



BRILL

Human Trafficking in Nahum

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Abstract

Nahum has come under recent censure for the term זונה (3:4). Scholars have argued that calling Nineveh a prostitute does not fit the brutal Neo-Assyrian Empire. This article argues that the book of Nahum charges Nineveh with multi-national human trafficking. Assyrian practices conform to the United Nations definition of human trafficking. The methods Assyria used to recruit, transport, and prostitute peoples match methods of modern slavers. The title זונה therefore is used because the city acted as a spiritual madam. Vast populations were kidnapped for economic purposes and much of the labor, money, and people acquired through conquest were used to serve the Assyrian pantheon.

Keywords

Nahum – Assyria – Ishtar – Feminist Criticism

Introduction

Twenty-three years ago, Judith Sanderson's five-page article on Nahum appeared in *The Women's Bible Commentary*.¹ This was the first article devoted to reading Nahum from a feminist perspective.² Since 1992, feminist scholars have produced a number of works that have made significant contributions by exploring the numerous feminine references in the book; attention to this

1 Judith E. Sanderson, "Nahum," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992): 217-221.

2 Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum* (Readings; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 81.

aspect had been neglected.³ These works have also asked a number of difficult questions about the text. This article focuses on—and seeks to answer—one specific question raised by feminist scholars: why would Nahum characterize Nineveh as a זונה? This word appears in 3:4, which reads, “because of the great fornications of the beautiful and charming prostitute [זונה], the mistress of sorceries who sells nations by her fornications and clans by her sorcery.”⁴

Feminist scholars have objected to Nahum’s label on at least two points. The primary objection argues that “the metaphor of Nineveh as a prostitute is surprisingly inappropriate: the Assyrians had conquered nations; they hardly needed to sell themselves. Nor, as conquerors, did they spend much time alluring or enchanting those they conquered.”⁵ Assyrian obsession with projecting an image of masculinity seems to support this view.

In the military expansion of the Assyrian empire during the ninth through seventh centuries BCE, gendered language expressed through military titles, taunts, and curses played an important role both in the self-representation of the victor as masculine and in the projected representation of the conquered as feminine. The epithets of Assyrian kings always included titles such as “the manly one, the strong one,” and the narration of the Assyrian military campaigns presented battle as a masculine contest wherein the Assyrian king demonstrated that “he was without rival among princes.” Defeated soldiers were said to behave “like women,” and defeated kings were called prostitutes.⁶

The Assyrian treaties that refer to recalcitrant vassal kings as prostitutes suggest to some that Nah 3:4 ironically reverses these treaties.⁷ If these treaties were Nahum’s primary motivation for the term זונה, then the metaphor does seem ill-fitted.

3 “When I began to read previous work done on the book of Nahum the lack of comment by many of the scholars concerning the feminine element in Nahum was notable.” Laurel Lanner, *Who Will Lament Her?: The Feminine and Fantastic in the Book of Nahum* (LHOTS 434. New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 1.

4 All translations from Nahum are my own.

5 Julie Galambush, “Nahum,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Rev. and upd. ed.; ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsely; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2012), 330.

6 Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (HSM 62; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 1.

7 For instance, Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (BibOr 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 58-60.

A second, related challenge to the term זונה comes from Julia O'Brien, who says, "Uniquely here, Yahweh punishes the promiscuity of one with whom he is not in covenant/marriage relationship."⁸ O'Brien goes on to say, "While in prophetic marriage metaphor Yahweh's own honor is at stake, Yahweh's interest in Nineveh's promiscuity is not so clear."⁹

This article asserts that Nahum not only knew these apparent inconsistencies, but also used them for rhetorical effect.¹⁰ Nahum 3:4 uses sexual metaphors for Nineveh because it served as a spiritual brothel and practiced human trafficking.

Ishtar

The explanation for this theory begins by considering Ishtar imagery in Nahum.¹¹ Many scholars have linked the ambiguous feminine pronouns in Nahum to Ishtar, especially since she was a war goddess and the patron deity of Nineveh.¹² The relationship between Nineveh and Ishtar presents a simple explanation for Nahum's description of Nineveh as a זונה. Mesopotamian religious texts called Ishtar a prostitute, associated her with prostitution, and considered her the patron goddess of prostitution. Far from being a disparagement, these texts praise Ishtar.¹³ In fact, poems which praise Inanna/Ishtar

8 O'Brien, *Nahum*, 63.

9 *Ibid.*, 67.

10 "Aids to attention can take two forms: either devices which slow down the onward movement of the poem, allowing time for the listeners to absorb its content (these are repetition, parallelism, word-pairs), or devices intended to jar interest (such as various kinds of symmetry breakers, defeated expectancy, staircase parallelism)." Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (New York: T & T Clark, 1984; repr., New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 34.

11 "The goddess Inana or Ištar was the most important female deity of Mesopotamia at all periods." Jeremy A. Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 108.

12 "From the time of the kings of Akkad (2500-2300 BC), however, Nineveh was consecrated primarily to Istar, goddess of love and war, to whom the oldest temple in Nineveh, the war-temple, was dedicated. It is significant that we find in Nahum 3 the blending of both "harlot" (vv 4-6) and "war" (vv 1-3) imagery." J. Daryl Charles, "Plundering the Lion's Den—A Portrait of Divine Fury (Nahum 2:3-11)," *Grace Theological Journal* 10, (September 1989): 185.

13 Mesopotamian literature praises Ishtar in other ways that modern audiences would not consider complimentary. For instance "O star of lamentation, who causes peaceable brothers to fight..." ("Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar," *ANET*, 384), and "Inanna, most deceitful of women..." ("The Ecstasy of Love," *ANET*, 640).

as a hierodule are the earliest literature with a known author.¹⁴ For instance, the lengthy “Hymnal Prayer of Enheduanna: The Adoration of Inanna in Ur,” begins and ends with this title.

Hierodule of An . . .
 Destroyer of the foreign lands, you have given wings to the storm. . . .
 You are known by your destruction of rebel-lands,
 You are known by your massacring (their people),
 You are known by your devouring (their) dead like a dog. . . .
 She was clothed with beauty, was filled with joyous allure.
 How she carried her beauty—like the rising moon-light! . . .
 To the hierodule whose command is noble. . . .
 My queen garbed in allure, O Inanna, praise!¹⁵

For almost two thousand years, Inanna/Ishtar was worshipped using “shockingly explicit sexual language.”¹⁶ Her cult glorified her sexual exploits and her worship included prostitution.¹⁷ The best-known example of this is the taming of Enkidu by Shamhat, one of Ishtar’s temple prostitutes, in the Epic of Gilgamesh. “She was not ashamed to take him, she made herself naked and welcomed his eagerness; as he lay on her murmuring love she taught him the

14 “Enheduanna (or Enheduana; estimated 2350 BCE) is the first identifiable poet in history.” Cass Dalgish, “Enheduanna,” in *Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World: A Global Sourcebook and History* (ed. Tiffany K. Wayne; Santa Barbara, Cal.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1. Enheduanna was “the first writer, man or woman, to assert authorship of a work” (ibid., 4) and “much of her work was written to honor Inanna” (ibid., 1).

15 “Hymnal Prayer of Enheduanna: the Adoration of Inanna in Ur,” *ANET*, 579-582; all ellipses mine.

16 Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001), 141.

17 “The bed and tavern plaque images would entice the goddess’s favor, if not her actual presence, by presenting those things most pleasing to her—sex, beer, and beds—and by flattering her with celebratory commemorations of her sexual exploits.” Julia Assante, “Sex, Magic and the Liminal Body in the Erotic Art and Texts of the Old Babylonian Period,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001* (vol. 1; ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki, Finland: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 47; The city of Uruk had the name “‘city of courtesans, harlots and prostitutes’ . . . on the basis of the temple staff of the goddess. Temple prostitution was in fact an important part of her cult and was thought of as promoting fertility. Epithets such as ‘the mistress of love,’ ‘the queen of joy,’ ‘she who loves pleasure and joy,’ characterize Ishtar in this aspect.” Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (trans. John Sturdy; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 60.

woman's art. For six days and seven nights they lay together, for Enkidu had forgotten his home in the hills."¹⁸ Since the Neo-Assyrian Empire associated itself so closely to Ishtar and worshipped her as a prostitute, one may reasonably conclude that Nah 3:4 alludes to this characterization.

Nahum's Definition of זונה

The description in Nah 3:4 also fits the historical crimes of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, but explaining this requires a precise definition of זונה. Two chapters of Phyllis Bird's book, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, discuss prostitution. These chapters, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts" and "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," are referenced repeatedly in feminist literature regarding prostitution. Bird's explanation of the prostitute's role in ancient Near East society has shaped scholarly understanding of prostitution in the Bible. Bird has many insightful things to say in these chapters, but these chapters do not address Nah 3 and her definition does not fit Nah 3.¹⁹

Bird defines a prostitute, or harlot, as

a woman who offers sexual favors for pay. In the Hebrew Bible she is normally designated by the single term *zônâ*, a *qal* participle from the root ZNH, used either alone, as a substantive, or attributively. Her social status is that of an outcast, though not an outlaw, a tolerated but dishonored member of society. She normally has the legal status of a free citizen; where she is a slave, or is otherwise legally dependent, it is not because of her occupation.²⁰

Understandably, any reader working with this definition would wonder at Nahum's choice of metaphor.

18 "The Epic of Gilgamesh" (N. K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction* [1960, repr. and rev., London: Penguin Books, 1972], 64-65.

19 Bird primarily discusses the stories of Tamar, Rahab, the two prostitutes and Solomon, and Hosea. Bird's observations are much more appropriate to those texts than to Nah 3 for reasons that this article will address.

20 Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 199.

Nahum 3:4 does not use Bird's definition and her definition does not fit the description of Jezebel in 2 Kgs 9:22 which has an inter-textual link with Nah 3:4.²¹

When Joram saw Jehu, he said, "Is it peace, Jehu?" He answered, "What peace can there be, so long as the many whoredoms [זנוני] and sorceries [וכשפיה הרבים] of your mother Jezebel continue?" (2 Kgs 9:22 NRSV)

Because of the great fornications of the beautiful and charming prostitute [מרב זנוני זונה], the mistress of sorceries [כשפים] who sells nations by her fornications [בזנוניה] and clans by her sorcery [בכשפיה]. (Nah 3:4)

There is no indication of sexual indiscretion in the life of Jezebel, let alone that she sold herself sexually.²² Neither did Jezebel function on the margins of Israelite society. Since neither text shows any indication of sexual promiscuity, another aspect of זונה may explain Nah 3 and 2 Kgs 9.

Phyllis Bird's discussion of Rahab provides this other definition. Bird writes,

The narrator begins the account of the spies' mission with a deliberately suggestive lead sentence. 'Go, view the land,' the spies are instructed, and the report of their action immediately follows: 'and they went and came to Jericho and entered the house of a harlot (*bêt- 'iššâ zônâ*), whose name was Rahab, and slept there (*wayyîškēbû šāmmâ*).' The place should probably be understood as an inn or public house, but the narrator clearly wishes to focus attention immediately on the connection with Rahab and especially on her occupation. Thus the designation *'iššâ zônâ* precedes the name as the determining expression following the noun 'house.' The language is obviously meant to suggest a brothel, and the following verb, *šākab*, reinforces the suggestion.²³

21 Both O'Brien and Sanderson briefly mention the similarity between Nah 3:4 and 2 Kgs 9:22. "Just as Jehu expressed his contempt by accusing her of promiscuity and sorceries (2 Kings 9:22), so Nahum applied the same two words to Nineveh" (Sanderson, "Nahum," 219); "As in 2 Kgs 9.22 and Isa. 57.3, the charge of *zônâ* is paired with witchcraft" (O'Brien, *Nahum*, 62).

22 "[T]here is nothing in the preceding chapters that the queen was anything but a loyal wife to her husband. This being the case, there is here the continuation of the tradition of apostasy as adultery which is found in Judg 2:17; 8:33, and which is traced through the later prophets (Jer 2:1-13; Nah 3:4; Hosea)." T. R. Hobbs, 2 *Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985), 116-117.

23 Bird, *Missing Persons*, 210.

A page later, Bird comments, “In our passage, the ‘house’ is identified as Rahab’s and is clearly not her family home, since her parents and siblings must be brought into *her* house in order to be saved (v. 18). In view of her profession, then, it is reasonable to view the house as her place of business.”²⁴ Therefore, Bird demonstrates that Rahab owned a business and ran a brothel. As Bird notes later, “sexual innuendo . . . pervades the whole first scene as an element of narrative intention.”²⁵ While the suggestiveness of the text makes it likely that Rahab worked as a prostitute, and therefore fits Bird’s formal definition of זונה, Josh 2 also indicates that a madam is a זונה.

Selling Nations

The definition of זונה as a madam explains the phrase המכרת גוים (“who sells nations”; 3:4). Nahum uses these words in two ways that seem at odds with their context. First, a prostitute sells sexual services. If the text speaks of selling people, one would expect it to say that the prostitute sold herself, not others. Second, Assyriology provides no indication that Assyria sold nations. On this basis, O’Brien and Sanderson’s challenge of Nahum’s metaphor appears valid. However, the Hebrew word מכר has a range of contexts. It can refer to everything from a tangible good to a nation of people. The Old Testament often uses the verb in the context of slavery. Nahum uses it to accuse Nineveh of wide-scale slaving.²⁶ The Neo-Assyrian Empire was one of the most effective, brutal human trafficking organizations the world has ever seen.

The most recognized definition of human trafficking comes from Article 3a of the *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*, which states,

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploita-

24 Ibid., 211; emphasis original.

25 Ibid., 212.

26 “Casting the lot [in Nah 3:10] suggests that the prisoners were distributed as slaves among the victorious soldiers.” Klaas Spronk, *Nahum* (HCOT; Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1997), 131.

tion. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.²⁷

The European Union and the United States have also adopted this statement as the legal standard for identifying human trafficking.

Using this definition, Assyrian inscriptions prove that the Neo-Assyrian Empire practiced human trafficking on a multi-national scale. Nahum knew about and condemned Nineveh's human trafficking enterprise. He declared that though Judah acted faithlessly toward YHWH in selling itself to Assyria, YHWH would restore Judah and wreak vengeance on those who prostituted his people.

The Assyrian foreign policy matched and exceeded methods that current slavers use. This article will now compare Assyria's recruitment methods with modern methods of recruiting slaves for trafficking. Since a satisfactory explanation of the clause *גוים בונניה* (*“who sells nations in her fornications”*; Nah 3:4) requires incorporating prostitution, this discussion will focus on modern human traffickers involved in sexual exploitation.

The following excerpt from an article about sexual trafficking in Pakistan explains the conditions that facilitate the recruitment of women into sexual slavery and why slavers transport them to other nations.

The global sexual exploitation of women and girls is a supply and demand market. In using economic terminologies, male dominated societies create the demand and women are supplied as commodities. Cities and countries where male demand for females in prostitution is legalized or tolerated are the receiving ends, while countries and areas where traffickers easily recruit women are the sending regions. Sending countries or regions are characterized by poverty, unemployment, war, and political and economic instability. These conditions facilitate the activity of traffickers who target regions where recruiting victims is easy.²⁸

27 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and The Protocols Thereto* (Vienna, Austria: United Nations, 2004), 42. Cited 6 May 2014. Online: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>.

28 Rashida Valika, "Women Trafficking in Pakistan: A Tale of Misery and Exploitation," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 1 (June 2007): 20-22.

Human traffickers profit from broken societies. A person becomes more vulnerable to deception and more willing to take risks in proportion to the severity of the environment.

The question of voluntary versus forced slavery is relevant to the biblical account of Assyria's actions, Assyrian records, and modern sexual trafficking. In the conclusion of an article about sexual trafficking in Nepal, Padam Simkhada explains the difficulty of this issue.

It is very hard to answer the question of how many girls were actually tricked or forced into the trade or how many went into the business of their own free will, because it is not clear where the dividing line is between choice and compulsion. As O'Dea noticed, the expression "own free will" seems out of place in this context. The influence of poverty, family pressure, caste and gender discrimination has to be taken into account. Mere resignation due to lack of a viable alternative may seem a rational response. In the Nepali context, "voluntary prostitution" is often considered a paradoxical term. However, it does not serve the reality of trafficked girls to fit their cases to a dichotomous system that only admits voluntary or forced prostitution. There are too many forces at work to decide.²⁹

The seriousness of the judgment against Assyria depicted in Nahum demonstrates that YHWH and Nahum consider Assyria guilty of taking advantage of the dire circumstances that Judah, and other nations, faced.

YHWH expected his people to trust him despite the apparently hopeless circumstances they faced. Instead, Judah made a calculated decision to sell itself into Assyrian bondage. Judah certainly did not relish the consequences that would come from Assyrian bondage, but considered it the best option. Second Kings 16 describes Ahaz's decision regarding Assyria.

Then King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel came up to wage war on Jerusalem; they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him. At that time the king of Edom recovered Elath for Edom, and drove the Judeans from Elath; and the Edomites came to Elath, where they live to this day. Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me from the

29 Padam Simkhada, "Life Histories and Survival Strategies Amongst Sexually Trafficked Girls in Nepal," *Children & Society* 22, no. 3 (May 2008): 244.

hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” (2 Kgs 16:5-7 NRSV)

While the prophets view such treaties as a catastrophic and unnecessary decision to enter into spiritual sexual bondage, the book of Nahum focuses on YHWH’s right of vengeance against those who encouraged and exploited Judah’s decision.³⁰

Assyria did not just wait for nations like Judah to volunteer. Like modern traffickers, they procured their victims through a range of strategies. Whereas some women face circumstances so extreme that they will knowingly enter a life of prostitution, other women become enslaved unknowingly. Many sexual traffickers pretend to be recruiters for legitimate businesses in wealthy nations. “Traffickers or intermediaries, acting as if they want to assist girls and women, but in reality wanting to deceive them and abuse their vulnerable positions, tell the prospective victims success stories of women who go abroad and earn lots of money.”³¹ Others rely on brute force. For instance, in Turkey, “Kidnapping is also used as a means of recruiting women. Specialised, medium-scale organisations often kidnap women from their homelands and bring them to their own nightclubs, bars, or illegal brothels to work by force, or tourists can be kidnapped and compelled to work for illegal purposes.”³²

Assyria certainly used kidnapping. When Ahaz volunteered Judah for Assyrian service, “The king of Assyria listened to him; the king of Assyria marched up against Damascus, and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir; then he killed Rezin” (2 Kgs 16:9 NRSV). Claims of kidnapping on a national scale fill Assyrian royal inscriptions. For example, an inscription from Tiglath-pileser III reads, “By means of earthworks [and] battering rams, I captured the city Sarrabānu. I carried off 55,000 people, together with their possessions, his booty, his property, his goods, his wife, his sons, his daughters, and his gods.”³³ This is one of hundreds of examples of Assyrian recruitment and transportation

30 “The prophets repeatedly called upon some of the most explicit, provocative, and lurid images of human sexuality to personify what they saw as the nation’s religious distortions and political blunders.” Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995), 12.

31 Oguzhan O. Demir, “Methods of Sex Trafficking: Findings of a Case Study in Turkey,” *Global Crime* 11, no. 3 (August 2010): 316.

32 *Ibid.*, 317.

33 *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* 1 47; brackets original.

of human slaves. Some sources put the number of people deported by the Neo-Assyrian Empire at 4.5 million.³⁴

One reason that “Assyrian Empire” and “human trafficking” do not often appear in the same sentence is that biblical historians treat Assyrian enslavement policies as military strategy. Scholars usually view these deportations as a means of subduing the population. The literature often disregards the economic importance of the deportees.

Nahum’s charge shows that the incredible expansion Nineveh experienced came about because of the lives and deaths of thousands upon thousands of kidnapped people. Nahum stands as an ancient indictment of human trafficking long before these crimes became a modern concern. Nahum and the Assyrian record make it clear that much more than foreign policy governed these decisions.

When Nahum uses “sells,” it indicts Nineveh for economic crimes. As the Tiglath-pileser inscription demonstrates, Assyrian annals tend to list the number of captives taken as the first item in the list of economic assets acquired in conquest. Assyrian texts give reason to believe that the enslavement of entire populations for economic purposes ranked as a primary reason for conquest.

Spiritual Prostitution

In the years preceding Nahum’s prophecy, the Assyrian Empire had used deportees for two massive building ventures. First, Sennacherib unexpectedly changed the capital of Assyria from Dur-Sharrukin to Nineveh. He then turned Nineveh into the largest, most ostentatious, and best defended city in the ANE. Second, Esarhaddon rebuilt Babylon, which Sennacherib had brutally

34 For instance, Michael Burger, *The Shaping of Western Civilization: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 57. This number represents the total number of deportees that Neo-Assyrian texts record, and multiple sources cite it. Other scholars consider this number excessive. For example, “Estimates of the overall number of people deported in the [Neo-Assyrian] period range from 1.5 to 4.5 million. But even the lower of these figures is commonly considered to be impossibly high, not least because of the logistical problem facing the Assyrian administration in moving, in the largest contingent, some 208,000 persons.” Peter R. Bedford, “The Neo-Assyrian Empire,” in *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (ed. Ian Morris and Walter Seidel; OSEE; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33. Whatever the actual total, the Neo-Assyrian Empire practiced kidnapping on a greater scale than the ancient Near East had ever witnessed.

destroyed.³⁵ Although Nahum commentators rarely mention this, these projects required massive amounts of money and labor. Both came from conquest.³⁶ Nahum indicts Assyria for killing, destroying, stealing, and enslaving to gain the economic resources—money, material, and labor—needed to build.

Nahum also charged Nineveh with sexual crime. Since the prophets condemned idolatry through the language of adultery, the link between forced worship and forced prostitution becomes apparent.³⁷ Nahum, therefore, names Nineveh a cosmic pimp.³⁸ Like modern human traffickers, Nineveh recruited vulnerable people, transported them out of their native land, forced them to commit spiritual prostitution, punished them for any perceived disloyalty,

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- 35 “The constant unrest in Babylonia was undoubtedly a source of vexation, indeed exasperation, to the monarch but the cruelest blow was the kidnapping of his son, Aahurnadin-shumi, in 694. The prince, who is never mentioned again, presumably was killed in exile, and so the war with the Babylonians and their Elamite allies became a blood feud. . . . When the Assyrians were pillaging and ravaging Babylon, they went so far as to destroy not only the temples of the gods, but the divine statues as well, although the statue of Marduk apparently escaped and was removed to Assyria. These actions were the height of sacrilege, not only to Babylonians but also too many Assyrians who had great reverence for the Babylonian deities.” A. K. Grayson, “Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (704-669 BC),” in *The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries BC* (eds. John Boardman, et al.; vol. 3, pt. 2 of *CAH*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 118. Esarhaddon, for debated reasons, rebuilt Babylon. He paid particular attention to the rebuilding of temples and restoring cultic activities. This project required massive amounts of money, material and labor.
- 36 “Continued military campaigns and extensive building projects were, however, very expensive. Much of the cost of Assyrian imperialism and architectonic grandeur had to be shouldered by its vassal states.” Aron Pinker, “Nahum: the Prophet and His Message.” *JBQ* 33, no. 2 (April 2005): 85-86. Cited 6 May 2014. Online: <http://jbq.jewishbible.org>.
- 37 “[P]rophet after prophet drew on a wide spectrum of sexual activities—from marriage (covenant), to infidelity (apostasy), to sexual violence (punishment/judgment), to sexual reunion (covenant renewal)—to describe the vicissitudes of Israel and God’s history together” (Weems, *Battered Love*, 27).
- 38 “Black’s (1990) law dictionary defines a pimp as someone who obtains customers for a prostitute. The reality of most pimps, however, is that they use manipulation, threats, and violence to keep prostitutes from leaving the trade and live entirely off the women they recruit. Research has consistently revealed that pimps are often perpetrators of violence against prostituted women.” Alexis M. Kennedy et al, “Routes of Recruitment: Pimps’ Techniques and Other Circumstances That Lead to Street Prostitution,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 15, no. 2 (November 2007): 5.

and received payment in return.³⁹ The seemingly endless supply of captives replenished the used up victims.⁴⁰

So how did Nineveh prostitute her captives? By considering how the Old Testament viewed oaths and service to foreign gods, this answer is not difficult. From the perspectives of both the Old Testament and Assyrian texts, the Assyrian kings recruited and transported their victims in order to sell them to Assyrian gods. An oath of service created a binding covenant. Assyrian inscriptions indicate that Assyrian kings forced conquered kings to take loyalty oaths that involved subservience to the Assyrian pantheon. For instance, one of Ashurbanipal's inscriptions reads, "Favour I granted him and an agreement to worship the great Gods I caused him to swear."⁴¹ The words "You are adjured by Ashur, the father of the gods, lord of all lands" occur early in Esarhaddon's Vassal Treaty.⁴² Later, the same treaty begins a curse by saying, "(If) you do not respect as your own god Ashur, king of the gods . . ."⁴³ When vassals broke these treaties, they came under the curses set out in these treaties.⁴⁴ These curses unleash the judgment of Ashur, and other gods, on the recalcitrant.

Assyria also prostituted Israel, Judah, and other nations in other ways. The crimes listed in Nahum's indictment include economic and sexual elements because the Assyrians used the money, materials, and slave labor of Israel, Judah, and other nations to build palaces and temples dedicated to Assyrian

39 "VICE police officers reported that pimps would refer to young women from a good home as 'in-for-a-million' girls. The reasoning was that healthy, good-looking young women can be worked for long hours on the higher scale strolls (e.g., Richards Street in Vancouver) where they would bring in more cash per client. Pimps bragged to police that they could make a million dollars off of a drug-free, high-end girl before she became useless, a physical and emotional ghost of her previous self" (ibid., 8-9).

40 "No matter how these women and girls get into the field of prostitution, it is difficult to get out of it once they are in. Pimps and brothel owners use violence, threats, and addiction to drugs and alcohol to control them, sometimes keeping them in slave-like conditions. Often women can leave prostitution only after they are used-up, become ill, and can no longer make money for the pimps" (Valika, "Pakistan," 22).

41 George Smith, *History of Ashurbanipal, Translated from the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1871), 264. Cited 7 May 2014. Online: <http://archive.org>.

42 "Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon," *ANET*, 534.

43 Ibid., 538; ellipses mine.

44 "May Ashur, king of the gods, who determines the fates, decree for you an evil, unpropitious fate" (ibid); "May Ishtar, lady of battle, break your bow in a heavy battle, tie your arms, and have you crouch at the feet of your enemy" (ibid); "may they decree for you an unrelieved darkness" (ibid., 539); "Just as a mule has no offspring, may your name, offspring, and descendants disappear from the land" (ibid); "may Ashur, father of the gods, strike you down with his fierce weapons" (ibid).

and Babylonian gods.⁴⁵ In biblical studies, the most famous Assyrian inscription, by far, is Sennacherib's "bird in a cage" reference to Hezekiah, which begins,

Moreover, (as for) Hezekiah of the land Judah, who had not submitted to my yoke, I surrounded (and) conquered forty-six of his fortified cities, fortresses, and small(er) settlements in their environs, which were without number, by having ramps trodden down and battering rams brought up, the assault of foot soldiers, sapping, breaching, and siege engines. I brought out of them 200,150 people, young (and) old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep and goats, which were without number, and I counted (them) as booty.⁴⁶

This excerpt comes from a much longer inscription. The first part of the inscription, which includes the encounter with Hezekiah, details five of Sennacherib's military campaigns. The second part gives extensive details of the massive expansion of Nineveh. The rebuilding account begins,

At that time, Nineveh, the exalted cult center, the city loved by the goddess Ištar in which all of the rituals for gods and goddesses are present; the enduring foundation (and) eternal base whose plan had been designed by the stars (lit. "writing") of the firmament and whose arrangement was made manifest since time immemorial; a sophisticated place (and) site of secret lore in which every kind of skilled craftsmanship, all of the rituals, (and) the secret(s) of the *lalgar* (cosmic subterranean water) are apprehended.⁴⁷

The inscription proceeds to give detail about the materials and engineering required to transform Nineveh in both size and luxury.⁴⁸ The inscription

45 "I, Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, the humble king, the exalted prince, favorite of the great gods, gathered together the peoples of the lands which my hands had conquered, I made them carry the basket and headpad. That temple, from its turrets to its foundation walls, [I rebuilt]." Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (vol. 2; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926; repr., London: Histories & Mysteries of Man, 1989), 273; "Generally foreigners did forced labor on building and agricultural projects or were otherwise employed in menial capacities in temples and palaces" (Bedford, "Empire," 37).

46 *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* 3 017.

47 Ibid.

48 "It was truly a splendid and sophisticated metropolis, but it had gained its wealth and grandeur by making merchandise of other nations through either military might or

intertwines praise to the brilliance of Sennacherib and the grandeur of his gods. Near the end of the inscription, Sennacherib tells how he dedicated the “palace without rival,” by saying, “After I had finished the work on my palace, I invited inside it the god Aššur, the great lord, (and) the gods and goddesses living in Assyria, then I made splendid offerings and presented my gift(s). I made fine oil from olives and aromatics from the orchards (planted) on newly tilled soil. At the inauguration of the palace, I had the heads of the subjects of my land drenched (and) I watered their insides with sweet wine.”⁴⁹ This inscription gives one example of many that show the Assyrian kings depended on pillaged money, material, and slaves to construct elaborate and luxurious buildings dedicated to Assyrian gods and goddesses. Although, not explicitly stated, they certainly would have used slaves from Israel and Judah for these projects. A comparison of this inscription and Nahum reveals a number of similarities that make it likely that Nahum censures this project.⁵⁰

The question of payment remains. Nineveh enslaved nations and forced them to take oaths, wage war, sing songs, and build buildings for the benefit of the Assyrian pantheon.⁵¹ Nahum’s words זונה and המכרת require that Nineveh received payment from the gods for the captives prostituted to them. Evidence of this pervades royal inscriptions. One example reads, “After the gods Aššur,

economic exploitations. Further, it had enslaved many with its sociopolitical seductions, most of which were connected with its religious harlotry.” Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Richardson, Tex.: Biblical Studies, 2003), 82.

49 *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* 3 017.

50 Without attributing all of these to deliberate allusion, the cumulative effect of so many similarities suggests some intention in Nahum to mock and undo Sennacherib’s inscription. Both the inscription and Nahum share the following words and themes: Nineveh (Nah 1:1; 2:9; 3:7); Ishtar (not named in Nahum, but present in theme); yoke (1:13); making bricks (3:14); palace (2:7); river (1:4; 2:7); flood (1:8); flood erosion (2:7); gold (2:10); silver (2:10); cypress (2:4); gates (2:7; 3:13); Asshur (3:18); name (1:14); Lebanon (1:4); sword (2:14; 3:3; 3:13); cutting down trees (2:4); mountains (1:5); temples (1:14); cultic images (1:14); lions (2:12-14); clay (3:14); pride (2:3); allure and charm (3:4); water (2:7, 9); great wall (2:6); fruit trees (3:12); vines (2:3); “time immemorial” (2:9); water marshes (2:9); wine (1:10).

51 “The bearers of the spade, the hoe, (and) the basket, the workers who carry baskets of brick(s), passed their time in joyous song, in rejoicing, with pleasure, (and) with radiant mien. I finished its work with rejoicing, jubilation, (and) melodious songs, and I named it Ešgalšiddudua, “The palace that administers everything” (*Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* 4 001); Carl-Albert Keller, “Die Theologische Bewältigung der Geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit in der Prophetie Nahums,” *VT* 22, no. 4 (October 1972): 408-409, believes that Nah 1:15 refers to Ashurbanipal’s conscription of Judah’s forces as he marched to conquer Egypt in 663.

Šamaš, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, and Ištar of Arbela made me stand victoriously over my enemies and I attained everything I wanted, with the booty of the vast enemies which my hands had captured through the help of the great gods, my lords, I had the shrines of cult centers built in Assyria and Akkad; I decorated (them) with silver (and) gold and made (them) shine like daylight.”⁵² Royal inscriptions show Assyrian kings mindful of and grateful for the aid that the Assyrian pantheon has given. Therefore, they spare no effort or expense to give the gods and goddesses honor, worship, and luxury. This task required the resources and lives of foreign peoples and resulted in a cycle of military victory, plunder, kidnapping, extravagant building, and then the need for more conquest.

Conclusion

The claims that Nahum’s use of זונה does not match the historical context of Assyria assume that the word refers to a woman selling herself. This article demonstrated that זונה may also refer to a woman who works as a madam—selling others. Since Nah 3:4 uses Ishtar imagery and accuses Nineveh of selling nations, this definition fits precisely. With this understanding, it becomes clear that Nahum links Assyria’s deportation policy to wide-scale slavery. This article showed that Assyrian practices meet the United Nations definition of human trafficking; the methods Assyria used also match methods of modern traffickers. The sexual language in 3:4 continues the prophetic tradition of linking apostasy with fornication. Assyria used brutal practices to prostitute Israel, Judah, and other nations to the Assyrian pantheon. That Nah 3:4 charges Nineveh with selling nations shows that the prophet was aware of—and condemned—human trafficking millennia before it became a modern concern.

52 *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* 4 001.