The acrostic of Nahum in
the Jerusalem liturgy

by

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In the current discussions concerning the relationship of the prophetic message to the cultic traditions, the short book of Nahum scarcely receives attention proportionate to the significance of its peculiar form. Here is a strange book—one filled with fierce denunciations of Judah’s enemy but strikingly wanting in many elements commonly ascribed to the Hebrew prophets, most particularly in any declaration of Judah’s sin as seen in the light of covenant obligations. For this reason, Nahum has been classed among the prophets of weal, or numbered among the “false prophets”, or even denied the name prophet in any true sense whatever.

Aage Bentzen is one of the few scholars who have clearly seen that, whatever the original life situation of Nahum’s poems against Nineveh, the book as a whole has in all likelihood been shaped into its present form for use as a liturgy for the celebration of Assyria’s overthrow 1). This is a point of view which the present writer strongly endorses and which he considers essential for an understanding, not only of how the book got into its present form, but also of how it gained its place in the canon of Hebrew prophecy.

The ancient translations of Nahum often reveal the failure of those who prepared them to comprehend what lay before them. This is really little wonder when one considers that the materials in this book have quite obviously undergone an unusually complex process of growth and transformation. The most vital problems involved in the book’s interpretation are (1) the extent of the acrostic hymn in chap. 1, (2) the identity of the person or persons addressed in the “you” passages in chaps. i and ii; and (3) whether the fall of Nineveh is depicted as future or as past. There is general agreement about the approximate date: it is surely later than the fall of Thebes in 663 and

earlier than the death of Josiah in 609. It is possible to define a more precise historical context only by resolving the questions just mentioned.

Although such recent commentaries as those of Karl Elliger in *Das Alte Testament Deutsch* 1) and of Friedrich Horst in *Handbuch zum Alten Testament* 2) agree that the acrostic hymn ends at i 8, there are still some who dispute this. As an example, we may mention the opinion expressed by Charles L. Taylor, Jr., in his commentary appearing in *The Interpreter's Bible*:

There are indications that an acrostic underlies the present confusion. Thus i 2 begins with the first letter of the alphabet (א), vs. 3b... with the second letter (ב), vs. 4 with the third (ג), and so on until from ten to sixteen of the twenty-two letters have appeared. In places the scheme breaks down; probably the redactor did not know the original poem very well, and became confused to the point of substituting lines from other poems in the place of what he had forgotten. At least it may be said that in the process of transmission what was once an alphabetic hymn has now become seriously corrupted, rearranged, and supplemented 3).

It is not too severe a judgment to assert that some of the confusion of which this writer complains seems to exist in his method of approaching the text 4). To be sure, the *Kittel Bible* does not help much. Nor do many of the older critics, who imagined that the entire alphabet must have been represented in the original poem, and accordingly have rearranged and reconstructed the text quite at will.

Two things ought no longer be disputed: (1) Nahum 1 does indeed begin with an acrostic hymn, in spite of Haldar’s argument to the contrary 5); (2) this hymn reproduces only half the alphabet,

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4) When the passage cited mentions a redactor as being responsible for the present form of the text, and then explains that the text is confused because this redactor forgot parts of the original poem and consequently substituted freely from his faulty memory of other poems, one must simply doubt whether the writer has a clear understanding of the differences between the processes of oral and of literary transmission. By definition, a redactor is one who works with literary materials, not one who shapes oral traditions.