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‘לביא’ and ‘לבוא’ in Nahum 2:12: A study of translation technique

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Author:
Philip S. Chia[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

[2]Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Philip Chia,
pchia275@students.sbts.edu

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This article examines the Hebrew term ‘לביא’ in Nahum 2:12 as a case study in the interplay between language, textual transmission and theological interpretation in ancient religious traditions. The verse presents a notable textual problem, as major witnesses diverge significantly in their treatment of the term. While the Masoretic text reads ‘לביא’ as ‘lioness’, several ancient versions – including the Septuagint, Vulgate and Peshitta – appear to reflect a different underlying sense, rendering the term in a verbal form meaning ‘לבוא’ or ‘to enter’. The Targum further complicates the picture by paraphrasing the verse entirely. Addressing these discrepancies, this article employs a causal model for translation studies to reassess the meaning of ‘לביא’ and ‘לבוא’ in Nahum 2:12. It analyses the available manuscript evidence, explores the likelihood of scribal errors and shifts in transmission and evaluates the translational choices made in early versions. In addition, the study situates the term within its immediate literary context and broader linguistic framework.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: By integrating these lines of inquiry, the article aims to clarify the most plausible interpretation of ‘לביא’ and ‘לבוא’ to contribute to a deeper understanding of how textual variation shapes exegetical and theological conclusions.

Keywords: Nahum; translation technique; LXX; Philology; לביא; לבוא.

Introduction

The interpretation of the Hebrew term ‘לביא’ in Nahum 2:12 presents a striking example of the complex interplay between language, textual transmission and theological reflection in ancient scriptural traditions. This verse is particularly challenging due to the wide divergence among its textual witnesses. The Masoretic text preserves the reading ‘לביא’, understood as ‘lioness’, while the Septuagint (LXX), Vulgate and Peshitta appear to translate differently, rendering the term in a way that suggests a verbal sense such as ‘לבוא’ or ‘to enter’. The Targum paraphrases the verse entirely. Such variation not only complicates lexical interpretation, but also raises broader questions regarding the processes of transmission, translation and exegetical adaptation.

From a translation perspective, the Hebrew word ‘לביא’ calls for a thoughtful reexamination of how its translator interacted with the original Hebrew text of Nahum. Due to the word’s range of meanings, it is unclear whether the translator aimed for a precise lexical match with the source or followed a more interpretative strategy. Thus, this study treats ‘לביא’ not simply as isolated lexical issues but as signs of deeper hermeneutical processes, revealing how ancient translators actively helped shape the meaning of the biblical text within their own intellectual and cultural contexts.

A causal model for translation studies

This study adopts the causal model advanced by Andrew Chesterman as its principal methodological framework. In his influential essay, ‘A Causal Model for Translation Studies’, Chesterman articulates an integrative approach that brings together three distinct methodological traditions: comparative, process-oriented and contextual approaches (Chesterman 2000:15–27). The comparative approach examines formal and functional correspondences between source and target texts; the process-oriented approach explores the cognitive dynamics that inform translational decision-making; and the contextual approach situates translation within its wider cultural, historical and social milieu. While each approach offers particular analytical strengths, each also presents limitations when employed in isolation. Chesterman’s model seeks to

preserve the advantages of all three while addressing their respective shortcomings by situating them within a unified causal framework, linking antecedent factors – such as translator competence, source text accessibility and theological orientation – to translation outcomes and their subsequent effects, including reception, influence and discursive impact.

The analytical procedure begins with an examination of translational effects – namely the observable linguistic features and patterns that differentiate the translated text from its source. These effects function as empirical data from which preliminary hypotheses may be generated, providing a necessary foundation for systematic descriptive analysis. This effect-oriented point of departure distinguishes the causal model from strictly source-oriented approaches, which tend to prioritise questions of fidelity and deviation, as well as from reception-oriented approaches, which frequently subordinate textual detail to reader response. Following the formulation of hypotheses, the methodology requires the identification of both a source text and its corresponding translation to enable structured, comparative analysis. In the present study, the Masoretic Hebrew version of the Book of Nahum is treated as the source text, while the LXX serves as the translated text under examination (Chesterman 2000:15–27).

A terminological distinction warrants explicit clarification at this point. Andrew Chesterman employs the term 'translation profile' to denote the constellation of linguistic features under examination – typically recurring patterns that characterise a given translation. By contrast, the present study follows Eric J. Tully in preferring the designation 'translated text' at the initial stage of analysis (Tully 2015:33). For Tully (2015), the 'translated text' refers to the linguistic artifact in its unprocessed, pre-interpretive form, serving as the primary object of investigation prior to any synthetic reconstruction. Within this framework, the term 'profile' is more appropriately reserved for the outcome of analysis rather than its point of departure. Specifically, a profile designates the reconstructed account of the translator's methods, tendencies and overarching strategies – an explanatory model derived from the systematic observation of the translated text. Whereas Chesterman subsumes these concepts under a single rubric, the present study maintains a clear analytical distinction: the translated text constitutes the object of inquiry, while the translation profile represents the product of that inquiry. Accordingly, the emphasis at this stage rests firmly on the translated text as a linguistic artifact subject to detailed and systematic examination.

The comparative stage advances through the analysis of correspondences between segments of the source and target texts. These segment pairs need not be equivalent in rank or scope; rather, they function as translational counterparts within the analytical framework. As observed by J.C. Catford, such correspondences frequently entail shifts in structure or form across multiple linguistic levels, including syntax, lexis and morphology (Catford 1965:73). For instance, a multi-word idiom in the source text may be rendered by a single lexical item in the target, while a condensed metaphor may be expanded into a full clause or complex sentence. Likewise, a passive construction in the source may be reformulated as an active construction in the target or a nominal phrase recast as a verbal clause. These shifts extend beyond mere stylistic variation and often bear significant interpretive and theological implications. The systematic identification and classification of such translational shifts within the translated text of the Book of Nahum – with particular attention to the rendering 'τῆς φυγῆς' in Nahum 3:9 – constitute the central descriptive task of the present study. The patterns observed in the translated text will, in turn, provide the empirical basis for subsequent claims concerning the nature and dynamics of the translation process.

Andrew Chesterman includes the translator's state of knowledge, disposition and self-perception within the analytical phase concerned with the translation act (Chesterman 2000:15–27). These factors, however, remain theoretical constructs intended to model the underlying characteristics that inform translational decisions. In the case of an ancient translation, such psychological or affective dimensions are not directly recoverable. What can be accessed, by contrast, are the translator's norms – recurring textual patterns that reflect both translational behaviour and the values shaping those choices. Following the foundational work of Gideon Toury, norms may be understood as internalised, regulative principles that mediate between the abstract system of linguistic possibilities and the concrete decisions made by the translator. Toury designates the norms operative during the production phase as 'operational norms', insofar as they govern the translator's actual choices throughout the process, including segmentation, omission, addition and structural reconfiguration (Toury 2012:87).

Translator behaviour may be situated along a continuum of influence, extending from absolute rules – understood as binding and inviolable constraints – at one extreme, to individual idiosyncrasies or personal preferences at the other. Norms occupy an intermediate position within this spectrum and may be characterised as either relatively strong (more constraining and rule-like) or relatively weak (more permissive and closer to individual variation) (Toury 2012:54). Within the context of the LXX's rendering of the Book of Nahum, operational norms may be reflected in consistent preferences for particular lexical correspondences, recurrent patterns of syntactic restructuring or systematic strategies for handling metaphor, divine epithets and prophetic imagery. The identification of such norms proceeds inductively through the comparative analysis of source–target segment pairs. Once established, these norms provide a principled basis for reconstructing the translator's habitual decision-making patterns, without reliance on otherwise inaccessible psychological states.

The subsequent analytical stage addresses what Andrew Chesterman designates as the *translation event*. At this

juncture, the operational norms identified in the preceding phase provide the basis for reconstructing the conditions that shaped the translation act. Central to this stage is an examination of translation policy, which encompasses two closely related dimensions: the selection of source text(s) and the degree of translational directness. With regard to source text selection, key questions concern the specific manuscript tradition or textual witness underlying the translation. Did the translator rely on a proto-Masoretic form of the Book of Nahum, or does the Vorlage reflect an alternative textual lineage? In the case of the LXX's Minor Prophets, the relationship between the Syriac rendering and its Hebrew base remains a matter of ongoing scholarly debate, necessitating close attention to variant readings and their broader interpretive implications (Chesterman 2000:15–27).

The final stage of the causal model situates the preceding findings within a broader socio-cultural framework, thereby accounting for the external forces that shape translational decision-making. As emphasised by Tully (2015:36), these influences are among the most fundamental, yet often the least explicit, determinants of the translation process. At this level, the analysis moves beyond textual and cognitive considerations to engage the wider historical, religious and cultural dynamics that condition the translator's work. In the case of the LXX's rendering of the Book of Nahum, such factors may include the liturgical and theological needs of the receiving community, inherited hermeneutical traditions from earlier Jewish and Hellenistic contexts, the political and religious environment of late antique Mesopotamia and the broader scribal culture within which the translation was produced.

This stage also encompasses questions of institutional and ideological patronage: Who commissioned or authorised the translation, and for what purpose it was intended – whether for liturgical use, scholarly inquiry, polemical engagement or pastoral instruction. It further considers how the translator negotiated the tension between fidelity to the sacred source text and intelligibility for the target audience. Although such macro-level influences are rarely explicit within the translated text itself, they nonetheless exert a significant, if often implicit, impact on micro-level decisions, including lexical selection and syntactic configuration. By integrating insights from earlier stages – analysis of the translated text, identification of operational norms and reconstruction of the translation event – within a comprehensive socio-cultural framework, the causal model fulfils its aim of offering a holistic account of translation as a simultaneously linguistic, cognitive and cultural phenomenon. Box 1 summarises the stages of this investigation.

Discussion

Translated text

This research uses the Hebrew text as its source text and other ancient translations (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia [BHS] 2000; Cathcart & Gordon 1989; ed. Peshitta Institute Leiden 1980:58–59; eds. Rahlfs & Hanhart 2006; eds. Weber & Gryson 2007:1453).

Translation act

Table 1 indicates that the translation technique employed by the Targum is best characterised as an instance of dynamic equivalence; in that it prioritises the communicative impact of the message upon the target audience. Rather than adhering strictly to the formal features of the source text, this approach seeks to render meaning in a manner that is both natural and intelligible within the linguistic and cultural framework of the receptor audience. Such a strategy frequently entails processes of rephrasing, structural reconfiguration, and, where necessary, expansion, in order to convey the intended sense with clarity and effectiveness.

The Septuagint (LXX), Peshitta and Vulgate generally preserve a more literal rendering of the Hebrew text in this passage. Their translations closely follow the structure and imagery of the source text with relatively little interpretive expansion. A notable point of divergence, however, concerns the Hebrew term 'לביא'. Rather than interpreting the word in its usual lexical sense as 'lioness', these versions appear to reflect an alternative reading associated with the verbal root meaning 'to enter' or 'to go in'. Consequently, the ancient translators render the clause in a way that emphasises movement into the den ('to enter there') instead of introducing

BOX 1: Four stages of translation.

Ancient texts
Stage 1: Translated text
Stage 2: Translation act
Stage 3: Translation event
Stage 4: Socio-cultural context

TABLE 1: Translation acts.

Ancient texts	Original text	Translation (NETS)
Masoretic text	איה מעון אריות ומרעה הוא לכפרים אשר הלך אריה לביא שם גור אריה ואין מחריד:	Where is [*the*] dwelling [*habitation*] of [*the*] lions and the pasture of young lions? Where a lion walks, lioness there, cub of lion and none [*is*] terrifier?
Targum	אן מדורי מלכיא ובית־משׁרי שׁלטוניא אתר דהוו אזלין מלכיא תמן בניהון שׁבקין הא כאריא דשׁרי על צידיה לרוחצן ולית דמניד:	Where are the dwellings of kings and the palaces of rulers, the place where kings used to go? There they left their children. Behold, like a lion lying beside his prey, with none to disturb him.
Peshitta	./ܐܪܡܐ ܕܠܐ ܡܐ ܕܠܗ ܐܪܡܐ ܕܠܗ ܐܪܡܐ ܕܠܗ ܐܪ

a separate reference to a lioness. This translational choice suggests that the versions may preserve either a different textual tradition or an exegetical attempt to smooth the syntax of the passage.

These ancient translations appear to interpret the Hebrew word 'לביא' or 'lioness' as 'לָבוֹא' or 'to enter' (cf. The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [HALOT]). This reading is likely explained by the orthographic similarity between the consonants 'י' or *yod* and 'ו' or *waw* (*vav*) in early Hebrew script, where the two letters could easily be confused in manuscript transmission. As a result, the Masoretic text preserves the reading 'לביא' [lioness], whereas the Septuagint, Peshitta and Vulgate reflect a *Vorlage* or interpretive tradition that understood the form as 'לבוא' [to enter].

Translation event

Within the framework of Chesterman's causal model, the translation event constitutes the stage at which the conditions surrounding the translational act are examined, including the identity and status of the source text and the potential influence of ancillary sources. According to this model, noticeable translational shifts may arise from three general causes. Firstly, translators may introduce shifts independently as a deliberate strategy to enhance communicative clarity or textual coherence. Such shifts manifest as consistent patterns that can be systematically classified and that reflect the translator's default decision-making preferences and overarching translational tendencies. Secondly, shifts may result from secondary influences exerted upon the translator by various external sources, including intermediary translations, parallel textual traditions or interpretive frameworks inherited from the broader scribal culture. Thirdly, certain observable shifts are not generated during the translation process itself but instead correspond to alternative readings present in the translator's source text, reflecting differing interpretations embedded within the *Vorlage* rather than any active intervention by the translator (Tully 2015:282).

Applying this model to the case at hand, this article argues that the textual variants arose from the orthographic similarity between the consonants 'י' or *yod* and 'ו' or *waw* (*vav*) in early Hebrew script. Because these two letters were graphically similar in ancient manuscript traditions, scribes or translators could easily confuse one for the other, resulting in divergent readings and subsequent translational differences.

Socio-cultural context

Within Chesterman's causal model, the final stage of analysis situates translational phenomena within their broader socio-cultural milieu, thereby accounting for the external forces – often the most fundamental yet least explicit – that shape translators' decisions (Tully 2015:36). In the case of the LXX's translation of Nahum, understanding the socio-cultural resonance of the verb 'τῆς φυγῆς' in Nahum 2:12 requires an examination of how historical and socio-cultural background may have informed the translator's lexical choices (cf. Chia 2025a:415–428; Radner 2015:34).

Nineveh, as the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, occupied a central position not only in the political administration of the empire, but also in the ideological construction of imperial power. Nineveh functioned as the symbolic and operational nucleus of a vast imperial system that extended across the ancient Near East. This system was characterised by a complex hierarchy of authority in which the Assyrian monarch exercised sovereignty over a wide array of subordinate territories (Chia 2026:1–16). From an administrative standpoint, the Neo-Assyrian Empire developed a highly organised system of governance that integrated conquered territories into a centralised imperial framework. This system comprised both directly administered provinces and indirectly controlled vassal states. Provinces were governed by Assyrian officials appointed by the king, who were responsible for taxation, military conscription and the maintenance of order. By contrast, vassal states retained a degree of local autonomy under their indigenous rulers, provided they remained loyal to Assyria, paid tribute and rendered military assistance when required (Grayson & Novotny 2012:17–19, 2014:45–47). This dual governance structure enabled the Assyrian state to exert control over a vast and heterogeneous territory while simultaneously reducing administrative burdens (Van De Mieroop 2016:236–238). Consequently, Nineveh is not just a physical place but a symbolic entity that embodies the accumulation and distribution of imperial authority (Liverani 2014:188–192; Van De Mieroop 2016:235–240).

Within the socio-cultural context of 'לביא' or 'lioness' in Nahum 2:12, the triadic imagery of the lion, lioness and lion's cub conveys a complete representation of power, stability and dynastic continuity within the symbolic 'lions' den'. In the prophetic context, the lion imagery most likely symbolises the ruling structure of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, especially its kings, royal household and successive generations. The progression from lion to lioness to cub creates the image of a complete and thriving pride living in apparent safety and dominance (cf. ed. Christensen 2009:229–231).

The 'lion' primarily symbolises the Assyrian king as conqueror and predator. In the ancient Near East, lions regularly functioned as royal metaphors for strength, domination and military superiority. Assyrian kings frequently identified themselves with lions in royal inscriptions and palace art, while lion-hunting scenes became a visual expression of kingly authority and control over chaos. The biblical prophet appropriates this same imagery ironically, transforming the imperial symbol of power into an image of coming destruction (cf. Radner 2015:62–65).

The 'lioness' broadens the metaphor beyond military aggression to include preservation, fertility and dynastic continuity. In the natural world, lionesses protect and nourish the cubs, and in prophetic symbolism, the figure may therefore represent the sustaining structures of empire,

including the royal household and mechanisms of succession. The inclusion of the lioness creates the image of a complete and secure pride, emphasising that Assyria's dominance extended not merely through a single ruler but through an enduring imperial system (Spronk 1997:86–88).

The 'lion's cub' or 'young lion' points to future generations and the continuation of imperial authority. In biblical and ancient Near Eastern symbolism, young lions often represent princes, heirs or emerging rulers who inherit the violent character and ambitions of their predecessors. The imagery therefore depicts an empire confident in its future stability, where even the vulnerable cubs dwell undisturbed. Yet the prophet's taunt exposes the irony of that confidence: The seemingly permanent dynasty has vanished under divine judgement (Robertson 1990:91–93).

Thus, this portrayal is deeply ironic theologically and rhetorically. The prophet asks, 'Where is the den of the lions?' precisely because that seemingly invulnerable order has disappeared. The empire that once provided safety for its rulers, queens and heirs has collapsed under divine judgement. The complete leonine family – lion, lioness and cub – therefore emphasises the totality of the downfall: not only the king, but the entire structure of imperial continuity has been destroyed. The imagery transforms what once symbolised permanence and fearlessness into a memory of vanished power.

In the socio-cultural context of 'לבוא' in Nahum 2:12, the passage employs the imagery of lions and their den as a metaphor for power, security and imperial dominance. Within the literary context, the 'the lions' symbolises the once-secure realm of a conquering empire, most likely Nineveh and, by extension, the Neo-Assyrian Empire (cf. Brown, Driver & Briggs 1906 [BDB] and HALOT). This lion, a common royal symbol in ancient Near Eastern iconography, represents the ruling power that formerly terrorised surrounding nations yet dwelt confidently in its own stronghold. The metaphor draws upon ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, in which kings frequently identified themselves with lions because of their strength, ferocity and dominance in battle. Assyrian royal inscriptions and palace reliefs regularly portray kings hunting lions or comparing themselves to them. The biblical author appropriates this imagery ironically: The empire that once behaved like an untouchable lion has itself become prey to destruction (Chia 2025b:1–13). Thus, the passage functions both as political satire and theological proclamation, asserting that even the mightiest earthly powers cannot escape divine judgement.

The rhetorical question, *'Where is the abode of the lions and the feeding ground for the whelps?'* functions as a prophetic taunt against Nineveh and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The lion imagery reflects the well-known ancient Near Eastern association between lions and royal power, particularly Assyrian kingship. The 'abode' or 'den' symbolises the empire's sphere of security and dominance, while the 'feeding ground' evokes a place where the empire nourished itself through conquest and plunder. The verse recalls a time when Assyria appeared invulnerable and unchallenged, only for the prophet to expose the fragility of that apparent permanence through ironic questioning (ed. Christensen 2009:229–231).

The phrase 'where the lion went to enter there' carries important literary and theological implications. In biblical imagery, entering one's den signifies rest, possession and secure habitation after predatory activity. The lion returns unhindered to its dwelling place because no rival or enemy exists to challenge its authority. Within the context of Nahum's oracle, however, this image becomes deeply ironic: The empire that once moved freely and fearlessly within its realm now faces destruction and exile. The prophet contrasts former confidence with present ruin, demonstrating that Assyria's security was ultimately temporary and subject to divine judgement (Chia 2025b:1–13). The emphasis therefore shifts from identifying another member of the pride to highlighting the lion's unrestricted movement and complete security within its territory. The imagery portrays the imperial ruler as one who could enter and inhabit his domain without fear of resistance or disturbance (cf. HALOT).

Theological Implication of the translations of 'לביא' and 'לבוא' in Nahum 2:12.

Within the context of the LXX's translation of Nahum, the Hebrew prophet's pronouncements against Nineveh – including the divine judgement articulated in Nahum 2:12 – would have been received and rendered by a translator situated within a later historical and cultural framework. The Masoretic text reading 'לביא' in Nahum 2:12 underscores the comprehensive destruction of Nineveh. By depicting the full leonine group – lion, lioness and cub – the text portrays not merely the fall of an individual ruler, but the collapse of the entire imperial order and its dynastic continuity. What once symbolised enduring strength, stability and fearlessness is transformed into an image of complete desolation and extinguished power. On the other hand, the reading 'לבוא' (Peshitta, LXX, and Vulgate) emphasises on the lion's act of entering its den. In this interpretation, entering the den symbolises rest, possession and secure habitation following predatory activity. The lion moves freely back into its dwelling place without obstruction, indicating that no rival or enemy is capable of challenging its authority. Consequently, the focus shifts away from identifying another member of the leonine family and instead highlights the lion's unrestricted access to and complete control over its territory. The imagery thus portrays the imperial ruler as one who could confidently enter, occupy and govern his domain without fear of resistance or disturbance.

Conclusion

Whether 'לביא' or 'לבוא' constitutes the original reading in Book of Nahum 2:12 remains a debated question. Rather than

attempting to reconstruct the original text, this article concentrates on the translators' textual choices and the interpretive implications of those choices. The study argues that the textual variation most likely arose from the orthographic similarity between the consonants 'י' or *yod* and 'ו' or *waw* (*vav*) in early Hebrew script, where the two letters could easily be confused during manuscript transmission. Consequently, the Masoretic text preserves the reading 'לביא' [lioness], whereas the Septuagint, Peshitta and Vulgate reflect a *Vorlage* or interpretive tradition that understood the form as 'לבוא' [to enter].

Applying a causal model for translation studies to Book of Nahum 2:12, the Masoretic text reading 'לביא' [lioness] highlights the total destruction of Nineveh and its imperial structure. Through the imagery of the complete leonine family – lion, lioness and cub – the text communicates not only the downfall of an individual monarch, but also the collapse of the entire dynastic and political system that sustained Assyrian dominance. Symbols that once conveyed permanence, security and invincible power are thus transformed into representations of desolation and vanished authority. By contrast, the reading 'לבוא' [to enter], reflected in the Peshitta, Septuagint and Vulgate, shifts the emphasis towards the lion's movement into its den. In this interpretation, the act of entering signifies secure habitation, possession and repose after predatory activity. The lion returns freely and unhindered to its dwelling place, suggesting a realm in which no adversary exists to contest its authority. As a result, the focus no longer rests on another member of the leonine family, but rather on the lion's unrestricted access to and absolute control over its territory. The imagery consequently portrays the imperial ruler as one who could confidently enter, inhabit and govern his domain without fear of resistance or disruption.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Philip S. Chia: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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