.”²³ However, careful attention to how Nahum begins demonstrates this is not the case.

After Moses recited YHWH’s self-revelation in Num 14:18, he continued with the petition, “please forgive the iniquity of this people as the greatness of your loving-kindness and as you have lifted this people from Egypt until now.” Nahum begins by allusion, demonstrating how YHWH has pardoned his people. The intercession of Moses remains effective. YHWH patiently endured Judah’s apostasy and adultery with Assyria. His power to forbear proved sufficient to spare them. He did not, however, leave the guilty unpunished, as YHWH “afflicted” (Nah 1:12) Judah for nearly a century before breaking off the Assyrian “yoke” (1:13).

CONCLUSION

This article contends that Nahum scholars typically misinterpret the reference to YHWH’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. Instead of recognizing that Nahum primarily quotes from Num 14:17–18, they interpret Nah 1:3a as a statement of YHWH’s wrath against Nineveh. The article demonstrated that the lack of mention of YHWH’s *חסד* cannot be attributed to a desire for vengeance against Assyria. It was also shown that the insertion of *וגדל־כֶּחַ* comes from Num 14:17 as a statement supporting YHWH’s mercy, rather than contradicting it. The allusions to Num 14 and Exod 34 place Nahum in the context of two of Israel’s most serious rebellions. Therefore, the version of the Thirteen Attributes in Nah 1:3a serves to explain how YHWH could have mercy on his rebellious people and bring them deliverance from Assyria: “YHWH is

22. R. Mason, *Micah, Nahum, Obadiah* (OTG 28; Sheffield, England; JSOT, 1991), 57.

23. Smith, *Critical*, 281.

slow to anger and great in power, but he [has not left] the guilty unpunished.”