

Crumbling Acrostic
 Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
 Jan 14, 2019

Nahum 1:5

(BHS)	(ISV)
<p>הָרִים רָעְשׁוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְהַגְּבָעוֹת הִתְמַגְּגוּ וְתִשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵי יְחִבְלֵי וְכָל־יְשָׁבֵי בָּהּ:</p>	<p>Mountains shake because of him, and the hills melt. The earth goes into upheaval at his presence, as does the world with all of its inhabitants.</p>

You may recognize that *har* is “mountain.” I like the International Standard Version’s “goes into upheaval” as a gloss of *nasa’* in line 3, “the land goes up.” It seems to be describing an earthquake. The land with its mountains and hills heaves and shakes before the face (*paneh*, line 3) of God. This is a good metaphor for the greater upheaval in this book: the shaking of civilization and overturning of a nation. (I am following Longman’s 1993 commentary.)

I chose this verse because it illustrates what I think is happening in the poem of 1:2 – 8. First, let me show you the whole poem as it appears in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. I added

the red circles.

I am a cretin. I show footnote references without the apparatus, Masoretic marks without the Masora, cantillation signs that should be edited out in this sort of presentation, and

(א) אֵל קָנֹא וְנָקָם יְהוָה יִנָּקֵם יְהוָה וּבָעַל חַמָּה
 יִנָּקֵם יְהוָה לְצָרָיו וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לְאִיבֵיו׃
 3 יְהוָה אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְגִדּוֹל־פֶּחִי וְנִקְחָה לֹא יִנָּקֵה יְהוָה׃
 (ב) בַּסּוּפָה וּבִשְׁעָרָה דָּרְפוּ וְעַגּוֹן אַבְקֵי רִגְלָיו׃
 (ג) גִּזְרֵי בָיִם וַיִּבְשֶׂהוּ וְכָל־הַנְּהָרוֹת הִחָרִיב
 (ד) אֲמַלְלֵי בָשָׂן וְכַרְמֵל וּפְרַח לְבָנוֹן אֲמַלְלֵ׃
 (ה) הָרִים רָעְשׁוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְהַגְּבָעוֹת הִתְמַגְּגוּ
 (ו) וְתִשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵי וְיַחֲבֵל וְכָל־יְשָׁבֵי בָּהּ׃
 (ז) לִפְנֵי וְעַמּוֹ מִי יַעֲמֹד וּמִי יָקוּם בַּחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ׃
 (ח) חֲמַתּוֹ נִתְּכָה כְּאֵשׁ וְהַצָּרִים נִתְּצוּ מִמֶּנּוּ׃
 (ט) טוֹב יְהוָה לְמַעֲזוֹ בַּיּוֹם צָרָה
 (י) וְיָרַע חֲסִי בּוֹ׃ וּבִשְׂטֵף עֲבָרָ׃
 (כ) כָּל־הַיַּעֲשֶׂה מְקוֹמָהּ וְאִיבֵי יַרְדֵּן וְהַחֲשָׁד׃

so on. But I wanted you to see how the Hebrew Bible actually looks in *BHS*—particularly with the letters along the right side in parentheses. See them?

The idea is that this poem is an alphabetic acrostic. The letters that begin each line (circled), it is argued, should be in alphabetical order, like the letters *BHS* placed along the right side. But look at the bottom (כ) line. Verse 8 doesn't start with כ, so the editors stuck its first two words on the end of verse 7. And the ו, ג, and י lines don't start with the right letters either! And what are those two extra lines doing up there between the ח and כ lines?

Longman reviews three approaches to this phenomenon. First, we can assume that the text was once truly alphabetical but has been damaged. Critics propose various emendations to “restore” the text to its supposed original state. So the second and third lines are simply removed. The first word of the ג line is changed to start with ג. “Yahweh” is inserted in front of the ו line. The first two words of the י line are swapped. And voila! A perfect acrostic is before us! Of course, it is our own invention, a testament to the ingenuity of the critic. (And it covers only half the alphabet.)

Secondly, we can simply deny that it ever was in alphabetical order. It is all in our heads. But come on—look at it. It is tantalizing, no? It sure looks like an acrostic is hiding there, teasing us. (For more information, see [Pinker](#).)

I prefer the third approach. Perhaps it is supposed to look like an acrostic poem—but a broken one. The poem feels like the crumbling walls of the doomed city. Parts still hold up, but other parts are missing. (This is like how the book of Job loses its structure as you read it. The highly organized dialogues crumble and disappear by the end, like Job's life trajectory.)

Nahum describes the fall of Nineveh, the city of blood. God raised up Babylon to take it down. He will then use Persia to destroy Babylon. He did this to orchestrate and manage the history of Israel, so that his people developed spiritually—in accordance with his plan.

All of human history revolves around God's great plan of redemption—and the crumbling walls of a civilization stand in stark contrast to the perseverance of the saints and the truth of the Word of God.

Think about how many civilizations have come and gone since Jesus poured out his Spirit on the church. The original cradle of Christianity was the Jewish state, which ended tragically. The ancient church, that gave us our theology and canon, grew in the context of the Roman Empire—which crumbled before barbarians. The Catholic Era (the high Middle Ages) constituted a third great civilization, and this transitioned into the modern world. By this analysis, the church is in her fourth great civilization. Throughout the rise and fall of these, the people of God continued on in faith and obedience.

Sometimes it feels like Western civilization is crumbling. But our citizenship is not actually located in this world. The church triumphant transcends it. Jesus is providentially managing the world—and you with it. What crumbles and falls does so for the sake of the kingdom of God. God is in control, all along.

Something to think about, when reading the acrostic. And the newspaper.