Introduction: The Ongoing Debate about the Acrostic

As can be derived from recent literature the scholarly dispute about the presence of some kind of acrostic in the first chapter of the book of Nahum is far from settled. In this article some indications in ancient Greek manuscripts shall be used as argument in favour of the view that the scribe used a line-acrostic to indicate that the words written down are a prophecy in the name of YHWH.

The discussion about the acrostic in Nahum 1 started with the discovery in 1867 by reverend Gottlieb Frohnmeyer that the prophet apparently used the order of the letters of the alphabet, from ב to ט, in expressing his thoughts in the verses 3-7. Since then many attempts were made to reconstruct a complete alphabetic acrostic. None of these reached general acceptation. Nowadays most scholars suppose, as is also indicated in the BHS, that originally the acrostic ran until the letter כ. One can find this view in most commentaries and many modern translations as well. Recently, however, commentators and translators seem to have become more reluctant in assuming an acrostic. For instance, in a new Dutch3 and also a new German Bible translation4 the reference to a possible use of this literary device in the original Hebrew text is missing. This is in line with some of the recent scholarly literature. For instance, Michael Floyd speaks of the acrostic as an impossible idea: a chimera.5 The fact noted by Frohnmeyer that some of the letters at the beginning of the lines occur in alphabetic order is in his view pure coincidence. In her lengthy monograph on the first eight verses of the book of Nahum Gerlinde Baumann6 answers the question whether Nahum 1:2-8 is an acrostic negatively.7 Also Martin Roth, in his study on the Twelve Prophets, dismisses the suggestion of an acrostic in the first verses of the book of Nahum. Although he does not want to deny the possibility of a play with letters, it is in his view not important for the interpretation of the text because he cannot accept it as evidence for the unity of the text. He suggests that, if it is indeed there, it is the result of later redactional activity.8 In his commentary Heinz-Josef Fabry takes over the conclusions of Baumann and Roth.9

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7 Baumann, *Gottes Gewalt*, 52-60.
8 M. Roth, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölff prophetenbuch: Eine Untersuchung zu den Büchern Joel, Jona, Micha und Nahum* (FRLANT 210), Vandenhoeck & Rüphert: Göttingen 2005, 241, n. 34: ‘Selbst wenn man solchen exegetischen Buchstabenspielen gewogen ist, sind sie kein Argument für die Einheitlichkeit. Denn es lässt sich genauro annehmen, dass Wortakrostichon wie auch Telestichon auf eine Bearbeitung zurückzuführen sind.’ The opinion that the book of Nahum can not be regarded as a unity is also found in the recent commentary by L. Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 25/1), Vandenhoeck &
The Suggestion of a Line-Acrostic

In 1995 the present writer presented a paper on Nahum 1 during a meeting of the Dutch Society for Old Testament Studies (het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap). Following a lead by Adam van der Woude, who noticed that the first letters of the verselines in verses 2-3a yield the personal pronoun אני, the comparison was made to Mesopotamian line-acrostics also beginning with the personal pronoun (anaku). In these texts this is followed by the name of the author. The writer of the book of Nahum, who not only prophecies against the Assyrians but in his use of metaphors also appears to be familiar with Assyrian literature seems to have been inspired by this Mesopotamian art form as well. The prophet Nahum, however, did not incorporate his own name in the text, but the name of the one whose word he is passing through: YHWH, who gives the prophets their visions (cf. Hos. 12:10f.). This would explain why the author placed the name of his god at the beginning of the two lines in verse 3 following the ‘acrostical’ introduction.

In the ensuing discussion during this meeting Casper Labuschagne remarked that to his surprise he discovered the name of YHWH also in a name acrostic at the end of the verselines of verses 1-3a: the final letters of the verses 1, 2a, 2b, and 3a form in Hebrew the name of the Lord:

משא ננוה ספר חזון נחום האלקש
לא ננוה ננוה ננוה בוטל המשא
לכון גזורי תיבר הלא אורל
ויאוה אפרים וה bordel ננוה לא ננוה
ויאוה במדמה ובשערה דרכו וענן אבק רגליו

This kind of acrostic or telestic is not found in any other text in the Old Testament, but is a well known phenomenon in Mesopotamian royal texts. This discovery sheds new light on the alphabetic sequence first noticed by Frohnmeyer. The א-line in verse 2a can no longer be regarded as part of an alphabetic acrostic. It is far more likely that the alphabetic sequence begins in verse 3a. There the name of YHWH, of which the first letter marks the end of the acrostic forming the Hebrew word אני, is followed by two words beginning with א. The same can be observed in verse 3b: the name of YHWH is followed this time by two words beginning with ב. In this way both acrostics are connected and emphasize the name of YHWH. The first acrostic mentions his name as the source of the prophecy. The second acrostic is a description of his power. It runs until the letter ז in verse 7, where it is combined again with the name of YHWH. The confession ‘YHWH is good’ in verse 7a constitutes a perfect ending.

Ruprecht: Göttingen 2004, 3: ‘Nah is keine literarische Einheit … nicht das Werk einer planvollen Redaktion, da das Buch auch in seiner kanonischen Endgestalt Abschnitte von kaum zu entwirrender Unordnung enthält … Auch die raffiniertesten Hypothesen zur Entstehungsgeschichte … sind weder plausibel noch gar zu zu begründen.’
Admittedly, we have to assume that at some point in the transmission of the text the acrostic was no longer recognized and a word beginning with the letter י was replaced by the present word beginning with an א. In the verselines 6a and 7b a word was added before the י-line, respectively the א-line. So it comes as no surprise that some scholars hesitate to accept the idea of an alphabetic acrostic. Also the assumption of a name- and a line-acrostic are not welcomed by all colleagues as an important new insight. It is qualified as merely ‘interesting’ or ranked under the heading of ‘phantastische Ausgestaltungen’, questioning whether this still can be regarded as scholarly work, although it also accepted, for instance, (partly) by Duane Christensen in his forthcoming commentary on Nahum in the Anchor Bible.

Evidence from the Manuscripts

Can a new look at the old text witnesses be of help here, offering new and above all reliable information? Because of the results of previous studies in the Pericope project we may at least hope to find some evidence for early views on the structure of the text. Fabry offers extensive surveys of the transmission of the book of Nahum in the Hebrew manuscripts and in the ancient versions, but unfortunately he pays no attention to the delimitation of units. Baumann did look for indications of a possible acrostic in the manuscripts from Qumran and Wadi Murabba‘at, but found nothing. She stopped, however, too early and should have extended her research to other ancient witnesses, because this leads to some very interesting results. In order to illustrate this, a survey will now be given of all periscope markers found in the most important manuscripts of the book of Nahum.

In the majority of the Hebrew manuscripts we find the same division by setumot and petuchot as is found in the Codex Leningradensis/Petropolitanus and the Aleppo Codex: a setuma after 1:11, a petucha after 1:14, and a setuma after 2:14.

In the most important manuscripts of the Peshitta we find divisions after 1:1, 11, 14; 2:1, 4, 6, 14; 3:4 and 19.

In the ancient Greek manuscripts found in Nachal Chever the text of Nahum is only partially preserved. As far as it can be read or reconstructed one finds a number of remarkable divisions in the text, namely after 2:6 and probably also after 3:7 and 3:10.

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14 Baumann, Gottes Gewalt, 59: ‘Wie diese Thesen zu bewerten sind, muß die weitere Forschung zeigen; interessant sind die Beobachtungen Spronks allemal.’ Fabry, Nahum, 81: ‘Interessant ist die Beobachtung K. Spronks …’.
15 Fabry, Nahum, 34.
18 Baumann, Gottes Gewalt, 56.
19 Thanks are due to Floor Sepmeijer for looking through the Syrian manuscripts.
20 Fabry, Nahum, 185, n. 1, rightly corrects my observation that there is a space after verse 7 (Spronk, Nahum, 117), because the manuscript is not complete there. On the other hand, as he also remarks, there is a clear indication of the beginning of a new paragraph with verse 8. So the outcome is the same.
The Codex Sinaiticus does not indicate many paragraphs in the book of Nahum. The text is divided into three parts: 1:1-3; 1:4-2:8 and 2:9-3:19.

In the Vaticanus the text is divided into a first part running until 2:1, ‘Behold, on the mountains the feet of a messenger announcing peace’ (Ἰδοὺ ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη οἱ πόδες ἐναγγελιζομένου καὶ ἀπογγέλλουσις εἰρήνην). The second part starts, in the middle of the corresponding Masoretic verse, with ἐορτάζει, ἱουδα, τὰς ἐορτάζουσιν, ‘Celebrate, Judah, your feasts’. It runs until 2:14. So the third part corresponds with the third chapter as we have it in the Hebrew Bible.

We find this intriguing division of the text in the middle of 2:1 also in the older Codex Alexandrinus. It clearly contradicts the Masoretic tradition that places a setuma after 1:14. The reason for this difference may have to do with the fact that we are dealing in 2:1 with a well-known text. It reminds of the words spoken by God according to Isaiah 52:6-7: πάρειμι ὦσ ὧρα ἐπὶ τῶν ορέων, ὡς πόδες εὐαγγελιζομένου ἀκοῆς εἰρήνης, ὡς εὐαγγελιζόμενος ἀγαθά, ὅτι ἀκοντισθεὶς ποιήσω τὴν σωτηρίαν σου λέγων Σωμα Βασιλεύει σου ὁ θεός, ‘I am present, as a season of beauty upon the mountains, as the feet of one preaching glad tidings of peace, as one preaching good news: for I will publish thy salvation, saying, O Sion, thy God shall reign’. Paul quoted this verse in Romans 10:15: καθὼς γέγραπται- ὄς ὤρα τοι πόδες τῶν εὐαγγελιζομένων ἀγαθά, ‘As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”’. According to Paul it refers to the people preaching the gospel. Apparently these parallels attracted the attention to the first part of the verse in the book of Nahum. By leaving a wide space after these words they were more closely connected to the previous verses which are explicitly introduced as the words of God in verse 12: ‘Thus says the Lord’. In this way the first half of 2:1 receives an extra emphasis, which is in line with the importance of the verse as a quotation by Paul. Clearly, this says more about the later interpretation of this verse than about its original meaning.

When it comes to the division of the text, the Alexandrinus appears to be the most interesting of these ancient Greek manuscripts, because it shows much more paragraphs than the other codices. These paragraphs are clearly indicated by capitals written into the left margin. Sometimes this capital is the first letter of the first word of the paragraph, namely when the previous paragraph ended at the end of the line with sometimes a small space at the end of the line (for instance in 1:2). Sometimes the next paragraph begins after a space in the middle of the line (cf. 1:4b). Then the capital written into the left margin is the first letter of the first word of the next line. In this way the text of the book of Nahum is divided into 24 parts: 1:1.2.3a.3b-4a.4b-6.7-8.9-10.11.12-14a.14b-14c.14d-2:1a.1b-2a.2b-7a.7b-8.9-10.11.12-14.3:1-4a.4b-7.8-12.13-14.15.16-17.18.19. The density of the paragraphs is the highest in the beginning of the book, at the transition from the first to the second chapter and at the end of the book. It may be regarded as a means of the writer to put emphasis on these parts of the book.

At the beginning of chapter 1 we clearly see a new paragraph beginning after the heading in verse 1. The next paragraph is indicated by the kappa in the left margin. Two lines below we see the next paragraph also indicated by a protruding kappa.

Δήμιο Νινετι, βιβλιών ὅρασες Ναουμ τοῦ Ἐλκεσαίου.

Θεὸς ἐξωτής καὶ ἐκάκιων κύριος, ἐκάκιων κύριος μετὰ θυμοῦ ἐκάκιων κύριος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐξαιρεῖν αὐτὸς τοὺς ἐχθροὺς αὐτοῦ.
A similar paragraphing is found in the Codex Marchalianus, also indicated with two protruding kappa’s. The division of the rest of the text differs. In the Marchalianus we find only eight paragraphs with the highest density at the beginning and the end of the book: 1:1-3a.3b-4a.4b-5a.5b-2:5.6-3:10a.10b-15.16-17a.17b-19. Precisely in the beginning of the book it fully agrees with the Alexandrinus. What is striking here is that divided in this way the text comes close to the analysis of the first verses as an acrostic with special emphasis on the name of the Lord, especially at the beginning of the two lines in verse 3. The original form of the Hebrew text could of course not be reproduced in the Greek translation, but its intention seems to have been preserved in a comparable way, namely by a special use of letters. To this can be added that the protruding capital chi (of the word χρηστος) at the beginning of verse 7 in the Alexandrinus coincides with the position the letter ע has in the analysis of the Hebrew text given above, emphasizing the importance of the statement that YHWH is good. It is not certain whether the writer knew that we are dealing with some kind of acrostic here. If he did, it is not to be expected from him to show this in the translation. Even in obvious cases of alphabetic acrostics like Psalm 119 the Greek translator did not attempt to show this in the Greek text. The remarkable way of dividing the text in the Alexandrinus and even more so in the Marchalianus can be regarded, therefore, as an indication that the writers still were aware of a special feature of the text concerning the name of YHWH and the quality of YHWH, which in the original Hebrew text was indicated by the two acrostics.

Extra Evidence from the Literary Analysis

A closer look at the Hebrew text also yields some extra indications pointing to verse 7 as a climax in the description of YHWH. In verses 2-3 the divine name is given five times or six times, when we also count the acrostic. There is a kind of countdown in the three verselines of verse 2-3a: the name of the Lord first appears at the end of the colon, then at the middle and in verse 3 it stands (twice) at the beginning of the verseline.21 After this we have to wait 6 verselines in which he is not mentioned. Then, on the seventh – so again after a some kind of countdown – we read it again: הוהי בוט, good is the Lord, which is also in my opinion the seventh occurrence of the name of the Lord. The coherence of this part of the text is underlined by the structure: from verse 2a until verse 6 the verselines are built up in the same way, with the conjunction waw connecting the two parts of the verseline.22 This ends after the name of the Lord who is described in these verses is given again in verse 7.

An extra argument for the given analysis of the first verses of the book of Nahum can be derived from the comparison with related texts within the collection of the Twelve Prophets. It is noted by many commentators that Nahum 1:2-3 reminds of the well known text of Exodus 34:6-7. As Michael Fishbane pointed out the original positive message is ‘vengefully reapplied’ in Nahum 1:2-3 with emphasis on the announcement of the anger of YHWH.23 There should be no doubt about it that YHWH avenges evil. In this situation there is no room for abounding love and faithfulness. It has also been noted before that we find another clear reference to Exodus 34 at the end of the book of Micah (7:18-20), that is in the

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21 Cf. Baumann, Gottes Gewalt, 61.
22 Cf. Baumann, Gottes Gewalt, 51.
chapter which now precedes the book of Nahum. Baumann demonstrates that the way the ‘Gnadenformel’ of Exodus 34 is used at the end of the book of Micah can be seen as the positive counterpart of the negative emphasis in Nahum 1.24

It is interesting to note that the reference to Exodus 34 is combined with the reference to the name of the prophet in the first words of verse 18: ‘מי־אל כמוך , ‘who is God like you’ – Micah is the short form of Micaiahu, ‘who is like the Lord’. This is another element it shares with Nahum, because the quotation of Exodus 34 is found precisely in these verses with the acrostic of the name of the Lord. Something similar can be noted with another text from the minor prophets with a reference to Exodus 34, namely Joel 2:13-14, because the final words of verse 14: ‘לאוהיכם ליוהה , ‘to YHWH your God’, remind of the name of the prophet Joel, ‘YHWH is God’.

Within this connection one could also refer to another possible reference to Exodus 34 which can be found in the names of the children of Hosea. They can be interpreted as ‘an ironic undoing of the Lord’s compassion or love’25. The command to name his daughter Lo-Ruchama, ‘not pitted’, indicating that YHWH ‘will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them’ (Hos. 1:6), uses the key word of Exodus 34:6.

A final reference to Exodus 34 is found in the exclamation of the prophet Jonah complaining about God’s mercy: ‘I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity’ (Jonah 4:2). This marks the book of Jonah as the counterpart of the book of Nahum; both are prophecies against Nineveh, but the first leads to repentance and forgiveness, whereas the second leaves no room for forgiveness and leads to the destruction of the city.

All this has been noticed and studied before and is often interpreted as evidence of a redaction of the book of the twelve indicating that all these prophecies should be read from a certain theological viewpoint. One could also say that in this way it is possible to keep theologically contradictory books like Jonah and Nahum together, as stated by Van Leeuwen: ‘By using the full, bipolar contrast of mercy and justice from Exodus 34:6-7, the redactor affirms, on the one hand, that the Lord is free to exercise his forgiveness and mercy toward any who repent and, on the other, that he will not be held forever hostage to the evil of the wicked’.26 He assumes that this was the work of scribal sages. This use of Exodus 34:6-7 was part of their technique by which these scribes added hermeneutical patches at key junctures, arranged and stitched together previously existing works, all to shape this prophetic scroll into a theological whole’.27 It is also possible – and this is the view of Baumann – that the book of Jonah was added later to the collection of the minor prophets and was written as a reaction to the book of Nahum. So the reference to Exodus 34 would not have been the work of a redactor but part of the story that was written after this redaction.

Now all these attempts to reconstruct the making of the scroll of the minor prophets are highly speculative. This is not the place to discuss them or even add another theory. What is relevant for the present discussion about the acrostics in the first chapter of Nahum is the

24 Baumann, Gottes Gewalt, 82-100.
27 Van Leeuwen, ‘Scribal Wisdom’, 32. The same view can now also be found with K. van der Toorn, Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 2007, 252-256.
attested combination in a number of texts within the Twelve Prophets of a reference to Exodus 34:6-7 with a wordplay concerning the name and message of the prophet. This can be used as an extra argument in favour of the given interpretation of Nahum 1:1-7.
Codex Alexandrinus - Nahum 1:1-6
Codex Marchalianus - Nahum 1