NAHUM'S PROPHETIC NAME

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Summary

While Nahum commentators correctly acknowledge that the prophet Nahum's name derives from the Hebrew root for 'comfort', they incorrectly interpret the significance of his name for the prophecy. Commentators usually argue that the name does not fit Nahum's violent vision or they state that the name fits precisely, as YHWH's vengeance brings comfort to his afflicted people. This article contends that the first two verses of Nahum allude to Isaiah 1:24, which indicates that YHWH receives comfort by being avenged. Therefore, Nahum's name indicates that the primary purpose of the book is to bring comfort to YHWH, not his adulterous people.

Commentators universally assert that Nahum's name (נַחוּם) derives from the same root as the verb meaning 'to comfort'.[1] In Hebrew, wordplay with names 'is quite frequent'.[2] Names often contain meaning that affects the interpretation of a passage, so much so that wordplay may even 'form the basis for complete poems'.[3] While scholars have recognised that the book of Nahum engages in wordplay

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[1]   For instance, 'The name comes from the root nḥm ("to be sorry, console oneself, have compassion")' (Duane L. Christensen, *Nahum: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24F [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009], 159); 'The name is derived from the root *nḥm*, which means "to comfort, have compassion"' (Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, Berit Olam [Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 2000], 2:420). The root נחם functions as the source of both name and verb as 'both nouns and verbs should be understood as having the bare root as their direct formal derivational source. Even if the verb is the source for the noun, the root serves as an intermediary' (Joshua Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns*, Harvard Semitic Studies 52 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003], 44).

[2]   Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, *Subsidia Biblica* 11 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988), 29.

[3]   Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 244.

with the prophet's name, they have not recognised Nahum's allusion to Isaiah 1:24, and therefore have misunderstood the significance of his name for interpreting the book.

Julia O'Brien observes that many scholars view 'the connection between comfort and the book's vengeance filled contents' as 'ironic or even nonsensical'.[4] It will be shown, however, that Nahum believed vengeance brought comfort. While other scholars make this precise point by arguing that Nahum's name foretold YHWH's 'compassion to his oppressed people',[5] this view misinterprets the primary object of Nahum's comforting words. The prophecy focuses on YHWH's comfort, not Judah's.

The evidence for this hypothesis comes from recognising the likelihood that Nahum 1:1-2 makes an intentional allusion to Isaiah 1:24.[6] The Hebrew text of Isaiah 1:24 reads

Thus, the utterance of the Lord YHWH of hosts,	לָכֵן נְאֻם הָאָדוֹן יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
The mighty one of Israel.	אֲבִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל
Ah, I will be comforted from my adversaries	הוֹי אֶנָּחֵם מִצָּרַי
And will avenge myself on my enemies[7]	וְאִנָּקְמָה מֵאוֹיְבָי

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[4] Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum*, 2nd ed., Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 32-33.

[5] Tremper Longman III, 'Nahum', in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. T. McComiskey (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 2:765-829, esp. 766.

[6] 'It is difficult if not impossible to draw the line between the conscious intention of the poet and what the attentive reader finds in a poem. On the whole, I think we have given insufficient credit to the poet for subtleties and intricacies in his artistic creation, and it is better to err on that side for a while. If we find some clever device or elaborate internal structure, why not assume that the poet's ingenuity, rather than our own, is responsible?' (David N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980], 8). Obviously, the theory of intentional allusion requires that Isa. 1:24 predates Nahum — a view that some contest. The question rests on one's perspective of Isaiah's composition and what role Isa. 1 plays in the structure of the book. As John N. Oswalt points out, 'it is very difficult to obtain agreement among scholars as to the date and authorship of any but a few chapters of the total book' (*The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986], 24). According to Brevard S. Childs, 'Regarding the question of the historical setting of the subunits [of Isa. 1], the majority opinion assigns the material largely to the eighth century' (*Isaiah*, OTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2001], 17). This article agrees with Paul R. House's assessment that 'chapters 1–5 can only be dated sometime during the reigns of the kings listed in 1:1, or between 783–687' ('Isaiah's Call and Its Context', *Chriswell Theological Review* 6 [1993], 207-22, esp. 210). Since Nahum could not have been written before the fall of Thebes in 663 BC (Nah. 3:8), this date range provides sufficient time for both Nahum and his audience to know Isa. 1:24.

Conspicuous similarities in vocabulary and structure between Nahum 1:1-2 and Isaiah 1:24 suggest that Nahum meant to bring about YHWH's comfort through vengeance on Nineveh.

Ten of the twelve Hebrew words in Isaiah 1:24 appear in Nahum. Initially, this may seem insignificant. Many of these words occur frequently in the Old Testament. For instance, the phrase נְאֻם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת (utterance of YHWH of hosts) occurs in Nahum 2:14 and 3:5, but also permeates prophetic literature. However, the similarities between Nahum and the second half of Isaiah 1:24 prove more distinctive. Isaiah 1:24c starts with הוֹי, an exclamation which often means 'woe' as it does in Nahum 3:1. More importantly, each of the remaining four words of Isaiah 1:24 figure prominently in Nahum 1:1-2.[8] First, the root נחם in Isaiah 1:24, which expresses the certainty of YHWH's future comfort, also identifies the prophet in Nahum 1:1. Next, Nahum 1:2 uses each of the final three words from Isaiah 1:24 to define the purpose of the prophecy. Nahum 1:2 reads

YHWH is a jealous and avenging God;	אֵל קַנּוֹא וְנֹקֵם יְהוָה
YHWH avenges and is lord of wrath;	נֹקֵם יְהוָה וּבַעַל חֵמָה
YHWH takes vengeance on his adversaries	נֹקֵם יְהוָה לְצָרָיו
and keeps wrath for his enemies.	וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לְאֹיְבָיו

Both Isaiah 1:24 and Nahum 1:2 place forms of צר (adversary) at the end of the third colon and ביא (enemy) at the end of the fourth colon, linking the words by parallelism. In Isaiah, the verb וְאִנָּקְמָה (I will avenge myself) intensifies the verb אֶנָּחֵם (I will be comforted), thereby showing YHWH's intention to find comfort through vengeance. Nahum declared this intention fulfilled by a threefold repetition of נֹקֵם יְהוָה (YHWH avenges) that precedes his use of צר and איב. In each of the three instances of נקם in Nahum 1:2, the word takes a participial form. The predicted vengeance in Isaiah 1:24 has emphatically commenced.

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7   All translations are my own.
8   Klaas Spronk's commentary on Nahum argues convincingly that Nahum depended heavily on Isaiah. 'A third source of inspiration — next to the Assyrian literature and the cultic texts — were the words of Isaiah, who had lived and worked in Jerusalem at the end of the previous century. As will be demonstrated below, 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' (*Nahum*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament [Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1997], 7-8).

In both books, God's comfort comes from vengeance on his enemies and adversaries. In Isaiah, 'the enemies of Yahweh, against whom he will bring his wrath, are the people of Jerusalem'.[9] In the book of Nahum, YHWH's vengeance turns against the Assyrian forces that seduced Judah into harlotry (Isa. 1:21; Nah. 3:4) and therefore offended YHWH's honour.[10] Nahum's message does bring comfort to Judah — but this theme is secondary as only three and a half verses refer to YHWH's covenant people (Nah. 1:12b-13; 2:1 [1:15 English]; 2:3 [2:2 English]). By comparison, the opening hymn of Nahum (1:2-8) begins and ends with declarations that YHWH will destroy 'his enemies', and the entire book describes YHWH's relentless pursuit of these enemies. H. G. L. Peels writes that God's vengeance 'is directed against those who offend God's majesty through transgression against his honour, his justice or his people'.[11] This article agrees with Peels's assessment — especially the order of importance. While YHWH's vengeance brought deliverance for Judah — and therefore comfort — the primary motive for vengeance in Nahum is YHWH's honour.

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9   Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, CC (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 41.

10   Gregory D. Cook, 'Human Trafficking in Nahum', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 37.2 (2015), 142–157.

11   H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 278.