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. Whether the commentator admires or disdains the content, there is agreement that Nahum uses strikingly descriptive words to pronounce a basic message. For exam-


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.” 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.” 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 הוהי ולגדול−כח (“and great in power”) and (3) misconstrued Nahum’s excision of ורב−חסד (“and great in loving-kindness”). 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).


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.” 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.

Sweeney represents established opinion in three ways. First, he makes no mention of Num 14:17–18. Second, Sweeney credits Nahum’s revisions


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 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 והגדל־כח. Almost all scholars treat these words as an original insertion by the prophet, rather than a quotation from Num 14:17. For example,


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: "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 נא, 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. Also, the beginning of Nah 1:2, אל קנאו ונקם יהוה ("YHWH is a jealous and avenging God"), is reminiscent of יהוה קנא שמו אל קנא הוא ("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.


11. Robertson, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, 63.
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 וגדל and כח, and (5) וגדלве 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 וָрабֶחֶס or ìג’dôl ḥâsed, “and great in loving kindness,” Nahum has ìג’dôl kôaḥ, “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 ורבֶחֶס, nor the insertion of וגדלве 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

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.” 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 ʾĕmet to deliver the psalmist, he is regularly to do this by shaming or destroying the enemy.” 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. The concept of חסד matches Nahum’s vengeance against Nineveh.

Attributing the addition of והגדול־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 kôḥ (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 (ugeot kôḥ).’” Timothy Ashley


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.

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.” In Num 14:17 the phrase גוחלו צאת לו חל 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 גוחלו צאת לו חל 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 בפלו בצאת לו חל 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.

Why then would Nahum remove נא from the phrase? The word נא has the context of “entreaty or exhortation.” In Nahum the phrase lacks נא 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 גדל־כח. 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 משש (Nah 1:1) strengthens this hypothesis. In the “seminal work” on the term משש, 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’.

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. 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).” 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.” 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 והגדיל־כח 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


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