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Author(s): John R. Huddlestun

Source: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (April 2003), pp. 97-110

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/376364>

Accessed: 12/05/2013 12:24

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NAHUM, NINEVEH, AND THE NILE:  
THE DESCRIPTION OF THEBES IN NAHUM 3:8–9\*

JOHN R. HUDDLESTUN, *College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina*

I. INTRODUCTION

WELL before the advent of modern biblical criticism, translators and interpreters of the Hebrew text puzzled over the identification of  $n\bar{o}^2\text{-}^2\bar{a}m\bar{o}n$  in Nahum 3:8–9. In the Septuagint, confusion over how to translate the opening words of verse 8 ( $h\bar{a}t\bar{e}l^2\bar{t}b\bar{i} minn\bar{o}^2\text{-}^2\bar{a}m\bar{o}n$ ) is evident in what appear to be multiple renderings, some of which may have originated as glosses.<sup>1</sup> In rabbinic tradition, No-Amon is interpreted as the Delta city Alexandria, a rendering adopted and defended by Jerome in the Vulgate.<sup>2</sup> With one or two exceptions,

\* Portions of the following were delivered in a paper at the 1998 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting (Orlando). I am indebted to John Baines, Peter Machinist, Robert D. Miller, and Peter Piccione for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

<sup>1</sup> The LXX reads “Prepare the (sacrificial?) portions (*merida*), arrange the entrails (*khordēn*), prepare the portions, Amon,” evidently reading  $mn^2$  as  $mnh$  “portion, share” (for possible sacrificial context, see references in LSJ 1104 [sub *meris*] and 703 [sub *etoimazō*] and LXX of Exod. 29:26; Lev. 7:23, 8:28; 1 Kings 1:4–5, 9:23; Num. 23:4; and Zeph. 1:7). For discussion, see Smith in J. M. Powis Smith, William H. Ward, and Julius A. Bewer, *Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Joel*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 356; J. van Doorslaer, “No Amon” *CBQ* 11 (1949): 280–95, esp. 288; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Micah—Nahum—Habakkuk—Zephaniah*, KAT 13/3 (Berlin, 1975), p. 181, n. b; J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, OTL (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 70; and Klaas Spronk, *Nahum*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Kampen, The Netherlands, 1997), p. 127. This contrasts with the Greek minor prophets scroll, which, while not free of its own problems, better reflects the Hebrew (see reconstructed text in Emanuel Tov, *The Greek Minor Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever (8HevXIIgr)*, Discoveries in the Judaean Desert, vol. 8 [Oxford, 1990], p. 49).

<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Targum Onqelos on Nahum 3:8; Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. 3, *The Latter Prophets according to Targum Jonathan* (Leiden, 1992), p. 457; Judah Theodor and Hanoch Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edi-*

*tion with Notes and Commentary* (repr. of 1903–36 edition with additional corrections by Albeck), 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 1–2; Shlomo Buber, ed., *Pesiqta: ve-hi aggadat Erets Yisra<sup>2</sup>el, meyuheset le-Rav Kahan<sup>2</sup>* (Lyck, 1868; repr., New York, 1949), p. 64a; and Rashi on Nahum 3:8 in *Miqra<sup>2</sup>ot Gedolot*. The reasons for this interpretation are not entirely clear. One possible explanation links the reading of No to the conflict among Alexandria’s Jews, Greeks, and Egyptians and the anti-Jewish riots in the first century C.E. For recent treatments, see John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 48–81, and Peter Schafer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge and London, 1997), pp. 136–60.

The Vulgate reads *numquid melior es ab Alexandria populorum*, “Certainly you are not better than Alexandria of the multitude,” apparently taking  $^2mwn$  as *hmwn* (see also Ezek. 30:15 and Targum there). In his commentary on Nahum, Jerome explains his translation, noting that “a Hebrew who instructed me in the scriptures claimed that it could be read this way . . . , and he says ‘in Hebrew, Alexandria is referred to as No’” (translation mine; *S. Eusebii Hieronymi, Opera Omnia*, vols. 5–6, Patrologia latina 25 [Paris, 1845], col. 1260). Jerome later comments on the position of Alexandria: “And the layout of Alexandria is described, which is located on the Nile and on the sea, on this side and on that side it is surrounded by waters and rivers . . . on this side it is surrounded by the River Nile, on that side by Lake Mariut, and from another side the sea” (translation mine; *S. Eusebii Hieronymi, Opera Omnia*, col. 1260C). For further discussion of Jerome on Nahum, see Yves-Marie Duval, “Jérôme et les prophètes,” *Congress Volume, Vetus Testamentum Supplement*, vol. 36 (Leiden, 1985), pp. 108–31, esp. pp. 110–14.

[*JNES* 62 no. 2 (2003)]

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0022–2968/2003/6202–0002\$10.00.

modern scholarship has associated the toponym, and the event referred to in 3:8–9, with the Egyptian Thebes of Upper or southern Egypt and its sack by the Assyrians in ca. 663 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as many have noted, this identification is not entirely consistent with the biblical text's portrait of that city as one encircled by water and protected by the sea. Thebes is far removed from the Mediterranean Sea, and, although situated on the banks of the Nile, one could hardly characterize the city as surrounded by water. The problematic description has occupied both Egyptologists and biblical scholars, who have offered various solutions—geographical, grammatical, and mythological—to reconcile the biblical portrait with the layout of the city. In what follows, I assume that the No-Amon of Nahum refers to the celebrated Thebes of southern Egypt, but I depart from the majority in offering a different explanation for the biblical text's portrayal of the city.<sup>4</sup> Following a critical survey of past scholarship, I examine the defensive intent of the analogy (Nineveh compared to Thebes), the biblical writer's knowledge of Nineveh and its environs, and consider the latter as a neglected source of inspiration for the description of Thebes. The passage in question translates as follows:

Are you (Nineveh) better than No-Amon (Thebes),  
situated on the streams (of the Nile),  
water encircling her;

<sup>3</sup> For the Neo-Assyrian accounts, see James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, 1969), pp. 295, 297, and Hans-Ulrich Onasch, *Die assyrischen Eroberungen Ägyptens. Teil 1: Kommentare und Anmerkungen, Ägypten und Altes Testament 27/2* (Wiesbaden, 1994), pp. 108–9 (Vs. 71'–Rs.11), pp. 122–23 (lines 28–48), pp. 124–25 (lines 37–50); discussion in Anthony Spalinger, "Assurbanipal and Egypt: A Source Study," *JAOS* 94 (1974): 316–28; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 B.C.)*, 2d ed. (Warminster, England, 1986), pp. 394–95; T. G. H. James, "Egypt: The Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Dynasties," in John Boardman et al., eds., *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2d ed., vol. 3, pt. 2 (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 677–747, esp. 701–2; and Onasch, *Die assyrischen Eroberungen*, pp. 156–58.

<sup>4</sup> The consensus of modern scholarship that Hebrew *n<sup>2</sup>* refers to Thebes (examples in previous note) finds etymological support in occurrences of the same designation elsewhere in the ancient Near East (for example, Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, Hittite, Aramaic, Greek, Coptic; see generally, Yoshiyuki Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic*, SBL Dissertation Series 173 [Atlanta, 1999], pp. 161–62, 231). Compare Egyptian *njw jmnw* "(the) city of Amon," a common designation for Upper Egyptian Thebes (see C. Lagier, "No-Amon, No" in *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, vol. 4, ed. F. Vigouroux [Paris, 1908], cols. 1635–54, esp. 1635; *nw.t* in A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 7 vols. [Leipzig and Berlin, 1926–63], vol. 2, p. 211, n. 7 [also *njw* alone as Thebes]; Henri Gauthier, *Dictionnaire des noms géographiques con-*

*tenus dans les textes hiéroglyphiques*, 7 vols. [Cairo, 1925–31], vol. 3, p. 76; Werner Vycichl, "Ägyptische Ortsnamen in der Bibel," *ZÄS* 76 [1940]: 79–93, esp. 83–84; Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, 3 vols. [London, 1947], vol. 2, pp. 24\*–25\*; Onasch, *Die assyrischen Eroberungen*, p. 57). For Neo-Assyrian *Ni<sup>2</sup>*, see Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Niniveh's*, VAB 7, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1916), vol. 2, pp. 10, 14–17, 160, 164, and Simo Parpola, *Neo-Assyrian Toponyms*, AOAT 6 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970), p. 261. For Aramaic *n<sup>2</sup>*, see A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford, 1923), text nos. 24, lines 18, 36 (p. 79), 34, lines 3–4 (pp. 127–28), 37, line 6 (p. 133), and Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1, *Letters*, The Hebrew University, Department of the History of the Jewish People, Texts and Studies for Students (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1986), p. 60. A few have disputed the identification in Nahum, most notably Julius Wellhausen, who argued (contra Schrader's ca. 660 date for the book) that 3:8 could hardly refer to the Assyrian sack of Thebes, although he did not elaborate on the identification of No-Amon (J. Wellhausen, *Die kleinen Propheten übersetzt und erklärt*, 3d ed. [Berlin, 1898], pp. 163–64; compare the response of W. Nowack, *Die kleinen Propheten übersetzt und erklärt*, 2d ed., Handkommentar zum Alten Testament III/4 [Göttingen, 1903], pp. 264–65). A more recent challenge to the equation of No-Amon with Thebes was the 1949 attempt of Van Doorslaer ("No Amon"), who defended the Vulgate reading for a city in the Delta.

whose (outer) wall is the sea,<sup>5</sup>  
water her (inner) wall (of defensive)? (v. 8)

Kush and Egypt (were) her strength unending;  
Put and (the) Libyans were her allies.<sup>6</sup> (v. 9)

## II. THEBES AS A MODEL FOR NINEVEH: THE PROBLEM AND SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

As noted above, Rabbinic tradition, followed by Jerome, understood the No-Amon of Nahum 3:8 to be the Delta city Alexandria, virtually isolated by the Mediterranean Sea and Lake Mariut. As early as the seventeenth century, some interpreters had departed from this interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In 1879, Heinrich Brugsch equated Hebrew No-Amon with Thebes (“a very exact transcription” of the Egyptian *njwṯ-Jmnw*), although he was troubled by the biblical description.<sup>8</sup> In a well-known study of Nahum 3:8, the noted Egyptologist Wilhelm Spiegelberg concluded that the Theban topography as described in Nahum was in no way suitable to the Karnak/Luxor area and that it was inconceivable (“einfach undenkbar”) that Thebes could have been protected strategically by the Nile or canals.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, according to Spiegelberg, the description was well suited to a typical city of the Delta, situated on one of the Nile mouths. The best candidate, he believed, both in terms of name and topography, was the Delta site Tell el-Balamun, for which links to the god Amun were attested.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For “outer wall,” or some type of outer defense, see the combination of *hyl* and *hwmh* in 2 Sam. 20:15–16, and Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1, *Social Institutions* (London, 1961), p. 233. Qumran’s 4Q169 (pNah), the LXX, and the Vulgate read *hylh*, “her wall” (4Q169 with pl.), paralleling *hwmth* at the end of the verse.

<sup>6</sup> I follow the LXX and Syriac in reading a 3fs suffix, thus *b<sup>c</sup>zrth* (contrast Targum Jonathan *bs<sup>c</sup>dykh* and Vulgate *tu*). While earlier scholars interpreted *pwt* as the land of Punt mentioned in Egyptian texts, a more plausible explanation links both *pwt* and *lwbym* to Libya/Libyans (for example, Jan J. Simons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament: A Concise Commentary in XXXII Chapters* [Leiden, 1959], pp. 56, 76; Thomas O. Lambdin, “Libya” and “Put” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3 [Nashville, 1962], pp. 123–24 and 971). For *pwt*, see Erhart Graefe, “Der libysche Stammesname *p(j)d(j)/pjt* im spätzeitlichen Onomastikon,” *Enchoria* 5 (1975): 13–17; Anthony Spalinger, “Egypt and Babylonia: A Survey (c. 620 B.C.–550 B.C.),” *SÄK* 5 (1977): 221–44, esp. 238; and Jürgen Osing, “Libyen, Libyer” in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf, eds., *Lexikon der Ägyptologie (LÄ)*, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1975–92), vol. 3, pp. 1015–33, esp. 1016.

<sup>7</sup> See Doorslaer, “No-Amon,” p. 280, and Spronk, *Nahum*, p. 127, for earlier scholarship.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Karl Brugsch, *Dictionnaire géographique de l’ancienne Égypte* (Leipzig, 1879–80; repr. with Supplement, Hildesheim and New York, 1974), see NAĪ-ĀMUN (*njwṯ-Jmnw*), p. 28. Under a later

entry (his NAĪ-MEH [*njwṯ-mh*], “city of the north,” pp. 289–92), Brugsch raised the possibility of a Delta Diospolis being the site to which Nahum might refer, given it would suit the description of a city that is “fortified, situated on the sea and surrounded by canals” (p. 291). He concluded, however, that these arguments for a Delta site were of little value if one wishes to identify Nahum’s No-Amon as Thebes of Upper Egypt (*ibid.*).

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Spiegelberg, *Aegyptologische Randglossen zum Alten Testament* (Strasbourg, 1904), pp. 31–36, esp. p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Tell el-Balamun (Egyptian *sm<sup>3</sup> bhdt* [the 12th nome of Lower Egypt] and *p<sup>3</sup>-jw-n-Jmnw*, “The Island of Amun”) was known in classical tradition as the Lesser Thebes (of the north; Greek, *Diospolis hē katō*; Latin, *Diospolis inferior*), as opposed to Thebes proper (Greek, *Diospolis hē megalē*; Latin, *Diospolis superior/magna*). See Gauthier, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 2, p. 54; vol. 3, p. 77; vol. 4, p. 49; vol. 5, pp. 33–34; Gardiner, “Horus the Beḥdetite,” *JEA* 30 (1944): 23–60, esp. 41–46, and his *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, vol. 2, pp. 180\*–81\*; Manfred Bietak, *Tell el-Dab<sup>a</sup> II*, Untersuchungen der Zweigstelle Kairo des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1975), pp. 110–12 and Plan 4. Recent excavations at the site (spring 1995) have uncovered further inscriptional evidence (a statue of Ramses II) confirming the long-held view of its identity (Jeffrey A. Spencer, *Excavations at Tell el-Balamun, 1995–98* [London, 1999], p. 74, pls. 81–83; I thank the author for this reference).

Others objected to Spiegelberg's proposal. For example, Lagier responded that the description in Nahum better suited Thebes insofar as this was the only city of Egypt situated on both banks of the Nile, and thus the waters of the river could be viewed as its wall.<sup>11</sup> While one does find a handful of Egyptian texts that speak metaphorically of the river's waters as a wall, these refer to conditions in the Delta, not Thebes. More importantly, Lagier offered no explanation as to how the Nile at Thebes would then serve as a *defensive* wall, which is clearly the point of the comparison with Nineveh. If anything, the river would facilitate easy access to both Luxor-Karnak on the eastern bank and the largely mortuary monuments of the west bank. Nevertheless, both Lagier and Smith drew attention to what is perhaps the most serious weakness in Spiegelberg's Delta location: the fact that the comparison would lose its force if Nineveh were likened to a less-known or less-powerful city of the Delta.<sup>12</sup> One thinks here also of the linkage of two celebrated cities, each symbolic of their respective empires. Moreover, the comparison is successful only with the Assyrian sack of the Upper Egyptian Thebes (663 B.C.E.) and the Medeo-Babylonian destruction or the anticipation of such of Nineveh (612 B.C.E.) in mind.

Smith maintained that the sealike appearance of the city during the inundation season best explained the presence of *ym* in the verse: "At such times, the city might well have been described as protected by a sea, or surrounded by waters."<sup>13</sup> For the Nile as defense, he cited the role of the river in the conquest of Memphis in the victory stela of the Kushite king Piye.<sup>14</sup> His use of the stela at this point, however, undermined his argument, since the high water level (due to the inundation) in this case *facilitated*, rather than hindered, the capture of the city, allowing the Kushite army to mount the city walls.<sup>15</sup>

As for  $y^2rym$  of 3:8, various interpretations, both grammatical and geographical, have been offered. For example, the plural has been characterized as intensive or one of majesty, amplification, or extent. Others see here a possible reference to the canals in and around Thebes, or the handful of channels or courses, reconstructed in some early maps, into which the river is believed to have separated at this point.<sup>16</sup> While none would deny

<sup>11</sup> See C. Lagier, "No-Amon, No," col. 1651.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1650 and Smith, *Nahum*, p. 341.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Nahum*, p. 341.

<sup>14</sup> Text in Nicolas-Christophe Grimal, *La stèle triomphale de Pi(ankh)y au Musée du Caire JE 48862 et 47086-47089*, Études sur la propagande royale égyptienne 1, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire 105 (Cairo, 1981), pp. 30\*-33\*; translation in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, vol. 3, *The Late Period* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 66-84, esp. 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> Following Grimal, *La stèle triomphale*, p. 115, n. 334 (contrast Hans Goedicke, *Pi(ankh)y in Egypt: A Study of the Pi(ankh)y Stela* [Baltimore, 1998], pp. 93-94). Although the text does at one point (line 88) state that the city's east side was protected by the river (*jtrw*), or possibly a branch of it, as Breasted noted long ago (James H. Breasted, trans., *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 5 vols. [Chicago, 1906-7], vol. 4, p. 433, n. a), this statement is rhetorical, given that it was precisely on this harbor side that Piye and his army

were able to mount the walls because of the high water (see also Grimal, *La stèle*, p. 113, n. 324 on the literary character of the text). Moreover, the text mentions the Nile in connection with various fortifications (ramparts, enclosure walls, battlements, etc.), none of which were a factor in the sack of Thebes (for Memphis, see also Esarhaddon's account in *ANET*, p. 293 and Onasch, *Die assyrischen Eroberungen*, p. 24; compare the description of Diodorus in C. H. Oldfather, trans., *Diodorus of Sicily I: Books I-II.34*, Loeb Classical Library 279 [Cambridge and London, 1933], bk. 1, chap. 50, esp. 178-79).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Paul Haupt, "The Book of Nahum," *JBL* 26 (1907): 1-53, esp. 30-31 ("intensive"); E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, trans. and eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1910), p. 398, par. 124e ("plural of amplification"); Smith, *Nahum*, p. 356 (*pluralis majestatis*). For canals, see, among others, Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum* (St. Louis, 1959), p. 316; Simons, *Texts of the Old Testament*, p. 69; and Rudolph, *Nahum*, p. 181.

the presence of canals and waterways in ancient Thebes—such allowed access to inland temple complexes, particularly during festival processions—these did not surround the city, nor is there evidence that they served any type of defensive intent.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, Kitchen has argued for the accuracy of the description in Nahum, citing Egypt's defensive use of the Delta branches and the distance of Thebes from the Delta.<sup>18</sup> One recalls here statements attributed to Ramesses III in the Medinet Habu temple inscriptions regarding his sea battles with the Sea Peoples (not cited by Kitchen), for example, "I commanded that the Nile mouth be made ready like a strong wall with warships, galleys, and coasters," while elsewhere the king states that those who entered into the mouths of the Delta were slaughtered or ensnared like birds in a net.<sup>19</sup> Could not Nahum's wall of water be taken metaphorically as indicating the resistance the Assyrians, or any approaching military force, would have met in the Delta?<sup>20</sup> Such a reading is attractive, especially when taken in conjunction with Spiegelberg's case for the Delta (although Kitchen is not advocating a Delta location for No-Amon). There is nothing in the biblical text, however, that would support the notion of *long-distance* defense. On the contrary, the biblical text stresses the *immediate proximity* of the water and "sea," and the success of the comparison with Nineveh—with its rivers, walls, and moats—hinges, I believe, upon this similarity. Thus, Kitchen's appeal to Thebes's distance from the sea as a form of defense is weak in this regard. In fact, the Egyptian evidence for the Delta mouths as protection from enemy incursion, noted by Kitchen and seen above in texts from Medinet Habu, only lends further credence to the proposal of Spiegelberg that Nahum's description of No-Amon is not suitable to Thebes proper but is more in line with those insular and aquatically fortified cites of the Delta.<sup>21</sup>

Some offer what might be termed a mythological interpretation, taking the waters of Thebes to be the waters of the netherworld or chaos or the waters of Nun from which dry

<sup>17</sup> For a recent reconstruction of the Theban area, see Sydney Aufrère, Jean-Claude Golvin, and Jean-Claude Goyon, *L'Égypte restituée: Sites et temples de haute Égypte (1650 av J.-C.–300 ap. J.-C.)* (Paris, 1991), pp. 72–73, 82–83.

<sup>18</sup> "The Nile, Nahum's 'rivers', was truly Thebes' defense. The Late Period pharaohs made full use of its E[ast] Delta branches and irrigation and drainage canals as Egypt's first line of defense, with seacoast forts at the Nile mouths and across the road from Palestine—perhaps alluded to in the phrase 'wall(s) from the sea' (coast inwards?). To this protection was added Thebes' great distance upstream, which invaders had to traverse to reach her" (see entry "Thebes" in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. [Leicester, 1982], p. 1192). Note the similar comments of Doorslaer, "No-Amon," p. 285.

<sup>19</sup> Egyptian *dj.j grg r3-h3t mj sbtj nht m h'w h3 mnšw b3jr(w)*; The Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu I: The Earlier Records of Rameses III*, OIP 8 (Chicago, 1930), pl. 46, line 20; also pls. 28, line 53 and 42, lines 5–6 (= Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions, Historical and Biographical*, 8 vols. [Oxford, 1968–90], vol. 5, p. 40, lines 7–9; also p. 25, lines 7–8; p. 33, lines 5–6). For translations, see

William F. Edgerton and John A. Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramesses III: The Texts in Medinet Habu*, vols. 1 and 2, SAOC, no. 12 (Chicago, 1936), p. 54; also references to Nile mouths on pp. 31, 41–42, and 55.

<sup>20</sup> In his account of the attempted Persian-Greek invasion of Egypt in 373 B.C.E., Diodorus describes how Nectanebo I fortified the Nile mouths of the Delta (esp. the Pelusiac) through the creation of artificial channels, the intentional flooding of land to protect against infantry attack, and the erection of embankments (perhaps then submerged at the time of the inundation) to block enemy encroachment. The campaign was finally aborted due to the rising waters of the inundation (Oldfather, *Diodorus*, bk. 15, chaps. 41–43, pp. 61–69; see also bk. 20, chap. 76).

<sup>21</sup> For topography of the Delta, see Karl W. Butzer, "Delta," *LÄ*, vol. 1, pp. 1043–52, esp. 1044; idem, *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt: A Study in Cultural Ecology* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 12–25; and Manfred Bietak, "Urban Archaeology and the 'Town Problem' in Ancient Egypt," in Kent R. Weeks, ed., *Egyptology and the Social Sciences: Five Studies* (Cairo, 1979), pp. 97–144, esp. 100–105.



land emerged.<sup>22</sup> Others see here as well an allusion to Yahweh's conquest of the primordial waters (*ym*).<sup>23</sup> While I agree that other passages in Nahum can be understood to carry mythological overtones (for example, 1:4), I am not convinced that such is the case with our particular verse. Unlike Isaiah 19:5–6 and Zechariah 10:11, where *ym* is paralleled with *y<sup>3</sup>wr* and *nhr* in an arguably mythological context,<sup>24</sup> other than the presence of *ym* here, there is no hint of any mythological theme. Yahweh does not smite Thebes or dry up the waters, nor does the city exhibit any attitude of arrogance or present itself as a threat. Rather, the image of Thebes in Nahum is a more concrete and practical one, dealing with fortifications and mercenaries.<sup>25</sup> The immediate context, then, I submit, is not conducive to a mythological reading of these verses.

The fullest treatment of the problem to date is that of Thomas Schneider, who vigorously defends the biblical portrait as indicative of a familiarity with the geographical situation of Thebes, perhaps the familiarity of a mercenary soldier who knew the city firsthand.<sup>26</sup> The author offers the following translation of Nahum 3:8: “. . . No-Amon, das an den Nilläufen liegt, / ihr Vorwerk ist die Nilüberschwemmung, Wasser ihre Mauer.”<sup>27</sup> Schneider thus understands *ym* to refer explicitly to the *inundation* of the Nile, rather than the river generally. The success of his argument follows upon two assumptions, the second more crucial than the first.

First, Schneider surveys briefly the various ways scholars have understood the problematic plural *y<sup>3</sup>rym* in v. 8a and concludes that any attempt to solve the question must go back to the geographical situation of Thebes in the seventh century B.C.E. and must examine evidence for the ancient course of the Nile. For this, he appeals to nineteenth-century (C.E.) maps and descriptions of the Theban area, which illustrate or refer to islands situated on the river's east (Luxor) side. Such “islands,” according to the author, are also mentioned in Egyptian texts in connection with Thebes, namely, the “Island of Amun” and the “Island of Amenope.” In light of these, the author argues that one can assume on good grounds that the Thebes of Nahum's time was situated on a Nile consisting of various courses (“Nilläufe”), owing to the islands in the river's midst, and that these explain the use of *y<sup>3</sup>rym* in the text.<sup>28</sup> A handful of maps from the early nineteenth century C.E.,

<sup>22</sup> See Alfred Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum*, Uppsala Universitets, Årsskrift 1946, no. 7 (Uppsala and Leipzig, 1946), p. 139; John H. Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (London, 1961), p. 74; John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 119; and Spronk, *Nahum*, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Richard J. Coggins and S. Paul Re'em, *Israel among the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of Nahum, Obadiah and Esther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> For Isaiah 19 and Zechariah 10, see my “‘Who Is This That Rises Like the Nile?': A Comparative Study of the River Nile in Ancient Egypt and the Hebrew Bible” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996) (forthcoming in *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*), chap. 4.

<sup>25</sup> The reference to Kush and Libya/Put as allies could reflect the presence of Kushites and Libyans as auxiliary/mercenary troops in the Egyptian military,

but the formulaic, and at times inaccurate, listing of similar groupings of allies elsewhere in the biblical text suggests the possibility of a stock literary convention where names have been selected or arranged more for euphonious effect (discussion in Walter Zimmerli, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48*, trans. James D. Martin [Philadelphia, 1983], pp. 59–60, 129–30).

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Schneider, “Nahum und Theben: Zum topographisch-historischen Hintergrund von Nah 3,8f,” *Biblische Notizen* 44 (1988): 63–72, esp. 64, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Schneider, “Nahum und Theben,” p. 68. More recently, Bernd Schipper has embraced the interpretation of Schneider in his *Israel und Ägypten in der Königszeit: Die kulturellen Kontakte von Salomo bis zum Fall Jerusalems*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 170 (Freiburg, Switzerland and Göttingen, 1999), pp. 224–25.

<sup>28</sup> Schneider, “Nahum und Theben,” pp. 64–65.

however, does not in and of itself provide sufficient evidence to determine topographical conditions in Thebes of the seventh century B.C.E. As Nims noted in his important review of Otto's work on the Theban district, modern maps, from the time of Napoleon to the present, vary in the number and placement of these islands (essentially elevated tracts of arable land periodically isolated by the flood waters), a result of the changing course of the river.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, Schneider offers no explanation for how the existence of such "islands" might account for the description in Nahum. Presumably, he refers to water-courses (Nahum's "rivers") that separate "islands" or that flow adjacent to the riverbank. Even if one allows for such courses in seventh-century Thebes, as we saw above with canals or waterways, the problem of their defensive function remains, particularly since Egyptian texts or reliefs do not refer to the river or its topographical features as essential for the defense of the city.

Second, the author then addresses the question of the meaning of *ym*. Since for him it cannot signify "sea" (that is, it cannot be the Mediterranean), Schneider looks to Isaiah 19:5, where the term appears to refer to the Nile, given its parallel use with *nhr*. Drawing upon Wildberger's comments on *ym* in Isa 19:5–10—that these verses reflect conditions following the failure of the Nile flood(s)—Schneider proposes that *ym* is not simply a synonym for *nhr*, as noted by others, but signifies rather the Nile "during the inundation" ("Überschwemmung") and with it the expanse of water that covers the land during the flood.<sup>30</sup> Working on the assumption that *ym* denotes the inundation, he is then able to bring in Egyptian (for example, Osorkon III, Taharqa), Classical (Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus), and nineteenth-century accounts that describe high inundations as sealike in appearance.<sup>31</sup> These, however, are of little significance, since no clear evidence has been adduced in support of his newly created meaning of "Überschwemmung" for *ym* in this or any other biblical text. Even if one were to grant the meaning here, as in his translation above, this still would not account for how the phenomenon functions as a means of defense in Thebes, in contrast, for example, to the Delta. Those few Egyptian accounts of excessively high inundations in Thebes emphasize the destructive force, not the defensive benefits, of Nile floods (Sebekhotpe VIII, Osorkon III, and Taharqa). To be sure, references to the beneficial aspects of the inundation are plentiful, particularly in hymns, but

<sup>29</sup> Charles F. Nims, "Places about Thebes," *JNES* 14 (1955): 110–23 (a review article of Eberhard Otto's *Topographie des thebanischen Gauces* [Berlin, 1952]). Both works are cited by Schneider in his notes. Nims noted the "constantly shifting course of the Nile" and cautioned against attempts to locate "with any exactness" the banks of the river in antiquity (p. 110). His caution is supported by geological surveys of the Nile Valley (Butzer, *Early Hydraulic Civilization*, pp. 34–35). For "islands," see J. Capart, A. H. Gardiner, and B. van de Walle, "New Light on the Ramesside Tomb-Robberies," *JEA* 22 (1936): 169–93, esp. 181. The presence (or absence) and location of channel "islands" and secondary courses varied, depending on the height of the inundation in any given year and the extent to which high or low floods altered the river's immediate surroundings. With average floods, the waters could overflow the levees, flooding the alluvial flats or flood basins, but leaving the tips of the levees briefly visible

as "islands" (Butzer, *Early Hydraulic Civilization*, pp. 17–18). As the water level dropped, higher tracts of land would emerge or "rise" from the waters. With low inundations, flood basins might contain little or no water. In this context, Egyptian texts note the presence of "sandbanks" (*tzw*), a term synonymous with drought and famine (*rnpt nt tzw* "years of drought"; Jacques Vandier, *La famine dans l'Égypte ancienne*, Recherche d'archéologie, de philologie et d'histoire 7 [Cairo, 1936], pp. 74–77).

<sup>30</sup> Schneider, "Nahum und Theben," pp. 56–66. For Hans Wildberger, see his *Jesaja 13–27*, 2d ed., *Biblicher Kommentar, Altes Testament* vol. 10/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1989), p. 717.

<sup>31</sup> Schneider, "Nahum und Theben," pp. 66–67. For the relevant Egyptian accounts, see my "Who Is This That Rises Like the Nile?," chap. 3. Schneider, relying on Daressy's 1896 publication of the text, incorrectly identifies the first-named king as Osorkon II.



one searches in vain for *any* Egyptian text that characterizes the inundation waters (Hapy) as Thebes's strategic defense.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there is nothing in the Assyrian accounts of the sack of Thebes to suggest that the river obstructed the advance of the Assyrian army.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, in highlighting some of the ways in which scholars have dealt with the portrait of Thebes in Nahum, the above survey sets in sharper relief what remains today the central problem with the text. That is, the depiction of that ancient city in Nahum is simply incongruent topographically with what we know of Thebes. Spiegelberg's conclusions regarding its unsuitability remain as valid today as they were when first penned nearly a hundred years ago.

### III. NINEVEH AS A MODEL FOR THEBES?

None of the above scholars, in my estimation, deal in a satisfactory fashion with the main thrust of the comparison between Nineveh and its illustrious Egyptian counterpart, namely, the inadequacy of fortifications in the face of Yahweh's impending judgment. Just as Thebes's aquatic defenses (at least as portrayed by the writer) could not save it from Assyrian pillage, neither could those of Nineveh spare her from a much worse fate. The force of the comparison derives from and depends upon a perceived similarity between the defenses of Thebes and Nineveh, focusing more on the physical dimensions and effectiveness of fortifications, with an absence, in verses 8–9 at least, of mythological overtone.<sup>34</sup> If the attempts of some to defend the portrayal of No-Amon (= Thebes) as topographically accurate prove unconvincing, then perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to examine the problem from the other end of the equation, namely, the topography and defenses of Nineveh. After all, it is Nineveh that occupies the author of Nahum, while the secondary and brief reference to Thebes simply reinforces the inevitability of Nineveh's downfall. If the writer apparently was not interested in accuracy in depicting Thebes, what then prompted the specific description of that city's water-based "fortifications"? There is, I submit, another possible source of inspiration, one that has not been identified as such in previous Nahum scholarship.

I should like to suggest that the author's knowledge of Nineveh and that city's watery destruction has influenced significantly the portrayal of Thebes; that is, the primary inspiration for the portrait of Thebes derived from a knowledge of the aquatic and other de-

<sup>32</sup> In my own work on Nile inundation texts and the Hebrew Bible, I have found no instance in the Hebrew text where *ym* signifies the inundation, nor have I encountered any Egyptian text that speaks of Hapy as one who defends or protects Thebes.

<sup>33</sup> As Spalinger notes, the Assyrian accounts of the flight of the Kushite king Tantamani (*Urdamanê*) and Assurbanipal's conquest of Thebes are sketchy at best (references in n. 3 above). Tantamani apparently engaged the Assyrian army north of the city, given that he is said to have fled the open battle in retreat to his residence at Thebes, which he did not attempt to defend ("Assurbanipal and Egypt," p. 324). For military approaches to Thebes from the Western Desert, see John Coleman Darnell and Deborah Darnell, "Theban Desert Road Survey," in *The Oriental Institute 1996–1997: Annual Report* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 66–76, esp.

70–71, and idem, "New Inscriptions of the Late First Intermediate Period from the Theban Western Desert and the Beginnings of the Northern Expansion of the Eleventh Dynasty," *JNES* 56 (1997): 241–58.

<sup>34</sup> The biblical writer's lack of specific knowledge about the fall of Thebes in particular is illustrated further by the use of conventional phraseology in 3:10, reflecting the consequences of divine judgment via conquest, captivity, and exile (compare 2 Kings 8:12, Isa. 13:16, 23:8–9; Jer. 11:6, Pss. 137:9, 149:8; and Joel 4:3; see also Carl-A. Keller, *Nahoum Habacuc Sophonie*, CAT 11b [Neuchâtel, 1971], p. 131; Rudolf, *Nahum*, p. 184; Coggins and Re'em, *Israel among the Nations*, pp. 53–54; and Rex Mason, *Micah, Nahum, Obadiah*, Old Testament Guides [Sheffield, England, 1991], p. 69).

fenses of the Assyrian city, which played a role in its downfall.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the comparison with Thebes was drawn not simply for political purposes (its earlier momentous fall to the Assyrians) or because it too, like Nineveh on the Tigris (and Khorsor), was a river-based city situated on the banks of the Nile, which suited nicely the author's comparative intent. Rather, given the overriding, some might say obsessive, theme of the book, Nineveh and its destruction, one can, I believe, plausibly isolate the Assyrian city with its riverine defenses as the more likely source of inspiration. That is, the writer views the more distant destruction of Thebes in 663 B.C.E. through the contemporary lens of that of Nineveh in 612. This proposal necessitates a discussion of two related issues: (1) the state of our knowledge about the topographical layout, defenses, and destruction of Nineveh and (2) biblical evidence that might indicate the writer's knowledge of these.

The ancient site of Nineveh is situated just to the east of the Tigris River and straddles its tributary the Khorsor River. The most dominant features of the seventh-century are its two mounds, Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus, situated along the western side of an expansive enclosure (over 1,800 acres in size), encircled by a massive double wall (originally 12 km in length) containing fifteen gates. The perimeter wall appears to have been surrounded by a series of defensive moats and ditches. The enclosure is horizontally divided roughly in half by the Khorsor River, which winds through the city before it empties into the Tigris nearby.<sup>36</sup> Modern excavators of the site suggest that the Medeo-Babylonian attack was strategically aimed at the city's weakest spot: the point in the eastern wall (the Kar-Mullissi Gate) through which the Khorsor entered the city.<sup>37</sup> The role of water, in this case flooding, as an agent in Nineveh's end has over the years been advocated by a number of scholars.<sup>38</sup> While the brief account of the city's fall in the Babylonian Chronicle does not mention water as a factor, its presence would seem to be indicated, albeit not as clearly as one

<sup>35</sup> This idea was first put forward, albeit more tentatively and briefly, in my dissertation (see n. 24 above) and has since been discussed by Peter Machinist in his "The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Perspective," in Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, eds., *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* (Helsinki, 1997), pp. 179–95, esp. 192.

<sup>36</sup> See D. Stronach and Stephen Lumsden, "UC Berkeley's Excavations at Nineveh," *Biblical Archaeologist* 55 (1992): 227–33; D. Stronach, "Notes on the Topography of Nineveh," in Mario Liverani, ed., *Neo-Assyrian Geography*, *Quaderni di Geografia Storica* 5 (Rome, 1995), pp. 162–70; "Nineveh" by D. Stronach and Kim Codella, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York and Oxford, 1997), vol. 4, pp. 144–48; and Julian E. Reade, "Ninive (Nineveh)," in *RLA*, vol. 9/5–6 (2000), pp. 388–433, esp. 397–407.

<sup>37</sup> Thus Stronach and Lumsden, "... it seems possible that the attackers sought to draw the Assyrian defenders towards the opposite ends of the elongated walled area before launching a critical assault at the most vulnerable point in the eastern defenses, i.e., at the precise spot where the River Khorsor wound its way into the city. Such a reconstruction of events would

take into account the way in which the waters of the river (no doubt partly contained behind the already long extant, upstream dams of Sennacherib) could have been used to weaken the midpoint of the eastern wall; and it would correspond, of course, with a once prevalent understanding that the fall of Nineveh was related to the effects of flooding" ("Excavations at Nineveh," p. 232).

<sup>38</sup> C. J. Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh: The Newly Discovered Babylonian Chronicle, No. 21,901, in the British Museum* (London, 1923), pp. 17–18; I. M. Diakonoff, *Istorii Midii ot drevnejsikh vremen do kontsa IV veka do n.e. [The history of Media from antiquity to the end of the fourth century B.C.]* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1956), pp. 308–9 (not seen by me); H. W. F. Saggs, "Nahum and the Fall of Nineveh," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 220–25; Gösta W. Ahlström, "Prophetic Echoes of Assyrian Growth and Decline," in H. Behrens, D. Loding, and M. T. Roth, eds., *DUMU-E<sub>2</sub>-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg*, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 11 (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 1–6, esp. 5–6; JoAnn Scurlock, "The Euphrates Flood and the Ashes of Nineveh (Diod. II 27.1–28.7)," *Historia* 39 (1990): 382–84; and Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 190–95.

would hope, in one or two classical sources.<sup>39</sup> Diodorus Siculus (drawing from his source Ktesias) relates the tradition that the mode of Nineveh's destruction—that is, by the flood waters of the very river that provided it protection—fulfilled a traditional oracle (*logion*) regarding the crucial role the river would play in the conquest of the city.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Ktesias/Diodorus, Xenophon's brief reference in the *Anabasis* to the thunder of Zeus being responsible for the conquest of Nineveh is less explicit with respect to the mode of destruction and more problematic in terms of the identification of the city named. Some have interpreted this thunder of Zeus as a flood, the result of a rainstorm, but others are hesitant.<sup>41</sup> Still others, following Diodorus, have argued that an excessively high inundation of the Tigris could have resulted in the flooding of the city. Such a scenario, however, is rendered improbable given the summer time frame indicated for the siege in the Chronicle.<sup>42</sup>

A number of scholars, including the most recent excavators of the site, believe the city was intentionally flooded in the course of its defeat, a practice not unique to Nineveh.<sup>43</sup> These same scholars, along with others, also contend that the classical references to water as the agent of destruction, meager as they are, find confirmation in Nahum's description of the event, particularly the statement in 2:7 (Hebrew) concerning the opening of the "(flood-)gates of the rivers" (*š'ry hnhrwt nphw*), which would accord with the suggestions of intentional flooding.<sup>44</sup> Following Machinist and others, I believe the similarities

<sup>39</sup> A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, TCS 5 (Locust Valley, New York, 1975), Chronicle 3, lines 43–45 (p. 94). Assyrian sources are silent on the fall. For classical references, see Diodorus Siculus, bk. 2, chaps. 26–27 (Oldfather, *Diodorus*, pp. 435–41), Xenophon's *Anabasis*, bk. 3.4, and discussion in Gadd, *Fall of Nineveh*, 17–18; Ahlström, "Prophetical Echoes," pp. 5–6; Scurlock, "Euphrates Flood"; and Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 189–90.

<sup>40</sup> Oldfather, *Diodorus*, bk. 2, chap. 27.1–2 (pp. 439 and 441), and Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," p. 190, n. 45.

<sup>41</sup> See *Anabasis* 3.4.10–12 in Carleton L. Brownson, trans., *Xenophon III: Anabasis Books I–VII*, rev. ed., ed. John Dillery, Loeb Classical Library 90 (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998), pp. 265–67 and n. 42. The city to which Xenophon refers is Mespila, located, according to him, near fortress ruins or possibly to be equated with the ruins themselves (for the problem in the Greek text, see Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," p. 189, n. 40), although we have no clear evidence linking this name with Nineveh.

<sup>42</sup> According to the Chronicle, the siege of the city continued over a three-month period, during the height of the summer ("from the month of Sivan until the month of Av"; see Grayson, *Chronicles*, p. 94, lines 42–43), during which time the inundation could not have played a role. See Ahlström, "Prophetical Echoes," p. 6; Scurlock, "Euphrates Flood," pp. 382–83 (the city "fell at a time when the river should have been approaching its low-water mark"); Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 192–93; and Stronach and Codella, "Nineveh," p. 147. Excavations of the site have as yet failed to produce any clear indication that the city was flooded, although Scurlock maintains that the manipulation of the canal system finds some sup-

port in the archaeological record ("Euphrates Flood," p. 384; discussion in Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," p. 193, n. 56).

<sup>43</sup> Hannes Galter, "Die Zerstörung Babylons durch Sanherib," *Studia Orientalia* 55 (1984): 161–73, esp. 169, 172; Scurlock, "Euphrates Flood," pp. 383–84; Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 191–92, 194–95 and nn. 63–65; Stronach and Codella, "Nineveh," p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> Cathcart renders: "The sluice-gates of the canals are/have been opened" and rejects the possibility of an unusually high flood in favor of an intentional manipulation of the gates (Kevin J. Cathcart, *Nahum in the Light of Northwest Semitic*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 26 [Rome, 1973], pp. 95–96; further references in Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 189–90). To be sure, not all concur with the idea of a literal flooding, intentional or otherwise, behind 2:7. Roberts is aware of the classical tradition regarding the mode of destruction but prefers a metaphorical reading: "the image may imply no more than that the enemy has breached the wall and that his troops are pouring through like water from opened sluice gates" (*Nahum*, p. 66), although he concedes that the source of the imagery derives from actual conditions at Nineveh. His reluctance to embrace a literal interpretation stems in large part from his position on the date of the book: "Even if an actual flood contributed to the fall of Nineveh, it is unlikely that Nahum was referring to such a specific event, for his prophecy probably dates some years before the fall of Nineveh" (*ibid.*). For Spronk, the rivers of 2:7 denote "the primordial floods" (*Nahum*, p. 96). The latter is distrustful of the Classical sources and suggests that the Greek writers were influenced by the biblical book (*Nahum*, p. 95, citing the earlier work of P. Kleinert).

between Nahum and Ktesias/Diodorus, and to a lesser extent Xenophon, are not “simply fortuitous.”<sup>45</sup> If in fact the city was flooded intentionally, then reference to this in Nahum 2 is significant because it points to some knowledge of the city and its fortifications, including the specific mode of destruction. Some have even suggested that the author was an eyewitness to the event.<sup>46</sup> This, of course, cannot be proven, but the “specificity” of Nahum (Machinist) at this point lends support, I believe, to the view that the book, or major portions of it, took shape during or not long after the event itself in 612.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to the description of Thebes in Nahum 3:8, the case for Nineveh as model now comes into sharper focus. The Tigris, Khsor, and defensive moats/ditches could account for the plural  $y^2rym$ , as well as the image of a city encircled by water ( $mym sbyb lh$ ). Additionally, the aforementioned ditches/moats in conjunction with Nineveh’s massive double walls accord well, much better than the layout of Thebes, with the aquatic  $hyl$  and  $hwmh$  of Nahum. The case for Nineveh being the source of inspiration does not, I believe, necessitate that one demonstrate precise correspondence for each feature. Rather, it is the cumulative effect of the above—rivers, moats, and massive fortifications—that suggests that the topography of Nineveh has influenced the depiction of Thebes in Nahum.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, with respect to both cities, the book as a whole seems to play upon the ambivalent role of water, both a means of protection and the agent of destruction, and this may reflect an intentional literary strategy. For example, in Nahum 1:8, water is the agent of destruction (the “rushing flood”), while in 2:6 and 8 (Hebrew), the waters that protect and sustain Nineveh (during siege in 3:14) flood the city, and in the passage under discussion, the waters protect Thebes and, by implication, Nineveh. Moreover, in 1:8 the writer reverses roles in that the rushing, destructive flood ( $^cbr štp$ ), a common motif in Assyrian

<sup>45</sup> Machinist, “Fall of Assyria,” p. 190.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Diakonoff, *Istoriia Midii*, p. 308, n. 3 (citing from Ahlström, “Prophetic Echoes,” p. 6, n. 30) and Stronach and Codella, “Nineveh,” p. 147. Van der Woude has argued that the writer resided in Assyria, one of the exiles of the northern kingdom (A. S. van der Woude, “The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile” in *Oudtestamentische Studien* 20 [1977]: 108–26, esp. 113–15; see also G. V. Stonehouse, *The Book of the Prophets Zephaniah and Nahum* [London, 1929], p. 127). Regardless, scholars have drawn attention to other elements in Nahum that point to a possible knowledge of Assyria, such as the use of Assyrian loanwords (for example,  $tpsrykh$  in 3:17; see Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah,” *JAOS* 103 [1983]: 719–37, esp. 736; Rudolf, *Nahum*, p. 182; Kevin J. Cathcart, “Nahum, Book of” in David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. [New York, 1992], vol. 4, pp. 998–1000, esp. 998; and Spronk, *Nahum*, p. 6).

<sup>47</sup> Compare Marvin Sweeney, “Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (1990): 364–77, esp. 375, although his reasons for a later date of composition differ from those of earlier scholars such as Humbert or Sellin (see also Machinist, “Fall of Assyria,” p. 181). While the writer, being an astute observer of the current situation, could have followed unfolding events and antic-

ipated the eventual fall of Nineveh, it is less likely that he could have described it in such detail without some knowledge of the event. Such reasoning, of course, contrasts with the assumptions of those who view the book as genuine prophecy (for example, Maier, *Nahum*, pp. 32 and 108). Others, citing the reference to the sack of Thebes in 3:8, prefer a date shortly after that event (for example, Keller, *Nahum*, p. 105; Spronk, *Nahum*, p. 13). Seybold maintains that 3:8–19 comprises the book’s oldest tradition, to be dated soon after 663 (Klaus Seybold, *Nahum Habakuk Zephaniah*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare 24/2 [Zürich, 1991], p. 36). For previous scholarship, see Maier, *Nahum*, pp. 27–40; B. Renaud, “La composition du livre de Nahum” *ZAW* 99 (1987): 198–219; Mason, *Nahum*, pp. 73–79; Duane L. Christensen, “The Book of Nahum: A History of Interpretation,” in James W. Watts and Paul R. House, eds., *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, JSOT Supplement Series 235 (Sheffield, England, 1996), pp. 187–94; and Spronk, *Nahum*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>48</sup> Machinist (“Fall of Assyria,” p. 192, n. 54) goes even further in suggesting that Nahum’s inaccurate description of Thebes “may be a witness to what actually happened at Nineveh.” I hesitate to follow in this regard, since the description itself in 3:8, while modeled on conditions at Nineveh, provides no information about the *mode* of destruction, although, as I have argued, this is evident from elsewhere in the book.

military inscriptions (the flood-weapon or Deluge), does not signify the Assyrian aggressor—as we read, for example, in Isa. 8:7–8 (the mighty waters of Assyria sweeping over Judah)—but becomes the instrument of Yahweh's wrath, the agent of that proud empire's demise.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV. THE DUAL ROLE OF WATER IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The dual role of water noted above is not unique to this biblical book. One in fact encounters this same phenomenon elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in passages relating to the destruction of cities, as well as in Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian texts. Perhaps the most familiar biblical example is that of Tyre in the oracles of Ezekiel (chaps. 26–28), where the same waters that protect the city are instrumental in its fall (26:19 and 27:26–27, 34).<sup>50</sup> A further example is found in Jeremiah's judgment against Babylon on the Euphrates (chap. 51). Here the text alludes to the presence of water as both defense (fords and marshes) and a sign of wealth (vv. 13 and 32), while at the same time citing it as the agent of destruction (vv. 16 and 42).<sup>51</sup>

In Neo-Assyrian campaign accounts (Sargon II, Esarhaddon, Sennacherib), the kings and inhabitants of the Phoenician coast and nearby islands (Tyre, Sidon, Arvad, Cyprus) are frequently referred to as ones who “dwell in the middle of the sea.”<sup>52</sup> This description forms part of a larger literary *topos* in Assyrian military texts, one that portrays the enemy in habitat antithetical to that of familiar Assyria.<sup>53</sup> The most striking example of this, and one that recalls the image of Thebes in Nahum, is found in a text from the reign of Esarhaddon: “Kings who dwell in the sea, whose (inner) wall is the sea and whose outer walls are the waves, who mount a ship as if it were a chariot and harness rowers instead of horses.”<sup>54</sup> In addition, both Assyrian and Babylonian texts relate the intentional flooding of a city or its environs for purposes of defense or destruction.<sup>55</sup> It is here, more spe-

<sup>49</sup> This reversal of roles—the conqueror becomes the conquered—has not gone unnoticed by commentators and others and is one of a number of literary *topoi* utilized by the writer. For example, B. Renaud, “Livre de Nahum,” p. 207; Mason, *Nahum*, pp. 65–72; Machinist, “Fall of Assyria,” p. 186. For Isaiah 8:7–8, see Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image,” pp. 726–28, and for the flood-weapon, *ANET*, pp. 277–79, 284, and 291 and references in *CAD* A/1, 76b–77a, s.v. *abūbāniš*.

<sup>50</sup> See H. Jacob Katzenstein, *The History of Tyre from the Beginning of the Second Millennium B.C.E. until the Fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C.E.*, 2d ed. (Beer Sheva, 1997), pp. 9–10, 162–64; Carol A. Newsom, “A Maker of Metaphors—Ezekiel's Oracles against Tyre,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 151–64; compare the account of Esarhaddon's conquest of Sidon (*ANET*, p. 291; Rykle Berger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*, AfO Beiheft 9 [Graz, 1956], p. 48 = Episode 5: A.II, lines 68–70).

<sup>51</sup> See discussion in David S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 59 (Atlanta, 1999), pp. 190–202.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, *ANET*, pp. 276, 284, 285, 288b, 290a, and 297 (Tyre, an island amidst the sea), 292 and 295 (siege of Tyre by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal), 294, 296–97 (list of 22 kings of the Levant, some from seashore and islands).

<sup>53</sup> Carlo Zaccagnini, “The Enemy in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: The ‘Ethnographic Description,’” in Hans-Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger, eds., *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn: Politische und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im alten Vorderasien vom 4. bis 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, XXV. *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Berlin, 3. bis 7. Juli 1978*, Part 1 (Berlin, 1982), pp. 409–24, esp. 412.

<sup>54</sup> Translation adapted from Zaccagnini, “Enemy,” p. 412; text in Berger, *Inschriften Asarhaddons*, p. 57 (Episode 18: A.IV, lines 82–84); compare the end of Episode 18, lines 17–20 (p. 58). To my knowledge, this passage was first mentioned in connection with Nahum by P. R. Berger (“Zur Bedeutung des in den akkadischen Texten aus Ugarit bezeugten Ortsnamen *Ḫilu (Ḫl)*,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 2 [1970]: 340–46, esp. 346).

<sup>55</sup> See, generally, Michael B. Rowton, “The Role of the Watercourses in the Growth of Mesopotamian



cifically in Nebuchadnezzar's water-based strategy for defending Babylon, that one encounters a fitting parallel for Nahum's use of *ym* with reference to the defense of a city. The Babylonian king erected a series of embankments to contain waters diverted from the Euphrates, thus creating an extensive aquatic barrier to deter enemy attack:

To strengthen the defences of Esagil, and so that the murderous enemy should not reach the territory of Babylon, I constructed a great earthwork from the border of Babylon as far as Kish and from opposite Kish to Kār-Nergal, over a distance of  $4\frac{2}{3}$  *bēru* and surrounded the City with mighty waters . . . and surrounded the Land with mighty waters for a distance of 20 *bēru*, like the expanse of the sea.<sup>56</sup>

As for destruction, the parade example of intentional flooding of a city in the course of its destruction occurs in Sennacherib's account of his devastation of Babylon (the Bavian Inscription):

I dug canals through the midst of that city, I overwhelmed it with water, I made its very foundation disappear, and I destroyed it more completely than a devastating flood. So that it might be impossible in future days to recognize the site of that city and (its) temples, I utterly dissolved it with water (and made it) like inundated land.<sup>57</sup>

It is, I believe, no coincidence that the earlier portion of this inscription deals with Sennacherib's construction of canals and water systems to supply Nineveh with water. Thus, the king sustains his own city with water while destroying that of his enemy with the same.

The above examples, biblical and Mesopotamian, reveal an awareness of the strategic roles of water—whether sea, river, canal, or moat—in the defense or demise of a city. To these one should add as well the metaphoric wall of water (the Delta mouths) in the Ramesses III inscriptions at Medinet Habu (see p. 101, above). Such prominence is understandable given that both Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations owed their origins and continued existence to major river systems. The ancients themselves most likely were not oblivious to the irony in a situation, whether historical or literary, where the defenses of

Civilization," in W. Röllig, ed., *lišān mithurti: Festschrift Wolfram Freiherr von Soden zum 19. 4. 1968 gewidmet von Schülern und Mitarbeitern*, AOAT 1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), pp. 307–16, esp. 309 and n. 26; John A. Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire: Babylonian Society and Politics, 747–626 BC* (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 25; and Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," pp. 191–92. For intentional flooding as a defensive measure (Marduk-apal-iddina II), see Zaccagnini, "Enemy," p. 414, and texts in H. Winckler, *Die Keilschrifttexte Sargons nach den Papierabklatschen und Originalen neu herausgegeben I–II* (Leipzig, 1889), vol. 1, pp. 120–22, 127–29. For marshlands as defense, see examples and discussions in Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. [Chicago, 1926–27], vol. 2, pp. 121–22, 133–34, 143, 146; J. A. Brinkman, "Babylonia in the Shadow of Assyria," in *CAH<sup>2</sup>*, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 30; Steven W. Cole, "Marsh Formation in the Borsippa Region and the Course of the Lower Euphrates," *JNES* 53 (1994):

81–109, esp. 89–96; and Richard D. Barnett, Erika Bleibtreu, and Geoffrey Turner, *Sculptures from the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh*, 2 vols. (London, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 88–89, nos. 340, 340a–b, and vol. 2, pls. 233–39.

<sup>56</sup> Cole, "Marsh Formation," p. 94. Compare Berger's mention of Babylon's fortifications in this context ("Zur Bedeutung des in den akkadischen Texten aus Ugarit bezeugten Ortsnamen *Hīlu* (*Hl*)," p. 346, n. 34, and text in Stephen Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*, Vorderasiatische Bibliothek 4 [Leipzig, 1912], No. 15, col. VI, lines 22–56 [pp. 132–35]).

<sup>57</sup> Brinkman, "Sennacherib's Babylonian Problem: An Interpretation," *JCS* 25 (1973): 89–95, esp. 94; Daniel D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, OIP 2 (Chicago, 1924), pp. 84:52–54, 137:36–39; analysis in Galter, "Zerstörung Babylons," pp. 161–73. There is as yet no clear archaeological evidence for Sennacherib's flooding of Babylon (see Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," p. 192).



a city serve as the agent of its destruction.<sup>58</sup> I am not suggesting here that the writer of Nahum necessarily possessed knowledge of these particular Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts, but, given the above parallels, it is possible that the description of Thebes and Nineveh, and the role of water in both, specifically reflects a Mesopotamian or even larger ancient Near Eastern literary tradition. Thus, a combination of historical and literary components (the role of water in the actual fall of Nineveh and the *topos* of water as protection/destruction) may lie behind the portrait of Thebes in Nahum.

In choosing the sack of Thebes for comparison, the writer evokes memories of a proud moment in Assyrian tradition—the conquest of the seemingly invincible city. But lest Assyria claim the same invulnerability for her own Nineveh, the author, in characteristic fashion, indicates that the tables have now turned. Just as Thebes fell to Assurbanipal, an event signifying Assyrian might, so too did Nineveh suffer the same fate, signaling the end of that empire's hegemony. In this comparison, the poetic talents of the writer are clearly manifest, but we should not thereby conclude, as some have done, that the less than accurate portrayal of Thebes is sheer poetic invention.<sup>59</sup> Rather, if I may alter somewhat the comment of Keller: while certainly a poet, Nahum's description of Thebes betrays equally a geographer's knowledge of Nineveh.

<sup>58</sup> While the proximity of cities to rivers, marshes, and canals tends to lend credence to the above accounts, that is, we can cite no compelling reason for doubting the potential role that water could play in a military context, the rhetoric and stock phraseology typical of campaign narratives cautions against too naive a reading. Nevertheless, taking into account the ideological component, it is not unreasonable to assume that the various literary uses of water in the texts have some basis in historical experience. The same is

true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Egyptian texts on the inundation: while their composition is governed by various literary and ideological norms, especially where the king is concerned, none would deny their basis in the bitter experience of excessively high or low inundations and their aftermath (compare Machinist, "Fall of Assyria," p. 192 and n. 50).

<sup>59</sup> Note, for example, Keller on 3:8: "Nahoum parle en prophète et en poète, non en géographe" (*Nahoum*, p. 130).