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Spronk, K.

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K. Spronk
Protestantse
Theologische
Universiteit,
Amsterdam,
The Netherlands.

E-mail:
k.spronk@pthu.nl

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THE AVENGING GOD OF NAHUM AS COMFORTER OF THE TRAUMATIZED¹

ABSTRACT

In this article dedicated to my esteemed colleague Fanie Snyman, I want to contribute to the fascinating field of the study of biblical literature and the hermeneutics of trauma. Instead of focussing on the more common reference to prophets such as Jeremiah who helped people cope with the traumatic experience of the Babylonian exile, I will pay attention to the very different message of Nahum to the Judeans who suffered under Assyrian tyranny. This prophecy is less popular and often condemned for the way in which it portrays YHWH as a violent god. This even seems to approve of, and therefore also incite sexual abuse of women. I will attempt to demonstrate that the trust in YHWH as both a good god and an avenger of the evil deeds of the Assyrians functions as a prerogative to restore the faith of the traumatized Judeans. The way in which YHWH's revenge is presented has an important function within this framework. Modern interpreters should be reluctant in criticizing it, because it can have a healing function in the specific situation of the traumatized.

1. INTRODUCTION

Surveys of recent studies on Bible and trauma show that it can be very useful to examine biblical texts “through the lens of trauma” (Boase & Frechette 2016; cf. also Becker *et al.* 2014; Garber 2015). It helps the reader notice elements, which, in modern medical terms, can be recognized as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as gaps in the memory of events or very distressed recollections, emotional problems, and avoiding behaviour. One

1 I thank Tshepiso Wilson Mashele (Pretoria) for his help in preparing this study.

can also note the growing respect for the way in which biblical studies can function positively in terms of coping with trauma (Ballaban 2014). The way in which the biblical prophets interpreted the exile is often mentioned in this connection (Carr 2011; 2014:67-80; Garber 2011; 2014). These studies view the collective trauma of the deported Judeans as represented in the personal traumatic experiences of Ezekiel. In the book of Isaiah, the city of Jerusalem takes central place, but there is no description of the destruction of Jerusalem. This gap between Chapters 39 and 40 relates to the gaps in the memory of traumatized persons.

One obtains a different picture when reading the book of Nahum according to the hermeneutics of trauma. This concerns the problems modern readers may have with his message. It appears that this message is restricted to condemning Nineveh as the capital of the Assyrians, with the limitless violence not only in the name of YHWH, but also by YHWH himself. Nahum 3:5-6, in particular, is problematic. It can be translated as follows (Spronk 1997:123-124):

(5) "Behold, I am against you,"

pronouncement of YHWH of hosts.

"And I shall uncover your private parts up until your face

and I shall let nations stare at your nakedness

and kingdoms at your shame.

(6) And I shall throw filth at you

and I shall make you contemptible

and make you a spectacle."

This text illustrates how YHWH will shame Nineveh, portrayed as a woman taken captive. It uses the metaphor of rape as a way of shaming not only the woman, but also the man who was supposed to protect her. This metaphor offers a negative and potentially harmful view of women as the property of men. Therefore, the words of Nahum are criticized. Modern interpreters maintain that readers should not go along with the perspective of the Judean men who wish to turn round their inability to protect their wives by violating the wives of the Assyrian oppressors. Instead, readers should sympathize and identify with Nineveh as the sexually abused woman (Baumann 2012:439). Gordon and Washington (1995:325) suggest the following:

to renounce, for a moment, the use of the shamed woman as a metaphorical figure of something else – a feminine city assaulted by an army of men,

or to conclude the attempt to apply this prophecy with a question (the book of Nahum itself ends with a question):

Could the very distress Nahum's war images raise evoke a counter-vailing message? That Yahweh can provide retributive justice is sure but could Nahum's words also encourage those who hear these words to raise a cry to Yahweh against the abominations of warfare? (Thurman 2014:75).

The answer to this question could be a "counter-reading", sympathizing with the victims of sexual violence and constructing a more compassionate image of God (Mare & Serfontein 2009). However, according to recent trauma studies, such texts can also have a more positive function; they can be used to help victims of sexual violence cope with their experiences. In this way, even "potentially harmful texts [may have] healing capacities" (Frechette 2015:20). Such a view is based on the idea that biblical texts about violence, even when this violence is attributed to God himself, can be used

as symbolic representations corresponding to actual violence experienced by survivors of trauma. ... In many cases, biblical texts attributing suffering to dehumanizing violations enacted by God as punishment can be understood as representations of trauma that serve as mechanisms of survival, recovery, or resilience (Boase & Frechette 2016:16).

This concerns not only Psalms with divine violence against the enemy (Frechette 2014), but also, more specifically, texts portraying the enemy as a raped woman such as Babylon in Isaiah 47:1-3. According to Frechette (2016:80; 2017), the violent imagery is necessary to disempower the Judeans of their internalized image of Babylonian superiority. This would have been necessary, in order to restore the confidence in YHWH's power and change their feeling of being insignificant and deserted by YHWH. It may be more difficult, however, to give a similar positive interpretation of the book of Nahum. Unlike the prophets of the Babylonian exile, Nahum only speaks of vengeance against the enemy, without any self-criticism. It appears that the only positive thought is that the vengeance fantasies in the book of Nahum help the reader "recognize and address the pain that they signify" (Garber 2008:293).

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In scholarly literature on the book of Nahum, it is usually maintained that the metaphor of rape should be interpreted, first, within its ancient

Near Eastern context (Magdalene 1995; Thistlethwaite 1993; 2015:60; Chapman 2004:103-111; Berlejung 2006). Women were regarded as the possession of men. The enemy was humiliated and dishonoured by showing that he was unable to protect his possessions. One could show one's superiority by playing around with the other's possessions. This was fairly common in ancient and modern warfare, but does not typify the way in which the Assyrians treated conquered peoples.² In fact, according to some scholars, the cruelty of the Assyrians may have been exaggerated (Bahrani 2001:124-130). Comparing the soldiers of the enemy with women (Nah. 3:13; see also Isa. 19:16; Jer. 50:37; 51:30) is another common element in ancient Near Eastern war vocabulary and is meant to provoke the opponent by calling him weak (Spronk 1997:134; Bahrani 2001:130; Chapman 2004:103-110; Lemos 2011).

In the book of Nahum, references to Nineveh as a woman can be related to the parallels in the Assyrian royal annals. It shows that the way in which YHWH acts is the counterpart of the brutal behaviour of the Assyrian kings. By thus pointing to the superiority of YHWH over the Assyrians, the words of Nahum function as an attempt to help those suffering from the Assyrian atrocities cope with their feelings of despair. Nahum comforts his readers by describing YHWH as a god who is superior to the powerful Assyrians. Typical of the way in which Nineveh's demise is described, YHWH himself is offended by the Assyrians and acts as avenger (Bedford 2016:68-75). By describing the Assyrian atrocities as something that will return upon themselves, the prophet shows that YHWH takes the suffering of his people seriously. The book of Nahum can be read as a counterpart of the Assyrian texts and reliefs "intended to terrify the enemies" (Liverani 2017:540). This is likely to be based on their own experiences with the Assyrian armies. Although the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE by Sennacherib did not end in the destruction of the city, the fact that the Judean king Hezekiah was shut up "like a bird in a cage", as reported in the Assyrian annals, was surely "traumatic" for Judah (Timmer 2012:79). The same holds true for the destruction of Lachish and the deportation of its women and children, as portrayed in the famous Assyrian reliefs in the palace of Sennacherib, which were designed to impress the beholder (Prinsloo 2000:350), like representatives of foreign peoples visiting the king. In his attempt to overcome the accompanying feelings of despair, the prophet used means both in content and in form related to the Assyrian texts, as will be demonstrated below.

2 On the fate of women in Mesopotamian warfare, see Stol (2016:331-338).

3. THE LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The book of Nahum starts with the threefold designation of YHWH as an avenger. As I have attempted to demonstrate in previous publications (Spronk 1997:22-26, 2009), this is presented as part of a beautifully constructed acrostic with the name YHWH in the letters at the end of the first four lines. The letters at the beginning of verses 1-3 form the word אני, the personal pronoun “I”. They are followed by the name of YHWH, forming the phrase “I am YHWH”, which is typical of Old Testament prophetic texts. The first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet follow the repeated name of YHWH in verse 3. In the first letters of the verse lines in verses 4-7, this is followed by the next letters of the alphabet, running until ט as the first letter of טוב, “good”, as a new qualification of YHWH in verse 7. A pronouncement about Nineveh:

- the writing of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite (י)
- (ס) A jealous and avenging God is YHWH
avenging is YHWH and a lord of wrath (ה)
- (ג) Avenging is YHWH against his adversaries
and reserving (his wrath) is He for his enemies. (ו)
- (י) YHWH, (ס) He is slow in anger, great in power
and He certainly does not leave unpunished. (ה)
- YHWH, (צ) in whirlwind and storm is his way,
and clouds are the dust of his feet.
- (ג) He is rebuking the sea and it dries up
and all the rivers He makes dry.
- (ד!) They wither away, Bashan and Carmel
and the bloom of Lebanon languishes.
- (ה) Mountains quake because of Him
and the hills are moving.
- (י) And the earth rises before Him
and the world and all that dwell therein:
- (י!) His wrath, who can stand before it?
And who can withstand the glow of his anger?
- (ח) His wrath is poured out like fire
and the rocks are scattered because of Him.
- (ט) Good is YHWH,
indeed, a shelter in the day of distress
and knowing those who seek refuge in Him.

This line acrostic is unique in the Hebrew Bible (and, therefore, contested), but it is a well-known art form in Mesopotamian texts (Soll 1988). One of the most famous texts was written for the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, who reigned from 668 to 626 BCE, the same time the book of Nahum was probably written. It also starts with the independent personal pronoun (Assyrian *anaku*), followed by the personal name. It reads: “I am Assurbanipal, who has called out to you: Give me life, Marduk, and I will sing you praises” (Livingstone 1989:6-10). In addition, a number of “telestics” from the same period are known: prayers, of which the terminal letters of each line, read downwards, form a phrase (Soll 1988:309-310); thus, the same literary form as can be found in Nehemiah 1:1-3. The use of this literary form fits excellently in a prophecy stating that the Assyrian king will receive what he has done to others. In this way, the prophet creates a strong opposition between YHWH and the king of Assyria. This also shows that, at least on a literary level, Judah is not inferior to the Assyrians. In the ensuing text, the prophetic visions will show that, on the military level, the Assyrians will meet more than their match.

From a theological point of view, it is important to note that this artistic way emphasizes the combination of YHWH as avenger and YHWH as the good god. It shows that YHWH, who is described in so many different ways, is not only a problem for a modern reader. Already, the ancient writer made it the central theme of the text. In the remainder of the book, YHWH plays the central role described in the formal structure. YHWH is mentioned thrice explicitly addressing Nineveh, namely in 1:12 and in the repeated line “Behold, I am against you, pronouncement of YHWH of hosts” (2:14 and 3:5). These three parts of the text are connected by a chiasmic structure, emphasizing YHWH as the opponent of Nineveh. This begins after the first speech by YHWH and then underlines the central place of the repeated pronouncements in 2:14 and 3:5 by mirroring the visions of 2:1-11 and 3:8-19. Note the following corresponding lines:

Behold, on the mountains the feet of the messenger announcing
(משביע) peace (2:1)

The gates of the rivers are opened (2:7)

Her maidens are moaning (2:8)

Nineveh, it was a pool of water (2:9)

Behold, I am against you,
pronouncement of YHWH (2:14)

Behold, I am against you,
pronouncement of YHWH (3:5)

No-Amon ... water surrounding her ...
water her wall (3:8)

Your people are women in your midst (3:13a)

The gates of your land shall be wide open (3:13b)

All who hear (שמעו) the news over you (שמעך) shall clap their hands
over you (3:19).

In the middle of this chiasmic structure, we find a triptych in verses 2:12-3:7. The central part contains the description of Nineveh as “city of bloodshed” being overrun by horses and chariots and filled with the blood of its own inhabitants (3:1-3). These verses are surrounded by two corresponding panels, containing the repeated reference to YHWH going against Nineveh. In the first panel, the Assyrians are compared to lions, which are themselves devoured by the sword (2:12-14); in the second panel, Nineveh is compared to a harlot, who is made into a despised spectacle, no longer able to seduce her victims (3:4-7). The fact that, within the present structure, 3:4-7 functions as a unity indicates that the comparison with a woman in verses 5-6 has to be related to Nineveh being accused of harlotry. Another consequence of the structural analysis is that the condemned harlotry is balanced by the more honourable comparison of the Assyrians with lions. They represent the two dangerous sides of the Assyrian empire: its strength threatening other countries and the temptation to these other countries to submit to its strength in the vain hope of becoming friends or even lovers. The prophecy of Nahum presents YHWH as the opposite of the Assyrians represented by their capital Nineveh on these two points. In the opening hymn, YHWH is called “good to those who seek refuge in him” (1:7), which is contrasted with Nineveh pictured as a harlot who cannot be trusted. In the direct confrontation with Nineveh, YHWH is presented as the stronger one, killing the lions.

4. COPING WITH TRAUMA AND THE ROLE OF VENGEANCE

Studies on trauma usually emphasise forgiving as the ultimate goal. The same holds true for biblical studies in this field. For this reason, the book of Nahum is often criticized.³ In most of the theologies of the Old Testament, the book of Nahum is simply ignored. This could be considered a luxury of scholars who do not have to wrestle with trauma themselves. In this instance, an eye opener could be Mihelič's (1948:199-200) remark made shortly after the Second World War:

3 See the survey in Spronk (1997:14-15).

It is my opinion that if the critics of Nahum had lived in the last decade and witnessed the brutality that had been visited upon the helpless people in the European and Asiatic concentration camps, that they would rather have joined their voices with Nahum in his joy over the fall of the “bloody city,” than have condemned his righteous indignation in the comfort and the security of their ivory towers.

One could also note that the message of Nahum is fully in line with what is expressed in Deuteronomy 32:35, where YHWH states: “Vengeance is mine, and recompense”, words taken up by Paul in Romans 12:19 (see also Hebr. 10:30).

On the semantic level, one could point to the fact that, in Hebrew, the verb נָחַם, which in the *piel* is translated with “to comfort” (as in Neh. 3:7), in the *hitpael* has the meaning “(to comfort oneself by) taking vengeance” (Ezek. 5:13; see Gen. 27:42). It is also interesting to note that, in the book of Jonah, which can be regarded as the counterpart of the book of Nahum YHWH’s compassion with Nineveh is expressed with the same verb in the *niphal*: he “repented” of the evil he had planned for the city (Jonah 3:10). In the Hebrew Bible, this coincides with the ongoing reflection on the two sides of YHWH, as expressed in the confession of YHWH as

merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation (Ex. 34:6-7).

Modern interpreters should be reluctant to emphasize one side or the other, because both are fully represented in the Hebrew Bible. The message of forgiveness for Nineveh in the book of Jonah is balanced by Nahum proclaiming YHWH avenging the evil by Nineveh. Those who may find it easier to accept a text about sexual violence against the enemy in Isaiah 47 than a similar text in Nahum 3, due to the fact that Isaiah 47 is part of the more positive message of Deutero-Isaiah, should also consider another parallel between these two prophecies. The famous (partly because it is quoted in Handel’s *Messiah*) announcement of peace in Isaiah 52:7,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things,

is unmistakably a quote from Nahum 2:1, where the same words announce the vengeful destruction of Nineveh. In this instance, an essential element

of the good news appears to be that the guilty will not remain unpunished and that the evil powers are not invincible.

Reading the book of Nahum through the lens of trauma may help obtain a better view on different aspects of revenge as a coping strategy. This can be derived from the way in which the phenomenon of revenge is discussed in modern scholarly psychology.

Following the coping approach, we characterize revenge as an attempt to manage the negative personal sequelae of traumatic experiences. In the context of coping and restoration of self-concept and self-worth, it seems that revenge emotions and cognitions can be regarded as useful reactions to trauma that positively impact the mental processes triggered by injury and suffering. Indeed, feelings or fantasies of revenge have benefits for the individual, by providing satisfaction, reassurance, and experience of power and control (Gäbler & Maercker 2011:45-46).

It cannot be denied that feelings of revenge can have negative effects, especially when these feelings are not controlled. They may last too long and receive too much attention, totally consuming one, alienating one from the social environment, and having a negative impact on one's physical health. Putting revenge into practice usually does not bring relief (Herman 2015:251), contrary to what is suggested in many movies, when everything is back to normal after the villains have received their proper reward. In fact, matters are more complicated. This also concerns the common assumption of revenge and forgiveness as polar opposites:

not forgiving does not necessarily result in the desire for revenge, and not seeking revenge does not necessarily imply forgiveness (Gäbler & Maercker 2011:58).

Forgiving can sometimes be regarded as improper, for instance, when it is not based on true conviction or because it is forced upon by one's environment. Similarly, accepting feelings of revenge can sometimes be a positive step towards accepting both things that happened in the past and the perpetrator. Sometimes, it may be better not to focus too much on forgiveness:

Forgiving a transgression or humiliation does not seem to be necessary for recovering from trauma. In fact, helping victims to acknowledge their feelings or fantasies of revenge and to accept the complexity and ambivalence of emotions, to release and to overcome revenge preoccupations, and to regain identity coherence should be regarded as the main therapeutic goals in the context of trauma (Gäbler & Maercker 2011:62).

5. CONCLUSION

Modern theories of trauma and their therapeutic implications cannot simply be related to texts in the very different context of Judah in the 7th century BCE. One should consider the difference with views on the personal and collective identity. Nevertheless, looking through this modern lens of trauma, one may discern some aspects in the vengeful visions of Nahum that can help get a better understanding of the text both in its historical context and in the way in which it can be applied by the modern reader to his/her own situation. This concerns the fact that feelings of vengeance should be taken seriously. They should not be put aside as inferior to the command to forgive. In the case of Judah, that suffered under the cruel oppression by the Assyrians, it is necessary to regain confidence in the knowledge that evil will be punished. Only in this way can the confidence in YHWH as the “good” god by whom one finds “shelter in days of distress” be restored. This is also necessary in order to regain one’s self-esteem. In the book of Nahum, this is not only found in the trust that Judah’s god is more powerful than the Assyrian oppressor; it also finds expression in the literary quality. Nahum is not simply crying out in despair; he shows that, on the literary level, a Judean scribe is not surpassed by his Assyrian colleagues. It is crucial – also on the therapeutic level – that Judah is able to share its feelings of revenge. They are taken up by YHWH. One could call this a way of sublimating these emotions. Vengeance is symbolically represented in the vividly described visions of Nineveh being destroyed. It cannot be ascertained whether the prophet was foretelling Nineveh’s destruction in 612 BCE or whether it is a *vaticinium post eventum*, as many scholars maintain. What is more important for the application of his vision is its basic message: evil, no matter how powerful, will not remain unpunished. As such, this vision, including the controversial comparison of the enemy with a woman, is taken up in Revelation 17. The vengeance is controlled as part of the trust in YHWH who is good. At the same time, this strong involvement of YHWH opens the possibility of criticizing the wish to revenge. One can be comforted by the conviction that the wish to revenge the experienced evil or humiliation is shared by the almighty YHWH. Prior to this conviction is YHWH’s question to Jonah: הֲהִיטֵב תִּרְהָ לִּי, “Is it right for you to be angry” (Jon. 4:4). Note the use of the verb *הִיטֵב*, “to be good”. Before one starts avenging in the name of YHWH, who is an avenger (Nah. 1:1-2), one must realize that what is good in the eyes of men is not always good in the eyes of YHWH, who is good (Nah. 1:7).

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