

NAHUM

INTRODUCTION

The name “Nahum” means “consolation” or “consoler.” His message was intended to comfort the oppressed and afflicted people of Judah.

Nahum revealed that Nineveh’s day of grace was past. If a nation is to survive it must be established upon and directed by principles of righteousness and truth. About 150 years earlier, Jonah preached at Nineveh when Assyria was experiencing difficult days, his message produced repentance and salvation.

In Nahum’s day, the empire and its capital city were at the height of their glory. Nineveh’s wealth and pride left no place for penitence. The message of Nahum centers on God’s vengeance upon the impenitent.

Apostasy is never more than one untaught generation away. The book of Nahum was written around 663-612 B.C. The time had come for divine judgment to fall upon such a nation, and the responsibility to make it known to the people of Judah and preserve it for all posterity fell upon Nahum.

Verse 1

When Jonah, about 100 years previous to Nahum, foretold the overthrow of Nineveh the great royal seat of Assyrian monarchy, the city repented and was spared.

Now, having fallen from their repentance, possibly deceived by their rise to world domination, Nineveh receives a written warning of irreversible doom. The repentance has not been continued, so neither will the reprieve from judgement be continued.

The important words in this verse are "burden of Nineveh" and "vision of Nahum." They constitute a claim to direct inspiration and a positive identification of the author.

The word *massa* (burden) was most frequently used to denote a threatening prophecy. The idea seems to be that of a burden laid by God upon Nineveh. There is a certain inherent ugliness about a bearer of the message of doom. There are few if any passages in the Bible to match Nahum for sheer hopelessness.

“The book of the vision” indicates that Nahum saw the destruction of Nineveh before it actually took place. The terror of God’s wrath cannot be aptly described it must be experienced for its full deadliness to be grasped.

THE COMING OF THE LORD OF JUDGMENT

Verses 2-8

Before we continue with verse 2, let us consider four comments about Jehovah that will help us better understand the verses that follow.

1. JEHOVAH GOD OF WRATH

The wrath of God is here revealed from heaven against His enemies at the same time His favor and mercy are assured to His faithful loyal people.

2. JEHOVAH IS JEALOUS

The Assyrian empire had desolated Israel and harassed Judah repeatedly. It seemed their idols had overcome the people of Jehovah. The poetic prophet warns that God is jealous. He will not allow the seeming power of false gods to go unchallenged.

There is a certain affection expressed here. Jealousy is of those we love. It is His wounded heart that brings about Nineveh's destruction. God's wrath is always God's love reacting to unfaithfulness.

3. JEHOVAH AVENGES

Only God is qualified to avenge. He does so in complete justice. In the case of Nineveh, He had gone to great lengths to warn them of the consequences of their sin.

4. JEHOVAH IS FULL OF WRATH

Paul, in Romans 1:18ff speaks of God's wrath being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Romans 2:5ff pictures God's wrath as being stored up against the day of wrath when it will be released in a burst of pent-up power.

John, the apostle of love, indicates that the wrath of God remains on those who do not believe and obey the Gospel. The loving God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament and wrath is yet one of the facets of His nature.

Verse 2-3a

While Jehovah is a jealous God, avenging and full of wrath, His wrath is never sudden with little thought or anger. His wrath is reserved for His enemies; those who have set themselves against His purposes and His people. He is slow to anger, as indeed a God of love Who demands patience of His people must be. Nevertheless, His patience and slow anger must never be misunderstood as weakness or tolerance of enmity toward Himself.

Verses 3b-7

Jehovah is great in power, as witness His control over the forces of nature: the whirlwind, the storm, the clouds, and the sea. Even the weather is in His power. The immovable mountains quake before Him, the hills melt, and the very earth itself is upheaved in His presence. Rocks break asunder at the outpouring of His wrath.

In the day of God's wrath, they are kept safe who are in Him, but those who attempt to flee will find their hiding places swept away as in a flood.

This entire passage of Nahum is a poetic picture of the wrath of God.

Verse 8

The image of an over-running flood is possibly an allusion to Nineveh's capture by the Medo-Persian armies through a flood in the river which destroyed her walls. The figure is also used quite normally to simply suggest calamity.

This phrase is a direct reference to Nineveh. The city is figured as a queen. Her place (of dwelling) is to be utterly demolished.

THE UTTER ANNIHILATION OF NINEVEH

Verses 9-13, Verse 9

There is no defense against Jehovah's wrath, once it has been incurred.

The armies of Assyria, led by the great king-general Sennacherib, fell like ten-pins before the walls of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. Nahum envisions Nineveh doing likewise a century later. The destruction would be so final that Nineveh, "the affliction," shall not rise up the second time.

Verse 10

As Babylon would later fall (c. 539 B.C.) with her playboy king in a drunken stupor, so Nineveh fell before Babylon (c. 612 B.C.) with her leaders drunk and "entangled like thorns." They could no more resist the conquering army than can dry stubble resist the spread of a prairie fire.

Verse 11

Nahum sees Sennacherib's attempts against Judah as the beginning of her own ruin. He is the "one gone forth that devised evil against Jehovah." It was Sennacherib who implemented the designs of Nineveh against God and His people.

Sennacherib and his spokesman Rabshaketh framed an evil letter and an evil speech not only against Hezekiah but also against God. He insinuated God was level with the idols of Assyria and unable to protect His people. In this way, the Assyrian sought to dissuade Jehovah's people from confidence in Him, and urged them rather to cast their lot for protection with the great king of Assyria, namely himself.

No one has ever more daringly and blasphemously affronted the Lord than Sennacherib. Nahum therefore counts him a wicked counsellor who has outwitted himself. The great destruction which God will bring against Nineveh because of his wickedness was deferred for a time, but it was the beginning of the end.

Verses 12-13

In one fatal stroke, when the measure of Nineveh's iniquity was full, the Assyrian empire will be "cut down and he shall pass away."

The contrast here between "they" and "his" on the one hand and "thee" on the other delineates between "they," the Assyrians, and "thee," Judah. Their punishment was final and utter destruction. Judah's was the chastising by the Lord of His people.

God had used the Assyrians as a yoke of His people, chastening them in the attempt (futile as it proved to be) to call them back to His covenant. But the yoke had been exceedingly wicked and must now be burst asunder. Assyria would burden God's people no more, after the destruction of Nineveh.

DESTRUCTION OF FALSE GODS AND VILE MAN

Verses 14-15, Verse 14

The decree has gone forth . . . even the memory of the Assyrian kings will dim. Their fame will no longer be spread abroad. Sennacherib's son succeeded him to the throne in Nineveh.

It was only shortly after Sennacherib that Nineveh, the capital, was destroyed. Not only will the king and his country be cut off, the gods he worshiped will also perish. The defeat of an empire was not just the disgrace of a people it was the overthrow of a god.

In the case of Assyria, both the dynasty and the deity fell together. The two sons of Sennacherib were killed in the temple while worshiping their chief god, Nisroch. The desecration of the temple occurred at the same time. Nahum's prophecy that the graven and molten images would be cut off was fulfilled.

Not only in the temple, but throughout the land, the conquerors, unlike the later Greeks and Romans who absorbed local gods, smashed the deities of Assyria wherever they were found.

Just how despicable were the sins of Nineveh is described in Ezekiel 31:3, 11, 15, 16. Her downfall was commensurate with the heinousness of her sin.

Verse 15

The destruction of Nineveh brought on the marching feet of the Babylonian army, burst asunder the bonds of vassalage and set Jerusalem free, albeit her freedom was short-lived, for her sins, as we saw in Micah, were becoming as great as those of Nineveh.

Along with Nahum's assurance that they will have no more trouble with Assyria is the subtle warning to remain faithful to God's covenant. He could not but be aware that Judah herself stood in the way of God's wrath unless she stood firm in her faith.

During the troublesome days of Assyria's invasion, the feasts had been interrupted. They had made vows to God, that if He would deliver them out of their distress, they would do Him extraordinary service. Now the poet reminds them to perform that which they have promised.

We may also learn a valuable lesson here from Nahum. We are prone, in times of trouble to plead prayerfully for help and promise service only to forget when the burden has been lifted.

DETAIL'S OF NINEVEH'S DOWNFALL

CHAPTER 2 — WARNING OF WAR

Verses 1-7, Verse 1

The destroyer is at the gates! In his prophetic vision, Nahum shouts the alarm to Nineveh as he sees the soldiers of Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar, allied with those of the Median, Ahasuerus, approach the very gate of the city.

Destruction is neither distant nor doubtful. Nebuchadnezzar well deserved his common title: "he who dashes nations to pieces." Jeremiah called Babylon the hammer of the whole earth. (Jeremiah 50:23)

There is to be no subtlety. The smasher has "come before thy face" in a straight forward attack. Nineveh is therefore called upon to man the towers and animate herself.

There is no way to forestall the stroke of God's judgment. Just as Assyria was used of God to chastise His people, so the Medo-Babylonian alliance will now punish Nineveh.

Verse 2

Assyria had been used of God to chasten His people. All God has done in human history He has done for the sake of His covenant purpose to ultimately bless His people. The Jews erred in considering national prosperity to be excellence before God. God is concerned that His people be faithful. He restores their real excellence by punishing their unfaithfulness. Assyria, who had been used of God to so correct Israel, that is, restore the excellence, is now being destroyed by those who will later punish Judah. The Assyrian policy of "scorched earth" against her enemies had earned her the title "the emptiers."

Verse 3

Here we begin the prophet's poetic account of the terrors of the invading enemy. Their shields are red with Assyrian blood. The men themselves are drenched scarlet with the gore of battle.

As the chariots approached the city, their charge was swift as lightning and their wheels struck sparks upon the stones. The spears of the Medes and Babylonians are like a shaking forest of fir trees. As a mighty tree overtops a shrub, so the attackers overwhelm the defenders of Nineveh.

Verse 4

The walls are breached, the gates are opened and the vehicles of war charge through the defenseless city streets. They are so numerous and driven with such fury that the red tunics of their drivers seem to be flames of torches and the burning of the city begins.

The dashing in pieces previously alluded to no doubt figures the instruments used to break down the stone and brick walls of the besieged city. The hammer-headed battle-axes of the Medo-Babylonian troops could crush a man's head with even a glancing blow. The red and scarlet of the bloody attackers was partly due to their uniforms of the same color. This color also would add to the fiery appearance of the chariots.

Verse 5

Nebuchadnezzar's commanders, here called nobles, are mustered and commanded to take the field immediately. So swiftly do they obey that they stumble over the bloody soaked streets. They hasten to secure the walls that are now approached by their troops.

The mantelet was a portable shield under which the invader was protected from the besieged defenders on the walls above.

Verses 6-7

At length the gates of the rivers would be opened. The western defense of Nineveh was the wall along the Tigris River. The Medo-Babylonian army engineers re-routed the river channel and the moats became a dry bed for the march into the city. Cyrus would later turn the same trick against its Babylonian originators and so defeat Belshazzar.

Finally, the defense of the palace itself dissolves and the Assyrian capital is no more. There remains only the mournful sound of the captives and the doves, like the larks bravely singing over Flanders Field, flap their wings over desolation and death.

Verse 8

A stream of refugees pours from the fallen city of Nineveh with no idea where to go. The call to them to stay is in vain. Hollow-eyed, they stumble away from all that has ever been home.

A century earlier, in Jonah's time, the population of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, was estimated as including 120,000 small children. (Jonah 4:11) Now in defeat, the multitude flees. The commanders cry for them to return, but they will not so much as look back. Their one thought is escape.

Verses 9-12

"To the victors belong the spoils." The Medes and Babylonians, and every other invading army to march through the pages of history, agree. The wealth of the city becomes the prey of its conqueror. The officers stir up their troops to make a thorough job of looting. Nineveh was rich, and the chief source of income to the ancient man of war was such loot.

The Assyrian lion will no longer ravage the world in search of prey for its lioness and her whelps. The destruction of Nineveh with her armies and chariots will forever prevent her from preying as a wild animal upon the victims of her greed for empire.

Verse 13

The prophet is careful to point out that the sack of Nineveh is carried out at the will of Jehovah. Each nation had its own gods and they were credited with that nation's victories over her enemies.

It is not, however, the gods of the Medes and Babylonians to whom Nahum credits the fall of Nineveh. It is Jehovah of Israel! Jehovah is not only the one true God, but He is Lord of all nations.

THE EPITAPH OF NINEVEH

CHAPTER 3 — WOE TO THE BLOODY CITY

Verses 3:1-3, Verse 1

Nineveh has aspired to be the capital of the world, by whatever means were at her disposal, whether intrigue in the courts of other nations or by sheer force of arms and the carrying away of conquered peoples. For this Nahum sees her now in ruins.

Verses 2-3

The city lies dead. The silence of death is broken only by the sound of enemy arms moving about the streets. There is no regard for the dead, the invaders stumble over the fallen corpses. No attempt is made to count the bodies. They are simply a multitude.

CAUSE OF THE CARNAGE

Verses 4-7, Verse 4

Here is a listing, brief and to the point, of the sins of Nineveh. No doubt the term “harlotries of the well-favored harlot” could be a literal description of the immorality of the Assyrian capital. Such corruption always goes before the downfall of an empire, just as it now eats the fiber out of the strength of the United States.

However, it is more likely Nahum intends here the more profound harlotry that brought on war. Nineveh had courted neighboring nations with the design to ruin their liberties and property.

Assyria was one of the most brutal empires ever to cross the pages of history. Her religion did nothing to reduce this tendency to violence. Ashur was the name of the national version of the sun god. He was warlike, merciless and was believed to take a divine satisfaction in the sacrifice of captured enemies before his shrine.

The worship of Ashur was largely one of omens and exorcism. These Nahum calls witchcrafts. The world was pictured as full of a host of demons to be warded off by charms and long incantations.

Verse 5

The foreign policy of Assyria, as we have seen, was one of ambitious deceit. This stood first in the list of her harlotries. Now her proud pretensions are to be baffled by Jehovah. Her shame is discovered to her neighbor nations. Her vain hope of universal domination is first revealed and then dashed to pieces.

Verses 6-7

That great city to which all nations had made court, with which they had coveted alliances, is made a laughing stock. Abominable filth and vileness are always the aftermath of war. The disease which rises from such putridity causes many to flee, and to marvel at the destruction of Nineveh. No one is left to mourn the passing of Nineveh. Nahum takes delight in it and taunts her with an offer to hire mourners.

One cannot but wonder if the Spirit Who inspired Nahum's prophecy approved of the poet's almost sadistic delight in the calamity that befell his enemies. More likely God's attitude toward Jonah, when that prophet pouted because Nineveh had been spared, was the same toward Nahum.

NINEVEH IS NO BETTER

Verses 8-19, Verses 8-10

No-Amon Karnak and Thebes are the names of one of the proudest cities ever built by man. Capital of the middle kingdom of Egypt, she stood majestically on the Nile and guarded the largest temple complex ever built. Every Pharaoh, from the 12th to the 19th dynasty except the heretic, Ikhnaton, added to her glory. Her civilization, in some instances, advanced beyond that of our own day.

Even today the visitor stands in silent awe before her columns and obelisks. One cannot but marvel at the sacred lake at Karnak, where the sprinkling of exorcism and the immersion of Christian baptism first became confused in the fourth century A.D.

But No-Amon Karnak fell! And it was the Assyrians themselves who in 674 B.C. swept down from the north and subjected the proud Egyptians to tribute and to even taunt the prophet of Nineveh who herself is now to be destroyed saying, "Art thou better than No-Amon?" Art thou better? It is a question that sends chills along the spine of any thinking American who is fortunate enough to stand amidst the ruins of fallen civilizations. Are we any better than they that our international harlotries, our internal

immoralities, our worship of false gods should not one day bring down upon our heads the wrath of Jehovah?

Is it a strange idea, reserved for crackpots and prophets of doom, that God may one day use a heathen nation to fill the streets of Washington, D.C. and New York and Chicago and our other proud cities with corpses even as He used the Medes and Babylonians to lay Nineveh in the dust for her sins?

Verse 11

The words fall like the knell of doom on the proud capital of Assyria. The leaders were literally drunken when the Medes and Babylonians came, but they had been in a stupor of a different kind long before. They were “made drunken with the wine of Nineveh’s fornication.” (Revelation 17:1-2)

Verses 12-15

All those things in which Nineveh trusted would fail her. Did they trust in bravery and daring? Their hearts would sink and fail them, so they should abscond (run away) for shame, being in disgrace. For fear they will not be able to face invaders because of a lack of strength, they shall sneak to their neighbors to beg their assistance.

Did they depend on the garrisons and strongholds? These shall prove to be paper walls. Like the first-ripe figs, if you give the tree a little shake, they will fall into your mouth.

Having seen the vanity of the efforts to defend the doomed city, Nahum nevertheless taunts them to make ready to stand off the invader. They are admonished to lay in quantities of water against a siege. New bricks are to be made to strengthen the fortifications.

Verse 15

By fire set to buildings and death sown by hand weapons are cities conquered. It is still the same, from Nineveh to My Lai. Though the defenders of Nineveh are as numerous as canker-worms and as locusts, yet they shall be over-run.

There is a scathing irony in Nahum’s choice of vermin to illustrate the multitudes of Nineveh’s defenders. Both the canker-worm and the locust leave devastation wherever they go. So had Assyria spread destruction throughout the region. Now—to use a cliché, “the worm has turned.” The Assyrian merchants who once fleeced the

populace of surrounding nations will be seen no more, they are like the canker-worm who “ravages and flees away.”

The princes also, and the marshals, those who enforced the Assyrian sway over conquered peoples will be seen no more. Like swarms of grasshoppers which destroy while they are present, but fly away to be seen no more, the Assyrian authorities will, like the merchants, not be seen any more in lands once ruled as defeated people.

Verses 18-19

The destruction of Nineveh will prove the mortal wound of the entire empire. It is all in Nahum’s future, but he has seen it in the present vision. History has verified his prophetic pronouncement.

In 612 B.C. the alliance between the Medes and Babylonians did indeed march into the city and that which Nahum foresaw became reality. The alliance was short lived and the victors shortly began to war among themselves. But the fatal blow had been struck.

Never again would Nineveh, or Assyria, play an important role in world affairs. Today the location of the city itself is scarcely discernable, rising as two tells (two mounds) on the valley of the Tigris.

God’s prophetic word once more is vindicated by history.