

## Prophecy goes Hollywood: A Fresh Approach to Nah 2

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Owing to the work of Reinhold Zwick<sup>1</sup> the methods of film analysis were introduced into New Testament studies. However, texts of the Old Testament also appear in a new light if investigated in this way. For this article the dirge against Nineveh in Nah 2 should serve as an example to show the benefits of this methodological innovation for biblical studies. As הגזר (v1) הגני' (v14) and the appearance/disappearance of a messenger in v1.14 form two inclusions, the chapter is dealt with as a literary unit.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Nah 2 in translation, divided into scenes and shots

Scene 1	Shot 1	1a	Behold, on the mountains the feet of the one who bears tidings,
		1b	(who) is proclaiming peace!
	Shot 2a	1c	Celebrate, Judah, your feasts!
		1d	Fulfil your vows,
	Shot 2b	1e	for the worthless shall not proceed with invading you any more:
		1f	he is utterly cut off.
Scene 2	Shot 3	2a	A scatterer came up before your face.
		2b	Guard the fortress!
	Shot 4a	2c	Watch the road!
		2d	Strengthen the loins!
		2e	Make exceedingly firm the power!
		2f	For the LORD has restored the pride of Jacob like the pride of Israel,
	Shot 4b	3a	for the emptiers have emptied them
		3b	and they have ruined their vine-branches.
Scene 3	Shot 5	3c	The shield of his mighty men (is) made red,
		3d	the warriors (are) clad in scarlet,
	Shot 6	4a	fire of steel (is) the chariotry on the day of his preparation
		4b	and the cypress spears are made to quiver.
Scene 4	Shot 7	4c	The chariotry storms through the streets,
		4d	it rushes back and forth through the broad places,
	Shot 8	5a	their appearance (is) like torches,
		5b	they run like lightnings.
Scene 5	Shot 9	5c	He recalls his majestic ones,
		5d	
	Shot 10	5e	
	Shot 11	5f	
	Shot 12	6a	
	Shot 13	6b	

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Zwick R., *Montage im Markusevangelium. Studien zur narrativen Organisation der ältesten Jesuserzählung* (SBB 18). Stuttgart 1989; *ibid.*, *Filmwissenschaft und Exegese*. Auf den Spuren des impliziten Betrachters der "Auferstehung" des Besessenen von Gerasa (Mk 5,1-20): In: *Exegese und Methodendiskussion*, Hg.: S. Alkier – R. Brucker. Tübingen – Basel 1998, 177-210.

<sup>2</sup> Also Deissler A., *Zwölf Propheten II. Obadja, Jona, Micha, Nahum, Habakuk* (NEB 8). Würzburg 1984, 205, treats Nah 2 as a unit.

	Shot 14	6b	they stumble on their way,
	Shot 15	6c	they hasten to her (=the city's) wall,
	Shot 16	6d	and the protective shield is put in place.
Scene 6	Shot 17	7a	The gates of the rivers are opened,
	Shot 18	7b	and the palace melts away.
Scene 7	Shot 19a	8a	And it stands firm:
	Shot 19b	8b	she is uncovered,
	Shot 19c	8c	she is carried away,
	Shot 20	8d	and her handmaids (are) moaning as with the voice of doves,
		8e	beating on their hearts.
	Shot 21	9a	But Nineveh (has been) like a pool of water from her old days onwards,
	Shot 22	9b	yet they (are) escaping.
	Shot 23	9c	Stand!
		9d	Stand!
	Shot 24	9e	But there is no one turning back.
	Shot 25	10a	Plunder the silver!
		10b	Plunder the gold!
	Shot 26	10c	But there is no end of storage, the wealth from all precious vessels.
Scene 8	Shot 27	11a	Emptiness and voidance and devastation,
	Shot 28	11b	and the heart dissolves,
	Shot 29	11c	and (there is) a tottering on knees
	Shot 30	11d	and anguish in all loins,
	Shot 31	11e	and all faces gather glow.
Scene 9	Shot 32	12a	Where (is) the habitation of the lions and the pasturage for the young lions?
		12b	Where the lion and the lioness went (and also) the lion's whelp?
		12c	And there was no one terrifying.
		13a	The lion did enough tear in pieces for his whelps,
		13b	and strangled for his lioness,
		13c	and filled his caves with prey, his habitations with torn animals.
Scene 10	Shot 33/1	14a	Behold, I (am) against you,
	Shot 34	14b	declaration of the LORD of hosts,
	Shot 33/2	14c	and I will make her chariotry going up in smoke,
		14d	and the sword shall consume your young lions,
		14e	and I will cut off from the earth your prey,
		14f	and the voice of your messengers will not be heard again.

## 2. The Plot of Nah 2

Nah 2 is the montage of 10 individual scenes<sup>3</sup> containing 34 shots.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Already Peter A., *Die Bücher Zefanja, Nahum und Habakuk* (Geistliche Schriftauslegung 3). Düsseldorf 1972, spoke of several characteristic scenes contained in this chapter.

In *scene 1* an unknown speaker addresses Judah turning her attention to an approaching messenger of good tidings and peace (shot 1), calling on her to celebrate her feasts and to fulfil her vows (shot 2a) and basing it on the fact, that the worthless one is cut off and so incapable of any further invasion of Judah (shot 2b). Thus the scene is divided into a shot depicting the approaching man (shot 1) and a speech (shot 2), which is subdivided into two imperatives to Judah (shot 2a) and a commentary explaining (1e) prospectively as well as (1f) the current safe situation of Judah retrospectively.

*Scene 2* shows the continuation of this speech and also the same structure as scene 1: Like shot 1, shot 3 depicts an approaching person, here it's a scatterer. Instead of the two imperatives of shot 2a, there are now four (shot 4a); and instead of a single commentary (shot 2b), in v3 there are two commentaries focusing first on the divine restoration of Jacob and Israel (shot 4b), which followed their destruction remembered in shot 4c. Due to the contrasting persons of the messenger and the scatterer, scene 2 must have a new addressee who is at this point as anonymous as the speaking person, as J. M. O'Brien pointed out in her recent commentary.<sup>5</sup>

*Scene 3*, in a series of four short stills (shots 5-8), presents the conqueror's army coming up. Four close-ups depict individual arms panning from weapons to the infantry, to chariotry and back to weapons. These details not only represent the whole forces but also symbolize their strength and power.

Looking at scenes 1-3 one gets a lot of different impressions, but almost no action has been taken so far. Nevertheless shots 3,4a and 5-8 give some insights into the recruitment and preparation of an army going to capture something.

So it is no great surprise, that the action gets fully started with *scene 4* which not with good reason views the chariotry as the most prominent part of the army since it is most feared.<sup>6</sup> These chariots could be followed on their way through the streets and wide places (shots 9+10), torches and lightening serve as symbols of their effect (shots 11+12). No sign of defence or resistance is given.

*Scene 5* forms a parallel action: An unidentified man – only those who are familiar with this whole scenery know from the beginning, that this must be the king of the beleaguered city – recalls his best warriors (shot 13), and although no reason is given for it, one knows, that it could only be the defence of the city. But in contrast to the rushing chariots of the invading army (shots 9 + 10), they only stumble (shot 14) yet hasten to the city-wall (shot 15), where the protective shield is erected (shot 16). That the text in shot 16 is formulated in passive voice fosters our imagination of this shield, where on one could be seen behind of it.

However, the situation starts tipping over with *scene 6* which shows the opening of the gates of the rivers<sup>7</sup> (shot 17) and the destruction of the palace (shot 18) – two of the strategically most important structures of the city.

In scenes 5 and 6 a tracking can be observed from the palace, where the mysterious "he" is speaking (shot 13), to the ways and walls of the city (shots 14-16), to the gates (shot 17) and back to the palace now captured (shot 18).

*Scenes 7* and the following show that the city has already been taken, so that it is not a big surprise that shot 19a gives the commentary "and it stands firm", thus preparing a total view

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<sup>4</sup> In film analysis "shot" denotes the smallest unit, i.e. a continuous, unedited piece of the film, "scene" is a series of shots forming together a complete episode of a narrative, "montage" marks the editing of a large number of shots.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien J. M., *Nahum* (Readings), Sheffield 2002, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Also Coggins R. J. – Recemi S. P., *Israel Among the Nations*. Nahum, Obadiah, Esther (etc). Grand Rapids – Edinburgh 1985, 38, noted that the chariotry often appeared as the deadliest danger of all.

<sup>7</sup> Here the gates of the Khusa River are meant (cf. Sweeney M. A., *The Twelve Prophets*. Volume Two (Berit Olam). Collegeville 2000, 436.

of the captured (shot 19b) and plundered (shot 19c) city. A close-up in shot 20 focuses on at least some of her handmaids now moaning and beating their breast. None of her officials is mentioned; no warrior is in sight. Shot 21 contains a final commentary on the whole scenery, and it is only now, that the city's name is proclaimed: It is Nineveh, the city surrounded by waters, which is conquered.

Nevertheless, shot 22 turns back to the events within the fallen city showing its demoralized condition:<sup>8</sup> its inhabitants try to escape (shot 22), whereas someone does his best to stop them by the repeated command "stand, stand" (shot 23). Shot 24 reveals his unsuccessfulness. In shot 25 there are two more orders for silver and gold to be plundered, while shot 26 points to the inexhaustible wealth of Nineveh. Unfortunately we will never know who the addressee of these two last imperatives is.<sup>9</sup> Is it a crowd from Nineveh that should take some precious goods while escaping or is it the conquering army receiving wages?

Scene 8 shows a total view of the destruction, first in a long shot depicting emptiness, voidance and devastation (shot 27) and then by a series of four close-ups (shots 28-31) - contrasting the close-ups of shots 5-8 - revealing fear and anguish on the side of the survivors. As J. M. O'Brien has shown, these staccato sentences support the terse description of the drama.<sup>10</sup> And maybe the prophet deliberately chooses here those parts of the human body which were thought to react especially to disaster.<sup>11</sup>

Scene 9 contains in a single shot (shot 32) a lament on the destroyed city calling its lost greatness back to mind. In this way the long scenic portrayal of Nineveh's capturing comes to an end.

Scene 10 with its proclamation of the city's devastation (shot 33) is at first sight somehow disturbing or even useless. But shot 34, interrupting shot 33, introduces the Lord as the speaker, so that shot 33 becomes the announcement of how He will deal with Nineveh and the scenes are converted into a prospective vision of these events.<sup>12</sup> In the montage of these scenes there is a rapid succession of shots rich in contrast and without transitions, binding together a couple of insights<sup>13</sup> to form a general portrayal of the city's devastation out of them. Finally Judah's present, which is full of salvation (scene 1), is contrasted by Nineveh's coming punishment and destruction (scene 10).

### 3. Actors and scenery in Nah 2

With regard to the actors, Nah 2 is clearly divided into two sections: scenes 1.2-6 (v1.2-7) and scenes 7-10 (v.8-14).<sup>14</sup> Besides scene 1 dealing with Judah, scenes 2- 6 are full of (male) warriors, also depicting specific parts of forces and weaponry (cf. shot 3: מַפְיִץ, shot 5: מַגֵּן, shot 6: אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִל, shot 7.9-12: הַרְכָב, shot 8: הַבְּרָשִׁים, shot 13: אֲדִירִים, shot 16: הַסֶּכֶךְ). As soon as the city is fallen (scenes 7 + 8), the city itself is shown as suffering (shots 19b + c) or some women (shot 20) or people without face or proper identity are (cf. shot 22: וְהִמָּה, shot 24: וְאִין, shots 28-31). By the way of its destruction Nineveh thus seems to lose its identity.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Coggins R. J. – Recemi S. P., *Israel*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Also O'Brien J. M., *Nahum*, 61, notes this obscurity of the implied agent.

<sup>10</sup> O'Brien J. M., *Nahum*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> This is suggested by Coggins R. J. Recemi S. P., *Israel*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Already Elliger K., *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten II*. Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephanja, Haggai, Maleachi (ATD 25. Göttingen<sup>5</sup>1964, 12, suggested that some visionary experience could have played a part in the formulation of Nah 2.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Peter A., *Die Bücher Zefanja*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> This hardly makes unnecessary other subdivisions of Nah 2 undertaken from different literary points of view (cf. e.g. Deissler, A., *Zwölf Propheten II*, 210: 1.2-5.6-11.12-14).

The same can be observed when the scenery is overlooked: Scenes 2-6 name several specific places (shot 3: על־פניך, "before your face = in front of the city"; shot 9: בהוציח, shot 10: ברהבות, shot 15: the city's דומה, shot 17: שְׁעֵרֵי הַנְּהָרֹת, shot 18: וְהוֹיכֵל). Yet in scenes 7 and 8 there is a lack of any defined locality. Has Nineveh been united into a single field of ruins? Has the city lost any place worthy of notice? E. Achtemeier's remark that the whole chapter is a study in contrast<sup>15</sup> applies especially to this part.

#### 4. Motion in Nah 2

Concerning motion the main plot in Nah 2 reveals a concentric form: Scene 3 (shots 5-8) depicts by means of four stills and close-ups might and force of the invading army. Correspondingly shots 28-31 of scene 8 show the fear and helplessness of those defeated in four stills.

Only scenes 4-7 contain real action, in the course of which scenes 4-6 are more vivid. As soon as the city has fallen (scene 7) the actions are passive (cf. shots 19b + c), slowing down (cf. the participles in shots 21, 22, 24) and finally stop (cf. the missing of any verb in shot 27 introducing scene 8).

So, also this continuous deceleration of motion supports the presentation of Nineveh's destruction. And the notice of the approaching scatterer, the encouragement to defend the city in scene 2 as well as the lament of scene 9 bringing Nineveh's past power back into mind form only a thin shell for the Lord's final proclamation (scene 10) to be fulfilled. At least indirectly He Himself might be the scatterer<sup>16</sup> coming up before the city to devastate it, although we cannot be sure if He really is that person.<sup>17</sup>

#### 5. Conclusion

Our investigation of Nah 2 by way of film analysis elucidates the dramatic vivacity of the Nahum's presentation of Nineveh's destruction. "The reader sees, smells and hears the siege of Nineveh", as J. M. O'Brien has recently noted.<sup>18</sup> He makes use of all conceivable literary remedies and techniques and reveals himself as an eloquent poet<sup>19</sup> to intensify the point of his message to be announced: Nineveh will be destroyed, because the Lord Himself will bring this super-power to its end.<sup>20</sup> Maybe, this prophet would have been a good scriptwriter or director in Hollywood or somewhere else in our film industry, but not only for some kind of fiction, Nahum could also be helpful for documentaries: Nineveh was really destroyed by the Babylonians and Medes 612 B.C.E.

<sup>15</sup> Achtemeier E., *Nahum – Maleachi* (Interpretation). Atlanta 1986, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Brown W. P., *Obadiah through Maleachi* (Westminster Bible Companion), Westminster – Louisville 1996, 75 and O'Brien J. M., *Nahum*, 59f, find here a portrayal of the divine warrior as depicted also in Hab 3; Zech 13; Ps 18; 68; 144; 2 Sam 22. Accordingly Nah 2,4f views the Lord's divine army.

<sup>17</sup> Together with Peter A., *Die Bücher Zefanja*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien J. M., *Nahum*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Deissler A., *Zwölf Propheten II*, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Deissler, A., *Zwölf Propheten II*, 204.