



The trauma of Nineveh's demise and downfall: Nahum 2:2–11

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Trauma is left, right and centre in the whole book of Nahum. The book reflects the oppression and hardship that Judah had experienced at the hands of the imperial power Assyria. For many a reader, the violent and derogative content of this book is in itself a traumatic experience. In this article, the focus is on Nahum 2:2–11 (Masoretic Text [MT]), which depicts the downfall of Nineveh and its traumatic effects on its citizens. Besides the analysis of the text, a reading from trauma theory is made to enhance insights into the text. It is argued that the text served the purpose of offering hope to the people of Judah who relied on Yahweh for relief from their own traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Nahum; imperial power; imagination; trauma; hope.

Introduction

In the annals of the Assyrian kings, they boast about their victories and achievements as conquerors of nations and their heroics on the battlefields. For an extensive period of time, both Israel and Judah suffered threats and defeats at the hands of the Assyrian forces. During the time of the prophet Isaiah, Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrian army, causing the Judeans to live in fear. Isaiah had to deal with the traumatised nation. Some of the Judean kings became vassals of the Assyrian kings in attempts to safeguard their people from death and destruction. This resulted in a lack of freedom and high taxation, leaving behind an impoverished and oppressed society. Judah became the embattled people, dominated by a foreign empire. This left the people of Judah dismayed because of physical and emotional trauma.

It is in the context of this imperial oppression of Judah that Nahum is presented as a prophet in the book of Nahum (Wessels 2019:313–326). This prophet went the route of undermining the imperial power by appealing to the imagination of the people of Judah; he appealed to them to imagine the demise and downfall of Assyria as an imperial power. This the prophet did by using metaphors and various rhetorical devices. Poetic mastery had become the vehicle for appealing to the imagination of the people of Judah and sending the message of hope and freedom across (Wessels 2014:315–338).¹ This he did by first presenting Yahweh in chapter 1:2–8 as the sovereign power who will act on behalf of his people to defeat the enemy. In 1:9–14, the prophet states that Yahweh will break the yoke of oppression and the chains that bind them. Chapter 2 commences with a vivid description of a battle in progress with Yahweh as the aggressor and his people as the spectators of the defeat of the enemy at the hands of Yahweh. Rudolph (1975:170) refers to 2:1–10 (Masoretic Text [MT] 2–11) as '*eine prophetische >>Schau<<, eine Vision*'. However, more than that, Nahum paints a picture of the gradual downfall of Nineveh, the symbol and seat of Assyria's splendour and might. The climax in verse 10 (MT 2:11) graphically depicts the traumatic impact of the destruction of Nineveh and the loss of power on the people of Nineveh.

In this article, the interest is not only to perform an exegetical analysis of the chosen passage, but also to relate the analytical endeavour to a trauma theory to enrich the understanding of this passage. This article, therefore, consists of two main sections, namely an exegetical exposition, followed by a reading from a trauma perspective. With regard to the trauma reading, the idea is not only to identify and discuss the trauma markers in the text, but to explore the use of elements (descriptors) of trauma as a means of motivating by inciting the emotions of the target audience. The question to be asked is whether it is an effective tool of motivation to use a trauma incident to offer hope to demoralised people.

1. The Nahum text is shockingly violent and repulses most readers. It is also upsetting that Yahweh is the aggressor and the one taking revenge on the enemy. The uneasiness of how Yahweh is portrayed in the text was previously addressed in an article titled 'Nahum, An Uneasy Expression of Yahweh's Power' (Wessels 1998:615–628). The argument promoted is that Nahum should not be regarded as incitement to violence or revenge, but as encouragement to the people of Judah to envision the downfall of their enemy.

Exposition of Nahum 2:10 (MT 2:11) in the context of 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11)²

Chapter 2 in the book of Nahum concerns the downfall of Nineveh. The downfall of the capital city of Assyria and her eventual defeat in a battle is vividly portrayed. The city's demise is depicted by means of well-crafted poetry and the application of stylistic devices (cf. O'Brien 2009:50). The description of the battle scene and the ensuing dire situation of the city and the people seem so real that it is almost like an eyewitness report.

It is clear that a new section follows in 2:1 because the 'you' addressed here is different from the one in 1:15 (2:1) that was a reference to Judah (Floyd 2000:55). In this passage, it is a reference to Nineveh. Although Nineveh is only explicitly mentioned in 2:8 (2:9), it is clear from the context that the city of concern is indeed Nineveh. Verse 1 (2) is followed by a word of encouragement to Judah in verse 2 (3). In verses 3–10 (4–11), the prophetic word is again focused on Nineveh, graphically describing the offensive against Nineveh, the seat of power of the Assyrian ruler. The last two verses of the chapter, verses 11–13 (12–14), satirically question what has become of the power of the 'lion' of Nineveh and Assyria.

Nahum 2:1–2 (2–3)

A scatterer has come up against you. Guard the ramparts; watch the road; gird your loins; collect all your strength. (New Revised Standard Version [NRS])

For the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob, as well as the majesty of Israel, though ravagers have ravaged them and ruined their branches. (NRS)

According to verse 1 (2), Nineveh is warned that she should prepare herself for an onslaught by a 'scatterer' who is advancing against her and her inhabitants. In texts where the idea of the Divine Warrior is in focus, the term 'scatterer' is a reference to Yahweh (Dietrich 2014:61; O'Brien 2009:51). Four commands on how they should react to the oncoming onslaught are uttered in a staccato-like fashion. Four commands are given on how they should get ready themselves for the imminent attack on the city. They should guard the post, watch the road, strengthen their loins and brace themselves with all their might and power. The satire in the call on how to prepare for the battle should not be missed, for however they prepare themselves, they will not be able to withstand the wrath of Yahweh (Coggins 1985:35–36). Nahum 3–10 (MT 4–11) graphically portrays how the downfall of Nineveh will unfold. Judah's plight is also Yahweh's plight; therefore, Yahweh will counter Assyria's power resulting in the oppression of his people by causing their downfall. They have oppressed and exploited his people, which he will no longer tolerate because of his sense of justice (Wendland 1998:170).

²There is a difference in numbering between the Masoretic Text (MT) and English translations. Verse references will follow the English translations with the Masoretic text reference in brackets.

In verse 2 (3) the focus shifts for a brief moment to Judah and Israel, conveying a message that Yahweh will restore the majesty of Israel as a nation and Israel as a whole. This view is supported by Dietrich (2014:63), who argues, however, that the reference should not be understood to imply the restoration of the united kingdom of Israel. Spronk (1997:86) regards the announcement in this verse to denote the restoration from the humiliation that the former state of Israel suffered from Assyria. In stark contrast to what Nineveh, and therefore Assyria, can expect, Yahweh will restore his people. Although Assyria excelled in suppressing and conquering nations such as Israel and Judah, they will now suffer the same fate through Yahweh's intervention.

Nahum 2:3–10 (4–11)

As stated before, verses 3–10 (4–11), this passage contains an eyewitness-like report of a raging battle against Nineveh and her eventual downfall. In a brilliant poetic fashion, the author (prophet) uses his artistic mastery to incite the imagination of his audience to be spectators of Yahweh's undoing of the power of the enemy and the eventual destruction of Nineveh as the symbol of Assyrian power. Tuell (2016:35) refers to it as 'vigorous, straightforward poetry'. This key factor should be kept in mind when prophetic oracles are interpreted. The author makes use of poetic freedom of expression, imagery, metaphors, sound and many other stylistic devices to enhance the power of expression and to involve his audience. It is an appeal to the imagination of the people of Judah to visualise the power of Yahweh in overcoming a fierce enemy that will break its stronghold on them. He, therefore, aims to engage the audience on an emotional level to reignite their hope in a better future free from oppression. It serves the purpose of encouraging the people of Judah to put their faith in Yahweh who cares for them and acts in their favour (Wessels 2014:315–338).

Verses 3–10 (4–11) continue the proclamation of judgement against Nineveh and concern the conquest and plundering of Nineveh. As always, there are slight differences in scholars' views on how to subdivide the section under discussion (cf. e.g. Coggins 1985:36–46; Floyd 2000:54–55; Robertson 1990:80, 86–97). The approach followed in this article is to subdivide the section into the following smaller sub-sections, namely verses 3–4, 5–8, 9 and 10 (4–5, 6–9, 10 and 11). In verses 3–4 (4–5) the siege of Nineveh is described, in verses 5–8 (6–9) scenes of capitulation and emotional outcries and a summons in verse 9 (10) is followed by a concluding summary in verse 10 (11).

Nahum 2:3–4 (4–5)

Verse 3 (4) describes the invading army that O'Brien (2009:52) argues 'is a portrait of Yahweh's divine army'.

The verse reads:

The shields of his warriors are red; his soldiers are clothed in scarlet. The metal on the chariots flashes on the day when he musters them; the spears are shaken. (authors' own translation)

The choice of the red and scarlet colours, as well as the image of flashing light reflected from the chariots, is deliberately

made to attract the attention of the observers and to create the sense of a live scene. Although the battle has not taken place yet, the red and scarlet colours might also hint at the bloodshed that will result from the ensuing encounter (Spronk 1997:89). The soldiers had spears with the shafts probably consisting of cypress wood. The quivering movements made with these spears further enhanced the notion of a live scene. The red colours mentioned do not necessarily refer to blood or stains of blood but may simply have the function of describing the army on the move, well dressed and equipped for battle with sunlight flashing on them (cf. O'Brien 2009:52). The picture the poet paints for his audience is that of a fierce, well-equipped and confident army (Robertson 1990:88).

In verse 4 (5) the focus shifts to the battle scene. 'The chariots race madly through the streets, they rush to and fro through the squares; their appearance is like torches, they dart like lightning' (NRS). Rudolph (1975:171) says: 'Mit V. 5 kommt Leben in das Bild'. The poet continues where he left off in the previous verse in creating the sense of a lively battlefield scene with a great deal of movement and speed.

Nahum 5–8 (6–9)

⁵He calls his officers; they stumble as they advance; they rush to the wall, but the mantelet¹ is set up.

⁶The river gates are opened, the palace collapses (melts away).

⁷It is decreed that she (the city) be exiled, her handmaids (slave women) led away, moaning like doves and beating their breasts.

⁸Nineveh was like a pool of water as long as it existed (throughout her days). 'Halt! Halt!' – but no one turns back. (authors' own translation)

Moving from a focus on the fierce assailants of Nineveh, their battle gear and their mobility, the scene in verses 5–8 (6–9) shifts to the invasion of the city and the emotional impact on soldiers and inhabitants (2:9 and 10; MT 10 and 11). As mentioned before, the author uses his poetic artistry to appeal to the imagination of the people.

Christensen (2009:306) also highlights the 'power of symbolic language'. The author of Nahum's description of the attack and the emotional impact of the destruction of the city and the defeat of the soldiers who were supposed to protect Nineveh is probably not a factual account, but an attempt to encourage the dismayed Judeans to keep on trusting Yahweh who will care for them. If this is true, then the envisaged downfall of Nineveh should be placed well before the actual fall of the city in 612 BCE. Others differ from the above interpretation and see it as a presentation of the fall of Nineveh after the actual event of the fall (Tuell 2016:34). To us, the key is the poetic nature of the depiction of the fall that serves the purpose of offering hope and courage for what is possible when Yahweh acts on behalf of his people.

Verse 5 (6) continues to describe the onslaught on Nineveh. A third person masculine, probably the king of Nineveh

(Rudolph 1975:168) or the commander of the army, has called on his officers (noble ones) for assistance in this dire situation; however, in their keenness and haste to run to the city wall in defence of the city, they have stumbled. The poet once again creates a scene of hasty movement, which gradually builds up to a climax of events. The city wall formed not only the most important security barrier for the inhabitants of the city, but also the last barrier for the attacking army to conquer the city. The poet makes it clear that the end is in sight for the inhabitants of the city because the attacking army has already erected the mantelet against the wall. We find some depictions of these mantelets, usually used by the Assyrians in attacks against fortified cities, in Assyrian reliefs (Spronk 1997:94). Tuell describes it as a siege engine, 'a wheeled shelter affixed to a battering ram to breach Nineveh's walls' (2016:36). In 2:5 (6), this device is ironically turned against the Assyrians.

The author of the Nahum text not only displayed knowledge of the warfare tactics to invade a city as alluded to in verse 5 (6), but in verse 6 (7) knowledge of the architectural structure of Nineveh is also shown. Nineveh was built on a site where the Tigris and the Khoser rivers meet (Emberling 2000:966), which most probably explains the need for sluice gates to be opened in times of flooding. Verse 6 (7) states that the river gates are opened and that the palace melts away (Niphal of the verb מרג). Although some take this as literal flooding of the city, it seems more likely that it metaphorically depicts the invasion of the enemy and the devastating effect on the leadership (palace) because of the flooding invasion. O'Brien (2009:53) argues that 'water was a common metaphor for destruction in the ancient Near East'. She refers to Jeremiah 51, where this image also appears. Robertson (1990:65–66) argues along similar lines and regards it as an indication of the fading of any further resistance and Coggins (1985:40–41) as the breaking up of the existing order. Because of the 'flooding in' of the enemy, the palace is overwhelmed and disorganised.

The text of Nahum is at times difficult to unravel and verse 7 (8) is one of those instances. The difficulty in the first line of the verse is the Hebrew word מַצְרָה. Views on the meaning of the word differ and there is no consensus on the meaning, whether it is the name of a person or a verbal form (O'Brien 2009:83). As Dietrich (2014:60) states, 'Die Deutungsversuche zu מַצְרָה sind Legion'. As a verb, it can mean something like 'it is decreed' or 'decided on'. The feminine subject probably refers to the city of Nineveh. It is decided or decreed that she, meaning the inhabitants, be carried away in exile. It is qualified as the women now enslaved who are being led away. It again is a case of irony on the part of Assyria, who used to take people into exile when they invaded and conquered cities. They are now the victims. In reaction to the traumatic events, her slave woman will make moaning sounds like doves and beat their breasts, literally their hearts. These actions are associated with grieving and lamenting practices at deaths and funerals. From what is described so far, it is not only the palace that was in a state of panic, but the whole Assyrian population that was affected (Rudolph 1975:172).

Nineveh is for the first time explicitly mentioned in this poetic oracle in verse 8 (9). The image here most probably alludes to the accumulation of water in pools to secure water for the city. Nineveh was famous for its artificial pools (Spronk 1997:99–100). However, it is no longer a symbol of pride and power, because the defenders of the city are fleeing. They act similar to water leaking from a pool, not even a double command to stop fleeing could affect a single turnaround. What is reflected here is that the inhabitants are in a state of panic (Robertson 1990:93). As O'Brien (2009:54) puts it, 'Yahweh has, indeed, scattered the Assyrians'.

Nahum 2:9 (10)

Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of treasure!
An abundance of every precious thing! (NRS)

Nahum 2:9 (10) makes it evident that Nineveh is a defeated and defenceless city. Staccato-like calls to plunder again create the sense of the rapid movement of events taking place and emphasise the reality of the eyewitness account. The invaders are encouraged to exploit the situation, to plunder the silver and gold of the affluent city. For years, the Assyrian armies took spoils of war and accumulated a great wealth of silver and gold from the nations they conquered (cf. Christensen 2009:297). Now, in turn, the Assyrians are the sufferers of such looting practices (Tuell 2016:37).

Nahum 2:10 (11)

Devastation, desolation, and destruction! Hearts faint and knees tremble, all loins quake, all faces grow pale! (NRS)

In Nahum 2:10 (11), the passage ends in a climax and summarises the state of affairs. In this imaginative poetic presentation, Nineveh is displayed as a conquered city. The first three consecutive words in the Hebrew text employ prophetic onomatopoeia, each time adding a syllable to the word (Coggins & Han 2011:29):

בַּיָּקָה וּמִבְּקָה וּמִבְּלָקָה

The outcome for Nineveh is quite conclusive: desolation, destruction and devastation! The impact of the siege on the inhabitants of the city affected persons in their whole being. The unsettling series of events resulted in hearts melting/hearts fainting (וּלֵב נָמַס), knees giving away (וַיִּפֹּק בְּרַגְלָיִם), trembling in all the loins (בְּכָל-מִתְּנִיחַיִם וַתִּלְחָלְהוּ) and all faces growing pale/faces gather blackness (וַיִּפְגְּוּ כָּל־פָּאָרָיוֹר). Concerning this last reference to what happened to the faces of the people, Tuell (2016:37) says, 'Whatever this expression means, it obviously conveys extreme emotion, whether fear or anger or dismay'. The picture is of distraught and traumatised people in the face of terror (O'Brien 2009:54). Nothing is left of the once haughty and ruthless people of Assyria.

Understanding trauma

Trauma has been part of humanity since the beginning of time. The origin of the word 'trauma' can be found in ancient

times with its origins in the Greek word meaning 'wound'. The first implication of trauma is usually a bodily experience as it may involve a direct violation of the body. This can include pain, suffering, abuse, rape, exposure to war, physical threat and assault. On this notion, Terr (1990) writes that:

Trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming, intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside. Trauma events which are external quickly become incorporated into the mind. (p. 8)

It could be deduced that trauma encompasses internal and external markers, making it unbearable and difficult to cope with the reverberations of the impact of trauma. Trauma is unbearable, whether it is physical, emotional, spiritual, social or a combination of these factors. Although the use of the term 'trauma' is becoming more commonplace today within various academic study fields, the use of trauma as a theory is actually not that old. The first studies were carried out within the field of psychology and gradually branched out to other research fields such as philosophy, social work and sociology, to name a few. The use of trauma as a tool or theory also gripped the attention of biblical scholars because it rendered a new scope for research. Theological literature on trauma has grown significantly in the last decade, giving an exciting new research perspective on the biblical text. Still, there needs to be an understanding of what trauma is and what it entails to be able to use it as a lens when reading scriptures. According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V-TR)*, trauma is when individuals have experienced events of threat, death and serious physical and mental injury, and there was a response of intense fear, helplessness and horror. To give a clearer understanding, the *DSM-V-TR* lists various symptoms such as anger, anxiety, numbness, feeling threatened, fear and hopelessness that are prevalent. Trauma does not only mean that there is suffering, disaster and violence, but trauma is also so much more, and the case in point is to understand how people suffer. This 'how' is entangled in the question of why people suffer. The 'why' is linked to the survival and resilience that people show when suffering. Resilience and post-traumatic growth are defined by Meichenbaum (2013:24) as 'the capacity to adapt successfully in the presence of risk and adversity'. Individuals and a collective community can encounter trauma and traumatic events and usually, both the individual and the community are changed through their encounter with trauma. These traumatic challenges can lead to growth and positive outcomes as a result of going through the pain of trauma and tragedy. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2018:32) see post-traumatic growth as positive changes even if traumatic and highly challenging life threats are experienced. It can, therefore, be construed that trauma and post-traumatic growth are not completely separate processes but are actually closely interrelated.

Biblical scriptures are not only awash with collections of struggles, pain and suffering, but they also provide lessons and insights into coping, survival, hope and resilience in

the face of trauma. Biblical scholars have always been intrigued and engaged with the question of trauma and suffering. Because of this engagement, Rambo (2010:4) states that there is a new awareness of trauma in the text that leads to trauma studies and new conversations about suffering in the biblical text. The use of trauma and post-traumatic growth as lenses to read scripture and especially Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11) provides different angles, unheard voices and fresh perspectives to understand the text within a new framework.

Reading Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11) through a trauma and post-traumatic lens

Suffering at the hands of surrounding superpowers such as Assyria involved intense trauma. In the text of Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11), vivid metaphorical references are made to traumatic experiences. However, this trauma is not fully understood at the time that it occurs, but the text conveys the tension, the build-up of the threat, making it almost unbearable not only for the people of Judah but also for the reader of this pericope. The underlying text of Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11) pertains to social, political and cultural elements that influence not only trauma but also post-traumatic growth as a process.

The scene is set for an ensuing battle. All the elements of war are at play creating a traumatic scenario of fear, suspense, demise and threat. Esterhuizen (2017:131) refers to this traumatic marker as the 'waiting effect'. As people, individually and as a collective community, Judah was waiting for something to happen, whether good or bad. The awaiting tension is heightened through metaphorical references and poetry.

Judah has been exposed to continuous traumatic events and circumstances. The constant threat and exposure to trauma not only disrupt and create havoc for the individuals facing these trials but the community also suffers as a collective, disrupting the social functions thereof. From a psychological viewpoint, Caruth (2016:18) writes that trauma is evident and characterised through communicative elements coming to the fore through metaphors, overstated speech and emotional language. Reading the passage in Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11), these trauma markers are noticeable in the text. Verses 3–10 convey emotive speech of heightened anticipation, threats, war, destruction and demise. Even though the prophet asked the people of Judah to imagine this battle where Yahweh is fighting on their behalf, they had first-hand experience of trauma and suffering. The trauma in a sense instils hope in the people of Judah, as the focus of retribution shifts towards the Assyrians. The traumatic experiences of Judah become the bridge of hope for them in coping with the threatening circumstances. From a psychological perspective, the reliving of trauma events triggers memories with intense emotional and physical

reactions that could lead to post-traumatic stress. The prophet Nahum relied on Judah's imagination. These conjured images might have given the individual and collective group flashbacks, fear and anxiety, as they were accustomed to trauma. For the reader of today, the text of Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11) could have similar implications of post-traumatic stress with intense emotional and even physical reactions to the imagery.

Between the lines of trauma and suffering, the resilience and hope reverberate in the text of Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11). Trauma also constitutes aspects of hope and resilience that can contribute to post-traumatic growth. In this corpus, Yahweh fights for the people of Judah, setting the scene of trust and victory. The texts contain a message of hope and salvation for the people of Yahweh. Although the poetic imagery instils fear in the inhabitants of Nineveh, with trembling, fear and outcries of lament, restoration and salvation are the beacons of hope for the nation of Yahweh. There is a restorative element in Yahweh's message, and from a post-traumatic growth perspective, it can involve positive changes in cognitive, emotional, circumstantial and behavioural domains.

Conclusion

The imperial oppression of Judah forms the overwhelming theme in the book of Nahum. The book and especially Nahum 2:1–10 (MT 2:2–11) attest to the structural complexity, emotive imagery and the descriptive poetry in this text. Using trauma as a lens contributes to a better understanding and insight into the imaginative poetry of the text. Within the layers of trauma, embedded in faith in Yahweh, the people of Judah experienced hope through the conjured imagery. The question asked was whether it was an effective tool of motivation to use a trauma incident to offer hope to demoralised people. It seems to be an effective tool because Judah, as a result of their own traumatic experiences caused by oppression and hardship, could relate to the depicted trauma announced by the prophet on their enemy. The basis of their hope is founded in the fact that Yahweh played a pivotal role in the whole unfolding of events.

Reading the text from a trauma perspective creates a better understanding of not only the suffering the people of Judah had to go through, but also the reader of the text today. Trauma has been part of us, for the people of Judah and for the reader today. And in this, the solace lies.

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