

The Book of the Twelve in a Menorah Pattern

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In 2003 Duane Christensen and I were working on a joint project, *The Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets*. The present article was published on the website we used at the time, which is no longer available. I take the liberty to republished it in his memory, because I consider it worthwhile for scholars working on one or more of the twelve books and on the Book of the Twelve as a distinct literary entity.

Though the Book of the Twelve (so-called Minor Prophets) is seldom read as a single literary unit, it may be outlined as such in a menorah pattern within a menorah pattern:

The Book of the Twelve in a Menorah Pattern

Hosea–Malachi

A	Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s judgment	Hosea
B	Day of Yahweh—the enemy from the north	Joel
C	Israel and the nations—judgment and hope	Amos
X	Yahweh’s “vengeance”: destruction & salvation	Obadiah–Zephaniah
C’	Rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem	Haggai
B’	Day of Yahweh and the restoration of Judah	Zechariah
A’	Day of Yahweh—against Judah and the nations	Malachi

The attribution of “vengeance” to the character of Yahweh has been the source of misunderstanding. As G. E. Mendenhall has shown (*The Tenth Generation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973, pp. 69–104), the Hebrew root *nqm* is properly translated in terms that designate punitive vindication in a judicial sense and should not be construed as involving “malicious retaliation for inflicted wrongs.” As a result, Yahweh is depicted in Nahum as a suzerain, one who demands the exclusive devotion of his vassals; for he is utterly intolerant of rivals. Nahum 1:2 is set over against 1:9–10, both of which focus on “the dark side” of Yahweh, namely, his jealous anger that leads to punishment. Nahum 1:2 and 1:7–8 present the other side of Yahweh, one who is “slow to anger” (cf. Exod 34:6–7). In biblical usage, God’s “vengeance” has a redemptive quality. His punishment often takes the form of discipline, however harsh it may appear to the recipient at the outset.

The outer frame in the above menorah pattern begins with the powerful imagery of redeeming love in the account of the prophet Hosea and his faithless wife Gomer (Hosea 1–3). It continues with a message of judgment against Israel for her perfidy, with the hope of ultimate restoration (Hosea 4–14). This same dual theme is taken up in the book of Malachi, in the other half of the outermost frame. The book of Malachi begins with the words, “‘I have loved you,’ says Yahweh” (Mal 1:2). The ensuing words about the coming day of judgment in Malachi are climaxed with a remarkable vision of hope. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible Day of Yahweh comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5–6). The second frame in this menorah pattern presents Joel and Zechariah as a literary pair, both of which focus on the destructive aspects of the Day of Yahweh. Once again we find hope within the

context of gloom, for both books include words of hope and restoration. God’s promise of restoration occupies the structural center and the conclusion of Joel’s depiction of the Day of Yahweh as a time of devastation for Judah and the nations (see 2:18–29 and 3:18–21). The book of Zechariah also has words of hope in its center, which focus on the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem by “the man whose name is the Branch” (Zech 6:9–15). The innermost frame in this menorah pattern sets the book of Amos over against that of Haggai. The book of Amos ends with specific prophecies of the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and the glorious age to come (Amos 9:11–15). The book of Haggai, which focuses on the building of the Second Temple in Jerusalem more than two hundred years after the time of Amos, concludes with a promise to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah (and a descendant of David), that God will again redeem his people. Like Amos, Zechariah links Israel’s earlier traditions with the coming messianic age (Hag 2:20–23). The remaining six books in the Book of the Twelve constitute the center of this menorah pattern, which is essentially an expansion of the great confession of faith in Exod 34:6–7 to show the two sides of Yahweh—his anger (Exod 34:7) and his steadfast love (Exod 34:6).

The center of the above menorah pattern may be expanded in its own menorah pattern, as follows:

2nd Level Menorah: The “Vengeance” of Yahweh		Obadiah–Zephaniah
A	Day of Yahweh—against Edom and Judah	Obadiah
B	Salvation of Nineveh	Jonah
C	Salvation of Israel	Micah
X	Confession of faith (cf. Exod 34:6–7)	Micah 7:18–20
C´	Destruction of Nineveh	Nahum
B´	Destruction of Judah	Habakkuk
A´	Day of Yahweh—against Judah and the nations	Zephaniah

The Day of Yahweh is a central theme in the Book of the Twelve (Lesser Prophets); and that theme is central in Obadiah and Zephaniah, which constitute the outer frame in this menorah pattern. In the structural center of the Book of the Twelve as a whole, we find a confession of faith that echoes Exod 34:6–7. In the second frame, the book of Jonah is set over against the book of Habakkuk. The message of the book of Jonah focuses on the salvation of Israel’s most repugnant enemy. The book of Habakkuk, on the other hand, raises the issue of theodicy in an explicit manner. After raising his complaint, the prophet asks God how long he can look on faithless men and do nothing “when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he” (Hab 1:13). In the third frame, the book of Micah is set over against Nahum. Most of the central part of the book of Micah focuses on Zion’s glorious future and the restoration of the Davidic kingdom (Micah 4–5). In contrast to this focus on the salvation of Israel, the book of Nahum presents a moving picture of the destruction of Nineveh.

Jonah and Nahum may be read in relation to the two aspects of God’s nature, his mercy and his anger, with Jonah focusing on God’s compassion and Nahum on God’s

wrath. Jonah presents God as one who is “compassionate, gracious . . . (and) abounding in steadfast love” (Exod 34:6–7a), whereas Nahum presents God as the “one who punishes sons and grandsons to the third and fourth generations for the iniquity of their fathers” (Exod 34:7b). In short, Nahum focuses on the “dark side” of God, while Jonah portrays God’s mercy and compassion toward the same wicked city of Nineveh.

The books of Jonah and Nahum are the only two books in the Bible that end in a question. They both have the city of Nineveh as their subject. This is remarkable in the case of Jonah, since we know from 2 Kings 14:25 that the prophet ministered in the days of Jeroboam II against the Aramean threat centered in the cities of Damascus and Hamath (1 Kings 14:28). These events occurred before the time of Tiglath-pileser III (“King Pul” of 2 Kings 15:19) and the expansion of the Assyrian Empire in Palestine. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria at its height from the time of Sennacherib, who assumed the throne in 705 BCE, to its destruction in 612 BCE. It was not the capital of Assyria in the days of Jeroboam II (786–746 BCE). Moreover, there was never a time when it was appropriate to speak of the “king of Nineveh” (Jonah 3:6) outside the book of Jonah. Nineveh is mentioned in Isa 37:37 (= 2 Kings 19:36) as the home of Sennacherib where he was assassinated and succeeded by his son Esarhaddon.

The name Nineveh was chosen in the book of Jonah because of its symbolic value. The word *Ninuwa* and the alternate form *Nina* in the cuneiform sources refer to an enclosure with a fish inside. The letter *nun* actually means “fish” in the Hebrew language. The word “Nineveh” in Hebrew would be written NYNWH. If the initial *nun* (“fish”) is removed, the letters that remain are YNWH. All one needs to do to get the word YWNH (“Jonah”) is a simple metathesis of the two central letters. In other words, Jonah is already in Nineveh—if you remove the “fish”! It is important to note the fact that the word YWNH (“Jonah”) in Hebrew means “dove,” a primary symbol for the nation of Israel. We are now in a position to understand the significance of the phrase “king of Nineveh” in relation to the prophet “Jonah.” From an historical point of view, the king in question was not the “king of Nineveh” but rather the “king of Assyria.” Nowhere else do we find a reference to the “king of Nineveh” outside the book of Jonah. The city of Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Its symbolic value is of primary importance here.

Though Jonah contains only forty-eight verses, this remarkable work of art may be outlined in a three-part nested series of menorah patterns:

The Book of Jonah in a Menorah Pattern

Jonah 1–4

a	Jonah’s commission to go to Nineveh	1:1–2
A	Jonah vs. Yahweh: Jonah’s flight and Yahweh’s storm (“anger”)	1:3–4
B	Dialogue between sailors and Jonah: “fear” motif	1:5–13
C	Sailors’ prayer: “Hold us not responsible for this man’s death”	1:14a
X	Freedom, anger and fear	1:14b–4:2
C’	Jonah’s prayer: “I am better off dead than alive”	4:3
B’	Dialogue between Yahweh/God and Jonah: “anger” motif	4:4–9
A’	Yahweh vs. Jonah: Yahweh justifies compassion for Nineveh	4:10–11

2nd Level Menorah: Freedom, Anger and Fear

Jonah 1:14b–4:2

A	Yahweh’s freedom: “What pleases you is what you have done”	1:14b
B	The sea ceases its raging (“anger”)	1:15
C	The men fear Yahweh with a Great Fear	1:16
X	Conversion is changing one’s mind	2:1–3:10
C’	A Great Evil came upon Jonah	3:11a
B’	Jonah becomes angry	4:1b
A’	Yahweh’s freedom: “I knew you would repent from the evil”	4:2

3rd Level Menorah: God Wants Conversion

Jonah 2–3

A	Yahweh appoints a Great Fish to change Jonah’s mind	2:1–2
B	Song of Jonah: a “proclamation” of deliverance	2:3–10
C	Jonah’s deliverance from the fish	2:11
X	Jonah’s commission renewed—with enigmatic message	3:1–4
C’	Nineveh’s repentance	3:5–7a
B’	Decree of king of Nineveh: proclamation to turn from evil	3:7b–9
A’	God changes his mind	3:10
a’	Jonah’s/Israel’s commission/response: an oracle of salvation	implied

The relationship between the prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah illustrates the proper relationship between the offices of prophet and king in terms of political leadership in ancient Israel. In like manner, the prophet “Jonah” (Israel) and the “king of Nineveh” illustrate the proper relationship between prophet and king in a symbolic sense, on a much broader stage. To those who shaped the canon of the Tanakh, as we now know it, Israel is called to be a “light to the nations” (Isa 42:6). This theme is explored in various ways within the Writings of the Tanakh and in the book of Daniel in particular.

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