

THE PROBLEMATIC HEBREW VERB 'נָשָׂא' IN NAHUM 1:5

PHILIP SUCIADI CHIA*

University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT The Hebrew word 'נָשָׂא' poses difficulties for ancient translations, Hebrew lexicons (BDB and HALOT), and the Old Testament scholars, as it can be interpreted as either 'נָשָׂא' (to lift) or 'נָשָׂא' (to crash into ruins). This research contends that 'נָשָׂא' is the correct lexical form of the Hebrew word 'נָשָׂא' even suggesting that the author of the book of Nahum deliberately utilizes 'נָשָׂא'. This article employs textual criticism to prove this thesis.

KEYWORDS: Old Testament, Textual Criticism, Nahum, נָשָׂא, נָשָׂא, נָשָׂא,

Introduction

The Hebrew word 'נָשָׂא' presents challenges in the context of ancient translations. The Greek Septuagint (Rahlfs 1935) and the Masoretic text (Elliger and Rudolph 1997) read 'נָשָׂא' as 'καὶ ἀνεστύλη' and 'נָשָׂא' respectively. On the other hand, Latin Vulgate (Weber, Fischer 2013) translate and Syriac Peshitta (the Leiden Peshitta Edition: 2012) 'נָשָׂא' as *et contremuit* and 'نَحَلَ'. Targum Aramaic interprets 'נָשָׂא' as 'והרובת' or 'and (the earth) will become a waste'. Aquila's Greek translation uses 'ἔφριξεν', while the Greek Symmachus has 'ἐκτιθήνη' (Field 1875). This research employs a textual criticism to solve the problematic Hebrew word of 'נָשָׂא'.

Methodology

Textual criticism of the Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible, is an academic field dedicated to study and examine the differences found in various manuscripts. This discipline has two main objectives. The first objective is to uncover the

* PHILIP SUCIADI CHIA (DTh 2014, Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia; PhD 2021, Southern Seminary) is a research associate at Faculty of Theology and Religion of Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa and a professor of Biblical Studies at Moriah Theological Seminary, Indonesia. Email: pchia275@students.sbts.edu. ORCID: 0000-0003-2453-7497

theological significance inherent in the different translations. The second objective is to reconstruct the most precise and authentic text of the biblical writings as they were initially composed. This process entails the comparison and analysis of numerous manuscripts, versions, and textual testimonies to uncover errors, variations, and modifications that have transpired throughout history (Barthélemy 2012, 92). This process can be approached through two primary methods: external evidence and internal evidence. External evidence involves evaluating the age, reliability, and geographical distribution of the manuscripts. Generally, older manuscripts are regarded as more authoritative. Internal evidence, on the other hand, includes transcriptional probability, which assesses what a scribe is more likely to have written or copied, and intrinsic probability, which considers what the original author is likely to have composed based on factors such as context, style, and theological considerations. This internal analysis often relies on principles like *lectio difficilior*, preference for shorter readings, and the need for contextual consistency (cf. Chia 2025: 5-16). This research focusses on the second objective.

BHS and BHQ

BHS apparatus indicates that 'וְחֵשָׁא' is read as 'וְחֵשָׁא'. Both Syriac Peshitta and Latin Vulgate reflect this reading of 'וְחֵשָׁא'. While the BHS apparatus offers significant insights, it does not present a complete picture. The readings from the Aramaic Targum, Greek Septuagint, and the Hexapla are not included in the BHS apparatus (Elliger and Rudolph 1997: 1044).

BHQ offers a more comprehensive set of information, which encompasses annotations and commentary related to the critical apparatus (Gelston 2010). In BHQ apparatus, Gelston presents the reading from the LXX 'καὶ ἀνεστάλη', Aquila's Greek translation 'ἔφριξεν', Latin Vulgate, Syriac Peshitta, Symmachus' Greek translation 'ἐκινήθη', and Aramaic Targum 'וְחֵרִיבָת'. In other words, Gelston adds the readings from the LXX, the Hexapla (Aquila and Symmachus), as well as Aramaic Targum (Gelston 2010: 84). In BHQ commentary on the critical apparatus, suggests that it is likely that the ancient translations exhibit confusion regarding the Hebrew text and provide interpretations considered appropriate for the context. He further notes that only the Aramaic Targum may, though not definitively, represent a *Vorlage* with 'ש' instead of 'ח' (Gelston 2010: 110). Gelston, however, fails to offer any details regarding which version constitutes the original and authentic text as it was originally created.

The origin of the textual problem

The textual issue presented in Nahum 1:5 offers two distinct interpretations: “(and the earth) is lifted up” or “and (the earth) is devastated”. This divergence stems from a couple of factors. The first factor is the root of the Hebrew verb ‘תשא’: it may be derived from the root ‘שׁוּן’ (to lift up) or ‘שׁוּן’ (to crash into ruins). The last factor is the Hebrew pointing system of the Hebrew verb ‘תשא’ (cf. Chia 2022: 1-6). The consonant ‘ש’ may denote either ‘ש’ (*sin*) or ‘ש’ (*shin*). If it signifies ‘ש’, then it refers to ‘שׁוּן’ (to lift up). Otherwise, if it indicates ‘ש’, then it relates to ‘שׁוּן’ (to crash into ruins).

The impact of the textual problem

The Hebrew verb ‘תשא’ presents significant difficulties for Hebrew lexicons and Old Testament scholars. HALOT, a notable Hebrew lexicon, acknowledges the intricacies associated with the term ‘תשא’ and proposes two distinct interpretations. The first interpretation corresponds with the Masoretic Text (or MT): a) the earth heaves, as translated in NRSV, a meaning corroborated by the Septuagint and Symmachus. This meaning is linked to the Arabic term ‘naša’a’, which means to arise or rise up (Kopf 1958: 161-214); and b) alternatively, it can be interpreted as the earth crying out, similar to ‘שׁוּן קוּל’ (Rudolph 1975: 150-151). The second interpretation suggests reading ‘תשא’ as ‘שׁוּן’ or ‘שׁוּן’ which conveys the idea of being destroyed or collapsing into ruins (Christensen 1975: 17-30). This interpretation is supported by ancient translations: both The Vulgate ‘*et contremuit*’ and the Peshitta as ‘ܬܬܪܫܐ’ which means “to tremble suddenly” or “to quake”. Aquila similarly employs a related term ἔφριξεν (to shudder) (Rudolph 1975: 150-151). Although HALOT presents both interpretations, it favors the second interpretation or ‘שׁוּן’. Another renowned Hebrew lexicon, BDB, also suggests that the Hebrew verb ‘שׁוּן’ may serve as the interpretation of ‘תשא’ as found in Nahum 1:5. Consequently, both BDB (1906: 980) and HALOT (2017) interpret ‘תשא’ in Nahum 1:5 as ‘שׁוּן’ (to crash into ruins) instead of ‘שׁוּן’ (to lift up).

In addition to Hebrew lexicons, the Hebrew verb ‘תשא’ also poses considerable challenges for the Old Testament scholars. These scholars are similarly divided regarding two possible interpretations: ‘שׁוּן’ (to lift up) or ‘שׁוּן’ (to crash into ruins). Oort (1900), Happel (1902) and Alonso (1980) favor the Hebrew verb ‘שׁוּן’ (to lift up) instead of ‘שׁוּן’ (to crash into ruins). Conversely, other scholars advocate for the reading ‘שׁוּן’ (cf. Barthélemy 1992: 785-787, Cappel 1689, Cappel 1650, Houbigant (1753), Gunkel (1893: 228), Marti (1904), Rießler (1911), Smith (1929), Elliger (1949), Horst (1964), Tournay (1964: 331), Keller (1971), Schulz (1973: 9), Cathcart (1973), Bickell (2019: 7), and Van Hoonacker (1908), Nowack (1903)). Cappel sup-

ports the reading of 'שָׂא' based on the translation provided by the Targum (Cappel 1689: 98; Cappel 1650: 777).

External evidence

This external evidence entails assessing the age, dependability, and geographical spread of the manuscripts. Typically, manuscripts that are older are considered to hold greater authority. The table below demonstrates that the Hebrew verb 'וַתִּשָּׂא' may be interpreted as either 'נָשָׂא', meaning 'to lift' (to carry or to take) or 'שָׂא', which translates to 'to be devastated'. Regarding its meaning, the Masoretic text, the Greek Septuagint, the Greek Symmachus, and the Syriac Peshitta share a common interpretation aligned with 'נָשָׂא'. Gelston notes that the Syriac Peshitta has שָׂא as its *vorlage* (Gelston 2010: 84). However, the Syriac verb 'ܬܠܥ' has two possible meanings: 'to move' (like the Greek Symmachus) and 'to be trouble' or 'to be frightened' (as seen in the Latin Vulgate). In conclusion, the Syriac Peshitta appears to have aimed for a cautious translation that could encompass both meanings of 'נָשָׂא' and 'שָׂא'. The Greek Aquila, Latin Vulgate, Aramaic Targum, and Akhmimic clearly adopt 'שָׂא' as their *vorlage*.

Table 1
Ancient translations of 'וַתִּשָּׂא' in Nahum 1:5

Source	Text	Translation	Vorlage	Dates
Masoretic Text	וַתִּשָּׂא	And it raises	נָשָׂא	Aleppo Codex: 930 C.E Leningrad Codex: 1008-1010 C.E
Greek Septuagint	καὶ ἀνεστάλη	And it was raised up	נָשָׂא	Around 2 nd Century
Hexapla (Aquila)	ἔφριξεν	It shuddered (active voice)	שָׂא	Around 2 nd Century
Hexapla (Symmachus)	ἐκινήθη	It was moved (passive voice)	נָשָׂא	Late 2 nd Century
Latin Vulgate	<i>et contremuit</i>	And it has trembled (shuddered)	שָׂא	Late 4 th Century
Aramaic Targum	וַחֲרוּבַת	and it will become a waste	שָׂא	Around 13 th -14 th Century

Syriac Peshitta	ܬܫܐ	It moved (to tremble or to be troubled)	נשא / שאה	Around 2 nd Century
Akhmimic	αϥϩωλ αϩαλ	It wastes away	שאה	Around 4 th -7 th Century

The table 1 presented above indicates that ‘נשא’ seems to be an older reading than ‘שאה’. The Aleppo codex, Leningrad Codex, the Greek Septuagint, the Greek Symmachus, and (or) the Syriac Peshitta appear to adopt ‘שאה’ as their *vorlage*. In other words, four older manuscripts prefer the reading ‘נשא’, while the rest of manuscripts favor ‘שאה’. In conclusion, the external evidence seems to favor the reading ‘נשא’.

Internal evidence

This internal evidence frequently depends on principles such as *lectio difficilior*, a shorter reading, and contextual coherence (cf. Chia 2025: 5-16). Regarding *lectio difficilior*, the Hebrew verb ‘תשא’ present a difficulty regarding its syntactical role in ancient translations, as it can be interpreted either as a fientive verb (transitive) or a stative verb (intransitive). Notably, the Masoretic text uniquely employs a fientive interpretation, whereas other ancient translations adopt a stative perspective. The ancient translations tend to support the stative function, as the Hebrew verb ‘נשא’ in its active form typically necessitates a direct object. Nahum 1:5, however, does not provide any direct objects for the Hebrew verb in question. Consequently, both the Greek Septuagint and the Greek Symmachus adopt ‘נשא’ as their *vorlage* yet employing a stative function to navigate this syntactical challenge. The Syriac Peshitta, on the other hand, opts for a translation that can encompass the dual meanings of ‘נשא’ and ‘שאה’, while the other ancient translations utilize ‘שאה’ to signify a stative function. Consequently, ancient translations see ‘נשא’ as *lectio difficilior*. The table below summarizes the syntactical role of ‘תשא’ in ancient translations.

Table 2
Syntactical role of ‘תשא’

Fientive Verb	Stative Verb
Masoretic Text	Greek Septuagint
	Hexapla (Aquila)
	Hexapla (Symmachus)
	Latin Vulgate

	Aramaic Targum
	Syriac Peshitta
	Akhmimic

Barthélemy provides a comprehensive overview of scholarly discussions surrounding the fientive versus stative functions (Barthélemy 1992: 785-787). Barthélemy notes that most of the Old Testament scholars prefers ‘שֶׁאֵה’ because the Hebrew verb ‘נִשָּׂא’ is the harder reading. ‘נִשָּׂא’ usually needs a direct object, while Nahum 1:5 provides no object of this Hebrew verb. Thus, both the ancient translations and the Old Testament scholars admit that ‘נִשָּׂא’ as *lectio difficilior*.

In the field of Old Testament textual criticism, a ‘shorter reading’ denotes a variant in which a passage in one or more manuscripts is abbreviated relative to the text found in other manuscripts. This implies that certain manuscripts may present a version of the text that lacks specific words, phrases, or even entire verses when compared to alternative versions of the same passage. Such shorter readings represent a significant category of variants in textual criticism, and their occurrence is crucial for comprehending the evolution of the text throughout history. A fundamental tenet of textual criticism is the principle of *lectio brevior potior*, meaning ‘the shorter reading is the stronger reading.’ This principle rests on the premise that scribes, during the process of manuscript copying, were more inclined to insert additional content—whether for clarification, harmonization, or elaboration—rather than to omit existing material. Consequently, a shorter reading is frequently regarded as being more faithful to the original text, as scribes were less prone to intentionally excluding words or phrases. Instead, their tendency was to augment the text for theological or explanatory reasons (cf. Tregelles 2000). Unfortunately, the Hebrew verb ‘נִשָּׂא’ and ‘שֶׁאֵה’ do not pertain to the analysis of a shorter reading, since no such shorter reading exists. Each reading consists of a single Hebrew word. In addition, the Hebrew verb ‘וַחֲשָׂא’ is found exclusively in Nahum 1:5. As a result, it is not possible to apply contextual analysis to determine whether Nahum employs ‘נִשָּׂא’ or ‘שֶׁאֵה’. Therefore, while the shorter reading and contextual consideration do not offer any valuable insights concerning the original reading, the *lectio difficilior* favors ‘נִשָּׂא’.

‘נִשָּׂא’ in Nahum 1:5

It is still difficult to ascertain whether Nahum 1:5 utilizes ‘נִשָּׂא’ or ‘שֶׁאֵה’ for ‘וַחֲשָׂא’, as neither of these words is found in the texts attributed to Nahum. However, both external and internal evidence support the preference for the reading of ‘נִשָּׂא’. The

persistent inquiry continues regarding the true significance of ‘נָשָׂא’ and the rationale behind its use as an intransitive verb.

The precise interpretation of the term ‘נָשָׂא’ remains a subject of debate. The Syriac Peshitta and the Greek Symmachus render it as ‘*ἔκινῃ*’ and ‘*ἐκινήθη*’ respectively, both of which convey the fundamental meaning of ‘to move.’ However, it is noteworthy that ‘נָשָׂא’ is not translated as ‘to move’ in either of the Hebrew lexicons, namely BDB and HALOT. Another alternative is to interpret ‘נָשָׂא’ as ‘to lift’, in accordance with its basic meaning. The challenge with this interpretation lies in the fact that the Hebrew verb ‘נָשָׂא’ requires a direct object (Barthélemy 1992: 785-787). For instance, in 2 Samuel 18:28 and Psalm 106:26, the word ‘hand’ serves as the direct object of ‘נָשָׂא’ (cf. ‘wings’ in Ezekiel 10:16; ‘feet’ in Genesis 42:26; ‘flesh’ in Job 13:14; ‘head’ in Psalm 24:7; ‘weapons’ in 1 Chronicles 5:18; ‘responsibility’ in Deuteronomy 1:12; or (take away) ‘transgression’ in Number 14:18). Although these examples are accurate, the Hebrew verb ‘נָשָׂא’ can also function as an intransitive verb with a reflexive connotation, as seen in Hosea 13:1, Psalm 89:10, and Habakkuk 1:3 (BDB:669-670). Consequently, the meaning of the Hebrew verb ‘נָשָׂא’ in Nahum 1:5 is ‘the earth’ lifts itself up ‘before him’.

A last inquiry to explore is the reasoning for the usage of the Hebrew verb ‘נָשָׂא’ in Nahum 1:5. The Book of Nahum is celebrated for its poetic composition, distinguished by vivid imagery, eloquent language, parallel structures, and rhythmic patterns (Smith, Ward, and Brewer 1911). Nahum 1:5 shifts the subject from YHWH, as discussed in Nahum 1:2-4, to his creations such as the mountains, hills, earth, and the dwellers of the world. Nahum 1:5 shifts the subject, yet it continues to the topic of the mightiness of YHWH over all creations (cf. Jonah 1:9). The table below illustrates the subject matter of Nahum 1:3b-1-5, which centers on the mightiness of YHWH.

Table 3

The Mightiness of YHWH (1:3b-5)	
The first sub-topic	Location: Sky (1:3b)
The second sub-topic	Location: Sea (1:4)
The third sub-topic	Location: Earth (Land) and its inhabitants (1:5)

The table presented above demonstrates that YHWH holds sovereignty over the heavens, the sea, and the earth. Nahum 1:5 depicts God’s mightiness over the earth with by vivid imagery, eloquent language, and parallel structures. The mightiness of YHWH is vividly illustrated by the mountains quaking before him and the hills dis-

solving (1:5a). Furthermore, the narrator envisions the greatness of YHWH, prompting the earth and its inhabitants lift (or take away) themselves before him (1:5b). The magnificence of YHWH in Nahum 1:5 is conveyed using parallelism. The table below demonstrates the parallelism in Nahum 1:5.

Table 4

Parallelism in Nahum 1:5	
The first parallelism (1:5a)	
Subject: הרים	Subject: והגבעות
Predicate: רעשו	Predicate: התמגגו
Adverbial: ממנו	
The second parallelism (1:5b)	
Subject: הארץ	Subject: ותבל וכל־ישבי בה
Predicate: ותשא	
Adverbial: מפניו	

Table 4 demonstrates a few important features. Firstly, the narrator avoids the repetition of identical words. Secondly the narrator employs synonyms, substituting ‘הרים’ with ‘והגבעות’ and ‘הארץ’ with ‘ותבל וכל־ישבי בה’. Thirdly, the narrator omits the second adverbial in the first parallel structure, as well as the second predicate and second adverbial in the second parallel structure, allowing them to complement one another. Lastly, the second parallelism (1:5b) represents an intensification of the first parallelism found in Nahum 1:5a. In other words, the first parallelism illustrates the fear and trembling experienced by the subjects, whereas the subsequent parallelism intensifies the notion that the subjects actively respond by either withdrawing or fleeing from the presence of the Lord. The subtle escalation present in the second parallelism acts as a prelude to Nahum 1:6, which presents a series of rhetorical questions: Before his indignation, who can stand? And who can rise at the burning of his anger? Therefore, the usage of the Hebrew verb ‘נשא’ in Nahum 1:5 has two purposes: ‘נשא’ serves as an intensification for the first parallelism (1:5a) and a prelude to a series of rhetorical questions in Nahum 1:6.

Conclusion

Is ‘נשא’ or ‘שאה’ for the Hebrew verb ‘ותשא’ in Nahum 1:5? This research unfolds that both external and internal evidence support the preference for the reading of ‘נשא’. The term ‘נשא’ is typically classified as a transitive verb; however, the absence of an

object suggests a reflexive connotation. As a result, in Nahum 1:5, the Hebrew verb 'נָשָׂא' conveys the idea that 'the earth, the world and its inhabitants' take themselves away 'before him'. The narrator intentionally utilizes the Hebrew verb 'נָשָׂא' in this verse to enhance the first parallelism (1:5a) and to set the state for a sequence of rhetorical questions that follow in Nahum 1:6.

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