


Fir trees or chariots in Nahum 2:4? The study of ancient texts

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Is the phrase 'והפרשים' or 'והברשים' found in Nahum 2:4? The textual tradition is divided. The Septuagint (LXX), the Vulgate, the Targum and the Peshitta support the reading 'והפרשים' in Nahum 1:12, while the Masoretic text preserves 'והברשים'. In addition, this problematic term poses a significant challenge for Hebrew lexicons and English Bible translations. This disagreement prompts significant inquiries regarding the verse's initial phrasing, its interpretation and the origins of the differing readings that emerged during the transmission process.

Contribution: This article employs textual criticism as its primary approach, analysing manuscript evidence, assessing the likelihood of transcription and translation variations, and considering contextual and linguistic elements. This methodology aims to identify the most probable original text and to explore potential explanations for the discrepancies among these ancient sources.

Keywords: Old Testament; textual criticism; English Bible translations; Nahum; והברשים.

Introduction

Ancient translations¹ of Nahum 2:4 are primarily divided into two readings: 'והברשים' and 'והפרשים'. The Greek Septuagint (Rahlfs et al. 2006) opts for 'והפרשים', translating it as 'καὶ οἱ ἵπται' or 'and the horsemen'. Similarly, the Peshitta ('ܡܫܪܝܬܝܗܘܢ' or 'charioteers'), the Targum ('משריתיהון' or 'their troops') and the Vulgate ('agitatores' or 'charioteers') also favour 'והפרשים', while the Masoretic text supports 'והברשים'. Hebrew lexicons reflect this division as well. Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB) Hebrew lexicon endorses 'והברשים' with the interpretation of noble tree, while the Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT) raises a question mark regarding spear-shafts. Modern English Bible translations exhibit similar discrepancies, with the King James Version (KJV) opting for fir trees and the New English Translation (NET) Bible selecting soldiers. This variation underscores the absence of a unified interpretation among ancient texts. The objective of this article is to address this divergence through the application of textual criticism as its main approach.

Research methods and design

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 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 present 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 the comparison and analysis of numerous manuscripts, versions and textual evidence to detect errors, inconsistencies and modifications that have arisen over time (Barthélemy 2012:92). This research focuses on the second objective.

There are three primary methodologies in textual criticism: 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

1. This article adheres to the verse division found in the Masoretic text. Consequently, Nahum 2:4 in the Masoretic text corresponds to Nahum 2:3 in the English Bible.

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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 (cf. Chia 2025:5–16).

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, Biblia Hebraica Quinta and the evaluations

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) apparatus conveys the reading of both the Septuagint (LXX) and the Peshitta. It illustrates the LXX's phrase 'καὶ οἱ ἰππεῖς', which is derived from 'והפרשים' (Elliger et al. 1997:1045). Major criticism directed at the BHS apparatus is its failure to include the entirety of ancient texts, such as those from the Targum and the Vulgate.

Notably, Gelston excludes these variants in both his notes and the commentary of Biblia Hebraica Quinta (BHQ) (Gelston 2010:26). Consequently, BHQ offers less informative content about these reading variants compared to BHS.

Thus, this research aims to enhance the BHS and the BHQ by integrating readings from Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943), the Targum, Murabba'at 88 (the Mur 88), the Hexapla, 4QXII^a and the Vulgate. Additionally, this article endeavours to ascertain the original reading of Nahum 2:4 by employing textual criticism as its methodological approach.

The origin of the textual problem

The textual variants in Nahum 2:4 can be traced back to a singular cause, which is the distinction between the third letter of the word: the 'פ' in 'והפרשים' and the 'ב' in 'והברשים'. In handwritten form, the consonant 'פ' resembles the letter 'ב'. 1QSa text, for example, displays this similarity in the first column. The distinction lies in the fact that the consonant 'ב' features an additional stroke above (Figure 1).

External evidence

This external evidence involves evaluating the age, reliability and geographical distribution of the manuscripts. Generally, older manuscripts are regarded as having more authority. Table 1 displays the ancient translations along with their respective texts and translations, including their estimated *vorlage* and dates.

Table 1 indicates that the Hebrew term 'והפרשים' or 'והברשים' is unknown in Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) (Tov, Kraft & Parsons 1990:44–45), the Origen Hexapla (Field 1875:1001) and 4QXII^a (Ulrich 1997:316) as it is so fragmentary. On the other hand, the Mur 88, also referred to as MurXII or the Wadi Murabba'at Minor Prophets Scroll, contains a similar reading with the Masoretic text, although the text is fragmentary. 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



FIGURE 1: (a) 'פ' on line 22 and (b) 'ב' on line 21.

refuge caves of Wadi Murabba'at. The presence of human bones and clothing found in the same location indicates a grave, 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 because of 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. Additionally, the significant shrinkage of the skin because of 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, Milik & De Vaux 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 (Am 7:34), column VIII 18 (Am 9:6–7) and column XXIII 7 (Hg 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

TABLE 1: Ancient translations along with their respective texts and translations.

Number	Source	Text	Translation	Vorlage	Dates
1	Masoretic Text	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	And the cypress (fir)	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Aleppo Codex: 930 CE Leningrad Codex: 1008–1010 CE
2	Septuagint	καὶ οἱ ἵπποι	And the horsemen	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Around 2nd century BCE
3	Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943)	(no available information)	(no translation)	(unknown)	Late 1st century BCE or early 1st century CE Around 50 BCE – 50 CE
4	Peshitta	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	And the charioteers	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Around 2nd – 3rd century CE
5	Vulgate	et agitatores	And the charioteers	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Late 4th century CE
6	Targum	מִשְׁרֵיתָיו	Their troops	וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Around 13th–14th century CE
7	Hexapla	(no available information)	(no translation)	(unknown)	230–245 CE
8	Murabba'at 88 (the Mur 88)	[וְהַכְרִשִׁים]	And the cypress or and the charioteers	וְהַכְרִשִׁים וְהַכְרִשִׁים	Around 132–135 CE
9	4QXII ^g	(no available information)	(no translation)	(unknown)	The last third of the 1st century BCE (Late Hasmonean or Early Herodian period)

meticulous. Additionally, some grammatical adjustments may stem from unintentional errors (Benoit et al. 1961:183). Concerning 4QXII^g, the condition of the book of Nahum is notably deteriorated, which greatly impedes effective study of the text. Firstly, numerous fragments have several layers of the scroll adhered together. Because of 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; Nahum 2:9–11 and Nahum 3:1–17 are so fragmentary, the editors of DJD Qumran Cave 4 attempt to reconstruct Nahum 3:1. The editors find that 4QXII^g contains a similar reading with the Masoretic text '[וְהַכְרִשִׁים]' (Ulrich 1997:316).

External evidence supports the reading 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים' as it is confirmed by the earliest known source: the LXX, which dates to around 2nd century BCE. In addition, this reading is corroborated by the Vulgate, the Targum and the Peshitta.

Internal evidence

This internal evidence often relies on principles such as *lectio difficilior*, *lectio brevior* and harmonisation (cf. Chia 2025:5–16). *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).

Lectio difficilior

In the context of the problematic Hebrew word 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים' or 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים' in Nahum 2:4, the principle of *lectio difficilior* rules out Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943), the Hexapla and 4QXII^g because there is inadequate information. The Hebrew term 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים' seems to present a more challenging interpretation, as this word is not found in the book of Nahum. Additionally, it interrupts the narrative concerning the army of Nineveh in Nahum 2:3–4.

Lectio brevior

Within the field of Old Testament textual criticism, the original reading aligns with the principle of *lectio brevior*. Nevertheless, the concept of *lectio brevior* proves unhelpful, as ancient texts exhibit identical word lengths, consisting of merely a single word.²

Harmonisation: The immediate context, Nahum 2:3–4, favours the reading 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים'. The text pictures the army of Nineveh (see Table 2). Barthélemy (1992:803–806) identifies Old Testament scholars who support the translation of the Masoretic text 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים', yet they do not adhere to a literal interpretation. Rather, they suggest that 'וְהַכְרִשִׁים' or 'serves as a figure of speech (just go to 'a synecdoche of material'), where the term refers to the product (spear-shafts) rather than the material (cypress wood) from which it is constructed (Cathcart 1973:89). Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew lexicon

2. This principle also cannot be applied to Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) due to the lacunae in the scroll.

TABLE 2: Nahum 2:3–4.

Verse	Hebrew text	English translation
2:3	מגן	Shield
2:3	גבריהו	His mighty men
2:3	אנשיחיל	Valiant men
2:3	הרכב	The chariot
2:4	הרכב	The chariot

acknowledges 'והפרשים', but asserts that it carries a figurative connotation in Nahum 2:4, referring to spear-shafts. Thus, the context of Nahum 2:3–4 and the interpretation of Old Testament scholars favour 'והפרשים'.

Alongside the context provided in Nahum 2:3–4, Nahum 3:3 also incorporates the Hebrew term 'פרש', which translates to horseman. This indicates that the Hebrew word 'והפרשים' is not unfamiliar within the text of Nahum, contrary to 'והברשים'. The narrative of Nahum illustrates the devastation of Nineveh, encompassing its city, military forces and inhabitants (Wiseman 1951), yet it does not address the destruction of their trees or vegetation. In summary, the principle of harmonisation supports the reading 'והפרשים'.

'והפרשים' in Nahum 2:4

Textual criticism involves analysing manuscripts to identify the most trustworthy version of a written work, especially when various versions are available. This process primarily utilises two types of evidence: internal and external.³ Is the phrase 'והפרשים' or 'והברשים' found in Nahum 2:4? External evidence supports the interpretations found in LXX, which is considered as the earliest known source, dating back to around the early 2nd century BCE. In addition to the LXX, the Targum, the Peshitta and the Vulgate favour the reading 'והפרשים'. However, there is an issue identified in Nahum 1:12 that lies in the internal evidence, where there is a notable absence of agreement. For instance, the principles of *lectio difficilior* lead to the conclusion that the Masoretic text reflects the original reading. In contrast, the principle of harmonisation supports the readings of the LXX, the Targum, the Vulgate and the Peshitta.⁴

3. Internal evidence is frequently regarded as more precise in specific situations, as it examines the text itself, whereas external evidence depends on external factors, including historical context or the age of the manuscripts. Initially, internal evidence scrutinises the text's content, style and linguistic characteristics. This analysis encompasses grammar, vocabulary and literary patterns that are inherent to the author's work. As internal evidence originates from the text itself, it circumvents the potential biases or uncertainties linked to external elements such as manuscript dating or provenance. Furthermore, internal evidence aids in identifying inconsistencies or irregularities that may suggest scribal mistakes, interpolations or later modifications (Parker 2008). For instance, if a section employs vocabulary or syntax that deviates from the rest of the text, it may be identified as non-original. Scholars such as E.J. Epp and Gordon Fee assert that internal evidence is vital for grasping the author's intent and style, which are essential for reconstructing the original text (Epp & Fee 1993). Additionally, internal evidence assesses how well a reading corresponds with the immediate context of the passage and the overall work. A reading that resonates with the author's thematic and theological concerns is typically favoured. This methodology is emphasised in Bruce Metzger's *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (2005), where he contends that internal evidence aids in resolving textual variants by considering the author's probable meaning. Consequently, external evidence, such as the age or geographical distribution of manuscripts, can occasionally be misleading. In contrast, internal evidence is less prone to such biases because it concentrates on the text's inherent qualities rather than external influences.

4. This research omits internal evidence analysis of Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) as the text is so fragmentary (cf. Tov, Kraft & Parsons 1990:44–51). Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll has a similar reading with the LXX. Nahum 1:13–14 are one of the examples. The differences are in the lacunae. In other words, the differences appear in the *constructed* text: ὑπὲρ σοῦ (the LXX) vs ἐπὶ σοί (Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll) and τὰ γλυπτὰ (the LXX) vs γλυπτὸν (Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll) in Nahum 1:14.

TABLE 3: Original reading is 'והפרשים' that is found in the LXX, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum.

Evaluation	'והפרשים' or 'והברשים' in Nahum 2:4	
	Evidence	Sources
Internal		
1	Harmonisation	The LXX, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum
2	<i>Lectio difficilior</i>	The Masoretic text
3	<i>Lectio brevior</i>	Not applicable
External		
1	The age of manuscript	The LXX, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum

The principle of harmonisation, derived from contextual and historical analysis, is the foremost focus of this research. This principle is crucial as it assesses what the author likely intended to convey, considering style, vocabulary, context and literary coherence. Following this principle, the next priority in the analysis is *lectio difficilior*. This principle posits that readings which are more challenging are often the original versions, as scribes typically tended to simplify, clarify or smooth out difficult passages rather than complicate them or alter their length by adding or reducing the text. The final principle related to internal evidence is *lectio brevior*. While this principle indicates that shorter readings are generally favoured – because scribes frequently added explanatory content – this guideline is not infallible. There are instances where scribes may have inadvertently left out words or phrases, particularly because of homoioteleuton, where similar endings lead to line omissions. Nonetheless, they were more inclined to insert glosses or harmonise texts, which makes *lectio difficilior* a more dependable criterion overall.

Table 3 indicates that the original reading is 'והפרשים' that is found in the LXX, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum. The book of Nahum serves as a prophetic declaration foretelling the demise of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, notorious for its cruelty (Nah 3:1, 19).

Although Jonah had previously called for repentance in Nineveh (Jnh 3), the city had reverted to its sinful ways (Baker 1988). The Assyrians had subjugated Israel and Judah; however, Nahum proclaims that God will terminate their military power (Longman 1999). The following is an examination of Nahum's portrayal of the annihilation of Nineveh's forces (Robertson 1990). Thus, the reading 'והפרשים' aligns with the theme of Nahum that God brings an end to their military strength, rather than to their trees or plants.

Conclusion

The examination of ancient translations 'והפרשים' or 'והברשים' in Nahum 2:4 presents a complex challenge because of the conflicting principles of *lectio difficilior* and harmonisation with internal evidence. External evidence aligns with interpretations found in the LXX, which is regarded as the oldest text, dating back to approximately the 2nd

century BCE. In addition, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum also align with the LXX. The principle of *lectio difficilior* prefers the Masoretic text, while the principle of harmonisation favours reading from the LXX, the Peshitta, the Vulgate and the Targum. Nevertheless, this research argues that the principle of harmonisation is more advantageous than the principle of *lectio difficilior*. This study contends that when inconsistencies arise within internal evidence, priority should be given to lexical, contextual and historical analysis. Subsequently, the principle of *lectio difficilior* should be applied, with *lectio brevior* considered only as a last resort. As a result, this research reveals that the original reading is reflected LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate and Targum 'והפרשים'. This terminology highlights the theme of the book of Nahum, which conveys that God brings an end to their city, army and inhabitants.

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Author's contribution

P.S.C. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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