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Unravelling "דהר": The study of ancient texts

ABSTRACT

The Hebrew word "דהר" remains a persistent exegetical challenge, with ancient texts reflecting striking discrepancies in its interpretation. As a result, this article aims to decipher the unclear Hebrew term "דהר" in Nahum 3:2. It addresses this lexical puzzle, using a comprehensive approach, emphasising textual criticism of ancient texts, while incorporating comparative Semitic languages such as Egyptian and Arabic along with a literary-rhetorical analysis of the battle imagery in Nahum. By synthesising these various strands of methodologies, this article seeks to offer a credible interpretation of this puzzling term.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew word "דהר" is problematic. Futato and Howard (2007:120) argue that the ancientness of the Hebrew word "דהר" creates this difficulty, because the meaning was lost after 250 BC or by the time of LXX's translators (Wilson 2002:80-81; Chia 2023). The lost meaning offers a predicament for Bible translations, in particular ancient Bible translations. Ancient texts of Nahum 3:2 are categorised into five primary translations of the Hebrew term "רכבה". First, the Greek Septuagint (Rahlfs *et al.* 2006) translates it as "διώκοντος" or "of pursuing". Secondly, the Syriac Peshitta (the Leiden Peshitta Edition 2012) interprets it as "dnpr" or "of growling". Thirdly, the Masoretic text (Elliger & Rudolph 1997) has "דֹּהֵר" or "a dasher". Fourthly, the Aramaic Targum (Gordon & Cathcart 1989) uses "מפנכין" or "to jump or kick (of horses)". Lastly, the Latin Vulgate interprets it as "raging" or "*ferventis*" in participle to modify "*quadrigae*" (Fischer & Weber

1994). This variation highlights the lack of consensus among the ancient texts. Therefore, this article aims to address this issue by examining ancient texts, cognates languages, and the literary context.

2. METHODOLOGY

Textual criticism is frequently described as a harmonious blend of artistic creativity and scientific inquiry. It is categorised as a science, because it relies on data analysis, the study of the genealogical connections between manuscripts, and a comprehensive understanding of copying methods. Nevertheless, it is also regarded as an art form, necessitating a sharp sense of judgement and critical evaluation throughout the process (Boltzman & Tuly 2016:138). This discipline has two main objectives. The first is to uncover the theological implications in various translations. The second is to reconstruct the most precise and authentic version of the biblical texts as they were originally composed. This task entails comparing and analysing numerous manuscripts, versions, and textual evidence to detect errors, inconsistencies, and modifications that have arisen over time (Barthélemy 2012:92). This article focuses on the second objective.

There are three primary methodologies in textual criticism, namely rigorous eclecticism, reasoned eclecticism, and the majority text approach. This article embraces reasoned eclecticism, which considers both external and internal evidence. The assessment of external evidence involves a comprehensive examination of the manuscripts' age, reliability, and geographical distribution, with older manuscripts typically being viewed as more authoritative. Conversely, internal evidence pertains to transcriptional probability, evaluating the likelihood of what a scribe would have written or copied, as well as intrinsic probability, which considers what the original author might have created, factoring in elements such as context, stylistic preferences, and theological implications. This internal evaluation often adheres to principles such as *lectio difficilior*, *lectio brevior*, and harmonisation (see Chia 2025b:418-428).

3. BHS, BHQ, AND THE EVALUATIONS

The BHS apparatus does not record the reading variants from ancient texts such as the Masoretic text, the LXX, the Targum, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate (Elliger & Rudolph 1997:1044). Thus, the major problem is that the BHS apparatus cannot offer significant insights into reading the Hebrew word "דהר".

The BHQ provides a more extensive array of information, including ancient texts such as the LXX, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta in the commentary section pertaining to the critical apparatus (Gelston 2010:113). In his commentary,

Gelston asserts that the various interpretations of the LXX, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta likely indicate a lack of understanding of the meaning of this Hebrew term, which appears solely in this context within the Bible. In addition, Gelston (2010:88) adds the Targum, Murabbaʿât 88 (the Mur 88), and 4QXII^{g} in his apparatus. A critique of BHQ is that it does not provide the reading from the other ancient source such as 4QpNah.

This article thus seeks to achieve two goals. First, it aims to enhance the sources in both the BHS and the BHQ, by integrating readings from other ancient texts. In addition, this article endeavours to provide a better and comprehensive examination to those witnesses and ascertain the meaning of "דהר" in Nahum 3:2, by employing cognate languages and textual criticism as its methodological approach.

4. SEMITIC LANGUAGES

A philological analysis must also be considered, in order to examine the Hebrew word "דהר" in Nahum 3:2 (see Chia 2025a:4-14). Table 1 shows the meanings of the root in question across cognate Semitic languages.

Table 1: Meanings of the root form across cognate Semitic languages

	Semitic language	Word	Translation
1	Egypt	*thr*	To travel by chariot
2	Arabic	*dahara*	To overcome (BDB) To hurry (HALOT)

Table 1 indicates that there are merely two Semitic languages that possess a similar term to the Hebrew word "דהר", namely Egyptian and Arabic. In the Egyptian language, it signifies to travel by chariot (see Albright 1936:30). The word "chariot" is supported by the context of Nahum 3. However, the phrase "to travel" is not validated by the Hebrew word "מרקדה" or "jolting" in Nahum 3:2. On the other hand, the Arabic verb "*dahara*" is understood differently, according to BDB and HALOT. The LXX follows the "to hurry" meaning, while the Masoretic text, Murabbaʿât 88 (the Mur 88), 4QXII^{g}, and 4QpNah have "the overcome" meaning. While the section on Semitic languages presents two possible meanings of "דהר", it does not offer a precise definition. Therefore, this article proceeds with a contextual analysis to determine the most suitable meaning within the framework of Nahum 3:2-3.

5. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

External evidence involves evaluating the age, reliability, and geographical distribution of the manuscripts. Generally, older manuscripts are regarded as having more authority. Table 2 displays the ancient texts along with their respective texts and English translations, and their estimated dates.

Table 2: Ancient texts with English translations

Hebrew word "דהר" in Nahum 3:2				
No.	**Source**	**Text**	**Translation**	**Dates**
1	Masoretic text	דֹּהֵר	A dasher	Aleppo Codex: 930 C.E. Leningrad Codex: 1008-1010 C.E.
2	Septuagint	διώκοντος	Of pursuing	Around 2nd century B.C.E.
3	Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943)	(no available information)	(no translation)	Late 1st century B.C.E. or early 1st century C.E. Around 50 B.C.E-50 C.E.
4	Peshitta	dnpr	Of growling	Around 2nd-3rd century C.E.
5	Vulgate	*Ferventis quadrigae*	Raging chariots	Late 4th century C.E.
6	Targum	מפנכין	Jumping (or kicking)	Around 13th–14th Century C.E
7	Hexapla	(no available information)	(no translation)	230–245 C.E
8	Murabbaʿât 88 (the Mur 88)	דהר	A dasher	Around 132-135 C.E.
9	4QXII[g]	ד]רה	A dasher	The last third of the 1st century B.C.E. (Late Hasmonean or Early Herodian period)
10	4QpNah	דהר	A dasher	Around 1st century B.C.E.

Table 2 indicates that the Hebrew term "דהר" is unknown in Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) and in the Hexapla, because it is so fragmentary (Tov *et al.* 1990:44-45; Field 1875:1001). Interestingly,

Murabbaʿât 88 (the Mur 88),[1] 4QXII[g],[2] and 4QpNah follow the consonants of the Masoretic text: "דהר" (Benoit, Milik & de Vaux 1961:198; Ulrich 1997:316; Allegro 1968:38). In contrast, the Peshitta and the Targum prefer "dnpr" and "מפנכין", respectively. Other texts such as the LXX and the Vulgate also differ in their translations.

1 The Mur 88, also referred to as MurXII or the Wadi Murabba'at Minor Prophets Scroll, contains similar reading with the Masoretic text, although the text is fragmentary (Benoit *et al.* 1961:197). This manuscript is dated to the early 2nd century CE, specifically around 132-135 CE. Key fragments of this manuscript, which include the complete text of the Twelve Minor Prophets, were discovered in a rock crevice located a short distance upstream from the larger refuge caves of Wadi Murabba'at. The presence of human bones and clothing found in the same location indicates a burial, likely that of a man laid to rest with a biblical scroll. Discovered during the rainy season, the scroll appeared as a large, flattened bundle with an irregular shape. The skin of the scroll had deteriorated significantly due to moisture, resulting in a soft, gelatinous texture akin to a sponge, with only a few areas of intact material remaining. Insects had damaged a considerable portion of both the inscribed surface and the reverse side. Furthermore, the entire scroll was heavily covered in dust and fine gravel. The careful handling by the Ta'amreh, who transported the manuscript from Wadi Murabba'at to Bethlehem, along with Kando's subsequent transfer to the Palestine Museum, played a crucial role in its preservation. The treatment it received at the Museum, while not highly technical, was conducted with great attention to detail, ensuring that the scroll was largely safeguarded for academic study. A thorough cleaning or systematic dusting of the inscribed surface was avoided, as removing the grains of sand that were firmly adhered to the fragile material posed a risk of further damaging the letters and reducing the manuscript's legibility. In addition, the significant shrinkage of the skin, due to decomposition and the periodic drying of the organic material, made it impossible to flatten the inscribed surface as intended. Consequently, the lines of writing are sometimes challenging to discern in photographs (Benoit *et al.* 1961:181). The text of Mur 88 largely adheres to the structure of the Received Text (*Textus Receptus*), as it is divided into *haftarot*, with exceptions noted in column VII 1 (Amos 7:34), column VIII 18 (Amos 9:6-7), and column XXIII 7 (Haggai 2:13-14) (Benoit *et al.* 1961:182). Composed several decades after the Received Text was established, Mur 88 presents several variations when compared to the original Hebrew Bible. Many of these differences such as instances of plene versus defective spellings, or *qere* versus *ketiv* are likely the result of occasional oversights by the scribe, who was otherwise quite meticulous. In addition, some grammatical adjustments may stem from unintentional errors (Benoit *et al.* 1961:183).

2 Concerning 4QXIIg, the condition of the book of Nahum is notably deteriorated, which greatly impedes effective study of the text. First, numerous fragments have several layers of the scroll adhered together. Due to the degradation, letters that appear adjacent may not actually form a single word; they could originate from different layers or sections of the scroll prior to its deterioration. Secondly, in certain fragments, the ink from one layer has created a mirror image impression on the reverse side of the layer above, adding to the difficulty of interpretation. Lastly, much of the text has faded to the point where it is illegible to the naked eye. Consequently, even when examining the original manuscript in a museum, the usual corrections that would assist in verifying interpretations based on photographs are not available (Ulrich 1997:270-271). Although Nahum 1:7-9; 2:9-11, and 3:1-3.17 is so fragmentary, the editors of DJD Qumran Cave 4 attempt to reconstruct Nahum 3:1 (Ulrich 1997:316).

Table 2, especially in the dates section, illustrates that the Hebrew word "דהר" is recognisable from the 1st century B.C.E to the 1st century C.E. (see 4QXIIg, 4QpNah, and the Mur 88). Nevertheless, this Hebrew term appears to pose challenges when translating into non-Semitic languages such as Greek and Latin. Consequently, the LXX and the Vulgate present differing translations. Furthermore, it seems that the Peshitta's translation is influenced by the temporal gap and the LXX, resulting in a distinct translation, while the Masoretic text retains "דהר". The Targum's translation serves as an interpretation of the Hebrew word "דהר".

While existing ancient texts provide an initial semantic range for the Hebrew term "דהר", they are inadequate to determine its exact denotative value within particular literary contexts. The shortcomings of conventional lexical methods, which frequently depend on comparative word lists or mechanically generated glosses, become especially evident when addressing rare or polysemous terms such as "דהר", whose occurrences in the biblical corpus are both sparse and semantically unclear (see Cathcart 1973:112-114; Barr 1961:218-220). This lexical uncertainty calls for a more comprehensive methodological framework, one that surpasses the limitations of isolated word-study techniques. As a result, the current study employs a dual-axis analytical framework. First, it incorporates Semitic languages of "דהר" such as Egyptian and Arabic (Kaufmann 1974:45-63; Mankowski 2000:77-89). Secondly, this research uses a contextual analysis that investigates this Hebrew word in Nahum 3 (Van der Merwe *et al.* 2017:205-208).

6. INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Internal evidence often relies on principles such as *lectio difficilior*, *lectio brevior*, and harmonisation. *Lectio difficilior*, a Latin term meaning "the more difficult reading", is a key concept in textual criticism. It suggests that, when confronted with multiple versions of a text, the one that is more complex or obscure is likely the original. This idea assumes that scribes typically simplified or clarified challenging passages rather than complicating them. As a result, the more difficult reading is often considered more authentic, as it is less likely that a scribe would have modified it in such a way (Tov 2015:307-310). *Lectio brevior*, which translates to "the shorter reading", serves as another guiding principle in textual criticism. It asserts that, when presented with different versions of a text, the more succinct reading is often the original. This belief arises from the understanding that scribes tended to enhance texts by adding material for clarity, consistency, or explanation, rather than omitting it. Therefore, shorter readings are frequently viewed as more authentic, as they are less vulnerable to alterations made by scribes (Tov 2015:307-310). Harmonisation in textual criticism refers to the practice of scribes or copyists

modifying a text to ensure its consistency with another related passage or to resolve perceived discrepancies. This phenomenon commonly occurs in works that feature multiple versions or parallel accounts such as the Gospels in the New Testament or similar narratives in the Hebrew Bible. The harmonisation process may involve changing specific words, phrases, or even entire sections to align them with another text that the scribe considers authoritative or more familiar (Tov 2015:307-310; see Metzger 2005).

Lectio difficilior

All ancient texts depict the might of Nineveh. Therefore, regarding the mysterious Hebrew term "דהר" found in Nahum 3:2, the principle of *lectio difficilior* is not relevant.

Lectio brevior

In the realm of the Old Testament textual criticism, the original reading supports the principle *lectio brevior.* This principle excludes the Vulgate because this Latin translation has one more word than the other ancient texts.

Harmonisation

Nahum 3:2 begins with two "קול" or "voice" to describe "שוט" or "whip", and "רעש" or "quaking". The word "קול" is applicable to the ancient texts such as dasher, pursuing, growling, raging, and jumping (or kicking). However, Nahum 3:1-4 vividly portrays the imagery of victory. The text describes horsemen brandishing gleaming swords and glittering spears, symbols of their triumph. This victorious scene is further emphasised by the mention of a vast multitude of slain and countless corpses. The act of raising weapons in triumph, coupled with the overwhelming devastation left behind, unmistakably confirms their decisive victory. Thus, the translation of the LXX (διώκοντος) is incompatible with Nahum 3:3, as the context expresses triumph rather than pursuit. Similarly, the translations of the Vulgate and the Peshitta do not align with Nahum 3:3, since the sentiment of victory is characterised by happiness and joy, rather than growling and raging. The Targum's translation is appropriate for the context if the term "jumping" signifies triumph. Consequently, the most suitable interpretation based on Nahum 3:2 is "jumping" or "dashing".

7. "דהר" IN THE BOOK OF NAHUM

This article explores the linguistic, literary, and theological ramifications of "דהר" in the book of Nahum.[3] In the latter, the chariot and horse thunder

3 Nevertheless, modern analyses have also investigated its psychological aspects and trauma-informed perspectives (Becking 2024; Wenyi 2021). The Hebrew term "רכבך" in Nahum 2:14

across the text as powerful symbols representing the strength of empires, the rapid execution of divine justice, and the sobering reality that no human authority can endure the fury of God. Nahum 2:3-4 bursts forth with the tumult of warfare: "The chariots shine like flames, their metal glinting in the sunlight; horses dance frantically, pulling at their reins". These were more than mere weapons; they represented the prized possessions of Assyria's military apparatus, the distinguished shock troops driving their ruthless victories (Nahum 3:2-3). Chariots embodied an indomitable power. Horses, the alarming swiftness of their destruction. Together, they solidified Nineveh's standing as an invincible predator. The rhetorical impact of this expression lies in its challenge to human reliance on political or military safety.[4] In a remarkable turn of events, the very tools of Assyria's supremacy transform into the harbingers of its downfall. Yahweh proclaims: "I will incinerate your chariots into smoke!" (Nahum 2:13). The unimaginable occurs; the might of the once invincible empire is diminished to a mere kindling. What previously instilled fear now ignites the flames of retribution. The chariots and horses, which were once emblems of Nineveh's invincibility and triumph, now race towards their own annihilation (Nahum 3:2). Nahum 3:13 presents a decisive conclusion: Assyria's soldiers, despite their numerous chariots and cavalry, are abruptly rendered "women in the face of their foes" – vulnerable, unprotected, and powerless (Reade 1978a:47-72; Smith 1984; Thompson & Hutchinson 1982). The prophet's communication is strikingly clear: No military force, no advanced technology, and no empire can withstand God's command. The formidable war apparatus of Nineveh, now shattered and charred, serves as a stark reminder of divine retribution. Nahum's chariots and horses represent

has sparked considerable debate among scholars, with interpretations varying from references to Assyrian alliances to theological claims of divine justice (Christensen 2009; Hagedorn 2011). Theologically, "רכבך" emphasises Yahweh's authority over nations. The supposed invincibility of Assyria is rendered ineffective by divine command. This is consistent with Nahum's central theme that no worldly power can resist God's judgement (Christensen 2009:165). However, Becking contests oversimplified interpretations of Nahum's theology of vengeance, suggesting that Yahweh's violence directed at Nineveh should be viewed not simply as retribution but as a response to trauma. The exaggerated descriptions of destruction (for instance, Nahum 3:1-7) reflect the harshness that Judah endured under Assyria. In this context, Yahweh transitions from being a punisher to a therapist, enabling Judah to confront its pain by observing the downfall of Nineveh. This perspective diverges from conventional punitive readings (such as those by Christensen 2009), presenting divine wrath as a means of restoration rather than mere vengeance. Consequently, the term serves as a critique of human pride, underscoring the prophetic assertion that genuine security is found in divine loyalty rather than in political partnerships (Hagedorn 2011:180).

4 Becking (2024; 222) interprets this passage through the lens of trauma theory, proposing that Nahum's prophecy acts as a counter-narrative to Judah's suffering under Assyrian rule, transforming the trauma through divine retribution.

more than mere battlefield imagery; they serve as a theological sledgehammer. They proclaim that human arrogance, regardless of how heavily armed, will inevitably break against the solid foundation of God's sovereignty. The fate of Assyria stands as a cautionary tale: those who place their trust in their own might will discover it to be fleeting, while those who revere the Lord will witness His justice triumph (see Haupt 1907:99-107; Luckenbill 1927; Maier 1959; Reade 1978b:157-180).

8. CONCLUSION

What does "דהר" signify in Nahum 3:2? Cognate languages and textual criticism examination suggest that the most accurate interpretation is jumping or dashing in triumph. In the prophetic narrative of the Book of Nahum, the chariot and horse function as complex symbols, intricately woven into the theological and argumentative framework of the text. These elements serve not only as representations of Assyrian military supremacy, but also as literary-theological instruments whereby Nahum critiques imperial hubris and asserts Yahweh's sovereign judgement. The chariot, which symbolises technological advancement and organised combat, together with the horse, which signifies speed, fear, and undeniable dominance, collectively represent the Neo-Assyrian Empire's claim of invincibility (see Nahum 2:3-4; 3:1-4). Their horses and chariots are leaping and racing in victory.

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