

Smoking Out the Fire in Nahum ה' 14

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The phrase *והבערתי בעשן רכבה* is usually translated “I will burn chariots with smoke.”¹ However, this translation can not be correct for two reasons: smoke can not burn down a chariot, and on the open spaces of a battlefield, where chariots were effectively used, there were no fires to burn a chariot. These facts were, perhaps, on the Targum’s mind when he translated our phrase, “I will burn your chariots with fire” (*ואדליק באשתא* *ורחיכך*). Yet, the MT has *עשן* not *אש*, “fire.” While *עשן* and *אש* occur sometimes as parallels in the HB (Gen. xv 17, 2 Sam. xxii 9, Isa. lxv 5), it is clear that they are not interchangeable (Ex. xix 18). The Septuagint and Peshitta translations reflect a reading *רובך* (“thy multitude”). This does not eliminate the basic problem of smoke not being able to burn. The Vulgate offers a kind of compromise interpretation for our phrase, “and I will set on fire its chariots all the way to smoke” (*et succendam usque ad fumum quadrigas eius*). However, *ad fumum* does not properly reflect *בעשן*.

The Hiphil perfect 1st (singular) of *בער*, meaning “I have burned, consumed, put on fire,” occurs only here. In the Hebrew Bible *בער* is mostly used in this sense or the derived meaning, “eradicate, destroy, destruct.” Nowhere else is *בער* linked or even collocated with *עשן*. In the Hebrew Bible *עשן* is associated with the verbs *עלה* (Ex. xix 18, 2 Sam. xxii 9, Ps. xvii 9, Jud. xx 38, Jos. viii 20-21, Isa. xxxiv 10, Cant. iii 6), *מלא* (Isa. vi 4), *אבך* (Isa. ix 17), *בוא* (Isa. 14:31), *נרף* (Ps. lxviii 3), *יצא* (Job. xli 12), *כלה* (Ps. xxxvii 20, cii 4), *מלח* (Isa. li 6), *סער* (Hos. xxxiii 3), all these verbs depict the gaseous nature of smoke. Some exegetes suggested emending *והבערתי* to *והעברתי*, “I will pass.” However, the act of “passing” chariot through smoke does not appear ominous enough, and *עשן* is nowhere else associated with the verb *עבר*. The emendation of *והבערתי* to *והעלתי*, “I will set, raise,” exploits the high frequency of *עלה* – *עשן* associations in the Hebrew Bible, but requires radical emendation of the MT verb. Neither of these emendations resolves the basic difficulty in the verse that is being discussed here.

Ibn Ezra seems to imply that the smoke, being the Lord’s anger, would be so hot that it will consume the chariots. A similar view holds Tanhum.

¹ Smith, Commentary 310.

He says, “The punishment is heavy as the blazing fire which burns with the smoke alone.”² Why then use smoke when fire could have better served? It is possible to say, “Where there is smoke, there is fire,” and Nahum alludes only to the very visible afar smoke. This approach was suggested by Kimchi, who explained our phrase “[I will burn its chariots] in a great fire whose smoke is seen at a distance.” Similarly, Metzudot says, “I will burn most of its chariots by raising smoke to heaven to indicate the enormity of the conflagration.”³ Abarbanel suggests that Nineveh’s vehicle of imperialism, chariotry, would be aptly burned till the smoke will rise to heaven.⁴ Bolle understands *בִּעֲשֵׁן הַבְּעֵרָתִי* as meaning “I will set to a fire that makes smoke.”⁵ These exegetes clearly realized the incongruity of the phrase under discussion, and tried to compromise by assuming that smoke implied the existence of fire. However, one may wonder why Nahum did not simply say *הַבְּעֵרָתִי בְּאֵשׁ רֶכְבָּה*. Indeed, some exegetes assumed that *עֵשֶׁן* is a corruption of *אֵשׁ*. However, the two words are orthographically very different. Most commentators seem to accept as self-obvious that smoke can burn.

It is tempting to assume that *בִּעֲשֵׁן רֶכְבָּה הַבְּעֵרָתִי* means, “I will destroy in a smoke screen its chariotry.” A screen of smoke that would have created panic in the chariotry, which was rushed to counter the attacker. Inside this smoke, the chariots would be destroyed, and its warriors would be killed. However, it is not clear whether smoke screens have been used at that time in warfare. Also, an analysis of Nineveh’s defensive strategy suggests that Nahum anticipated a fast moving cavalry force that would thwart Nineveh’s deployment plans.⁶ Such a force would not have been able to form an effective smoke screen.

Perhaps the original reading was *וְהִסְעֵרְתִּי בְּעֵשֶׁן רֶכְבָּה* (Hos. xxxiii 3), “I will twirl (storm-toss) as smoke their chariots.” Smith notes that some Hebrew manuscripts have *כְּעֵשֶׁן*.⁷ It is possible that in a densely written text the left part of the *ס* was mistakenly assumed as being part of the following *ע*, and the remainder interpreted as a *ב*. The emended phrase would perfectly describe the confusion that befell Nineveh’s chariotry. The appearance of

² Shy, Tanhum 198.

³ Mikraoth Gedoloth / Neviim Ahronim (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1959). Metzudot is the commentary of Yehiel Hillel Altshuler who lived in Prag and Galicia, in the 18th century. He completed the commentary begun by his father David Altshuler. The commentary was first published in 1753 and became quickly very popular because of its simplicity and clear language.

⁴ Abarbanel, Perush 269.

⁵ Bolle, Sefper 15.

⁶ Pinker, Nineveh’s.

⁷ Smith, Tanhum quotes *כְּעֵשֶׁן* as the MT (Shy, 198) 333.

the enemy, even if small in number, in front of the city gates would have completely choked up the exit of Nineveh's chariotry. In his vision (Nah. ii 5), Nahum saw the chariots rambling in the streets, from gate to gate, desperately trying to find a point of exit, to no avail. The term fully describes the situation as Kimchi described it in his commentary on Nah ii 5. He says, "The chariots could not exit the city to confront the enemy because they were more numerous and more valiant than they. Thus they ride in the city, its streets, confused and mad." It should also be noted that **והסער** was one of the Lord's agents of destruction (Ps. cxlviii 5, lxxxiii 16)

In summary, the minor emendation of **והבערתי** into **והסערתי** results in a text that is in full agreement with the *Sitz im Leben*. This emendation is justified by the collocation of **עשן** and **והסערתי** in the Hebrew Bible, its orthographical possibility in the square script (when closely written), the resultant good sense, and the removal of the ambiguity of smoke acting as fire.

Summary

It is suggested that in Nah. ii 14 **והבערתי** should be emended into **והסערתי**. This emendation is justified by the collocation of **עשן** and **והסערתי** in the Hebrew Bible, its orthographical possibility in the square script (when closely written), the resultant good sense, and the removal of the ambiguity of smoke acting as fire.

Zusammenfassung

Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass Nah 2,14 **והבערתי** in **והסערתי** zu verändern ist. Als Begründung kann man folgendes anführen: In der hebräischen Bibel werden **עשן** und **והסערתי** gewöhnlich neben einander gestellt. Bei enger Schreibweise kann es in der hebräischen Quadratschrift zu Verwechslungen kommen. Der Emendationsvorschlag ergibt einen guten Sinn und berücksichtigt die Mehrdeutigkeit, dass „qualmender Rauch“ zugleich ein Zeichen für Feuer ist.

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