Tackling Violence in the Prophets as a People of Peace: Anabaptist Hermeneutics Then and Now[1]

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Abstract: While some scholars have recently appealed to a "Christocentric approach" as an Anabaptist framework for resolving biblical portrayals linking God to violence, this paper explores historical Anabaptist hermeneutics through a case study of the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*. Rather than appealing to divine nonviolence, Anabaptists traditionally focused on discipleship and following Jesus in life, while maintaining God's prerogative to exercise divine judgment and even vengeance on wrongdoers. From this basis the paper makes a constructive proposal for contemporary contextual Anabaptist hermeneutics that refuses to jettison challenging biblical portrayals of God while also committing to be a people of peace.

The prophetic books of the Bible present an intriguing challenge and opportunity for a tradition committed to following Jesus's way of peace. In recent decades there has been an increasing tendency among Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars to appeal to a Christocentric approach as a litmus test to distinguish between theologically correct and mistaken understandings in the Bible, at times limiting the bounds of a functional canon.[2] In contrast, I have called for a focus on Christocentric *hermeneutics* that refuses to jettison diverse, and at times seemingly contradictory, biblical material.[3] In what follows, I explore how an early biblical concordance

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[2] W. Derek Suderman, "Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Non-Violent God," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (2014): 44–66.

[3] "Following Jesus entails adopting a hermeneutical stance that seeks to hear the voice of God by attending closely to the theological witness of Scripture . . . Rather than a means for functionally excluding biblical material linking God to violence on one hand or concepts such as the understanding of God as a warrior on the other, a Christocentric approach should

draws on Nahum as a specific case study to explore historical Anabaptist hermeneutics, in conversation with several Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars dedicated to tackling the issue of biblical violence and its contemporary implications (Eric A. Seibert, J. Denny Weaver, and Gregory A. Boyd).[4]

In short, this paper builds on the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* in order to provide a constructive proposal for contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics. Rather than centering this approach on peace or the nonviolence of God, it outlines dedication to a contextual hermeneutics committed to nonviolent Christian discipleship and rooted in the early Anabaptist movement that engages prophetic, and even profoundly offensive, material with the conviction that it has something to offer. While it is vital to critically engage prophetic material with an awareness of its potential use to support violence, and misogyny and violence against women in particular, our challenge remains to engage the biblical prophets with the hope and anticipation that we can still encounter God and discover good news in this material.[5]

I. Violence in the Prophets: Nahum as a Violent Book

Overview of Nahum

Nahum is a short and largely neglected prophetic book, for understandable reasons. The opening lines immediately reveal the tenor and basic perspective of the book:

> An oracle concerning Nineveh.
> The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

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instead prompt immersion in the very Scriptures Jesus and NT writers treasured." Suderman, "Assyria the Ax," 65.

[4] While the term *Anabaptist* describes a historical movement beginning in the sixteenth century, it has also gained traction to describe a contemporary theological movement that grew out of this tradition. In the latter case, Anabaptist has become a theological category, whereas Mennonite is sometimes used as a historical one to describe a specific religious and ethnic group. In this paper the term *Anabaptist* will be used for the early historical movement and *Anabaptist-Mennonite* to identify contemporary scholars who see themselves within this broader theological tradition.

[5] The impetus for this paper emerges from my being assigned the prophetic books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah for the Believers Church Bible Commentary series. Since the BCBC represents a joint effort by several historical peace church denominational groups rooted in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist tradition to provide an accessible guide to scriptural interpretation, addressing the issue of violence in the Bible and today represents a perpetual point of interest in the series. Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah pose particular challenges for an Anabaptist peace church series since Nahum uses graphic language, including rape imagery, to celebrate God's judgment of Nineveh; Habakkuk depicts God as a warrior in defense of the people; and Zephaniah centers on divine judgment in the anticipated "Day of the Lord." Because it is perhaps the most challenging of the three, this paper focuses on Nahum in particular.

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and rages against his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger but great in power,
and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.
His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet. (Nah 1:1–3).[6]

Nahum is eager for God to punish Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. The dramatic opening description of the LORD uses the identical Hebrew term for "vengeance" (*nōqēm*) three times in verse 2, the only verse in the book where it appears.[7]

As is widely recognized, the book then immediately quotes an adaptation of Exodus 34:6–7,[8] the Lord's key self-description that reverberates throughout the Old Testament:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet *by no means clearing the guilty*,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod 34:6–7)

While the prophet acknowledges that the Lord is "slow to anger," he underscores the conclusion of this divine description, which insists that this does not mean God will let the wicked off the hook, but God will "by no means clear the guilty." In effect, while recognizing the graciousness and mercy of the Lord, in Nineveh's case Nahum believes that divine wrath is entirely appropriate.

Nahum thus provides a counterpoint to the book of Jonah, in which this reluctant prophet explicitly cites the same description of God to explain

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[6] Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations will be taken from the NRSV.

[7] Since the Hebrew root for vengeance (*nqm*) only appears seventy-three times in the entire Old Testament, the three occurrences in this one verse account for 4 percent of the total. Although forms of the term appear prominently within the major prophetic books (notably eighteen times in Jeremiah, twelve times in Ezekiel, and seven times in Isaiah), it only appears one other time within the Book of the Twelve/Minor Prophets: "And in anger and wrath I will execute *vengeance* on the nations that did not obey" (Mic 5:14).

[8] James Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 611.

why he did not want to deliver his message to Nineveh; he was concerned that God may be *so* gracious and merciful that even Nineveh would be spared (Jonah 4:1–3). In responding to Nineveh's dramatic repentance (even the animals are commanded to "be covered with sackcloth"), God's decision to "change his mind" concerning the divine judgment of Nineveh is seen as a "great evil" to Jonah.[9] In effect, Nahum's perspective appears to reflect that of the *prophet* Jonah, which the *book* of Jonah challenges and rejects.[10]

For Nahum, the Assyrians deserve God's judgment and vengeance more than anyone. In characteristic prophetic form, he depicts this anticipated judgment as resulting from divine wrath:

> Who can stand before his indignation?
> Who can endure the heat of his anger?
> His wrath is poured out like fire,
> and by him the rocks are broken in pieces.
> The *LORD is good*,
> a stronghold in a day of trouble;
> he protects those who take refuge in him,
> even in a rushing flood.
> He will make a full end of his adversaries,
> and will pursue his enemies into darkness.
> Why do *you* plot against the LORD?
> He will make an end;
> no adversary will rise up twice. . . .
> From *you* one has gone out
> who plots evil (*rʿh*) against the LORD,
> one who counsels wickedness. (Nah 1:6–9, 11)

For Nahum, both God's anger and wrath against Nineveh and protection for "those who take refuge in him" (cf. Ps 2, etc.) reflect divine goodness (Nah 1:7). And intriguingly, the introductory description of

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[9] While the key verses in Jonah, 3:10–4:1, are notoriously difficult to translate, the profound word plays reflected in the Hebrew text are worth drawing attention to. Rendered literally, these verses could be translated, "And God saw their actions, how they turned (or repented, Heb. *šûb*) from their *evil* (*rʿh*) ways, and God relented/changed his mind concerning the *evil* (*rʿh*) that he said he would do to them and did not do it. This was a great *evil* (*rʿh*) and it angered him" (author's translation; the use of masculine pronouns for God reflects the linguistic gender of biblical Hebrew). For the idea of God "changing his mind," see the identical formation in Exodus 32:14, which describes the Lord relenting from punishment immediately following the golden calf incident. The same formulation also appears in Job's final speech, signaling his changed perspective (Job 42:6).

[10] For a more extended comparison of Nahum and Jonah, including their contrasting use of this description in Exodus and its hermeneutical implications, see Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 2 (2011): 151–62.

God's appearance in a theophany (Nah 1:2–8)[11] leads to a direct challenge of the enemy: "Why do *you* plot against the LORD? . . . From *you* one has gone out." This latter element does not reflect an abstract theological depiction of God's ontological character so much as depict a traumatized victim railing directly against the more powerful party; in effect, Nahum is screaming at the perpetrator of his and his people's suffering.[12]

It is only after this initial description and direct challenge that the standard prophetic messenger formula introduces God's speech:

> *Thus says the LORD*,
> "Though they are at full strength and many,
> they will be cut off and pass away.
> Though I have afflicted you,
> I will afflict you no more.
> And now I will break off his yoke from you
> and snap the bonds that bind you."
>
> The LORD has commanded concerning you:
> "Your name shall be perpetuated no longer;
> from the house of your gods I will cut off
> the carved image and the cast image.
> I will make your grave, for you are worthless."
>
> Look! On the mountains the *feet of one*
> *who brings good tidings*,
> who proclaims *peace*!
> Celebrate your festivals, O Judah,
> fulfill your vows,
> for never again shall the wicked invade you;
> they are utterly cut off. (Nah 1:12–15; cf. Isa 52:7)

Though more familiar from Isaiah (Isa 52:7), "the feet of one who brings good tidings" clearly reflects the announcement of the downfall of a foreign empire. In effect, this "good news" and message of "peace" (Heb. *shālôm*) consists of unabashedly celebrating the destruction and humiliation of the hated Assyrian enemy.[13]

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[11] Nogalski, *Book of the Twelve*, 609–13.

[12] The resonance between this rhetorical turn to confront the enemy directly has an intriguing parallel in the infamous end to Psalm 137, where the exilic setting "by the rivers of Babylon" leads to the reference of dashing children against the rocks. Less often recognized, there too the rhetorical audience is the offending Babylon itself:

> O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,
> Happy the one who repays *you* as *you* have served us!
> Happy the one who takes and dashes *your* little ones against the rock!" (Ps 137:8–9, KJV).

[13] In the LXX the verb to "bring good news" is none other than εὐαγγελίζω (the Greek verb "to evangelize"), in the same form also found in both Isaiah 52:7 and Luke 20:1.

Following the description of warfare in Chapter 2, Nahum 3 becomes even more graphic and troubling, with the conquest of Nineveh depicted as a rape that God allows:

> Ah! City of bloodshed,
> utterly deceitful, full of booty
> —
> no end to the plunder! . . .
> Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute,
> gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery,
> who enslaves nations through her debaucheries,
> and peoples through her sorcery,
> *I am against you*,
> says the LORD of hosts,
> and *will lift up your skirts over your face;*
> *and I will let nations look on your nakedness*
> *and kingdoms on your shame.*
> I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt,
> and make you a spectacle.
> Then all who see you will shrink from you and say,
> "Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?"
> *Where shall I seek comforters for you?* (Nah 3:1, 4–7; italics added)

Drawing on the metaphor amply employed in Hosea for Israel itself, Nahum depicts Nineveh as a *zônâ*, often translated as "whore" or "prostitute."[14] Once again Nahum confronts the evil empire directly, with verse 5 linking the rape of the city directly to the Lord: "I am against *you*, says the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face." In

[14] While the term's Hebrew root connotes "primarily a sexual relationship outside of a formal union" and so could simply imply "adulteress" or the like, the connection to payment here suggests prostitution or whoredom is in view (maintained in the KJV's rendering, "who *sells* nations"); this metaphorical use reflects a repeated prophetic motif (S. Erlandsson, "זָנָה," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 99, 99–104). However translated, the term's function as a derogatory slur seems clear; Wilda C. M. Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 46–47.

Most important for the current discussion, the phrase rendered "debaucheries of the prostitute" in the NRSV (Heb. *zənûnê zônâ*) recalls the initial chapter in the Book of the Twelve, where Hosea is instructed to marry Gomer: "Go take for yourself a wife of whoredom (*zənûnîm*) and have children of whoredom (*zənûnîm*), for the land commits great whoredom (*zānōh tizneh*) by forsaking the LORD." (Hos 1:2). While in Hosea this metaphor is used to depict Israel's "whoredom" by engaging in idolatry and making alliances with stronger foreign powers, in Nahum the same terminology is redeployed to depict a foreign power subject to the violative invasion of hostile forces. This prophetic metaphor later provides the scriptural background for the depiction of the "whore of Babylon" in Revelation (Rev 17:5; 18:3), which allegorically uses a long defunct empire to depict an enticing and destructive power opposing the divine.

Nahum there is no way to sidestep or soften the connection between God and violence; even more troubling, the city's destruction is metaphorically depicted as sexualized violence against a woman. As Gafney notes:

> [Nahum 3] Verse 13 derides Nineveh's men as being women. The language play here is multi-layered. . . . In this context, being women means being vulnerable to rape by invaders. In the same way, the invasion of the city is also a rape. Nineveh's now-feminized men are as vulnerable to rape as are her women and Nineveh herself. In the poet's oratory the "gates" of Nineveh are "wide open" for their enemies to enter as easily as their enemies enter their city gates. In the poet's metaphor the gates of the city-woman are analogous to a woman's vagina and buttocks.[15]

The name Nahum, meaning the "Comforted One," further underscores the basic perspective of the book; the assured gruesome destruction of Nineveh functions as a source of comfort for the Israelite audience. The contrast is made explicit in the only other use of the term in the book; while the prophet himself is comforted (*naḥûm*, he taunts the Assyrian adversary: "Where shall I seek *comforters (mənaḥămîm)* for you?" (Nah 3:7).[16] In other words, the *lack* of comforters for Nineveh corresponds to the comfort granted to Nahum and the Israelites.[17]

The end of Nahum further underscores this basic issue in its concluding rhetorical question:

> All who hear the news about you
> clap their hands over you.
> For who has ever escaped
> your endless cruelty (*rʿh*)?" (Nah 3:19)

This conclusion again highlights a dramatic resonance with the character of Jonah, over against the book. Where both books contend directly with Nineveh, their respective concluding questions point in

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[15] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 58. Here Gafney makes explicit the sexualized rape metaphor Nahum employs: "Look at your troops: they are women in your midst. The gates of your land are wide open to your foes" (Nah 3:13).

[16] Nahum's words here closely parallel Job's critique of his friends. Although they initially join him on the dung heap in order to "console and comfort (*lənaḥămû*) him" (Job 2:11), after chapters of accusation and debate Job responds sarcastically: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters (*mənaḥămê ʿāmāl*) are you all" (Job 16:2). Where accusations against Job were not warranted but rather comforting, Nahum insists the opposite regarding Nineveh.

[17] The pivotal turn from judgment to comfort found in the familiar passage "Comfort ye, O comfort (*naḥămû naḥămû*) my people, says your God" (Isa 40:1) reflects a similar dynamic, though in this context the messenger of peace heralds the destruction of Babylon and the subsequent ability to return to the land under Persian hegemony.

opposite directions.[18] While Jonah is sent to "cry out" against Nineveh *because of* its "wickedness" (*rʿh*, Jonah 1:2) enroute to their repentance and God's subsequent mercy, in Nahum there is no doubt that God's drastic judgment of Nineveh is justified because of its legendary evil/cruelty/wickedness (*rʿh*, Nah 3:19).

Contemporary Critique of Nahum

Given this brief overview of Nahum, we turn to the hermeneutical challenge of engaging with this material. As a womanist scholar, Wilda Gafney provides a particularly significant perspective for doing so. While her detailed treatment of the text of Nahum proves profound, here I will simply outline her candid concluding evaluation of this biblical book.[19] And since the force of her writing underscores her perspective, I quote her description of Nahum and its implications at some length.

Regarding the book as a whole, Gafney states:

> The rhetoric of Nahum is vicious and violent. The proclamations are engineered to elicit a set of responses from Israelite/Judean hearers that would encompass approval and even celebration of the physical and sexual violence marshaled against Nineveh, including her sexual violation by Israel's God.[20]

With respect to the sexuality reflected in the book, she writes:

> The sanction and sanctification of sexual violence is misogynist whether in secular or sacred texts or contexts. . . . Not unexpectedly, misogyny in the text of Nahum occurs in a highly patriarchal framework in which the male figures dominate the female figures. . . . The patriarchal framework in which it occurs is itself violent.[21]

The pervasiveness of patriarchal and even misogynist assumptions within Nahum also prompts her to question the tactic of adopting more "inclusive language" with respect to the book.[22]

Gafney summarizes the book's depiction of God with a particularly jarring turn of phrase:

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[18] Jonah concludes with God's challenge: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11).

[19] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 61–65.

[20] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 61.

[21] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 62, 63.

[22] As she also states, "Nahum's God is immutably male; his virulent maleness resists the inclusive language that many womanists and feminists use to translate and interpret the Scriptures." Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 64.

> One way of understanding Nahum's God is that *the God who batters Israel will batter on behalf of Israel*. This theology is not unique to Nahum; it can be found throughout Torah and Prophets. Nahum's portrait of God is not the only troubling one in the Hebrew Bible.[23]

Although they are particularly pronounced here, Gafney notes that these problematic understandings of God are not unique in the Old Testament.[24]

This leads Gafney to her overall evaluation and fundamental rejection of the book:

> Nahum is *not good news for me*. As a religious reader, priest, and preacher, I cannot own Nahum's God as my own. I need to distinguish between the God of the (in the) text and God beyond the text.[25]

In effect, what the book proposes as "good news" and a message of "peace" to its people, she finds irredeemable in her context.

At the very end of her treatment of Nahum, Gafney lists a series of rhetorical, "unanswerable questions" regarding the book:

> For whom is Nahum good news today? Who would choose a battering God? Would anyone on the margins of racial, ethnic, gender, or identity hierarchies willingly embrace the God of Nineveh? Can Nahum be anything more than revenge fantasy pornography?[26]

Like the book itself, Gafney concludes her discussion of Nahum with a provocative question that engages readers and leaves them unsettled.

In sum, after detailed engagement and careful consideration, and for good reason, Gafney concludes that "Nahum's God is not my God" and fundamentally rejects its portrayal of the divine. Though the book is not unique in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, in her view it reflects such a highly problematic understanding of God that readers should ultimately reject it.

Proposed "Christocentric" Readings

I suspect that Gafney's perspective may sound familiar. In addition, lay people who have a visceral, reflexive agreement with her view, several contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars have recently expressed similar views on a broader level when wrestling with the issue of violence

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[23] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 64; italics added.

[24] Similarly: "While Nahum's rhetoric is extraordinarily vicious, it is not without parallel in the biblical text; Nahum's god is not entirely unrelated to the God of the Hebrew Scriptures." Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 63.

[25] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 64; italics added.

[26] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 65.

in the Bible, though I am unaware of any who have done a deep dive into Nahum in doing so. Two issues emerge repeatedly. First, the theology and depiction of God in Nahum (and most other prophets) links God to violence and judgment, which seems to be in tension with an Anabaptist focus on peace. Second, this divine portrayal is largely seen as a Hebrew Bible or Old Testament problem that seems incompatible with New Testament portrayals of the divine, with the implication that the New Testament disagrees with and somehow resolves this dilemma.

For instance, Old Testament scholar Eric Seibert's perspective echoes that of Gafney, proposing an approach for dealing with "disturbing" depictions of God in the Old Testament by systematically "Distinguishing Between the Textual God and the Actual God."[27] Seibert sees a "Christocentric Hermeneutic" as the key for evaluating and distinguishing "the Actual God" from among a variety of divine portrayals in the Bible; in his view, appealing to "the God Jesus reveals" as a criterion largely resolves this dilemma.[28] As he states:

> Since *some* Old Testament portrayals of God do not accurately reflect God's character, these particular portrayals should not be used to determine our beliefs about what God is really like. . . . Like Jesus, we too can reject certain portrayals of God without consequently rejecting the Old Testament.[29]

In the end, as I have written elsewhere, "Seibert concludes that the 'actual God' is nonviolent and thus implies that a 'textual God' incompatible with such a view may be historically inaccurate, contextually derived, or simply mistaken regarding God's character."[30]

J. Denny Weaver employs a more theological approach to arrive at a similar conclusion. In particular, he opposes what he sees as the inherent violence of a substitutionary atonement view and proposes "Narrative Christus Victor" as an improved and more faithful alternative to resolve what he identifies as the basic problem:

> It seems to me that one of the great and longest-running distortions in Christian theology has been the attribution of violence and violent intent to the will and activity of God. But if God is truly revealed in

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[27] Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 169–81.

[28] Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 183–207. For various critical responses to Seibert's approach, see the issue "Does God Behave Badly?: Answers and Questions" of *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 2 (2011). For connections and tension between Jonah and Nahum specifically, see W. Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," in *Direction* 40, no. 2 (2011): 151–62.

[29] Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 211. Original emphasis.

[30] Suderman, "Wrestling," 152.

> Jesus Christ, and if Jesus rejected violence, as is most universally believed, then the God revealed in Jesus should be pictured in nonviolent images. If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.[31]

While he occasionally makes brief asides regarding the contextual nature of theology,[32] Weaver's overall tone evinces a more universal claim of the veracity of his position. [33]

In his two-volume work, Gregory A. Boyd provides probably the most in-depth and systematic contemporary attempt to resolve the issue of divine violence in the Bible, arguing for what he calls a "Cruciform Hermeneutic" that views violent portraits of God through the cross of Christ.[34] In his view God acts like a skilled martial artist, able to turn the violence of others in upon itself; he concludes that "God always judges sin and defeats evil in this same nonviolent, Aikido-like manner."[35]

Boyd sees the cross as putting the lie to any understanding of God that links the divine to violence, arguing that four "principles" explain the presence of violent understandings of God in the Old Testament: "Cruciform Accommodation" suggests that any violent understanding "*indirectly* reveals God's true character and will" (1253; italics added); "Redemptive Withdrawal" prompts a form of natural consequence, where God pulls back divine "merciful protection" from sinners to "allow their sin to ricochet back on them as a divine judgment" (1255); "Cosmic Conflict" explains how "the NT understands Jesus's crucifixion to be God's decisive battle against, and victory over, the powers of darkness" (1257); and "Semiautonomous Power" describes the extent to which "God grants a degree of divine power to human agents" that effectually relieves

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[31] Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 5.

[32] In the conclusion to his book on atonement, Weaver states, "it should be stated clearly that all theology is particular or specific to a context. It cannot be claimed that narrative Christus Victor is the ultimate atonement image and that our problem of how best to articulate the saving work of Christ has now been definitively solved for the remainder of life on earth. Since all theology is particular, that claim could never stand." Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 324–25.

[33] Though it is not discussed here, Ted Grimsrud provides another Anabaptist-Mennonite critique of substitutionary atonement along similar lines: see Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013). For my critical review, see: W. Derek Suderman, "Instead of Atonement," *MQR* 88 (January 2014): 145–48.

[34] Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

[35] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 1255.

God of responsibility when this power is misused (1259).[36] In his approach Boyd seeks to hold together the conviction that the cross reveals God's true nature and character, through which violent divine portrayals need to be understood on one hand,[37] while also maintaining a sense that all of Scripture is "God-breathed" on the other. In the end, Boyd believes that:

> The Cruciform Thesis empowers us to finally become consistent with our call to display God's cruciform character and to be witnesses for peace by allowing us—or better, *requiring* us—to repudiate all the violence that is ascribed to God in Scripture. For the heart of this thesis is the conviction that when Jesus abolished the sin of the world on the cross, this included all the sinful, violent ways humans have viewed and used God and/or gods throughout history. . . . If we fully trust the revelation of the crucified God, we can only understand his crucifixion to be the permanent crucifixion of the warrior god.[38]

While all three of these contemporary writers are concerned with clearly understanding God's character as fundamentally nonviolent, their approaches also differ in important ways. Seibert focuses primarily on the Bible itself and repeatedly underscores the importance of "thinking rightly about God," while Weaver's project largely derives from a concern that the later development of Christian theology, and its understandings of atonement and appeals to violent images of God in particular, have fed Christian violence. Boyd deals extensively with biblical, theological, and historical topics and discussion partners, consistently appealing to historical Anabaptism in the process. All three prove vitally interested in ethics, and in part arrive at their respective depictions of God's nonviolence because they believe this provides a solid basis for Christian life and action in the world.

In light of these approaches taken by contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars, it is worth returning to how early Anabaptists approached this dilemma, with Gafney's key concluding question in mind: "For whom is

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[36] For a more detailed description of these four principles, see Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God,* 1252–60.

[37] In a similar vein, Seibert states that "The nonviolence of God is most plainly visible in Christ crucified on the cross." Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 197.

[38] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God,* 1261; original emphasis. Or, as he writes at the end of the first volume:

> [J]ust as we are called to set aside our old sinful nature that was crucified with Christ to manifest our true self in Christ (Eph 4:22–24; cf. Rom 6:6), so too, *we should forever set aside the sin-stained portraits of Yahweh as a violent warrior god that were crucified with Christ to manifest the nonviolent, self-sacrificial, enemy-embracing love of the one true God*. In short, I submit that we should consider the crucifixion of the one true God to be the permanent crucifixion of the warrior god. (Boyd, 552; italics added).

For Boyd's description of both Seibert and Weaver efforts as exemplars of a "dismissive solution" to the issue, see Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God,* 341–43.

(or we may add, *was*) Nahum good news?" Given these scholars' suggestion that God's nonviolence demonstrated in Christ reflects the critical basis for an Anabaptist-Mennonite commitment to peace, we turn now to a key source from the early Anabaptist movement.

II. Hermeneutics in the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*

The *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* reflects some of the earliest understandings and interpretations of the Bible in the Anabaptist movement,[39] consisting of material compiled "sometime between 1529 and 1540."[40] Although its authorship remains anonymous, this collection had extraordinary staying power, resulting in "at least fourteen German editions, and one Dutch edition, published from ca. 1540 to 1710," a rate of publishing second only to the *Ausbund* hymnbook among "work originating with the Swiss Brethren."[41]

Given its broad scope, early provenance, and sustained influence, this biblical concordance provides a vital resource for considering historic Anabaptist hermeneutics. While it goes without saying that biblical interpretation was not uniform within early Anabaptism, this source also provides a helpful point of comparison to prevalent interpretive assumptions and tendencies in our own day.

The Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540

Before delving more deeply into its treatment of biblical prophetic material specifically, a few initial observations about the *Concordance* are in order. First, this document represents a topical rather than verbal concordance, organized into sixty-six thematic categories. Thus, in addition to identifying specific biblical passages, it "answers the question of what the most significant 'topics' in all of Scripture were for those who compiled and used the collection" and so provides "a kind of anthology of the Bible, or a 'Bible digest' organized along Anabaptist lines."[42] While "expressly intended for the 'common layperson,'" the *Concordance*

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[39] *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, trans. Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters, Anabaptist Texts in Translation series (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

[40] C. Arnold Snyder, "General Introduction," *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, vii.

[41] Snyder, "General Introduction," vii.

[42] Snyder, "General Introduction," x. This topical listing proves particularly striking given that BCBC commentaries conclude with a series of short essays on various topics. Comparing the topics of contemporary commentaries with this *Concordance* proves striking both with respect to some perpetual questions addressed in both (Judgment, Wrath, Discipleship, etc.), as well as elements uniquely of interest then (Spiritual Whoredom, etc.) and now (historical context, authorship, and date of composition, genre of material, and the like).

contains no introduction or guide for how it was to be used though it reflects both a conviction of the clarity of Scripture and some apologetic interest.[43] Visually, it consists simply of named topics with lists of relevant chapters from biblical books, with some verbatim quotations ranging from a short verse or two to entire pages of rewritten biblical material.

In his introduction, historian Arnold Snyder notes that, "the Swiss Brethren Concordance reflects what came to be the mainstream biblical reading of Swiss and South German Anabaptists."[44] As such, this resource provides a valuable window into early Anabaptist hermeneutics and a striking point of comparison with that espoused by contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars.

The Sermon on the Mount and Nahum in the Concordance

The *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* (hereafter the *Concordance*) proves instructive for considering both Anabaptist hermeneutics in general and the issue of violence in the Prophets in particular. Given the common focus on the Sermon on the Mount among contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites, in what follows I will concentrate particularly on the appearance of material from the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Nahum in this early resource.

The *Concordance* cites the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) twenty-eight times under twenty-five distinct topics. The Sermon on the Mount clearly exerts a strong influence on the document since several of the listed topics derive directly from it, with some also appearing in the approximate order found in these biblical chapters. For instance, topics referencing Matthew 6 consist of "Prayer," "Fasting," and "Alms" (35–38); "Light" (48–49); and "Treasure," "Do Not Worry," and "No One Can Serve Two Masters" (53, 54–56).

In short, the considerable prominence of the Sermon on the Mount in this *Concordance* is hardly surprising, both in terms of the specific themes it discusses, as well as noting that 38 percent of topics include a reference to these three chapters in Matthew.

It may be considerably more surprising, however, to see the relative prominence of the book of Nahum—also three chapters in length—as well. References to Nahum appear nine times under seven distinct topical categories: While the listing of Nahum under topics such as "Vengeance" and "Punishment of the Godless" may be expected, its appearance as a

[43] Snyder, "General Introduction," ix.

[44] Snyder, "General Introduction," xiv.

biblical source to contemplate "Hope," "Mercy," and the "Reward of the Pious" is less so.[45]

In contrast to its relative invisibility in contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite discourse, Nahum appears in over 10 percent of the topics found in this *Concordance*. While the Sermon on the Mount appears approximately four times as often, the relative prominence of Nahum proves even more striking; it would be shocking to find a 4:1 ratio between references to the Sermon on the Mount and Nahum in a contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite resource.

Why does this matter? To orient the remainder of this paper, it is worth quoting Snyder's "Introduction" at length:

> Although it is true that the Anabaptists rejected the "learned" project of theology as it was known in their day, nevertheless the parsing of the entire Bible into its most relevant topics, verses, and passages is no less a theological project than is the writing of a theological treatise. The lack of accompanying commentary from the anonymous Anabaptist "theologians" who compiled the Concordance should not mislead us. The Concordance is not a random collection of verses. . . . In fact, the logic and rationale that stands behind the selection of biblical topics and texts reveals the theological and spiritual heart of Anabaptism: how these Anabaptists thought and spoke about God, redemption in Christ, and the life of a disciple in the Body of Christ.[46]

As a resource that reflects "the logic and rationale" of early Anabaptist hermeneutics and "reveals the theological and spiritual heart of Anabaptism," I will explore references to Nahum to describe its interpretive approach and assumptions related to prophetic material. While this study provides just a brief foray into the *Concordance*'s treatment of one particular book, we shall see that even this exploratory effort raises questions about some common assumptions and interpretive habits found in contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics.

In what follows I will comment particularly on the four topics that cite both the book of Nahum and the Sermon on the Mount: "Mercy" (Nah 1; Matt 5), "Concerning Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring" (Nah 2; Matt 5), the "Reward of the Pious" (Nah 2; Matt 5), and "Vengeance" (Nah 1; Matt 5, 6). In doing so, I will dedicate more time to the latter entry on "Vengeance," since it both illustrates the approach of the *Concordance* and

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[45] The "Punishment" topic lists Nahum 1, 2, and 3, and is one of two references to chapter 3 in the *Concordance* (see discussion re: "Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring" below). Beyond these two topics, either Nahum 1 or 2 is cited once in the remaining topics. *Concordance*, 190. The remaining topics are "Idolatrousness" and "Concerning Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring."

[46] Snyder, "General Introduction," xvii.

proves particularly relevant for considering Anabaptist hermeneutics of prophetic material.

Mercy, Whoring, and Reward

In the half page dedicated to "Mercy," the *Concordance* lists twelve Old Testament and ten New Testament references, including Nahum 1 and Matthew 5, respectively. Five citations also appear from what is now called Apocryphal or Deutero-Canonical material, with the vast majority of the entry dedicated to extended quotations from Ben Sirach.[47] Listing Nahum 1 in a topic on mercy seems to reflect the description of the LORD as "good," a "stronghold," and "refuge" (v. 7); freedom from the "yoke" of the oppressor (v. 13); and the messenger proclaiming peace (v. 15). While listing Nahum 1 here proves striking, given its strident call for God's vengeance and judgment discussed above, in this chapter divine mercy for one group is made possible through the judgment and even destruction of another.[48]

In "Concerning Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring" the *Concordance* cites a wide range of material extending from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, through some of the "historical books" and Proverbs, to a special prominence in prophetic material (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea in particular). The longest verbatim quotation is taken from Jeremiah 13:23–27, a passage that closely parallels the rape imagery in Nahum, although in this case referring to the plight of the capital of Judah (Jerusalem) rather than that of Assyria (Nineveh):

> That will be your portion, and the portion of your measure with which I will repay you, says the Lord, because you forgot me and hoped in deceitful things. There *I will lift your clothes over your heads, and reveal your hips, that your shame may be seen*, your adultery, your cowardly malice, your agitation, and your shameful whoring. For I have seen your abomination on the fields and hills. Woe to you Jerusalem, for it is not to be hoped that you will ever be cleansed. (Jer 13:25–27)[49]

[47] It should not come as a surprise that early Anabaptists cited what is now referred to as Apocrypha as fully authoritative Scripture, since the separation of this material occurred later. On this topic see Jonathan R. Seiling, "Solae (Quae?) Scripturae: Anabaptists and the Apocrypha," *MQR* 80 (Jan. 2006): 5–34.

[48] "Mercy," 42.

[49] As quoted in the *Biblical Concordance*, "Concerning Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring," 87; italics added.

Shortly afterward, the *Concordance* lists Nahum 3 and Matthew 5 in the same line,[50] with the first reflecting similar rape imagery (Nah 3:4–7) and the second presumably referring to Jesus's discussion of adultery and divorce (Matt 5:27–32). While it is somewhat jarring to see these passages listed beside each other, once again Old Testament references outpace those from the New Testament, along with several provided from the Apocrypha (thirty-six OT, twenty NT, five Apocrypha).

The section titled "Reward of the Pious" is one of the longest in the entire *Concordance*, spanning approximately eight and a half pages of material in translation. In this case, the disparity between Testaments proves even more dramatic, with approximately five and a half pages of extended quotations from the Old Testament; over two pages of extended quotations from what are now labeled Apocrypha or Deutero-Canonical materials; and just over half a page of New Testament material, with the only extended quotations taken from the book of Revelation.[51] The number of citations also proves striking. Where twenty-four New Testament citations appear (including six from Revelation), there are twelve from the Apocrypha, and a full ninety-four from the Old Testament. In fact, this section cites twenty-four chapters from Isaiah alone (as many as from the entire New Testament), along with eighteen from Ezekiel, and twelve from Jeremiah; over half of the Old Testament references come from these three major prophetic books. Also intriguing, given its prominence in contemporary prosperity Gospel preaching and writing, the "Reward of the Pious" section contains no references to Proverbs.

This brief overview of *Concordance* topics that mention both the Sermon on the Mount and Nahum challenge the often asserted and assumed Anabaptist preference for the New Testament over the Old Testament. Even more striking, the *Concordance* provides a surprising answer to Gafney's final rhetorical questions—"For whom is (was) Nahum good news? Who would choose a battering God?"[52]—since it appears that early Swiss and South German Anabaptists did not shy away from Nahum's perspective.

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[50] *Concordance*, "Concerning Fleshly and Spiritual Whoring," 88. While the English translation mistakenly refers to this as Nahum 2 rather than 3, the 1612 Zurich edition clearly refers to the latter. *Concordantz Und Zeyger der Nammhafftigsten Sprüch . . .*. (Zürych, 1612), 268. My thanks to archivist Laureen Harder-Gissing at Conrad Grebel University College for tracking down the electronic version of this 1612 German edition in the Goshen digital archive to confirm this suspicion: http://dx.doi.org/10.25673/opendata2-18889.

[51] *Concordance*, "Reward of the Pious," 107–115.

[52] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 65.

III. Vengeance, Judgment, and Kingship: A Vital Backdrop for "the Kingdom of God"

On Vengeance

The topic of "Vengeance" conforms to the pattern of previous usage in the *Concordance*, with twenty-seven Old Testament, eight Apocryphal, and thirteen New Testament citations, respectively. Again, the fourteen citations from prophetic material (ten from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel alone) proves more than all of the New Testament citations combined. While Nahum 1 is listed among the prophetic passages, both Matthew 5 and 6 from the Sermon on the Mount also appear.

This topic reflects several developments from the Old Testament to the New Testament that are widely recognized. For instance, it lists both the biblical basis for "an eye for an eye" (Exod 21) and Jesus's reinterpretation of this idea (Matt 5). Or again, both the description of vengeance as divine punishment and its citation by Paul appear here: "'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord" (Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19).

However, there is also an often unrecognized and unappreciated continuity within the flow from Old Testament to New Testament reflected in the movement from Nahum 1 to the Sermon on the Mount and beyond. As described previously, Nahum 1 describes the Lord as an "avenging (*nōqêm*) God" who "takes vengeance (*nōqêm*) upon his adversaries" (Nah 1:2), with the Assyrian empire in view. While the *Concordance* is clearly topical, it also identifies passages that are not only thematically relevant, but where the term *vengeance* itself appears.[53] In some instances this speaks about God enacting vengeance on foreign nations and powers (like Nah 1), and in others it describes divine punishment of God's own people (Lev 26:25).

For our purposes, it is worth noting that the section on "Vengeance" in the *Concordance* lists multiple psalms, explicitly quoting specific verses from three of them: Psalm 58:10–11, 94:1–2, and 149:4–9.[54] While the third of these proves extremely unusual in the Psalter,[55] the first two passages explicitly associate vengeance with God's role as judge in characteristic

[53] For instance, this includes the Cain story (Gen 4:15, 24), mistreatment by a slave owner (Exod 21:20), and the like.

[54] *Concordance*, "Vengeance," 102.

[55] While God and the "anointed" (*messiah* in Hebrew, *christ* in Greek) can legitimately wield violence in the Psalter (for the latter, see Ps 18:34–42, 46–50), Psalm 149 is one of the only instances where this possibility is broadened to include the community at large (Ps 149:7). For a discussion of vengeance in the Psalms that underscores the distinction between divine and human roles, see Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

fashion.[56] Where we may link vengeance to an individual vendetta or uncontrolled rage, Nahum Sarna notes that the term "means nothing of the kind" but rather "signifies an action worthily motivated, purposeful, intended to serve the ends of justice."[57] This connection of vengeance to the pursuit of justice undergirds the strident call for the Lord's appearance as the "God of vengeance" in Psalm 94.

> O LORD, you God of *vengeance* (*nəqāmōwt*),
> you God of *vengeance*, shine forth!
> Rise up, O *judge* of the earth;
> give to the proud what they deserve!
> O LORD, *how long* shall the wicked,
> *how long* shall the wicked exult? (Ps 94:1–3)

The situation described in Psalm 94 could hardly be more severe. The psalmist struggles with the infuriating problem that the wicked are prospering rather than the righteous (cf. Ps 1:6), dramatically underscoring the dilemma with drastic language and examples of pervasive injustice ("They crush your people," "They kill the widow and the stranger," "they murder the orphan," vv. 5–7). From this context the psalmist calls on the Lord to fulfill the role of a king and to judge the earth; from the psalmist's perspective it would be a dereliction of duty for God not to do so. This untenable situation occasions the classic cry of lament, "How long . . . ?" that demands a divine response.[58]

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[56] These biblical quotations, as translated in the *Concordance* ("Vengeance," 102; italics added):

> The righteous one will rejoice when he sees such *vengeance* (*nāqām*), and will bathe his footsteps in the blood of the godless, and the people will say, the righteous one will always enjoy that which is his, it is always *God who is judge* on earth." (Ps 58:10–11)
>
> Lord God, to whom *vengeance (nəqāmōwt)* belongs, God, to whom *vengeance (nəqāmōwt)* belongs, shine forth, arise you *judge of the world*, reward the proud according to their deeds. (Ps 94:1–2).

[57] As Sarna writes concerning the use of this term in Psalm 94, "It should be noted that the Hebrew term here translated 'retribution' is often misleadingly rendered 'vengeance' in many other English versions. But that word conveys to the popular mind a negative, primitive conception of religion. 'Vengeance' is usually taken to be synonymous with revenge, and implies actions prompted by base emotions. The Hebrew root, however, means nothing of the kind, for in most instances, it signifies an action worthily motivated, purposeful, intended to serve the ends of justice. Unlike 'revenge,' which is essentially antisocial, 'retribution' is concerned with vindication, not with vindictiveness, with upholding or restoring a just social order, not primarily with retaliation." Nahum M. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 192–93.

[58] For a classic overview of the crucial theological function of lament, and an extension of this argument to focus on the role of the discerning community, respectively, see Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in Patrick D. Miller, ed., *The Psalms: The Life of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 98–111; and W. Derek Suderman, "The Cost

This basic insight is further underscored when we recognize the location of Psalm 94 in Book 4 of the Psalter (Pss 90–106),[59] whose central motif lies in the foundational conviction that "The LORD is king" (Ps 93:1; 97:1; 98:1; et al.).[60] And as king, God necessarily takes on the role of judge (Ps 96:13; 98:9; 99:4; etc.).

In effect, the lack of justice and shocking inversion of morality depicted in Psalm 94 grounds its invocation of divine vengeance as an appropriate response to this desperate cry. And most important here, the understanding of God as king is inextricably linked to the divine role as judge. Seen alongside Psalm 94, Nahum 1 also comes into greater focus. Like a prosecuting attorney in God's court, Nahum makes a compelling argument for why Nineveh must be punished for its "wickedness" or "evil" (*rʿh*), since the Assyrian empire embodies the practices described in this psalm.

The *Concordance* entry on "Vengeance" then provides extended quotations of three New Testament passages. The first comes from Luke 9:54–56: "Should we say: Let the fire fall from heaven and burn them, like Elijah did? But Jesus turned and rebuked them and said: Do you not know what spirit's children you are? The Son of man has not come to destroy the souls of people, but rather to save them."[61] This passage would fit well within the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutical approaches outlined above, since it signals a turn away from punishment and toward mercy, from destruction to salvation.

The *Concordance* then explicitly quotes Romans 12:19–21 as a second New Testament passage: "Do not avenge yourselves, my beloved, but rather give way to wrath instead; for it is written, *vengeance is mine, I* will repay, says the Lord. So if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink."[62] Far from denouncing or rejecting the perspective in the psalms above, Paul approvingly cites Deuteronomy 32:35 ("Vengeance [Heb. *nqm*] is mine"). Rather than disappearing from the New Testament, "vengeance" figures prominently in this passage, even as Paul clearly distinguishes God's role from that of his human audience. In short, by explicitly quoting these verses, the *Concordance* underscores both

of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (2012): 201–17.

[59] It is widely recognized that the book of Psalms is divided into five books, each marked by a concluding blessing, such as: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting, Amen and Amen" (Ps 41:13; cf. 72:18–19; 89:52; etc.). Book 4 (Pss 90–106) responds to the utter disorientation of exile (see Ps 89:38–52) by returning to the ancient conviction of the Lord's kingship (cf. Exod 15:18).

[60] For the royal portrayal of God as key to reading the Psalms, see James L. Mays, *The LORD Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

[61] *Concordance*, "Vengeance," 103.

[62] *Concordance*, "Vengeance," 103; italics added.

vengeance and wrath as the Lord's prerogative in contrast to the human role of extending hospitality, love, and solidarity, even to the "enemy" as described earlier in the chapter.

The third and final New Testament quotation extends from Revelation 18:4–8:

> Go out of Babylon my people, so that you [will?] not be participants in her sins and not receive her plagues, for her sins have followed her into heaven, and the Lord has remembered her wickedness. Pay her as she paid you, and make it double the worth of her works. And with whichever chalice she has given you to drink, give her back twofold. . . . Therefore her plagues will come one day: death, suffering, and hunger, and she will be burned by fire, for mighty is God the Lord *who shall judge her*.[63]

Here again the *Concordance* underscores its basic conviction that God is willing, able, and right to judge. And like the description in Nahum, the precipitating factor once again lies in Babylon's "wickedness."

Vengeance in the Sermon on the Mount

In this light, the *Concordance's* reference to the Sermon on the Mount under the "Vengeance" topic also comes into greater focus. Jesus clearly challenges the logic of retribution in Matthew 5, since his teachings to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies" represent substantial reinterpretations of the received tradition, consistent with the human role described in Romans 12.

At the same time, assuming the uniqueness of the Sermon on the Mount can also prompt us to overlook key elements of continuity with previous understandings. This should not surprise us, since Jesus introduces this teaching by saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matt 5:17).[64] By listing Matthew 6 as well as chapter 5 the *Concordance* article on "Vengeance" also draws attention to the description of God's "kingdom" so central to the Lord's Prayer.[65]

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[63] *Concordance*, "Vengeance," 103; italics added.

[64] For our purposes here I am focusing on the canonical depiction of Jesus, with no attempt to discern whether or how this compares to a reconstructed historical Jesus. Such a pursuit lies well beyond the scope of this paper and is a complex and fraught topic in and of itself.

[65] While one might suggest that Matthew 6 is being cited in reference to Jesus's warning about attempting to "serve two masters" and admonition "do not worry," these appear as separate topics in the *Concordance*, so do not appear to be in view under the "Vengeance" topic.

Like in Book 4 of the Psalter, the central motif of this prayer/psalm lies in the basic conviction that *God* is king (not Caesar), and that following Jesus means being committed and maintaining allegiance to this alternative kingdom ("*your* kingdom come, *your* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"). Less often recognized, by emphasizing the "kingdom of God," Jesus also recognizes and underscores God's role as judge.

In short, the Sermon on the Mount does not eliminate divine vengeance any more than it assumes that enemies no longer exist. Proclaiming God's kingdom underscores, rather than rejects, the necessity of judgment, while simultaneously insisting that this reflects God's role, and not ours. Far from a drastic contrast with Paul's statement regarding divine vengeance in Romans 12, the Sermon on the Mount reflects the same basic logic. At the same time, this does not predetermine what form(s) such judgment may take. After all, God's response to Nineveh in Jonah also represents an instance of God's judgment, in that case foregoing punishment in favor of mercy.

While it may be tempting to play off vengeance in the Old Testament with love in the New Testament, or even to try to contrast a loving, nonjudgmental God of Jesus with divine wrath and vengeance in Paul's writings and Revelation, the *Concordance* moves in the opposite direction. It sees God as sovereign in the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as ultimately responsible for judgment and vengeance in both. Consistent with the breadth of the biblical witness, the *Concordance* shows little discomfort with divine vengeance and judgment, while also clearly identifying this as God's task and not that of the followers of Jesus.

A Contemporary Use of Nahum

In contrast to Wilda Gafney's evaluation of the book, Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi has recently pointed to Nahum as perhaps the most significant biblical resource for Christians facing ongoing violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Speaking from this context, Wenyi points to "divine presence and memories of war" as two key topics in Nahum that "can help Congolese Christians face their past of individual and communal wounds, and (hopefully) imagine new possibilities for reconciled communities where trust, justice, love, belonging, and respect for human dignity are upheld."[66] As he explains:

[66] Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses: Reading Prophetic Poetry and Violence in African Context* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 169. Wenyi also addresses the issue of sexual violence that Gafney appropriately raises, suggesting that Nahum can actually speak into this perpetual issue in the context of the DRC (177). The dramatic book title reflects a direct quotation describing the destruction of Nineveh: "Horsemen charging, flashing

> The book of Nahum cannot be dismissed as irrelevant or merely vindictive. On the contrary, this study shows that this book is essential, *especially for traumatized communities*. The connection that I make between this prophetic violent text and the possibility of healing is anchored in my theological commitment to reconciliation and my conviction that, even in violent biblical texts, God intends to offer us something transformative.[67]

In short, Wenyi sees Nahum as a companion on the journey for living in a context of unresolved, continuing violence and as a significant resource for moving toward reconciliation. Far from celebrating or legitimating human violence, he writes that:

> [A]scribing vengeance to YHWH can suggest to the victims of violence that they do not have to take matters into their own hands because YHWH himself will intervene. Thus, while showing that God is provoked when anyone commits violence against other humans, texts that ascribe vengeance to God also call for an end to the cycle of violence among humans.[68]

It is striking how strongly the perspective that Wenyi articulates from a contemporary context of ongoing warfare and trauma resonates with that found in the *Concordance*; neither dismisses vengeance on the one hand, while both clearly place this possibility in God's hands on the other.

In effect, Wenyi provides another positive, and this time contemporary, response to Gafney's question, "For whom is Nahum good news?" In fact, even as they differ in their evaluation of the usefulness of Nahum in their distinct contexts, Gafney's description of the book itself proves remarkably similar:

> While I can find no redemption in or for Nahum's God, I find I can relate to Nahum, poet and proclaimer, as a "tortured man who lives admidst the violence of war." Reading texts like Nahum, Ezekiel, and Obadiah through the lens of trauma theology helps me to make sense of them. The horror of war is generative, begetting horror after horror in text and theology.[69]

In short, the difference between the perspectives of Gafney and Wenyi does not lie in the traumatic origins of the book or even its resonance with their own settings, so much as whether or not they see this material as

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sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end" (Nah 3:3).

[67] Wenyi, *Piles of Slain*, xviii–xix; italics added.

[68] Wenyi, *Piles of Slain*, 173.

[69] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 64–65.

beneficial in their respective contemporary contexts.[70] While Gafney rejects the perspective of the book, Wenyi believes that Nahum holds good news for Christians in the DRC.

IV. Preliminary Observations: Contextual Anabaptist Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in the Biblical Concordance

As noted previously, the Sermon on the Mount appears to have had significant influence on the topics listed in the *Concordance*. It reflects clear interest in discipleship, evidence of living in a hostile environment, and the challenge of being faithful under such difficult circumstances. Again, if this *Concordance* reflects "the logic and rationale" of Anabaptism, including "how these Anabaptists thought and spoke *about God*,"[71] then it is worth unpacking its approach. In what follows I draw attention to several characteristics of the interpretive approach reflected in the topics discussed, particularly since they stand in tension with often assumed and asserted contemporary descriptions of Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics.

First, it is clear that appeals to Jesus, a Christocentric perspective, or nonviolence were not used to limit or sideline related biblical material or challenging views of God. Where some today claim that Christocentric hermeneutics or the God that Jesus reveals prove fundamentally incompatible with certain biblical depictions of the divine, the *Concordance* maintains a complex, nuanced understanding of God. For instance, under "Vengeance," the *Concordance* does not reject a divine link to judgment or even violence, but rather focuses on when, against what or whom, and why God pronounces such judgment.

Second, the *Concordance* reflects a broader functional canon than that employed by many (perhaps most) contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites in North America, including scholars. The *Concordance* includes robust discussions of divine judgment, wrath, reward and punishment, and the like, including a focus on Christ as judge. These are not seen as topics to avoid or sideline but rather provide a window into the Bible's "most relevant topics, verses and passages" for these Anabaptists.

Third, the *Concordance* does not reflect a systematic or doctrinaire preference for New Testament material over Old Testament material. It is striking how frequently the Old Testament is cited without hesitation as

[70] In light of Gafney's attentiveness to the gendered and misogynist character of violence in Nahum, it would be very helpful to hear a female perspective from the DRC alongside that of Wenyi.

[71] Snyder, "General Introduction," xvii; italics added.

fully authoritative alongside more familiar New Testament passages, often to surprising and intriguing effect. In fact, on various topics, references to the Old Testament material dwarfs those from the New Testament, including some where we might expect the opposite. Although it has become routine to assume and assert the priority of the New Testament for Anabaptist hermeneutics along with an implicit, and at times, explicit, denigration or marginalization of the Old Testament, the *Concordance* does not reflect this tendency.[72]

In short, the *Concordance* draws from the breadth of the biblical witness, Old Testament and New Testament, and in no sense does the commitment to be Jesus's disciple eliminate challenging views of God. Indeed, rather than provide a trump card for limiting God or divine action, the *Concordance* heavily emphasizes God's sovereignty and highlights the related issues of divine judgment, wrath, reward/punishment, and the like.

In light of contemporary discussions, it is also striking to note what is missing in the *Concordance*. While contemporary Anabaptist resources would likely sideline Nahum and highlight Jonah, whose message of repentance and God's compassion for Nineveh seems more palatable in our context, Jonah is the only book of the Twelve Minor Prophets not to appear in the *Concordance* at all!

Similarly, given their frequent prominence and proposed centrality in contemporary descriptions of Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics, it is striking that "Peace," "Nonresistance," and "Nonviolence" do not appear as discrete topics at all either.[73] Snyder notes that "the narrative thread guiding the selection [of included topics] marks the stages of the Christian life, lived in response to God's call: its beginning, formation, and faithful obedience to the end."[74] To do so, the *Concordance* begins with the topics "Fear of God," "Repentance," "Discipleship," and "Rebirth," and concludes with "Judgment," "Vengeance," "Day of the Lord," "God Will Repay All according to Their Deeds," "Reward of the Pious," "Punishment of the Godless," and finally "Child Rearing."

Noting the lack of "Peace" or "Nonresistance" as topics does not downplay an Anabaptist-Mennonite commitment to nonviolence; I would describe these as key to my understanding of the Christian gospel and find

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[72] For a classic and still relevant description of the historical bases and implications of the Anabaptist tendency to prioritize New Testament over Old Testament, see Waldemar Janzen, "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation," in Gordon Zerbe, ed., *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 2001), 3–21.

[73] Similarly, the article "Community" is only half a page long with eight citations (39), while the "Reward of the Pious" (107–115) and "Concerning False Prophets and the Antichrist" (71–77) are the longest.

[74] Snyder, "General Introduction," xvii.

them embedded within the *Concordance* at various points. However, these concerns do not form the center of the tradition, but rather result from it. To use an analogy, where some in our day propose a commitment to peace as the focal point of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity, the *Concordance* sees Discipleship, Repentance, Fear of the Lord, and the like as the trunk of the Anabaptist tree. Where peace and justice could be seen as the branches or even the leaves of the tree "for the healing of the nations," they do not form and should not be mistaken for the trunk.[75]

Finally, it is clear that this *Concordance* reflects what might be called an embodied biblicist tradition, more than an abstract, theoretical one.[76] Again, I am not advocating for an anti-intellectual Anabaptism but simply seek to underscore that there is no philosophical principle, platonic ideal, or abstract (re)construction of Jesus that provides a means for eliminating biblical material. Where contemporary scholars at times seek (or assert) philosophical coherence or make definitive universal statements regarding the nature and character of God, the *Concordance* shows little hesitation in citing a broad range of biblical perspectives on the topic.

In short, the compilers of the *Concordance* assumed that uneducated, largely illiterate Anabaptists could know and should operate within a broad and complex biblical canon. A focus on Christian discipleship to Jesus did not provide an excuse for shortcuts or inattention to Scripture, but quite the opposite. Snyder's description gives food for thought, particularly for contemporary North American Anabaptist-Mennonites in the age of the iPhone and digital culture:

> For common people in the sixteenth century, the *remembered* word was of more worth than the mere printed word. . . . 'Owning one's faith' for the majority of Anabaptists meant owning the *biblical foundations* of their faith in the form of specific Bible verses, memorized, stored, and ready for use when one's faith was called to account.[77]

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[75] For an overview of this perspective, including a call to focus on shoring up the primary language of faith over secondary languages of human rights, international law, and the like, see my contribution in Lowell Ewert, Mary Lou Klassen, and W. Derek Suderman, "Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness: Human Rights and Mennonite Faith in the Context of Peacebuilding Practice" in Fernando Enns, Nina Schroder-van 't Schip, and Andrés Pacheco-Lozano, eds., *A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Global Mennonite Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Nonviolence* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 70–86. The metaphor of leaves "for the healing of the nations" adopts the phrase from Revelation, which in turn was drawn from Ezekiel (Rev 22:2; Ezek 47:12).

[76] *Biblicist* here should not be mistaken for *fundamentalist* or *inerrantist*, which reflect a profoundly different perspective and emerged significantly later.

[77] Snyder, "General Introduction," xv; italics added.

Far from simplistic or naive, the *Concordance* of 1540 reflects as great, if not greater, sophistication than many contemporary readings, as well as a broader, richer, and more varied conception of God than many (perhaps most) contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites would espouse.

Reconsidering Contextual Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics Today

Though we often seek to make universal claims, biblical hermeneutics is stubbornly contextual. The *Concordance* discussed here clearly emerged from a situation of persecution and struggle; like the psalmist, these early Anabaptists viscerally identified with being persecuted, and so could resonate with appealing to God as a righteous, powerful judge who cared for their plight. Further, living in such a polemical and highly charged apologetic situation, they focused on God's faithfulness and believed that the Lord would eventually set things right. So it comes as little surprise that topics like "Judgment," "Reward of the Pious," "Punishment of the Godless," and even "False Prophets and the Antichrist" figure prominently.

Returning to the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars discussed above in light of the *Concordance*, several observations stand out. First, these scholars often present binary depictions of God, repeatedly centered on the question of violence. As Seibert states most succinctly, "God either is or is not merciful."[78] However, the very understandings that these contemporary scholars see as "mutually exclusive" possibilities appear repeatedly in the Bible,[79] Old Testament and New, as well as in the *Concordance* just described. God is both merciful and committed to stand in judgment as divine king; the One who takes on "Judgment" and even "Vengeance" is the same that "Rewards the Pious." Where our tendency may be to insist on a theologically or philosophically tidy either/or, these historical Anabaptists reaffirmed the Bible's contextual both/and. Playing these possibilities off against one another represents a false dichotomy.

Second, some contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars further conflate this binary choice with the ethical assumption, at times seemingly deterministic in nature, that a theological understanding that links God to violence inevitably leads to the Christian use and justification of the same. As Weaver writes:

> Since both violent and nonviolence-shaped theology confess the name of Jesus Christ, this situation might appear to pose a dilemma. At the least it poses a choice among theologies. One option is to continue to espouse theology from within the time-honored, multifaceted tradition that is comfortable with the idea that God

[78] Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 173.

[79] Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 172.

> exercises violence *and with the exercise of violence by Christians in the name of God*. . . . The other option rejects violent images of God, and displays the victory of God through resurrection—the restoration of life—rather than through violence and the taking of life.[80]

In light of the *Concordance*, Weaver's statement reflects several problematic assumptions and assertions that undergird his approach. For instance, he suggests that folks are either "comfortable" with the link between God and violence or should "reject violent images of God." In doing so, he implies that our discomfort with certain biblical portrayals of God provides a warrant to dismiss them; in short, faced with such discomfort, our task is to modify our understanding of God into something more palatable. While the depiction of God in Nahum and most prophetic material prompts profound discomfort, this provocation reflects its purpose. Repeated New Testament appeals to Isaiah by New Testament writers and Jesus himself stand in stark contrast to approaches that reject its basic understanding of God.

Weaver's further assertion that any traditional link of God to violence results in "the exercise of violence by Christians" is simply inaccurate, and effectively inverts both a traditional Anabaptist perspective and a common biblical view. As the previous discussion noted, early Anabaptists did not shy away from God's role in judgment and even vengeance but saw it as essential; it was this conviction, at least in part, that undergirded their own commitment to nonviolent discipleship. Biblically speaking, Jesus's teaching on nonviolence reflects a basic continuity with and grounding in the logic of lament in the Psalms on one hand, where vengeful feelings are handed over to God rather than acted upon, and in the theology of Isaiah on the other, where appeals for trust in the Lord and the assertion of divine sovereignty pushes against military armament or making foreign alliances. Far from peripheral, superseded, or displaced in the New Testament, Isaiah and the Psalms are the two books of the Old Testament most commonly cited and alluded to by New Testament writers.

Third, where some contemporary scholars rightly highlight the kingdom of God as central to the gospel message and Jesus's teaching, they often do not mention or even recognize the intimate connection between divine kingship and God's role as judge in the Bible and reiterated in the *Concordance*. For instance, Weaver's passionate concluding appeal to participate in the "reign of God" overlooks this vital connection:

> Narrative Christus Victor, the nonviolent atonement image developed in this book, is intrinsically ethics-oriented. It depicts the work of Christ in a way that invites and requires Christians to be

[80] Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 149; italics added.

> followers of Jesus. . . . Narrative Christus Victor undergirds being a follower of Jesus, which means participating in Jesus' mission of making the reign of God visible in the world that does not yet acknowledge the reign of God.[81]

I strongly agree with Weaver's depiction of the importance of following Jesus, its implications for nonviolent discipleship, the central importance of ethics, and the depiction of the church's role in "making the reign of God visible." I disagree, however, with his additional step of extending this "nonviolent ethic" to insist on *God's* nonviolence and then largely sidelining the possibility of divine judgment. Doing so both overlooks a key element of God's role as king and proves inconsistent with the traditional Anabaptist basis for nonviolence.

Along similar lines, Seibert is forced to contend with Jesus's judgment parables in his attempt to use the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as a "Christocentric key" to distinguish between the "textual God" and the "actual God." To insulate God from judgment and violence, Seibert insists on the eschatological nature of these stories, concluding that "it is still possible to maintain that the God Jesus reveals acts nonviolently in historical time and is, therefore, fundamentally nonviolent even in the face of Jesus' teachings about eschatological judgment."[82]

Clearly uncomfortable with the possibility of divine judgment, here too Seibert does not adequately reckon with the implications of Jesus's repeated reference to the "kingdom of God" in light of the connection between identifying God as king, the divine role as judge, and the resulting link to "vengeance" in Old Testament and New. Indeed, it is striking that many if not most of the passages listed in the *Concordance* entry on "Vengeance" reflect material that Seibert would presumably dismiss as a theological misconstrual of God's character,[83] including "disturbing" images of God in the Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Romans, and Revelation. Rather than an embarrassing feature to be sidelined as

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[81] Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 324.

[82] Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 254.

[83] For a concise description of Seibert's approach on this issue see the section titled "To What Extent Should We Adopt Israel's Theological Worldview as Our Own?" and especially his discussion regarding the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem so prominent for prophetic material (Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 162–66). While he strongly rejects various prominent biblical perspectives as "culturally conditioned interpretations of God's involvement" (166), Seibert does not acknowledge the same challenge in contemporary theological perspectives; repeated rhetorical appeals to contemporary North American understandings place these as seemingly unquestioned norms ("few would accept," "we think differently," "we all reject some of Israel's theological worldview assumptions," and so on; 164). Seibert's appeal to common contemporary perspectives as a norm proves particularly striking given his appeal for a nonviolent understanding of God that itself represents a small minority claim within the contemporary Christian tradition.

happening outside of "historical time," Jesus's judgment parables reflect this same basic conviction. Similarly, far from rejecting this understanding, the *Concordance* underscores the link between God's kingdom and divine judgment that proves foundational for Anabaptist hermeneutics as well.

Fourth, whereas scholarly appeals to historical Anabaptism suggest a basic continuity with this theological tradition, the move to assert (or create) a nonviolent understanding of God represents a recent theological innovation within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that proves inconsistent and incompatible with what came before. For instance, Boyd repeatedly points to historical Anabaptism as a precedent for his approach. He emphasizes the Christocentric Anabaptist approach that led to "an unparalleled emphasis on the call to obey his teachings and to follow his example."[84] Boyd further ties this to the Anabaptists' "narrative approach to Scripture" and argues that their "Christocentric hermeneutic tended to be more intensely, and more consistently, crucicentric than the hermeneutic of the Reformers and the previous ecclesial tradition."[85] Boyd also underscores how Jesus's death was seen not only as salvific in this tradition but participatory:

> The primary reason they [i.e. Anabaptists] refused to engage in violence, even in self-defense, was precisely because they understood Jesus's cruciform way of defeating the powers to be something they were not only called to benefit from but also to participate in. In short, their understanding of the atonement was both "objective" and "subjective."[86]

Here Boyd helpfully highlights the Anabaptist willingness and commitment to "take up the cross" and so participate in the suffering of Christ, a dedication to faithful discipleship even when facing persecution. However, his subsequent move to insist on the nonviolence of God does not compute in the Anabaptists' own *Concordance*. As we have seen, the call to "Rebirth" and "Discipleship" for Christians does not eliminate "Vengeance" and "Judgment," though the latter are clearly reserved for God.

In short, Boyd quotes and then seems to extend beyond historian Walter Klaassen's suggestion that the Anabaptists' "chief hermeneutical principle is Jesus, his life, words, and death. Whatever is in conflict with this is not God's Word for the church."[87] Boyd converts this hermeneutical

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[84] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 123.

[85] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 255.

[86] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 254–55.

[87] Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 125.

perspective—that is, a lens for reading the Bible and the role of the church as a discipling body—into an abstract philosophical principle that he then employs as a warrant to eliminate biblical depictions of God as a warrior. This is decidedly *not* what historical Anabaptists did. In short, although the ethical commitment to nonviolence remains, Boyd's perspective does not reflect continuity with, so much as a profound departure from, the logic of this theological tradition.

While early Anabaptists were willing to "take up the cross," identifying with and even seeing themselves as participating in Jesus's suffering, their hope lay in the faith that God would eventually set things right. Given the impressive scope of Boyd's conversation partners and his consistent appeal to Anabaptist precedents, it is also striking that he does not engage several key Anabaptist-Mennonite Bible scholars that have written directly on the topic more in line with this traditional Anabaptist orientation, who have not insisted on God's nonviolence but rather consistently distinguished between divine and human roles with respect to warfare and violence.[88]

The preceding discussion has outlined four major ways in which some contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars differ substantially from the hermeneutics reflected in the *Concordance*, even as they claim continuity with this tradition. They tend to 1) adopt binary depictions of God, centered on the issue of violence; 2) assert that the link between God and violence, clearly reflected in both the biblical material and the early *Concordance*, necessarily leads to human violence; 3) portray the kingdom of God as central, without noting this motif's intimate connection to God's role as judge, and thereby minimize or even explicitly reject the possibility of divine judgment; and 4) claim that their insistence on God's nonviolence reflects a basic continuity with historical Anabaptism tradition, even suggesting that this represents the genius or kernel of the tradition, whereas this claim actually represents a departure from a historical Anabaptist perspective.

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[88] For instance, Boyd does not mention Millard C. Lind's classic work *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), which suggests that the Exodus portrayal of the Lord as a warrior functions to provide a means for the people *not* to engage in warfare. Similarly, Boyd does not cite the work of Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, who repeatedly demonstrated how New Testament writers built on and transformed, but did not reject, the divine warrior motif. Among other works, see "Waging Peace: Putting on the Armor of God" in *Ephesians* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), 290–316; *Put on the Armour of God: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians*, JSNT Supp. 140 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); and *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). While Ben Ollenburger's article on Anabaptist hermeneutics is cited (Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 127), his book-length treatise on the understanding of divine kingship in the Psalms and Isaiah that gives rise to "Yahweh's exclusive prerogative" is not. See Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, The City of the Great King: A Theological Study of the Jerusalem Cult*, JSOT Supp. 41 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987).

To conclude this discussion of contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite tendencies in light of the *Concordance*, I will briefly engage the *Nonviolent Word*, a recent book co-written by J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Mast, which illustrates all four of these contemporary tendencies.[89] The introduction asserts:

> At least three characteristics of this living and active Word of God shape Anabaptist understandings of the Bible—and the Bible's witness to "anyone who has ears to hear" of the Word made flesh—Jesus of Nazareth. The Word creates, divides, and reconciles.[90]

In the following discussion Weaver and Mast describe various "threads" in the Bible, in church history, and in theology that illustrate these three motifs, all of which are filtered through their Christocentric lens.[91] From this basis they immediately provide an extended binary description of the divine centered on the issue of violence, where "the Word of God is above all else a living and loving word—a peaceable word."[92] Their effort to actively insulate God from any connection to violence goes over familiar ground described above, including the claim that: "Although this peaceable Word judges and discerns and is thus often greeted with violence, it is a mistake to attribute violence itself to the Word of God."[93] And finally: "The Word of God deals with the forces of evil and violence through a vengeance of consuming judgment—allowing the sword to destroy the sword, armies to wipe out armies, and conquest to overthrow conquest."[94]

Drawing explicitly from Boyd, Weaver and Mast portray God as an Aikido master who orchestrates things by turning their own judgment on themselves.[95] Despite repeated references to the "reign of God,"[96] there is no real *divine* judgment or vengeance since God is not the active agent; rather, a kind of natural consequence occurs that God facilitates. Such a suggestion would have puzzled biblical writers and early Anabaptists

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[89] J. Denny Weaver and Gerald J. Mast, *Nonviolent Word: Anabaptism, the Bible, and the Grain of the Universe* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020).

[90] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 5.

[91] Weaver and Mast, 5–11. Their description of "giving our lives over to the Word of God" succinctly underscores this Christocentric focus. "From this standpoint, the whole point of reading and studying and discussing the Bible is to become acquainted with the birth, life, ministry, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ—the one who cares for us and accepts our burdens." Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 10–11.

[92] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 11.

[93] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 11.

[94] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 11.

[95] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 11.

[96] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 78–79, 135, etc.

alike—and, I might add, Jesus the "Jewish rabbi" himself, who was intimately familiar with and drew extensively on the prophetic tradition.[97]

From this basis the authors move on to several chapters that describe the "nonviolent Word" expressed in Jesus's life, the "defenseless church," and "the inner experiences and social practices of faithful believers"[98] as reflected in the *Ausbund*, the writings of Pilgram Marpeck, and the Christology of Menno Simons. In doing so, they seek to find precedents for their perspective and depict a basic continuity with the historical Anabaptist tradition. A chapter titled "The Nonviolent Grain of the Bible" provides the pivot to move from a discussion of historical Anabaptist sources to engage in vital contemporary issues in the latter chapters ("Black and White Believers Churches in Conversation" and "Bearing Public Witness to the Gospel of Peace"). Though appreciative of their Anabaptist forebears, the authors do not seek to reproduce their hermeneutical approaches but rather to "sketch . . . a contemporary updating of an Anabaptist perspective on the story from Scripture of Jesus who made present in his life and teaching the reign of God."[99] For our purposes, this "update" is of most immediate interest.

Following brief discussions of the diversity of the Bible and the role of perspective in interpretation, Weaver and Mast return once again to the issue of God and violence. While they describe the various biblical portrayals of God as a "conversation" in which both sides should be maintained, in their view this dialogue represents a problem that Jesus resolves. The violent images of God in the Bible "reflect a dimension of how God seems to have acted to those scribes who gave us the Bible; they pose an understanding of God that conflicts with—even as it is in conversation with—the revelation of God in Jesus Christ."[100]

In contrast to the understanding of the Sermon on the Mount above, Weaver and Mast point directly to Jesus's "you have heard it said but I say" statements as reflecting a confirmation of one view of God and the repudiation of another. This binary depiction is immediately underscored by their appeal to "sixteenth-century Anabaptist writings" as a precedent

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[97] It is striking that the Old Testament prophetic tradition is largely invisible in their description of "the Word of God"; the only prophetic passage explicitly cited in the Scripture index is a passing reference to Isaiah 61, as the passage Jesus reads in the synagogue in Luke 4 (110). In the Old Testament the "word of the LORD" is most commonly associated with prophets and prophetic books (Isa 2:1; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; etc.), while the phrase "Thus says the LORD" is one of the most common ways of introducing prophetic speech, including oracles of judgment.

[98] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 12.

[99] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 67.

[100] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 72.

for "dealing with *contradictions* resolved by the narrative of Jesus."[101] In short:

> The violent texts are necessary; without them we would not see the conversation. Seeing that the conversation exists and that Jesus resolves the contradiction adds to the significance of Jesus. If the violent elements of the story in the Old Testament were suppressed, that element of the significance of Jesus would be missing.[102]

In effect, in their view Jesus collapses the earlier conversation about God into a contradiction between a right and wrong way of seeing the divine, such that "Old Testament issues" are resolved through a focus on Jesus's life, teaching, death, and resurrection. While Weaver and Mast note differences among the Gospel accounts, they attribute these to "the context of their proclamation."[103] In short, diversity in the Old Testament represents a problem that needs to be resolved, whereas differences among the Gospels do not; and New Testament passages about judgment, including those referenced in the *Concordance* article on "Vengeance," are notably absent.

There are two primary, concrete effects of Weaver and Mast's "update" of Anabaptist hermeneutics that uncover the basic concerns for their perspective. First, this clarification asserts the nonviolence of God and therefore eliminates God's connection to judgment, which is again portrayed as a self-executing consequence of evil and violence turning in on itself.[104] Whereas Weaver and Mast are certainly correct to identify "the early Anabaptist impulse of appealing to the story of Jesus as norm or beginning point,"[105] they shift this from being an appeal to discipleship and following after Jesus as a guide to life to a theoretical abstraction of God's nonviolence, including a basic rejection of divine judgment.

Second, they move beyond asserting God's nonviolence to a highly abstract identification of nonviolence as "the grain of the universe" that reflects "the way the world works when responsive to its own source and life."[106] By the end of the book this "grain" has been equated with

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[101] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 73; italics added.

[102] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 74.

[103] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 69.

[104] They support this claim in part by highlighting a minority view in the Psalms: "Following the theological vision of Psalms 7 and 9, we suggest that texts that celebrate God's vengeance or that declare destruction as divine punishment can be interpreted as statements of the way violence breeds violence, and as declarations of what happens when God's way is rejected. . . . This claim is the other side of saying that the way of the God revealed in Jesus is to reject violence." Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 75.

[105] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 76.

[106] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 79.

"nonviolent love," which even leads to speculation that quantum theory may scientifically "vindicate" their description of the nonviolent Word of God.[107] Weaver and Mast thus move beyond the theological assertion of divine nonviolence reflected in Weaver's earlier work to the idea that the "nonviolent word" represents a fundamental cosmic principle. In short, in their depiction of contemporary Anabaptism, biblical hermeneutics has taken a back seat to a highly theoretical search for philosophical and even scientific coherence centered on nonviolence as a fundamental cosmic principle.

In sum, Weaver and Mast's *Nonviolent Word* illustrates the four tendencies outlined above that stand at odds with the hermeneutical approach reflected in the early *Concordance*. Their book represents less of an update than a rejection of "the logic and rationale that . . . reveals the theological and spiritual heart of Anabaptism: how these Anabaptists thought and spoke about God, redemption in Christ, and the life of a disciple in the Body of Christ."[108] Seen in light of the *Concordance*, the contradiction here lies not between Jesus and an Old Testament depiction of God, as Weaver and Mast suggest, but between their highly theoretical, abstract philosophical/theological perspective and the historical Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition they claim to build upon. While they frequently employ the analogy of a biblical conversation, in the end they shut down such discussion in favor of their binary view in order to insulate God from violence. As a result, Weaver and Mast transform the emphasis on divine agency and judgment so prominent in the *Concordance* into a biblical thread, and ultimately a mistaken theological misunderstanding that Jesus contradicts and corrects.

Where the Christocentrism of early Anabaptists reflected a *hermeneutical* approach focused on their commitment to discipleship and consequent insistence on Jesus as the ethical norm to be emulated, this did not fundamentally contradict or undermine their understanding of God or an active divine role in judgment. In contrast, the contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars described above have moved beyond this ethical frame to seek theological, philosophical, and even scientific coherence grounded in appeals to the fundamental nonviolence of God, a perspective at odds with that found in both Scripture and the *Concordance*.

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[107] Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 134–38. As they state: "We are not scientists but we view with curiosity and interest many of the emerging accounts of the basic structures of the physical universe as described in quantum theory. We believe that some of these discoveries *vindicate the picture we have painted* of the noncoercive yet reconciling actions of the Word of God." Weaver and Mast, *Nonviolent Word*, 130; italics added.

[108] Snyder, "General Introduction," xvii.

Questions for Anabaptist-Mennonites in the North American Context

Biblical interpretation inevitably takes place in, is informed by, and seeks to address particular contextual circumstances. So it is understandable that a womanist scholar from the United States may reject the perspective of a book like Nahum (Gafney), while a male scholar from the DRC sees in the same material profoundly "good news" for his community of faith (Wenyi). I am not offended by, nor do I seek to disparage, either perspective; indeed, I value and am inspired by both.

At the same time, our recognition of the inevitably contextual nature of biblical hermeneutics should prompt some soul searching and raise questions of our own. What is it about the context of Anabaptist-Mennonite churches and scholars in North America that makes us so deeply uncomfortable with divine judgment and even vengeance? Why are we drawn to propose a universal theory, a fix, that could resolve the issue once and for all? Perhaps most important, what gives us the confidence that our situation and location provide the basis to adjudicate and depict "God as God really is," to determine what the divine can or cannot do?[109]

While downplaying the biblical link between God and violence may reflect an important interpretive move in the current context of the United States, it becomes problematic to assert divine nonviolence as a universal claim that eliminates other biblical understandings or possibilities. In contrast, the historical Anabaptist insistence, on the one hand, that vengeance belongs to God alone, and, on the other, that the role of the Christian lies not in exercising such judgment but rather in nonviolent discipleship, unfortunately seems as relevant, significant, and challenging in the twenty-first-century US as in sixteenth-century Europe.[110]

The Bible consists of a rich, complex, and interrelated ecosystem. Sidelining, delegitimating, or ignoring large swaths of biblical material or key understandings of God threaten to destroy it. By seeking criteria to functionally eliminate biblical perspectives that seem to stand in the way

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[109] In his quest to describe the divine character, Seibert repeatedly uses this phrase to describe his ultimate goal. As he states: "By uncritically accepting problematic portrayals of God as reflective of God's true nature, these solutions further complicate efforts to see *God as God really is*. If we hope to think rightly about God, we need to find a more constructive way of dealing with disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament that goes beyond just trying to defend it." Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 88; italics added.

[110] As this paper moves toward publication, a major candidate for president of the United States continues to employ Christian, apocalyptic, and even quasi-messianic language to promise "vengeance" and "retribution" as a major plank of his political platform. While the language is particularly drastic in this case, as a Canadian I have long been disturbed by frequent appeals to and the perpetual misuse of the Christian tradition during election cycles in our neighbor to the south. I believe that paying greater attention to the historical Anabaptist tradition could provide a significant resource for navigating such a context.

of resolving crises in the moment, we may well sleepwalk into a profound hermeneutical and theological crisis in the medium to long term. As if we were clear-cutting a forest, we are in danger of undermining this rich ecosystem and replacing it with a biblical and theological monoculture incapable of withstanding future shocks to the system.

Underscoring the contextual interpretation of Nahum, Wenyi says it well:

> Each reader [and I might add, interpreting community] will react to this book [Nahum] based on her conditions of life. Some fortunate readers can have the ability to imagine the world beyond revenge. But as for the readers still living in the "whirlwind of violence"—as do most survivors of violence in the DRC—Nahum is probably the best place to be.[111]

I certainly count myself among the "fortunate readers" to whom Wenyi refers. But I refuse to say that Nahum cannot be "good news" for anyone in any circumstance. While I do not defend Nahum's theology or view of God, I do seek to understand and empathize with how this has been and could continue to be seen as "gospel" in various contexts.

Contextual hermeneutics allows for the potential contribution of any part of Scripture, including those we find profoundly uncomfortable or even offensive, in a particular moment or addressing a specific situation.[112] In the end, the aversion of North American Anabaptist-Mennonites to such material may say as much about our social and economic location as anything else. When we cannot see the good news in such material it is worth attending to fellow Christians who could, whether these be sixteenth-century Anabaptists or contemporary brothers and sisters experiencing horrific violence and trauma today.

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[111] Wenyi, *Piles of Slain*, 178-79. He goes on to say: "Thus, inviting Congolese survivors of violence to use the unpalatable message of Nahum as a means to help them stay for a moment in their vengeful sentiments is a necessary path toward reconciliation. . . . If anything then, reading Nahum can help the wounded Congolese acknowledge the danger of rushing to the embrace of the enemy while their hearts are still hard with anger and undealt-with feelings of revenge. Rather, with honesty—through the poetry of vengeance and rage—they can voice their rage and desire for vengeance in the presence of God." Wenyi, *Piles of Slain*, 179.

[112] Waldemar Janzen uses a sports analogy to describe biblical hermeneutics in a similar way. Even though a basketball team has stronger and weaker players, it is possible for any team member to score a crucial basket in a particular moment. In a similar way, Janzen suggests that while certain biblical voices and books carry more weight than others, it is possible for a relatively minor "player" to have a crucial word for a given context. To build on his analogy, deferring to a stronger player does not provide the basis for kicking another one off the court, much less the team. See Janzen, "Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation," 17–20.

Although Wenyi's book contrasts sharply with how "Anabaptist hermeneutics" or "Christocentric approaches" are often described in our day, his perspective resonates strongly with that found in the *Concordance*. In the historical Anabaptist tradition, following Christ provided not a means to functionally eliminate biblical material, but rather a guide for interpreting it. As a perpetual minority perspective within the broader Christian movement, contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites should be particularly attuned to the importance of maintaining a diversity of perspectives.

V. Conclusion: Reading Biblical Prophets as a People of Peace

It is vital to tread cautiously with Nahum and other prophetic material. By being particularly attuned to patriarchy and its attendant violence against women, Wilda Gafney provides a crucial cautionary perspective: "Generations of white, male, mainstream or 'malestream' scholarship has [*sic*] been untroubled by the book of Nahum or has minimized it by distancing metaphorical and rhetorical violence from actual violence."[113]

At the same time, it is also important to recognize that Nahum and other prophetic material has been heard as good news in various contexts over time, including by Anabaptists in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and by some Congolese Christians today. As Gafney suggest, the key lies in recognizing the fundamental importance of "Contextual Hermeneutics,"[114] and her conclusion that "Nahum's God is not my God" makes good sense. At the same time, as our discussion of the *Concordance* and the work of Wenyi demonstrate, it is both problematic and historically inaccurate to suggest that Nahum has not been or could not be good news to anyone at any time. In short, it is one thing to sideline Nahum as counterproductive temporarily or contextually; it is quite another to reject it as either fundamentally theologically mistaken or universally unusable.[115]

As contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites we may be tempted to begin with an assertion of God's non-violence, and then reverse engineer our biblical interpretation to arrive at or demonstrate this principle. Where some scholars believe that a contemporary ethic of nonviolence must be

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[113] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 62.

[114] Gafney, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 61–65.

[115] Following an oral presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference at Eastern Mennonite University in June 2023, the first person to respond was a church leader from South Africa who said that the perspective of a strong God who cared about their plight was key for the church to survive Apartheid. Similarly, Anabaptist-Mennonite church leaders from India commented on how directly relevant this topic was for them in their current context, as they face opposition and even violent persecution under a nationalist Hindu government.

grounded in the nonviolence of God and portray this view as standing in continuity with the historical Anabaptist tradition, such a perspective represents an innovation of the last several decades. I suspect that the social location of many North American Anabaptist-Mennonites may explain this orientation, since by and large we do not face systemic persecution but more closely resemble the "fortunate readers" Wenyi describes.

In contrast, early Anabaptists emerged at a conviction of ethical nonviolence through an interpretive approach that prioritized Christian discipleship while insisting on God's sovereign prerogative to exercise judgment in defense of the defenseless. For people facing seemingly never-ending violence and systematic oppression, a conception of God as the sovereign king and judge who sees, has compassion on, and sides with those trampled underfoot, can certainly be good news—whether in Europe in the sixteenth century or the DRC in the twenty-first.

I believe we should follow the lead of our Anabaptist predecessors by committing ourselves to persistent biblical study and engagement, holding fast to all of Scripture while seeking its implications and guidance in our own time and place. Like them we should dedicate ourselves to following Jesus in life, including reading the Bible he read—what to us is the Old Testament. And like most of the early Anabaptists, we should commit ourselves to nonviolence as a key implication of discipleship, even as we also recognize God's continuing role as divine king and therefore judge. Finally, we should hesitate to universally reject certain passages or biblical concepts as fundamentally flawed, instead recognizing that any part of Scripture may hold a divine word for faithful disciples in a specific context with respect to a certain issue.

In the end, rather than employing a "Christocentric approach" to sideline certain biblical understandings to cultivate a theological monoculture, I contend that an Anabaptist-Mennonite reading of the Prophets should continue to seek the good news of this material, aware of its many potential pitfalls.[116] Rather than a problem to overcome, the diversity of the Bible, including its varying portrayals of God, provides a vital means to break out of our myopic tendency to see other perspectives as contextually derived but hold our own as universally valid.

[116] In this paper I seek to articulate a specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite approach to biblical prophets in light of the historic Anabaptist tradition, which does not deny or denigrate the contributions of excellent scholars emerging from other traditions and perspectives that also constitute important dialogue partners.