

NAHUM'S DOUBLE REFERENT?: CONSIDERING THE
ADDRESSEES OF NAHUM 1

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The book of Nahum opens with a superscription explaining to the reader that it is a “burden [oracle] of Nineveh.” One’s first encounter with the text, then, is conditioned by the knowledge that Nahum is directing his words of destruction against the Assyrians. This has been the traditional understanding of Nahum’s addressee. Notably, however, the body of Nahum’s prophecy leaves out any explicit reference to Nineveh until 2:8. Without the superscription, there is no way to tell precisely whom Nahum is addressing throughout the first chapter. In fact, until 2:1 it is actually possible to conclude that the nation of Judah itself is being addressed. Even after chapter 2, the addressee could still conceivably be a corrupt Judaeon monarchy.

Several modern scholars have noted this ambiguity as well, and some have concluded that Nahum is using language that is intentionally vague in chapter one in order to indict two nations at once: wicked Judah along with the Assyrians. If the superscription was added by a later redactor or compiler of Scripture, there is no barrier to supposing that Nahum’s prophecy in chapter one could carry this double referent. It is clear that chapter one addresses both Judah and Assyria, but most commentators understand the words to Judah as words of salvation, whereas the words to Assyria are words of condemnation. The question, then, is whether the ambiguity of referent in chapter one is intended to function as an implicit *indictment* of both Judah and Assyria.

This paper argues that reading a double referent into Nahum’s indictments is not an acceptable interpretation. Instead, along traditional lines, readers should understand Nahum as addressing condemnation to the Assyrians and salvation for Judah throughout the length of the book. The first section of the paper details the “Double Referent Hypothesis,” which sees two addressees in Nahum’s indictments. Special attention is paid to the origin of the superscription

and the structure of Nahum 1. The second section responds to this position point for point, showing that (1) the reconstruction of the text without a superscription is too tentative an idea on which to base an interpretation and (2) the structure of Nahum 1 fails to support the proposed double referent. The paper concludes with a word about the value of canonical interpretation for Nahum 1.

The Hypothesis of Nahum's Double Referent

Examining The Superscription

In order to know whom Nahum is addressing, we need to begin with an analysis of the superscription in 1:1, which reads: “משא נִינְוָה סֵפֶר חֲזוֹן נַחֻם הַאֶלְקֹשִׁי, The burden of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.” This superscription bears both similarities and differences to other prophetic superscriptions. משא describes an oracle several times in Isa. 13-23, Mal. 1:1, and Jer. 23:33, among other texts. Julia O’Brien suggests that this word is stereotyped in the prophetic literature, used to invoke “a literary world in which punishment for the wicked is necessary for the salvation of the righteous, and it clues its reader to expect harsh words for ‘them’ and promises of salvation for ‘us.’”¹ The word חֲזוֹן, or a verb from the same root, is also commonly used in the prophetic literature (Isa. 29:7, Oba. 1:1, Hab. 1:1). It refers to truth revealed to the prophet (or claimed to have been revealed, c.f. Jer. 23:16) by God.

These parallels between the superscription of Nahum and other prophetic superscriptions reveal that explanatory notes or titles were common and expected among the sacred writings of the Old Testament. Gene Tucker writes that, out of “the fourteen prophetic books, eleven are prefixed with superscriptions.”² Additionally, “the superscriptions are not in

¹ Julia M. O’Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 32.

² Gene M. Tucker, “Prophetic Superscriptions and the Growth of a Canon,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 59.

any way grammatically attached to what follows; the body of the book simply begins after the superscriptions.”³ The fact that (1) adding superscriptions was a common way of titling the book and (2) they are not part of the body of the text, has led some modern scholars to the belief that they should be conceived as “detached from the books.”⁴ So much so that it “is all but self-evident that the superscriptions were not created by the prophets themselves.”⁵

Beasley agrees with Tucker, stating that “it is clear that these superscriptions weren’t written by the prophets themselves, but by those who collected the sacred writings.... For readers, it is important to note that these words often provide information that the prophet’s original audience would not have heard.”⁶ The reason this is important, as Beasley will go on to argue, is that “the ambiguity in Nahum’s words [in chapter 1] is intentional,” for “his readers would assume that he is speaking about them.”⁷ If the superscription is not present, it becomes much easier to see how Nahum’s original Judaeen audience would have at first thought that they themselves were being addressed. Thus, we see that this understanding of the superscriptions as extrinsic to the biblical text allows for their removal. This in turn makes room for the reinterpretation of Nahum chapter 1 that sees a double referent in Nahum’s words.

Examining Nahum 1:9-14

In addition to the superscription arising at a later date than the original message given in Nahum 1, advocates of the Double Referent Hypothesis point to the rest of the chapter as evidence for their viewpoint. In these verses, the ambiguity of referent is used to argue that Nahum is addressing both Judah and Assyria. Sweeney notes that “scholars find a variety of

³ Tucker, “Prophetic Superscriptions and the Growth of a Canon,” 59.

⁴ Tucker, “Prophetic Superscriptions and the Growth of a Canon,” 59.

⁵ Tucker, “Prophetic Superscriptions and the Growth of a Canon,” 65.

⁶ Yaakov Beasley, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: Lights in the Valley* (New Milford: Maggid Books, 2020), 39.

⁷ Beasley, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: Lights in the Valley*, 62.

generic entities in these verses, including condemnations of Assyria and the Assyrian king, condemnations of Judah, and blessings for Judah mixed together with no discernable order or intent.”⁸ Lanner concurs, stating that “I... would lean towards Sweeney’s view that both Assyria and Judah were addressed...”⁹

The first eight verses of chapter 1 consist of a theophanic acrostic poem, emphasizing God’s awesome power, His protection of those who trust in Him, and the destruction He will bring to His adversaries. Beginning in verse 9, however, the reader is presented with a problem. An enemy of the Lord is addressed, but the identity of this enemy is not yet stated. In fact, apart from the superscription, no identity is given until 2:8. 1:9 opens with a 2mp *yiqtol*: “מה-מה תחשבון אֶל־יהוה, What will you plot against the LORD?” It seems likely that a nation is being addressed here, or perhaps it is a general rhetorical statement directed against anyone who would foolishly challenge God.

The 2mp is followed by a verse presumably about the same people, this time with a 3mp pronominal suffix. Verse 11, however, uses a 2fs suffix to address a nation, and it is said that “ממך יצא חשב על־יהוה רעה יעץ בליעל, From you he came out, one plotting evil against the LORD, a counselor of worthlessness.” The change from masculine to feminine and singular to plural is odd, but not unheard of.¹⁰ So far, then, it is possible to conclude that the addressee is one nation, from whom a wicked plotter came forth. Verse 12 complicates things, however. It reads: “בה אמר יהוה אִם־שלמים וכן רבים וכן נגזו ועבר וענתך לא אענך עוד, Thus spoke the LORD, if they are full and this many, also in this way they will be sheared and he will pass away, and though I afflicted you, I will not afflict you again.” It seems that the Lord is going to punish

⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, “Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum,” in *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104, no. 3 (1992): 364, 2021, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000875100>.

⁹ Laurel Lanner, *Who Will Lament Her?: The Feminine and the Fantastic in the Book of Nahum* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 13, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=243764>.

¹⁰ Stein remarks on Deuteronomy 28:3 that “The verse interweaves singular with plural, and masculine with feminine.” David E.S. Stein, “The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew,” in *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008): 9, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27913874>.

the mighty nation spoken of in the preceding verses (here it is referenced with mp participles and a 3ms *weqatal*). Yet, the Lord also promises to save someone whom He has afflicted in the past (referenced with 2fs pronominal suffix).

This confusion about the recipients of salvation and judgment continues into the following verses. God promises to “break his yoke [מטהו] from upon you [מעליך]” in verse 13 and he announces in verse 14 that “It will not be sown from your name [משמך] again,” and that “From the house of your gods [אלהיך] I will cut down idol and molten image. I will make your grave [קברך], for you are worthless [קלות].” But who is God promising to punish, and who is He promising to save? It is clear from 2:1 onward that God will save Judah and punish Assyria. Yet, if this is the case in chapter one, why the ambiguity in verses 9-14? The historical background for these verses is unclear, increasing the difficulty of identifying the referent. O’Brien remarks, “the generic way in which the characters and events are described leaves readers with few clues from which to reconstruct the background of Nahum.”¹¹

It is not obvious, then, why Nahum switches back and forth between Judah and Assyria in these verses without any warning. Advocates of a double referent may point out that if one is to assert that no ambiguity is intended, it is hard to understand why Nahum addresses both the recipients of judgment and of salvation in the second person (“you”) with no explicit shift in the text. Beasley writes, “Our understanding is that the ambiguity in Nahum’s words is intentional.”¹² Surely Nahum’s hearers hoped that they were those whom God would save, but his message at this point would not give them much hope. Since Beasley dates the prophecy of Nahum to the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings of Judah, it makes good sense that Judah would also be included in Nahum’s indictment.¹³

¹¹ O’Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 42.

¹² Beasley, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 62.

¹³ Beasley, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 62.

Questioning the Hypothesis

Re-Examining the Superscription

The previous section sought to delineate what we have termed the “Double Referent Hypothesis.” Those who subscribe to this view see Nahum 1 using intentionally ambiguous language to refer to God’s judgment on both Judah and Assyria. This viewpoint is established on the basis of the late addition of the superscription and the ambiguous addressees in 9-14. If the superscription were original the idea of intentional ambiguity would not have convincing support, but if it were a late addition room is made for giving a certain meaning to Nahum’s words that the superscription otherwise rules out. This section reexamines the superscription and finds that it should not be so quickly pushed aside. As S.D. Snyman declares, the superscription “informs the reader that the proclamation of the message is all about Nineveh.”¹⁴

The previous discussion of the superscription reveals that in order to establish the hypothesis of a double referent the superscription must be removed from consideration. Though no actual textual emendation is suggested, this idea does bear resemblance to a conjectural emendation, that is, a judgment about a possible reading “that is not documented in the known texts.”¹⁵ Conjectural emendations are not problematic in themselves, but they must be treated as subjective, for that is just what they are. This does not mean that they are false, but that they must always be held tentatively, since they are not based on the text itself but on a hypothesis about the text. It is possible to conclude that Nahum’s superscription was not original to the written form of the prophecy. It is possible, but it is not certain. The fact is that no textual evidence exists to lend support to the idea of a later addition of the superscription. Generally, when making interpretive judgments from a reconstructed text, textual evidence should be present to support this reconstruction.

¹⁴ S.D. Snyman, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 27 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), chap. 1, “The superscription to the book (1:1),” para. 1, Kindle.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 353.

As mentioned previously, two of the primary reasons given for understanding the superscription to be an addition of a later compiler of the Scriptures are (1) adding superscriptions was a common way of titling the book and (2) they are not part of the body of the text. To the first point, it is worth noting that this proves nothing except that there was a common understanding of how prophetic books should be titled. The fact that Nahum is called a “משא” or “חזון” along with other prophetic books is not evidence of a shared tradition of compilation. This is a possibility, but it is also possible that these were simply common words used in the titles of prophecies.¹⁶ Consider Jeremiah 23:33, “And when the nation, or a prophet, or a priest asks you, saying, ‘What is the burden [משא] of the LORD,’ then you will say to them, ‘What is the burden [משא]? That I will forsake you, declares the LORD.’” The people of Judah are pictured here asking Jeremiah for the Lord’s message, which they call a משא. Just a few verses earlier (23:16), חזון is used to describe a vision from the Lord which the false prophets claim to have received.

These verses show that the words used in Nahum’s superscription are not at all uncommon in referring to prophecy, but rather were standard among the people. Far from showing that the superscriptions must have been added by later compilers, these parallels show that they are what one should expect at the head of a prophet’s book even if the prophet himself were to entitle it. The case of this academic papers in the 21st century presents an interesting analogy. In many institutions, it is standard to format one’s title for a research paper in the same way. First, a creative name is given to the paper in order to catch the reader’s attention. This is followed by a colon and a further technical description of the content of the paper. In the case of this paper, its title is “Nahum’s Double Referent?: Considering the Addressees of Nahum 1.” This format is common, yet one would never suggest that the similar format demands its later

¹⁶ Robert D. Culver “חזון” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:274; Walter C. Kaiser “משא” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:601.

addition by compilers of these papers. On the contrary, the similar format reveals a community with similar customs.

One word used in Nahum's superscription that is unique to Nahum is "ספר, book." Not only does the uniqueness of the word indicate that superscriptions were not all added by the same tradition of compilers, its meaning also offers a clue to its originality. Snyman notes that some scholars "believe that the book is a compilation of different parts that were put together,"¹⁷ but the opposite may be true. The idea that Nahum is a "book" indicates that it is a crafted work, not simply a later compilation of Nahum's prophecies. The literary artistry of the text points us in this direction as well. The idea that Nahum was artistically crafted, whether by Nahum himself, a disciple, or later recipients of the oral tradition of his prophecies is a reminder that the divine inspiration of the Bible is not only inspiration of the characters in it who speak God's words, but also inspiration of those who write these words down for posterity. Even if the superscription was a late addition in some sense, then, it cannot be ruled out as an integral part of the canonical text, and this we hold as our interpretive authority.¹⁸

It is not clear that any scholar has written specifically on the superscription from the perspective put forward in this paper, but that should not cause doubt about what is being asserted. The vast majority of commentaries on Nahum take it for granted that Assyria is the nation being indicted from the very beginning because of the presence of the superscription. For example, in the Holman Old Testament Commentary on Nahum, Stephen Miller writes that, although "Nahum preached his message to his fellow countrymen in Judah, the barbs of his severe message were directed towards the Assyrians."¹⁹ Klaas Spronk similarly notes that the

¹⁷ Snyman, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, chap. 1, sec. 2b, para. 1.

¹⁸ This same point is made about the superscriptions of the Psalms in James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021), 1:47-48.

¹⁹ Stephen R. Miller, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Holman Old Testament Commentary, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 6.

“first part of the book of Nahum is a theological introduction to the words against the Assyrians...”²⁰ Luther’s comment on the superscription is also apt,

He begins his prophecy with a wonderful word of consolation when he says, “The burden of Nineveh.” It is as if he were saying: “The burden which up to now has been crushing you will be removed from you. You will be free. It is far from the truth that you will perish—that in your oppression you will fall. In fact, the people of Nineveh, whom you have feared and still fear, are the ones who are going to be crushed.”²¹

Re-Examining Nahum 1:9-14

The body of the chapter must also be reexamined. It is argued that the ambiguity of referent in Nahum 1:9-14 is evidence of its double indictment of Judah and Assyria. Yet, there are several reasons why this is not convincing evidence. Note, first, the ease with which Hebrew switches referent. As was mentioned earlier, it is not terribly uncommon in the biblical texts to find switches from masculine to feminine or from singular to plural, even in unambiguous references to the same nation.²² It must be admitted that in Nahum this does make the flow of the passage somewhat confusing, but it would still have been understandable to its hearers as proclaiming the salvation of Judah and the destruction of Nineveh.

Consider also the constant use of the feminine pronominal suffix for the recipient of salvation in the passage and the masculine for the recipient of judgment. To put the matter starkly, the feminine is used five times in these six verses, and four out of those five uses are directed explicitly towards the nation that God will save. The masculine is used thirteen times, and every time it refers to the nation God will judge. The feminine clearly represents Judah, for in 2:1 it is used explicitly for her. Throughout the rest of the book, when Nineveh is clearly being addressed, Nahum switches between masculine and feminine regularly (c.f. 3:3-4). Here,

²⁰ Klaas Spronk, *Nahum*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. Cornelis Houtman et al. (Kampen: Kom Pharos Publishing House, 1997), 20.

²¹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Nahum,” trans. Richard J. Dinda in *Lectures on the Minor Prophets*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 281.

²² See footnote 10 for an example.

however, it seems that the prophet recognizes the possibility of ambiguity and makes an effort to distinguish between Judah and Assyria.

Interestingly, Sweeney agrees that the feminine pronominal suffixes refer to Judah, whereas the masculine refer to Assyria, yet he still believes that both Assyria and Judah are rebuked in this passage.²³ This is in part because of the feminine suffix in verse 11 that is used to indict a nation. If the masculine and feminine suffixes in 9-14 clearly distinguish between two nations, then why should the presence of the feminine suffix in verse 11 not be used to support a double indictment of Assyria and Judah given that the other feminine suffixes in this passage all refer to Judah?

The answer is that other than this one single usage of the feminine in verse 11, the usages of masculine and feminine occur in clearly distinguished groupings. The usages of the masculine occur together in 9-12a and again in 14, whereas the usages of the feminine occur together in 12b-13. If ambiguity of referent in verse 11 had been intended, there would be no reason to distinguish clearly between the referents in every other verse by grouping them together. Contrary to what has been claimed, God addresses the Assyrians and the Judaeans distinctly and the referents are not so muddled as some have made them out to be. It is likely that the feminine suffix in verse 11 is simply a stylistic variant referring to Assyria, such as occurs throughout the rest of the book. Spronk concurs, noting that in verse 11 “we find Nineveh addressed in the second person fem.”²⁴ All things being equal, it appears that the Double Referent Hypothesis lacks support from the ambiguity of referent in verses 9-14.

Conclusion: Reading Nahum 1 Canonically

The most certain hermeneutic for probing this question is a canonical one, wherein “canon shapes the discussion, not a system attempting to explain the canon’s contents.”²⁵ This

²³ Sweeney, “Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum,” 371-372.

²⁴ Spronk, *Nahum*, 52.

²⁵ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 46.

approach sees the Bible as the inspired word of God and expresses trust that the received text has been preserved well by His guiding hand. It asserts that trustworthy theology will be done in the context of the received canon and it will not start from a position of criticism of the biblical text. To be sure, textual transmission results in error and redaction, even with the Bible, and in these cases we must do our best to understand what the original text said, but there must be solid evidence against a reading if it is to be concluded that we can remove it from the text. This canonical reading is faithful to the intricacies of exegesis, but it is also faithful to the canonical hermeneutic that best expresses trust in the word of God.

The Double Referent Hypothesis rests on the assumptions that the superscription may be removed without altering the divinely inspired text and that the referents in 1:9-14 are ambiguous. To the first assumption we reply that there is no evidence that the superscription is not original to the text. Moreover, even if the book of Nahum is a compilation of sources, interpreters through all ages have believed that God has guided His word so that that the received text functions as our authority. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the superscription must remain. To the second assumption we reply that the use of masculine and feminine in clear groupings—both where they appear in the text and who they refer to—points to a distinction between two nations. Given the explicit declarations of salvation for Judah and judgment for Assyria throughout the rest of the book, there is no reason to think that Judah is indicted in these verses.

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