NAHUM: POET LAUREATE OF THE MINOR PROPHETS

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"It has been said that the best reason for the serious study of the Bible—for learning how to read it well—is written across the history of Western culture: see what happens when people misread it, read it badly, or read it on false assumptions."[1] You may think that these words are taken from a systematic theology textbook or even from a sectarian tract. But they are not. They are written by Robert Alter (a Biblical scholar) and Frank Kermode (a literary critic) in the introduction to a book that considers the literary features of the books of the Bible. Their volume is only one of many recent publications by both Biblical and literary scholars that approach the Biblical writings in the light of their literary features. Never has Biblical criticism been more interested in and influenced by literary criticism than today.[2]

There is good reason for the recent resurgence of interest in literary criticism among Biblical scholars: The Bible is patently literary in its styles and forms, genres and rhetorical devices. To ignore the literary features of the Scriptures is to misread them. Alter comments further:

> For a reader to attend to these elements of literary art is not merely an exercise in "appreciation" but a discipline of understanding: the literary vehicle is so much the necessary medium through which the Hebrew writers realized their meanings that we will grasp the meanings at best imperfectly if we ignore their articulations as literature.[3]

Christian literary critics are in an enviable position today. They have, as it were, "Praxed's ear to pray," their contributions to Biblical criticism never more welcome. As J. Maier notes: "The present moment in literary studies is valuable because it is intensely self-reflective."[4] Maier's observation is more true today than it was ten years ago. English departments in such prestigious universities as Yale, Carnegie Mellon and Duke have entirely restructured their English majors along deconstructive or reader-response

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[1] *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. R. Alter and F. Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987) 2.

[2] For comments on the current interest in literary matters in Biblical criticism see *Literary Guide* 2–6; *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu* (ed. J. Maier and V. Tollers; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 4.

[3] *Literary Guide* 21.

[4] *Literary Milieu* 4.

lines.[5] Both English and Biblical studies are undergoing significant self-scrutiny and redefinition at this time. What is more important, literary studies have much to offer Biblical scholars.

Literary studies are important to Biblical scholarship because, on one level at least, the Bible is a literary book. Unfortunately, however, much traditional Biblical scholarship has ignored the literary features of the Scriptures. Thus Leland Ryken comments: "Traditional biblical scholarship . . . has tended to break a biblical text into fragments and has been alarmingly indifferent to preserving the unity of passages."[6] Alter notes the same tendency toward fragmentation of the Biblical text, describing the process as "the nervous hovering over . . . various small components"[7] of the passage in question. Neither Alter nor Ryken minimizes the importance of painstaking textual analysis, but they both understand such careful work as a part of right interpretation, not the whole. Certainly we do not wish to denigrate the importance of careful textual study. We wish merely to indicate the value of considering literary matters in exegesis as well.

Indeed, exegesis is incomplete without proper attention being paid to the literary features of the Biblical passage in question. First, "literary analysis is a necessary precondition to a sounder textual scholarship"[8]— that is, before a reader can judge a Biblical text authoritatively, he must pay adequate attention to matters of genre and form as well as matters of theology and history. Second, attention to literary matters in a Biblical text assures a full understanding of the text in that literary features point to the psychological truth implied in a passage. The Bible is not solely a theological textbook with prooftexts. Rather, it is a thoroughly human book that displays a more profound picture of man in all of his imperfections than does any other book. The Bible presents man as God sees him— as an emotional as well as theological creature. Ryken focuses the value of paying due attention to literary matters in his conclusion to *Words of Delight*:

> We should read the Bible expecting to encounter religious and moral truth. More often than not, that truth will come to us in a literary form—in stories, poems, proverbs, and visions, for example. To understand the Bible, therefore, we need to know how these literary genres work. Our enjoyment of the

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[5] For Yale and deconstruction see C. Campbell, "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," *New York Times Magazine* 9 (February 1986) 20-48; for the restructuring of Carnegie Mellon's English curriculum along deconstructive lines see S. Heller, "Some English Departments Are Giving Undergraduates Grounding in New Literary and Critical Theory," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 3 (August 1988) A15-A17; for the redesign of Duke University's English curriculum along reader-response lines see S. Heller, "A Constellation of Recently Hired Professors Illuminates the English Department at Duke University," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 27 (May 1987) 12-14.

[6] L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 20.

[7] *Literary Guide* 26.

[8] Ibid.

Bible will be enhanced if we have developed the capacity to perceive its artistry and beauty. In short, the Bible is not an occasionally literary book—it is MAINLY a work of literature.[9]

We risk misinterpretation, then, if we ignore literary matters in exegesis.

The present authors wish to bring to our attention in this article one contribution of literary criticism to Biblical scholarship. Our thesis is that the use of literary criteria in Biblical analysis vastly enhances the experience and understanding of the text and even helps to solve exegetical *cruces interpreta*. This thesis will be illustrated by its application to Nahum, generally conceded to be one of the most literary of the OT prophets.[10]

I. CRITICAL APPROACHES

Before we turn to the book of Nahum for purposes of illustration, it might be appropriate for us to mention some of the most significant current literary approaches taken to the Bible by comparing them with well-known literary critical paradigms. Traditional Biblical criticism (such as that represented by E. D. Hirsch[11]) has been mainly author-centered in that it locates meaning in the author's intention. Form criticism, which searches for public conventions in the Biblical writings, and redaction criticism, which studies the history of the text up to its crafting in the hands of a final editor, have both assumed that the text is a clue to the author's meaning.

Of late, however, a number of text-centered approaches to Biblical criticism have emphasized the discovery of meaning in the text as the primary task of the exegete.[12] One such approach is the logological, a method that emphasizes the analysis of narratives in Scripture in order to show how theological truths are developed within the structure of events. Structuralism, another text-centered approach and a method whose usefulness is still under debate,[13] searches for the latent content of narratives as a clue to their meanings. Rhetorical criticism, a third text-centered approach, emphasizes the unity and structure of the individual text as necessary to a full appreciation of meaning in the text at hand.[14] All three of these approaches presuppose that the meaning of a text is to be found in the text itself, not mainly in its cultural and historical contexts. While the present writers do not agree that contextual matters are largely irrelevant,

[9] Ryken, *Words of Delight* 355.

[10] For example, J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (3d ed.; New York: Columbia University, 1962) 147, remarks: "Nahum was a great poet. His word pictures are superb, his rhetorical skill is beyond praise."

[11] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1979). Hirsch is one of the foremost modern scholars who hold to the traditional view that a text inscribes the author's intended meaning and that the reader's responsibility is to recover that meaning as accurately as possible.

[12] For the issue of text-centered as opposed to author-centered literary criticism see T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 17.

[13] Longman, *Literary Approaches* 36.

[14] *Literary Milieu* 329.

we do support the careful attention that these text-centered critics pay to the range of features of the Biblical texts in their own right.

Of greatest interest to our present paper is James Muilenburg's "rhetorical criticism."[15] He draws attention to the structural patterns and literary unity of the Biblical texts and emphasizes an understanding of the rhetorical considerations of genre, author and audience as necessary to the proper appreciation of the Biblical writings. Muilenburg particularly underscores the value of the literary unit, which he identifies as "an indissoluble whole, an artistic and creative unity, a unique formulation," for the "grasp of the writer's intent and meaning."[16] In this view the literary units are the "building blocks" of the meaning in a text, not just its structure. Equally important in Muilenburg's view to an emphasis on the nature of each literary unit is a careful study of the turning points and shifts between such units. It is these structural relationships that help guide the exegete's understanding of the meaning of the text.[17] For Muilenburg the exegete's task is to discern "the actuality of the particular text . . . (in its) . . . concreteness,"[18] not just deduce theology from narrative or poetry. Muilenburg's rhetorical criticism is close to what literary critics in the middle of this century called new criticism or formalism, which stressed the autonomy of the individual literary work and therefore demanded that the literary critic pay careful attention to the literary elements of a work as the means by which the author expressed his meaning.

Our approach to Nahum is text-centered with a view to establishing the unity and conscious artistry of the book. It might be characterized as Biblical rhetorical criticism in the context of form criticism. That is, with full consciousness of Hebrew literary conventions we examine the text carefully for evidence of the deliberate, idiosyncratic crafting of the author. To identify our method in literary terms we approach Nahum in the manner of a new critic (with his emphasis on careful textual analysis) who pays due regard to contextual and generic considerations in his analysis. We do not wish to suggest that other text-centered approaches are not valuable interpretive tools. We merely wish to demonstrate the value of one literary approach in the proper understanding of a book of the Bible.

II. LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. *Structural matters.* Turning to a consideration of literary matters, the present authors have demonstrated elsewhere that attention to the "literary leg" of proper hermeneutics (literature, history, theology) enables one to formulate a distinctive case for the unity and single authorship of the book of Nahum.[19] We have pointed out that by taking into account

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[15] J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," in *Literary Milieu* 362–380. The pagination to this essay is taken from this printing.

[16] Muilenburg, "Form Criticism" 369.

[17] Ibid. 373.

[18] Ibid. 378.

[19] R. D. Patterson and M. E. Travers, "Literary Analysis and the Unity of Nahum," *GTJ* 9/1 (1988) 45–58.

not only the theme and development of the book but also principles of compilation and literary organization known to the Semitic world and demonstrably practiced by the OT writer, one can find an essential unity of perspective for the whole book. Indeed, it becomes clear that Nahum developed the theme of his prophecy in accordance with set organizational techniques while utilizing a broad spectrum of literary devices that provide the form and context in which the meaning of his message is to be understood.

The results of that earlier inquiry established that Nahum's message concerning the doom and demise of Nineveh proceeds in a basic bifid structure (1:2-15; 2:1-3:19) that is patterned in accordance with theme (1:2; 2:1-2), development (1:2-10; 2:3-10; 3:1-7), and application (1:11-15; 2:11-13; 3:8-19) and is closed at major section termini by the refrain of the activity/inactivity of a messenger (1:15; 2:13; 3:19; cf. 3:7). The employment of bookending (e.g. "scattering," 2:1; 3:18-19) and stitching (e.g. "plotting," 1:9, 11) devices at major narrative seams was also noted.

It may be added here that in developing his prophecy Nahum utilized the same structural devices to develop and unite smaller units. Thus one may note his use of the bookending/enveloping of whole sections (e.g. *bĕlîyaᶜal*, "wicked(ness)," 1:11, 15), or even individual cola (e.g. *YHWH*, "The LORD," 1:3a). Likewise, hooking words (stitchwords) or ideas connect not only major sections but even subsections (e.g. "fire," 3:13, 15). In addition Nahum uses the familiar compositional/organizational techniques of repetition and refrain: "not (again)/no (one)" (1:15; 2:9, 13; 3:3, 7(?), 19); *hinnēh*, "behold/lo" (1:15; 2:13; 3:5, 13); the motif of "fire" that "consumes" (1:6, 10; 2:3, 13; 3:13, 15); the use of rhetorical questions (1:6, 9; 2:11; 3:7, 8, 19) often either to begin or signal the near ending of a unit. All of this, together with the observed literary richness throughout the book, argues for a carefully constructed literary piece that was the product of a skilled writer.

2. *Literary features*. Something of that literary richness may be seen by noting that literary devices abound in every portion of this short prophecy (e.g. synecdoche, 2:4, 10, 13; 3:13; picturesque brevity, 2:1, 9, 10b; 3:2-3; irony, 2:1, 8; 3:14, 15; satire, 2:11-13; 3:8-13, 14-19; woe, 3:1-7), certain kinds of which are employed with ubiquitous regularity (e.g. metaphor and simile, 1:3b, 6, 10, 13; 2:4, 7, 8, 11-13; 3:4, 5-6, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19). In many cases Nahum's literary devices are designed not merely as an expression of his artistic skill but provide the very form and context in which the author's meaning is to be apprehended.[20]

Thus Nahum depicts the terror that will prevail at Nineveh's fall by noting that even the lowest levels of society will feel the weight of the conqueror's heel: Her slave girls will "moan like doves" (2:7). The pathos is

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[20] For the statement that metaphor, as an example of a trope, constitutes meaning see P. Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," in *On Metaphor* (ed. S. Sacks; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 141-157. Ricoeur's thesis is that metaphor creates meaning rather than embellishing it.

striking: War is not just a matter of armaments and defenses, of victories and defeats—it involves helpless, innocent people. In 3:4-7 Nineveh is portrayed as a harlot. She has made merchandise of the nations in every way—politically, economically and, above all, spiritually. Accordingly she must suffer the public shame befitting her activities.

In 2:11-13 rapacious Nineveh is described as a lion's den into which the mighty lion of the nations (Assyria) brought its bounteous booty for its pride (Nineveh's citizens). The reversed circumstances at Nineveh's fall provide a touch of irony: "Where now is the lion's den?" This passage is also one of three satirical pieces in which the prophet denounces Nineveh for its unchecked rapacity (2:11-13), its unrealistic trust in its massive defenses (3:8-13) and its unbridled cruelty (3:14-19). The satirical form not only adds the unmistakable touch of a taunt song to the prophetic oracle but also provides the vehicle for understanding the prophet's words as containing God's just judgment of the incorrigibly wicked city.

3. *Exegetical concerns.* Attention to the above structural details will enable the reader not only to follow the author's flow of thought but may on occasion provide him with an exegetical tool for deciding the author's precise intention. To illustrate this, the well-known crux in 3:4 will be considered. In this context, does the statement relative to Nineveh's harlotry explain the death and destruction described in the previous verses, or does it initiate the following declaration of God's judgment against the city? This problem is particularly heightened by realizing that 3:4 in MT is not an independent sentence and therefore would normally need to be related grammatically either to what precedes or to what follows.[21]

We would like to suggest that we have here a deliberate authorial technique. By employing a hinge verse, one that has individual existence yet binds two portions of a narrative together,[22] the writer has achieved both vividness and smoothness of flow in his portrayal of Nineveh's demise. That our text is so constructed may be noted in the employment of a first-slot preposition to introduce new yet related material (cf. 1:11), the use of the familiar sub-unit terminator *ʾên qēṣeh* ("there is no end"; NIV "without number," v. 3), the use of initiating staircase parallelism in 3:4, and the picking up of the image of harlotry in what follows.[23] Even more decisive is the fact that 3:1-7 belongs to a type of lamentation literature known as a woe.[24] Such prophetic pronouncements normally contain three

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[21] LXX resolves the problem by reading the phrase concerning causation (*apo plēthous porneias,* "from much fornication") with v. 3 and then beginning a new sentence with a vocative "O comely harlot" (v. 4) that continues into v. 5, which contains the apodosis "behold, I am against you."

[22] For literary hinging see H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Transitional Techniques in the Bible," *JBL* 102 (1983) 540-541.

[23] For the use of staircase and terraced patterns of Hebrew parallelism see W. B. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1986) 150-156.

[24] The introductory particle *hôy,* "woe," has its origin in laments for the dead. As used by the prophets it lends strong emphasis to their pronouncements of judgment; see further *TDOT,* 3. 359-364.

major elements: invective, criticism, threat. Here these are arranged chi-astically: invective (vv. 1, 7), threat (vv. 2-3, 5-6), criticism (v. 4). The central position of v. 4 in the chiasmus underlines the idea of a deliberate authorial transitional verse.

These data suggest that the reader is presented with a distinctive state-ment that is clearly related to what precedes and that anticipates/initiates the discussion that follows. The effect is to provide a smooth transition from one sub-unit to another, the mention of Nineveh's harlotry and witch-craft accounting for the grisly death scene that precedes while providing the critical basis for the Lord's judicial pronouncement that follows.[25] Further, the wedding of the metaphor of Nineveh as a harlot to that central position in the chiasmus reinforces the author's intention in this second description of Nineveh's fall (cf. 2:3-10) to dwell on the reasons for the fall. The reader's understanding of this difficult text is thereby aided by noting the structure and literary features that convey the author's message.

III. CONCLUSION

Though our comments have been brief, enough has been said to validate Nahum's superior literary position among the minor prophets. J. M. P. Smith rightly observes:

> In some respects the poetry of Nahum is unsurpassed in the OT. . . . Lowth rightly said, "Ex omnibus minoribus prophetis nemo videtur aequare sub-limitatem, ardorem et audaces spiritus Nahumi. . . .[26]

Our remarks further suggest that a careful literary analysis, along with grammatical, historical and theological analysis, is necessary in a number of ways for reading the Bible with full understanding. First, understand-ing and appreciation of literary matters in the Biblical texts is necessary for a full experience of the Scriptures. It is in part through literary devices that the Biblical authors allow the the reader, in all of his humanness, to feel the full impact of their writings. Second, the literary approach helps the reader stress the unity of the whole Biblical text before him. Rather than only examining minute textual data, the exegete who employs the literary approach properly restores the integrity of the text in its totality.

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[25] Even though a decision must be reached as to the grammatical relationship of the preposi-tionally introduced nonverbal clause that comprises the main clause of v. 4, the final result need not lie with relating it to v. 3 that precedes or to the following material in v. 5. We suggest the possibility of an independent sentence with elided subject/conclusion (aposiopesis) here; note the discussion in R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1976) 99-101. The difficulty of determining the precise grammatical relationship of v. 4 is doubtless the cause for some of the renderings in the modern translations. For example, *La Sainte Bible* translates MT as an independent statement, "C'est a cause des," rather than utilizing the more familiar comparative causal particle "parce que" whether in postpositive (e.g. Jer 14:4, 5, 6) or initial (e.g. John 20:19) position.

[26] J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911) 273-274.

Third, the application of literary matters to the task of Biblical interpretation assists the exegete to understand properly the meaning of passages long regarded as cruces. Above all, then, the literary approach fosters a high view of Scripture, not a low view. Thus Alter, commenting on the Hebrew poetry in Job, can speak of it as both "conveying" and "deepening doctrine,"[27] and Tremper Longman, speaking of the use of literary methodology in understanding OT prose narrative, can declare that

> the question of historical truth boils down to the question of who ultimately is guiding us in our interpretation of these events. If we look ultimately to human authors, then literary art may be deceptive. If we look to God, then we cannot have deception. A literary analysis of a historical book is thus not incompatible with a high view of the historicity of the text, including the view that affirms the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture in the area of history.[28]

[27] *Literary Guide* 15.
[28] Longman, *Literary Approaches* 58.