

The Meaning of פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1. Study of Ancient Texts

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ABSTRACT: The Hebrew term פָּרַק found in Nahum 3:1 poses a considerable challenge, as ancient texts exhibit discrepancies in their rendering of פָּרַק. Consequently, this article aims to clarify the ambiguous Hebrew word פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1 by employing textual criticism as its main approach. It will analyze manuscript evidence, assess the likelihood of transcription and translation variations, and take into account contextual and linguistic considerations.

Keywords: Ancient Texts, Old Testament, Textual Criticism, English Bible Translations, Nahum, פָּרַק

Introduction

Ancient texts of Nahum 3:1 are categorized into three primary translations regarding the Hebrew term פָּרַק. Firstly, the Greek Septuagint (Rahlfs 2006) and the Syriac Peshitta (the Leiden Peshitta Edition: 2012) have ἀδικίας and ܦܪܩܐ respectively (or “injustice”).¹ Secondly, the Latin Vulgate (Fisher and Weber 1994) uses *dilaceratione*, which means tearing apart or tearing to pieces.² Thirdly, the Aramaic Targum (Gordon and Cathcart 1989) understands the Hebrew term פָּרַק as ביזא (or “plundering”). While the Masoretic Text (MT) offers a consistent consonantal tradition, the semantic ambiguity of the word has led to a remarkable variety of interpretations throughout its historical reception. Consequently, the primary issue this article seeks to address is not merely one of determining a superior or “older” textual version—the ancient translations do not seem to have depended on a Hebrew *Vorlage* that differed consonantly from the MT (cf. LXX and Peshitta). Rather, the core question revolves around interpretation: how can we explain the extensive range of

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1. The Syriac Peshitta changes the word order to ܦܪܩܐ ܦܪܩܐ.
 2. The noun is in singular feminine ablative.

meanings assigned to this word, and what insights can this historical context provide regarding its most likely meaning in its original setting?

To overcome this deadlock, this article posits that the methodologies of textual criticism are essential, even when there are no variant Hebrew readings available. By utilizing its criteria—not to select between rival texts, but to scrutinize competing interpretations as documented in the versions, this research can pave a fruitful route towards a more precise comprehension. A thorough analysis of the Septuagint, Vulgate, Peshitta, and other witnesses enables us to reconstruct the early semantic possibilities that ancient translators linked to the term. Their translations, whether they are literal, paraphrastic, or conjectural, constitute a vital dataset that outlines the interpretive difficulties inherent in the MT itself. This approach elevates the versions from simple translational artifacts to active witnesses of the word's intricate exegetical history, thereby establishing a solid basis for a sophisticated philological conclusion.

Methodology

Textual criticism is frequently described as a harmonious blend of artistic creativity and scientific inquiry. It is categorized as a science because it relies on data analysis, the study of the genealogical connections between manuscripts, and a comprehensive understanding of copying methods. Nevertheless, it is also regarded as an art form, necessitating a sharp sense of judgment and critical evaluation throughout the process (Boltzman and Tuly 2016: 138). This discipline has two main objectives. The first is to uncover the theological implications present in various translations. The second is to reconstruct the most precise and authentic version of the biblical texts as they were originally composed. This task entails the comparison and analysis of numerous manuscripts, versions, and textual evidence to detect errors, inconsistencies, and modifications that have arisen over time (Barthélemy 2012: 92). This research focuses on the second objective.

There are three primary methodologies in textual criticism: rigorous eclecticism, reasoned eclecticism, and the majority text approach. This article embraces reasoned eclecticism, which considers both external and internal evidence. The assessment of external evidence involves a comprehensive examination of the manuscripts' age, reliability, and geographical distribution, with older manuscripts typically being viewed as more authoritative. Conversely, internal evidence pertains to transcriptional probability, evaluating the likelihood of what a scribe would have written or copied, as well as intrinsic probability, which considers what the original author might have created, factoring in elements such as context, stylistic preferences, and theological implications. This internal evaluation often adheres to principles like *lectio difficilior*, *lectio brevior*, and harmonization (cf. Chia 2025: 5–16).

BHS, BHQ, and the Evaluations

The BHS apparatus fails to document any reading variants for the Hebrew term פָּרַק (Elliger and Rudolph 1997: 1047). Consequently, a significant critique of the BHS apparatus is its exclusion of reading variants from ancient sources, such as the Peshitta, the LXX, the Targum, and the Vulgate.

In his commentary on BHQ, Gelston offers an analysis of the Hebrew word פָּרַק. He asserts that the majority of ancient writings understand this Hebrew term as related to פָּרַק (or “to divide), yet the LXX and the Syriac Peshitta appear to merely conjecture a word that fits the context (Gelston 2010: 113). A significant point of criticism is that Gelston does not comment on the other ancient texts such as the Targum and the Vulgate.³

Therefore, this article seeks to achieve two goals. Firstly, this research aims to expand the scope of sources investigated both in the BHS and the BHQ by integrating readings from Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943), Murabba‘ât 88 (the Mur 88), the Hexapla, and 4QXII^g. Additionally, this article endeavors to provide an evaluation to those witnesses and ascertain the original reading of פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1 by employing textual criticism as its methodological approach.

External Evidence

This external evidence involves evaluating the age, reliability, and geographical distribution of the manuscripts. Generally, older manuscripts are regarded as having more authority. The table below displays the ancient translations along with their respective texts and translations, including their estimated *Vorlage* and dates.

Table 1

No	Source	Text	Translation	<i>Vorlage</i>	Dates
1	Masoretic Text	פָּרַק	Parting of ways (Obadiah 1:14) or plunder (Nahum 3:1)	פָּרַק	Aleppo Codex: 930 CE Leningrad Codex: 1008–1010 CE
2	Septuagint	ἀδικίας	Injustice	(questionable)	Around 2 nd Century BCE

3. Barthélemy also does not discuss this Hebrew term. He focusses on Nahum 2:14, then Nahum 3:8 (Barthélemy 1992: 815–16).

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3	Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943)	(lacunae)	(no translation)	(unknown)	Late 1st century BCE or early 1st century CE. Around 50 BCE–50 CE
4	Peshitta	𐤀𐤃𐤁	Injustice	(questionable)	Around 2 nd – 3 rd Century CE
5	Vulgate	<i>dilaceratione</i>	Tearing apart (to pieces)	פרק	Late 4 th Century CE
6	Targum	ביזא	Plunder	פרק	Around 13 th –14 th Century CE
7	Aquila in Hexapla	ἐξαναγκισμοῦ (<i>escervicatione</i>)	To cut the throat (the neck)	פרק	230–245 CE
8	Symmachus in Hexapla	ἀποτομίας (<i>crudelitate/severitate</i>)	Severity (cutting off cruelty)	פרק	230–245 CE
9	Symmachus other reading in Hexapla	μελοκοπιὰς (<i>sectionibus cranium et frustis per membra conscissis</i>)	Cutting (tearing to pieces)	פרק	230–245 CE
10	Murabbaʿât 88 (the Mur 88)	[פרק]	Parting of ways or plunder	פרק	Around 132–135 CE
11	4QXII ^g	ק[פר]	Parting of ways or plunder	פרק	The last third of the first century BCE (Late Hasmonean or Early Herodian period)

The table presented above indicates that the Hebrew term פרק is unknown in Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) since it is so fragmentary (Tov, Kraft, and Parsons 1990: 44–45). On the other hand, the Mur 88, also

referred to as MurXII or the Wadi Murabba'at Minor Prophets Scroll, contains similar reading with the Masoretic text, although the text is fragmentary (Benoit, Milik, and de Vaux 1961: 197). This manuscript is dated to the early 2nd century CE, specifically around 132–135 CE. Key fragments of this manuscript, which include the complete text of the Twelve Minor Prophets, were discovered in a rock crevice located a short distance upstream from the larger refuge caves of Wadi Murabba'at. The presence of human bones and clothing found in the same location indicates a burial, likely that of a man laid to rest with a biblical scroll. Discovered during the rainy season, the scroll appeared as a large, flattened bundle with an irregular shape. The skin of the scroll had deteriorated significantly due to moisture, resulting in a soft, gelatinous texture akin to a sponge, with only a few areas of intact material remaining. Insects had damaged a considerable portion of both the inscribed surface and the reverse side. Furthermore, the entire scroll was heavily covered in dust and fine gravel.

The careful handling by the Ta'amreh, who transported the manuscript from Wadi Murabba'at to Bethlehem, along with Kando's subsequent transfer to the Palestine Museum, played a crucial role in its preservation. The treatment it received at the Museum, while not highly technical, was conducted with great attention to detail, ensuring that the scroll was largely safeguarded for academic study. A thorough cleaning or systematic dusting of the inscribed surface was avoided, as removing the grains of sand that were firmly adhered to the fragile material posed a risk of further damaging the letters and reducing the manuscript's legibility. Additionally, the significant shrinkage of the skin due to decomposition and the periodic drying of the organic material made it impossible to flatten the inscribed surface as intended. Consequently, the lines of writing are sometimes challenging to discern in photographs (Benoit, Milik, and de Vaux 1961: 181).

The text of Mur 88 largely adheres to the structure of the Masoretic Text as it is divided into *haftarot*, with exceptions noted in column VII 1 (Amos 7:34), column VIII 18 (Amos 9:6–7), and column XXIII 7 (Haggai 2:13–14) (Benoit, Milik, and de Vaux 1961: 182). Composed several decades after the Masoretic Text was established, Mur 88 presents several variations when compared to the original Hebrew Bible. Many of these differences—such as instances of plene versus defective spellings, or *qere* versus *ketiv*—are likely the result of occasional oversights by the scribe, who was otherwise quite meticulous. Additionally, some grammatical adjustments may stem from unintentional errors (Benoit, Milik, and de Vaux 1961: 183). Concerning 4QXII^g, the condition of the book of Nahum is notably deteriorated, which greatly impedes effective study of the text. Firstly, numerous fragments have several layers of the scroll adhered together. Due to the degradation, letters that appear adjacent may not actually form a single word; they could originate from different layers or sections of the scroll prior to its deterioration. Secondly, in certain fragments, the ink from one layer has created a mirror-image impression on the reverse side of the layer above, adding to the difficulty of interpretation. Lastly, much of the text has faded to the point where it is illegible to the naked eye. Consequently, even when examining the original manuscript in a museum,

the usual corrections that would assist in verifying interpretations based on photographs are not available (Ulrich 1997: 270–71). Although Nahum 1:7–9; 2:9–11; and 3:1–3.17 is so fragmentary, the editors of DJD Qumran Cave 4 attempt to reconstruct Nahum 3:1. The editors find that 4QXII^g contains similar reading with the Masoretic text פֶּרַק [פֶּרַק] (Ulrich 1997: 316).

External evidence excludes Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) due to insufficient information regarding Nahum 3:1. Eight ancient texts support פֶּרַק as their *Vorlage*. On the other hand, the *Vorlage* for the two ancient texts, the Peshitta and the LXX, remains uncertain. External evidence supports the reading “injustice” as it is confirmed by the earliest known source: the LXX, which dates to around 2nd century BCE.

Internal Evidence

This internal evidence often relies on principles such as *lectio difficilior*, *lectio brevior*, and harmonization (cf. Chia 2025: 5–16). *Lectio difficilior*, a Latin term meaning “the more difficult reading,” is a key concept in textual criticism. It suggests that when confronted with multiple versions of a text, the one that is more complex or obscure is likely the original. This idea assumes that scribes typically simplified or clarified challenging passages rather than complicating them. As a result, the more difficult reading is often considered more authentic, as it is less likely that a scribe would have modified it in such a way (Tov 2015: 307–10). *Lectio brevior*, which translates to “the shorter reading,” serves as another guiding principle in textual criticism. It asserts that when presented with different versions of a text, the more succinct reading is often the original. This belief arises from the understanding that scribes tended to enhance texts by adding material for clarity, consistency, or explanation, rather than omitting it. Therefore, shorter readings are frequently viewed as more authentic, as they are less vulnerable to alterations made by scribes (Tov 2015: 307–10). Harmonization in textual criticism refers to the practice of scribes or copyists modifying a text to ensure its consistency with another related passage or to resolve perceived discrepancies. This phenomenon commonly occurs in works that feature multiple versions or parallel accounts, such as the Gospels in the New Testament or similar narratives in the Hebrew Bible. The harmonization process may involve changing specific words, phrases, or even entire sections to align them with another text that the scribe considers authoritative or more familiar (Tov 2015: 307–10).

Lectio difficilior

In the context of the problematic Hebrew word פֶּרַק in Nahum 3:1, the principle of *lectio difficilior* rules out Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) because there is inadequate information concerning פֶּרַק.

Both the Peshitta ܦܪܩ and the LXX ἀδικία offer an easier reading because the translation matches the previous word ܠܝܥܐ (or “lie”) and ψευδής

(or “false) respectively. In other words, the translation of the Peshitta and the LXX consistently speaks of two traits of Nineveh: all false and full of injustice. Thus, Gelston’s examination of the Peshitta and the LXX is quite accurate, as both translations seem to contextualize their meanings (Gelston 2010: 113). The Targum employs the term בִּזְזָה, which translates to “plunder.” Although the Targum uses the same *Vorlage* as the most other ancient texts, it appears that the Targum offers a distinct interpretation of פָּרַק: “plunder.” The “plunder” meaning is also supported by both Hebrew lexicons: BDB and HALOT. However, the problem of this translation is twofold. Firstly, the Hebrew word פָּרַק does not signify plunder. For instance, the Hebrew verb פָּרַק translates to tearing apart into pieces, removing, or dividing, while the Hebrew noun פֶּרֶק refers to a “fragment.” The Hebrew word מִפְּרָקָה means “a neck as dividing head from the body.” Furthermore, Semitic languages lack the connotation of plunder. Aramaic, for instance, has the verb פָּרַק as to tear away or to break off in Daniel 4:24. Syriac has פָּרַק as a fragment, while the Arabic word *farq* means separation or division. In summary, the interpretation of פָּרַק as plunder lacks support from other Semitic languages and is particularly alien to the Hebrew language.

The Masoretic text, the Vulgate, 4QXII^g, Aquila’s translation, two recensions of Symmachus, and Murabba’at 88 (the Mur 88) attest to the more challenging reading. The introduction of פָּרַק interrupts the flows of the Hebrew nouns: כְּזֶה and עִיר. Nahum 3:1 opens with a condemnation of Nineveh as the city of bloods and all of her is lie. The abrupt insertion of פָּרַק or “a tearing into pieces” creates a jarring syntactic rupture, as it shifts abruptly from description to violent nature. This grammatical and semantic difficulty suggests its originality, as later scribes would have been inclined to smooth the text rather than introduce such a harsh interruption. Thus, the principle of *lectio difficilior* suggests that the Masoretic text, the Vulgate, 4QXII^g, Aquila’s translation, two recensions of Symmachus, and Murabba’at 88 (the Mur 88) contain the original reading.

Lectio brevior

Within the field of Old Testament textual criticism, the original reading aligns with the principle of *lectio brevior*. Nevertheless, the concept of *lectio brevior* proves unhelpful, as ancient texts exhibit identical word lengths, consisting of merely a single word.⁴

Harmonization

This section offers a contextual analysis and intertextual analysis from Obadiah 1:14 aimed at evaluating the original text. Nahum 3:1a portrays Nineveh as the city characterized by bloodshed. Nahum 3:1b illustrates specific aspects of Nineveh: her deceitful speech, her פָּרַק, and her relentless pursuit of prey. The phrase “a tearing into pieces” aligns with the overarching characterization of

4. This principle also cannot be applied to Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) due to the lacunae in the scroll.

Nineveh as the city of bloodshed, elucidating the violent nature of its inhabitants who dismember their foes.

The translation of “a tearing into pieces” also corresponds with the literary structure of Nahum 3:1–4. This passage characterizes Nineveh as the city of bloodshed, highlighting two primary traits: its deception (1b) and its power (1b). Following the description of Nineveh’s attributes, the book of Nahum enumerates illustrations of these depictions (see table 2). The attributes and their details are organized in a chiasmic format, A-B-B-A (see structure below).

A Nineveh’s Deception (1b)
 B Nineveh’s Cruel Power (1b)
 B’ Nineveh’s Cruel Power (1c-3)
 A’ Nineveh’s Deception (4)

Table 2

General	The City of Bloods (3:1a)	
Traits	Deception / Lies (1b)	Cruel Power / Tearing into Pieces (1b)
Depictions	Many harlotries of the harlot (4)	<i>Her prey</i> never departs (1c)
	The charming one (4)	The noise of the whip (2)
	the mistress of sorceries (4)	The noise of the rattling of the wheel (2)
	Who sells nations by her harlotries (4)	Galloping horses (2)
	And families by her sorceries (4)	Bounding chariots (2)
		Horsemen charging (3)
		Swords flashing (3)
		Spears gleaming (3)
		Many slain (3)
		A mass of corpses (3)
		Countless dead bodies (3)
		They stumble over the dead bodies (3)

An analysis of the contextual and literary structure of Nahum 3:1 reveals that the original reading is present in the Masoretic text, the Vulgate, 4QXII^g, Aquila’s translation, two versions of Symmachus, and Murabba’ât 88 (Mur 88).

The Hebrew word פָּרַק also occurs in Obadiah 1:14. The Septuagint (LXX) translates it with the phrase ἐπὶ τὰς διακβολὰς αὐτῶν, meaning “at their ways out,” implying a traversing action from a city. This rendering, which uses a plural form for “way,” aligns conceptually with the plural “gates” mentioned elsewhere in Obadiah (1:11, 13). The addition of the pronoun αὐτῶν (“their”) is a notable expansion does not present in the Hebrew. The Vulgate concurs with the LXX’s core meaning, also using a plural form for “way” and translating it as “ways out” (*exitus*). The Targum stands apart by adhering closely to the Hebrew Text (HT), using the Aramaic פָּרַק which signifies a “parting way” or “crossroads.” The Peshitta offers a distinct interpretation, using ܡܚܒܠܐ to mean a “siege device for breaking through a wall” or the resulting “breach.” This suggests the translator understood the verse to depict Edom standing at the broken-through section of Jerusalem’s wall, a point of military invasion. Obadiah 1:14 enlightens that ancient translations consider פָּרַק as parting of ways.

פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1

Textual criticism involves analyzing manuscripts to identify the most trustworthy version of a written work, especially when various versions are available. This process primarily utilizes two types of evidence: internal and external. The problematic term of פָּרַק found in Nahum 3:1, however, serves as an illustration of the discrepancy between external and internal evidence. External evidence supports the interpretations found in LXX, which is considered as the earliest known source, dating back to around the early 2nd century BCE. In addition, internal evidence tends to favor the Masoretic text, the Vulgate, 4QXII^g, Aquila’s translation, two versions of Symmachus, and Murabba’at 88 (Mur 88).⁵ Nevertheless, internal evidence is frequently regarded as more precise in specific situations, as it examines the text itself, whereas external evidence depends on external factors, including historical context or the age of the manuscripts. Initially, internal evidence scrutinizes the text’s content, style, and linguistic characteristics. This analysis encompasses grammar, vocabulary, and literary patterns that are inherent to the author’s work. Since internal evidence originates from the text itself, it circumvents the potential biases or uncertainties linked to external elements such as manuscript dating or provenance. Furthermore, internal evidence aids in identifying inconsistencies or irregularities that may suggest scribal mistakes, interpolations, or

5. This research omits internal evidence analysis of Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll (8Hev XII gr = Rahlfs 943) since the text is so fragmentary (cf. Tov, Kraft, and Parsons 1990: 44–51). Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll has a similar reading with the LXX. Nahum 1:13–14 are ones of the examples. The differences are in the lacunae. In other words, the differences appear in the *constructed* text: ὑπερ σοῦ (the LXX) vs. ἐπὶ σοί (Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll) and τὰ γλυπτά (the LXX) vs. γλυπτόν (Nahal Hever XII Greek scroll) in Nahum 1:14.

later modifications (Parker 2008). For instance, if a section employs vocabulary or syntax that deviates from the rest of the text, it may be identified as non-original. Scholars such as E. J. Epp and Gordon Fee assert that internal evidence is vital for grasping the author's intent and style, which are essential for reconstructing the original text (Epp and Fee 1993). Additionally, internal evidence assesses how well a reading corresponds with the immediate context of the passage and the overall work. A reading that resonates with the author's thematic and theological concerns is typically favored.⁶ Consequently, external evidence, such as the age or geographical distribution of manuscripts, can occasionally be misleading. In contrast, internal evidence is less prone to such biases since it concentrates on the text's inherent qualities rather than external influences. This study, therefore, supports the interpretation of the term פָּרַק as meaning a tearing into pieces, rather than "injustice," as evidenced in the LXX and the Peshitta, or "plunder" in the Targum.

What is the meaning of פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1. This article illustrates that the interpretation of "plunder" as proposed by two renowned Hebrew lexicons—BDB and HALOT—is somewhat misleading for several reasons. Firstly, the Hebrew verb פָּרַק denotes the act of tearing apart, removing, or dividing, whereas the Hebrew noun פָּרֶק signifies a "fragment." Additionally, the Hebrew term מִפְּרִקָּה refers to the neck, symbolizing the division of the head from the body. Moreover, Semitic languages do not carry the connotation of plunder. For example, in Aramaic, the verb פָּרַק means to tear away or break off, as seen in Daniel 4:24. In Syriac, פָּרַק is translated as a fragment, while the Arabic term *farq* indicates separation or division. Consequently, the rendering of פָּרַק as plunder is unsupported by other Semitic languages and is particularly foreign to the Hebrew language. The Latin Vulgate understands פָּרַק as a tearing into pieces. Aquila's Greek translation uses ἐξασχυισμοῦ which relates to the Hebrew word מִפְּרִקָּה, meaning to sever the neck. Despite the differing translations in the two versions of Symmachus, they convey a consistent idea of separation. The Greek term ἀποτομία highlights a brutal method of severance, while μελοκοπία refers to a form of mutilation. Consequently, the term פָּרַק signifies dismemberment or a type of mutilation. The book of Nahum illustrates the brutality and the cruelty of Nineveh by not only slaying its enemies but also disfiguring them.

Conclusion

The investigation into the Hebrew term פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1 reveals a striking divergence between external and internal evidence. While the Septuagint (LXX), as the oldest extant version (2nd century BCE), offers a smoother

6. This methodology is emphasized in Bruce Metzger's *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (2005), where he contends that internal evidence aids in resolving textual variants by considering the author's probable meaning.

reading, the weight of internal evidence—including the Masoretic Text (MT), Vulgate, 4QXII^g, Aquila’s translation, Symmachus’s recensions, and Mur 88—strongly supports the more difficult and violent interpretation: a tearing in pieces. This study argues that internal textual considerations outweigh external attestations, particularly because the disruptive presence of פָּרַק aligns with the *lectio difficilior* principle—the more challenging reading is often the original. Contrary to the interpretation of “plunder” proposed by BDB and HALOT, a thorough linguistic analysis demonstrates that the Hebrew verb פָּרַק carries the core meaning of violent separation, specifically “to tear apart,” “to break off,” or “to divide.” This fundamental sense is reinforced by the nominal form פָּרֶק, which consistently denotes a fragment throughout biblical Hebrew. In addition, the evidence from related cognate languages significantly opposes the meaning of “plunder” from פָּרַק, rendering such an interpretation linguistically unfounded. Lastly, the cumulative evidence suggests that פָּרַק in Nahum 3:1 conveys extreme brutality—not mere plundering, but dismemberment or mutilation. This aligns with the book’s depiction of Nineveh’s cruelty: the Assyrians did not merely kill their enemies but disfigured and desecrated them.

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