

## The Violent, Rhetorical-Ideological God<sup>1</sup> of Nahum.

LEONARD MARE & JOHAN SERFONTEIN (UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG)

### *ABSTRACT*

*This article tries to identify YHWH in the violent text of Nahum as a character and a construct of the ideology of society. God's acts of violence are depicted in a way that reflects the socio-cultural background of the author and his society. Therefore God is violent and chauvinistically gender-ideological. Suggestions are made to consider the options and solutions that a "counter-reading" brings to the problem. A counter-reading challenges the reader to empathise with the pain of the victims and to put modern faces to it. In reading this way readers would be able to act in the world around them in ways that would help to construct a more passive (as opposed to violent) and compassionate image of God.*

### A INTRODUCTION

Scholars, preachers and teachers have over the years stayed well clear of a problematic book such as Nahum. Nahum, a short book in the Old Testament and consisting only of three chapters, is not judged a popular book by those who read it. In the end it becomes difficult to extract a theological message from this book which is drenched in blood and violence. The prophet gleefully describes the fall of the city of Nineveh and celebrates its destruction. Johnston (2001:21) calls Nahum "nationalistic" and not very "spiritual" while Coggins (1985:13) refers to Nahum as a "one-theme prophet". Others regard his war poetry as some of the most graphic in Old Testament prophetic literature (Achtemeier 1986:18).

The problem of violence in the book of Nahum is compounded by the fact that YHWH himself is not only the instigator but also the perpetrator in some of the very violence that the book describes. Violence itself remains one of the unresolved issues of the Old Testament (Snyman 1990:319). Any form of violence creates uneasiness for modern readers coming from a more pacifist environment. While there are more than six hundred (Snyman 1990:320) cases of violence in the Old Testament, this article will focus on a few verses in the text of Nahum. Although possibilities of many redaction processes exist and

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<sup>1</sup> In this article reference to God will be in lowercase when referring to "god as a construct". The word will be in uppercase when referring to that God a person wishes to know, theologises about and worships.

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were studied (Wieg 2001:81-130) this article assumes that Nahum can be read as a unit. It is the book as a whole in its current form that poses the problem.

The following verses<sup>2</sup> confirm the violent nature of the book.

The LORD is a jealous and **avenging God**; the LORD takes **vengeance** and is filled with wrath. The **LORD takes vengeance** on his foes and **maintains his wrath against his enemies** (Nah 1:2)

...but with an overwhelming flood he will **make an end** of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness (Nah 1:8)

It is decreed that *the city be exiled* and carried away. Its slave girls moan like doves and beat upon their breasts (Nah 2:7)

Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many **casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number**, people **stumbling over the corpses**... (Nah 3:3)

“I am **against you**,” declares the **LORD** Almighty. “I will **lift your skirts over your face**. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will **pelt you with filth**, I will treat you with contempt and **make you a spectacle**” (Nah 3: 5-6)

Yet she was **taken captive** and **went into exile**. Her **infants** were **dashed to pieces** at the head of every street. Lots were cast for her nobles, and all her great men were put in chains (Nah 3:10)

There the **fire will devour** you; the **sword will cut you down** and, like grasshoppers, consume you (Nah 3:15)<sup>3</sup>

The abovementioned verses leave no doubt to the violence in the book of Nahum and contribute to the problem the modern reader encounters when he/she reads it. Juxtaposed to the modern reader is the manner in which YHWH (the God who requires humankind to act in an ethical way) acts violently and engages in violent acts of war which includes killing, taking of slaves and rape. These violent acts lead to an aversion of the text of Nahum, resulting in an endless quest to justify or explain the violence in Nahum. The quest tries to make the book more accessible to modern readers as well as to answer some of the embarrassing questions left by the text, as will be seen shortly.

The article proposes that the violent YHWH in Nahum should perhaps not be associated with the God humankind is struggling to know and comprehend. It argues that humankind creates a god that serves its needs and ideologies. Thus, the god of Nahum becomes a rhetorical-ideological construct of the expectations of the society and ideologies of the world in which Nahum's au-

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<sup>2</sup> Verses quoted from the 1984 New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> These verses are singled out for their violent content.

thor and audience once lived. Regarding the god of Nahum a construct makes it easier to reject the violence in the text while it also opens the door for “counter readings” (O’Brien 2002:126).

## B THE QUEST TO RESOLVE THE PERSISTING PROBLEM

Most scholars agree that Nahum must be read against the background of the Assyrian crisis of the seventh century B.C.E. (Verhoef 2006:14-16), therefore leading some to propose (Spronk 1997:1-2) that Nahum could be seen as a “smugglers pamphlet” that was sent from a gifted writer to console the people who were oppressed by Assyria. In the superscription of the book (Nah 1:1) the word **רְבָבָה** can be translated either with “book” or “letter”. Both refer to a written document. The name of the prophet **נָחוּם** (meaning “to comfort” or “comforter”), appearing in the superscription can be interpreted as a pseudonym (Spronk 1997:1). We will now turn our attention to some of the attempts to understand the violence in the text.

### 1 Understandable rage

The first explanation comes from reading Nahum against the background of the seventh century B.C.E. This reading would put the writer as well as his audience in a specific socio-historical situation that opens the way for readings O’Brien (2002:111-112) calls *understandable rage*. The rage and violence in the text would be directed at Nineveh as representative of the tyranny of the Assyrian empire. It is not difficult to demonise Assyria who was at that stage the most powerful and feared world power known to Judah. Therefore a violent description of the fall of this tyrant becomes *understandable* and even ethical (Van der Woude 1985:75). An attempt to resolve the problem of violence in Nahum in terms of the concept “understandable rage” might result in a more sympathetic reading of the text. Yet, to understand rage and violence does not necessarily make the text of Nahum easier to read. The rage and violence in the text remain shocking, because in the end, Yahweh is the perpetrator.

### 2 A plea for the poetic nature of Nahum

A second explanation focuses on the *poetic nature* of Nahum. There is no doubt that Nahum’s description of not only YHWH in chapter 1 but also the siege and fall of Nineveh in chapters 2 and 3 contain material that is very poetic in nature. In this regard Floyd (2000:70-71) emphasises that the book of Nahum is filled with poetry and metaphorical language. He asks why readers would easily read poetry and metaphors but shrink away when the poetry and metaphors turn violent. The poetry is indeed part and parcel of a violent society. Not to read it is to deny the poetry the chance to attain what the poet set out to do, namely to capture the imagination of an oppressed people and to help them imagine better possibilities (Brueggemann 1986:1-7; Carroll 1983:25-26).

Joining these voices, but taking the argument further is Wessels (1998:615-628), who suggests that Nahum should not be read merely as poetry but especially as “*resistance poetry*” and, to be more specific, as a “*poetic overstatement*”. The text of Nahum should thus be understood as being the poetic voice of the oppressed. He sees similarities with the poetry of anti-apartheid poets in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid. In many of their poems there is mention of violence and rage. The purpose, however, was not to infuse people with rage and violence but to give the oppressed hope that the oppressor will come to a fall. One can think of the slogans “one settler one bullet” and “kill the Boer, kill the farmer”. Bullets were not handed out and settlers shot as a result of these slogans. At least that was not the intention of these poems. These poetic overstatements were rather calling for the elimination of a system and to help people in the midst of the struggle to find hope and strength. Hence Wessels argues that the poetry of Nahum should be seen as ideological resistance rather than physical confrontation. O’Brien (2002:113) also sees it as a call of resistance against a system of tyranny.

The interpretation of Nahum as resistance poetry definitely brings something new to the discussion regarding the violence in the book, but it does not resolve the persisting problem in a society that finds violence, especially godly violence, intolerable. It is also not possible for every reader of Nahum in a modern society to have the luxury to read the text of Nahum over the shoulder of a seventh century B.C.E. oppressed Judean. Knowing the social-historical background of the text and understanding the Assyrian reign of terror is sometimes privileged information only available to scholars who took the time to research it. The modern reader in churches and synagogues does not necessarily have access to all this information. Therefore the violence in the text (as it appears in modern translations) comes to them in all its brutality, resulting in the persistence of the problem.

### **3 A text about the sovereign YHWH**

A third proposal to address the problem of violence in Nahum is to see the book not as a text about people and violence, but as a text *about God who is sovereign and in the end conquers evil* (Achtemeier 1986:5-6; O’Brien 2002:117-121). This proposal differs from the previous proposals in that it suggests that the violence is not about human rage, but about a theological confirmation and inspiration to its readers that YHWH will right all the wrongs and that He will ultimately triumph over every evil oppressor or enemy who may stand in his way. The readers must realise that no-one is as strong as their God. This line of argument would also explain the theophanic nature of chapter 1 (Wessels 2005:55-73) where YHWH is announced as the main character of the book. In this regard O’Brien (2002:119-120) remarks that “only a God who cares about what happens in the world gets angry – and acts and restore justice”. But this type of response to the violence in Nahum adds to the problem. It de-

picts YHWH as a god who can only restore justice with violence. It suggests that his social tools are limited to violence and bloodshed. It shows him as a god who leaves corpses lying on streets (Nah 3:3) or infants dashed to pieces (Nah 3:10). Nahum depicts a god engaging in rape (Nah 3:5).

The quest to resolve the problem led to dead-ends in those instances where scholars tried to justify the violence in the book and attempted to clear YHWH's name. We suggest a different angle: reject this god of Nahum as being only a rhetorical-ideological construct of **a society** whose only social tools were violence and bloodshed. Subsequently, to identify his gender-ideological actions (Nah 3:5) as part of a patriarchal system and a violent society leads to the suggestion that the god of Nahum is created by an ideology. The ideology with which this god is created then becomes the problem.

At this point, it is necessary to make some observations on ideology. There is no agreement on the precise meaning of this term; therefore it needs to be defined for the purposes of this article. In this article *ideology* means the "coherent set of ideas amounting to a worldview, or outlook on life" (Cline 1995:10). In Nahum the worldview is one where the fittest survive, the strongest win and the violent conquer. It is a worldview where women are treated as objects and the patriarch has all the power. In this world the gods, as the creation of a specific ideology, act in accordance with the ideology of their creator.

### C IDEOLOGY CREATES A "GOD" WHO BECOMES A PROBLEM

If ideology creates a god that becomes problematic, two perspectives are necessary to explore. Firstly we need to consider if an ideological 'god-creation' is plausible and then secondly, to what extent is the Bible's construct of YHWH ideological and problematic?

As humans, we need gods and a "supernatural agency". This, according to Artran (2002:57), is "the most culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionary compelling concept of religion". Noting that few societies do not have gods he lists four traits (2002:13) that is evident in most societies.

- Widely counter factual belief in the supernatural (ghosts, spirits and gods)
- Unmistakable public expressions of material commitment to these gods (giving of gifts, time and lives)
- A belief that these gods have got something to do with our existential fears (death, sickness, pain, lost etcetera.)
- These three traits come together in some form of ritual in the community.

Gods differ from one society to the next. Some societies have gods that are more pacifist than others and some societies have more violent gods. If this observation is true, where does this distinction come from? Is it because humankind is creating their gods to serve different purposes or is it the other way around?

Cognitive scientists of late have argued strongly for the case that humankind creates their own gods, rather than the other way around. Humans have specific cognitive tools that help them to construct the reality in which they live. It is with these tools that humans also comprehend gods (Viviers 2006:6). Justin Barratt (2004:3-6) compares the human brain to a “tool shed” with different shelves. On these shelves are different metal tools which are used to conceptualise. He distinguishes between three different mental tools which we use to interpret reality. They are *categorisers* (identify different things – faces, animals, subject etc.), *descriptive* tools (ability to describe living things, also to create theory), and *facilitators* (social status-monitor, guilt regulator and sense of morality). Among the categorisers it is the subject-identifying tool that plays an important part in the conceptualising of gods. Viviers (2006:8) provides the example of hair standing on the back of your neck when something frightens you as a direct result of the work of this tool. With this tool you make observations without seeing the reality. A sound at the window might be an intruder. This creates the reality without you seeing it. This “antenna” (tool) plays an important part in creating a reality about gods. The detail, according to Barratt (2004:43) gets completed by the descriptive tools, and specifically the tools that create theory out of what is perceived. In the end these observations and theories become the gods that humans worship. It is necessary to note here that different gods is highly plausible, because humans make these observations and theories at different localities and from different “viewpoints” at different times in history and under the influence of different ideologies.

The second perspective that needs exploring is the manner in which YHWH features as a rhetorical-ideological character in the Bible and thus also in the text of Nahum. Carroll (1991:56) voiced his discontent with the contradictory descriptions of YHWH, the God of the Old Testament. According to him YHWH hates and loves, destruct and builds up, explodes in wrath and blesses with kindness and forever changes his mind. This poses a question to the idea of an almighty, all-knowing and never-changing God in the Old Testament. His solution is to consider the possibility that YHWH features as a literary construct in the texts of the Bible – different writers would then create different gods, who differ in character (Viviers 2006:3). Yahweh as a literary construct was studied in depth in an article by Gericke (2004:30-57). From a religious philosophical angle he mentions seven arguments that make the objective existence of YHWH within the text of the Bible highly unlikely.

- Theological pluralism – YHWH being the only (Deut 6; 2 Kgs 5:15) in many cases but also part of a pantheon (Gen 3:22) of gods.
- Orthodox theology that cannot be defended – YHWH being all-knowing but also not (Ps 14:2).
- Polymorphic projection – the god of the bible appears to share too much of the thoughts and images of humankind – almost as if it is given to him by humans.
- His predictions of the future are faulty – the dynasty of David eventually comes to an end (2 Sam 7).
- He appears too close to the god of the Canaanites and his stories share too much in common with mythology (Ps 29).
- Faulty cosmography – appears to believe in the ‘three-layered’ cosmology (Ps 104).
- The meta-textual history – the Bible reports him only showing up at the beginning of the last millennium B.C.E. after ancient history has already started.

All these opposing and contradictory facts leave one with no other option than to agree with Carroll (1991:56) that YHWH functions in the rhetoric of the text as a character; a character that is depicted as a construct of the ideology of the writer. Why would YHWH the almighty God engage in rape and violence? Why would he feel the need for revenge? Why would he kill or command people to kill? Why would he be a male and act in a certain manner towards woman and the ostracised? Perhaps because the author of the text and the ideology of the society want him to act in such a manner? Thus God becomes their construct - a construct that is totally different from what and who he really is.

This idea is not farfetched. Only a few years ago many South Africans believed that God was an “apartheid-god” and that he advocated segregation and discrimination. Children grew up and did not ask any questions because their picture of God was constructed by the ideology of a certain society (political system). These children then went on to defend the borders of their neighbouring countries to keep out those (also motivated by ideology and sustained by their gods who believed in their cause) who threatened their ideology. They were motivated and consoled by chaplains who believed that the god who supports their ideology will also support their cause “even in the valley of the shadow of death”. Even in war! This god has now changed his mind, or has he? Is it not the ideology that has changed?

In this regard McLaren (2004:43-65), when he looks at modern and post-modern society, writes of the “seven Jesus” he has come to know in the church. This Jesus is protestant and catholic, passive and militaristic, he baptises babies and adult believers; he sings “happy songs” with the Charismatics and enjoys the quietness and reverence of the reformed denominations. Ac-

cording to him he “didn’t think of them as different saviours, requiring a lateral conversion to a new denomination each time. Rather I believed that each was a new facet, a new dimension ...” (2004:55). Jesus has been deconstructed and reconstructed timelessly. Each new face was nothing but an instrument of a specific church’s theology (or should we rather call it ideology?).

It becomes apparent from the disciplines of cognitive science and religious philosophy that gods are constructed by humankind and will be constructed by humankind in the future to serve and rubberstamp human ideologies. To conclude this section I would propose that the god of Nahum was a construct of ideology that was sketched in the text (rhetorical-ideological) and that we as a biblical community (scholars and believers) should deconstruct this god and engage the text in different ways - ways that “construct” a god that can be God for those who need God. To stay muted about the violent god of the text is to identify with his actions. To leave him there does not help those who seek answers and comfort from him. In closing lets look at the option of counter-reading and new constructions of YHWH.

#### **D THE OPTION OF COUNTER-READING**

By now it has become clear that the problem of violence in Nahum and the violent god of Nahum is more a problem rooted in ideology than in violence itself.

The ideology behind the text of Nahum appears to be a culture of “conquer or be conquered”. It is one in which women and the “other” is ostracized. O’Brien (2002:103) calls this “the patriarchal fishbowl”. The text struggles to escape this fishbowl and remains problematic. Many voices have been raised over the last few years as to the opportunity for new readings of old texts. When ancient texts come to us filled with underlying ideologies, we are obliged, if necessary, to reject the ideology and read the text anew.

An example of rejecting an ideology and reading a text in a new way is illustrated in Viviers’s reading of Psalm 150 (2003:47-61). He suggests that the Psalm invites people to “complete the unfinished symphony”. This Psalm is saturated with the normal male dominated metaphors, but in the end invites “everything that has breath” (including women) to sing the praises of YHWH. The earth (female) and nature joins in to complete in a symphonic way this “open-endedness”. He concludes that a balanced gender participation as well as the “eco-justness” (the whole earth and environment) of this approach helps to complete this Psalm in a way that is more acceptable for a modern society. The question now is, how could we “complete” Nahum?

O’Brien (2002:124-128) suggests a “counter-reading”. David Clines (1995:191) calls it “reading against the grain” of the text. One would read “with the grain” when one reads the text of Nahum as saying that YHWH is

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violent and engages in rape. Reading “with the grain” causes the reader to subscribe to an ideology of violence and gender inequality and to become sympathetic to the construct of the god of Nahum. Reading “against the grain” or “counter-reading” would be to read what the writer is “hiding” and to be weary of the ingrained ideologies of the text. This is according to Clines (1995:190) not

disrespectful to the text. [...] We should not assume that “believing communities” always want to hear the ideology of the text being rehearsed. Perhaps they also need to know what their texts are capable of and what unorthodox meanings they can suggest.

In the case of Nahum the author deliberately hides the faces of the people of Nineveh. In the prophecy they are paying the price of being on the “wrong side” of Nahum’s god. They become the victims of his ideology and pay the price in a way which is acceptable to him and his society. His god also acts in this manner. “Counter-reading” would suggest a reading against the grain of the author’s intentions. Nahum portrays the victims to be pawns in a bigger picture. “Counter-reading” would make these people and their outcries of anguish real.

The “other” would become someone with a face and a name. The children who are “dashed to pieces” become someone’s first born. The “many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number [...] the corpses [...]” become someone’s husband and father. The harlot (Nineveh) whose skirts are lifted over her face and who is raped becomes someone’s beloved who is embarrassed by men in the war games that men play.

This type of reading makes it easier for us to read the violent text of Nahum in a modern Western environment. The “other” who have faces and names become the victims of our systems of injustice. They become the children who are oppressed and made into sex slaves. They become the victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa. They become the victims of genocide in Rwanda. They become women who are abused and raped all over the world. They become the hungry and oppressed on our streets.

In this light Nahum becomes relevant especially if we embark on a journey to alleviate pain and suffering. By alleviating pain and suffering we deconstruct the perceptions about God that exist in our world and participate in constructing new understandings of God. The idea of constructing new understandings of God is not farfetched as has been shown by Viviers (2005:799-808) when he investigated the way in which people with disabilities were handled in the Bible. They were seen as unclean and cursed by the gods (YHWH) and made to stay outside cities. Reading these laws makes it difficult to understand YHWH. Those with disabilities would also perceive YHWH as cruel and exclusive. The truth is, what they are experiencing are actually the fears and

ideology of their society and not that of YHWH. Today by being more tolerant towards people with disabilities we help to construct a more positive image of God.

## **E CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The problem of violence in Nahum and the violent god of Nahum can only be solved when we begin by admitting the violence and the problem of his violent god. This violence should then be rejected (Gordon & Washington 1995:324; Magdelene 1995:352). Unfortunately this is not enough. This article has made an attempt to get out of the problem by identifying YHWH as a character in the "comfort" that Nahum tries to bring. This character is rhetorical ideological creature of a society. The way he acts to free people from their oppression is violent and destructive. The way he handles women is gender-ideological. It is the ideology of Nahum's rhetoric that becomes the problem and not necessarily YHWH. Modern society will always have problems with the ways of the seventh century B.C.E. poets who, in their defence, tried to capture the imagination of their oppressed society in a way that was not foreign to their culture. In hundred years from now our ways of speaking about God might also become a problem to the next generations.

The recommendation of this article is to move on from the rhetorical ideological god of Nahum (captured in the text) towards a construction of a God who is compassionate and loving to those in need. We will always construct an image of God, even if we keep silent. By keeping silent we leave it in the hands of the text that is far removed from the world in which we live. Our response will again only be a construct (clothed with ideology), but it will be a more relevant one. Reading difficult texts of the Old Testament in new ways can help with this. In the case of Nahum a new way of reading the text would be to identify the faces of the victims and see victims of injustice of our society and to mirror oneself in the "other" who is ostracised and violated.

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Dr. Leonard P Maré, Senior Lecturer, Department of Semitic Languages, University of Johannesburg, [mwlm@iafrica.com](mailto:mwlm@iafrica.com)

Past. Johan Serfontein, 5<sup>de</sup> Laan 92, Boston, Bellville, 7530,  
[serfonteinjohan@gmail.com](mailto:serfonteinjohan@gmail.com)