

NAHUM COMMENTARY

THE DOOM OF NINEVEH, ASSYRIA'S CAPITAL

A number of great empires around the Mediterranean Sea were overlords to the people of Israel from their inception with Abraham's call throughout the Hebrew Scripture era. Among them were Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece (with Rome becoming their master about 70 years before the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem. Each of these dominations was in the sovereign plan of God for Israel, often because of her rebellion against Him. The most ruthless and cruel of the oppressors was likely Assyria, whose mistreatment of subjugated peoples is sad and horrific legend. Here are statements attributed to Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria 669 - 631 B.C.: "I slit their mouths and brought them low. The rest of the people, alive, I cut down as an offering. Their dismembered bodies I fed to the dogs, swine, wolves, and eagles. I pierced his chin with my keen hand dagger. Through his jaw I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him and made him occupy a dog kennel of the east gate of Nineveh." Their reputation for cruelty was likely why Jonah drew back from God's command to preach there. This short prophecy is about the doom of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. It was likely written in the middle of the seventh century before Christ, perhaps around 650 B.C. Obviously, Israel has already fallen to Assyria, and Judah felt the pain of her cruelty, but did not fall to them, protected by Yahweh. It will comfort Judah to know that Assyria will fall under God's rod of judgment. The message is in part a bit like the imprecatory Psalms, the ones which call for the overthrow of the enemies of God's people. Jonah's preaching resulted in repentance in Nineveh years before, but there is no hint here that judgment can be averted by this cruel, violent, bloodthirsty people.

CHAPTER 1

Nahum first sets forth the character of God, including His irresistible sovereign power. God is good, for sure, and He loves to act from His goodness on the sons of men, but those who thumb their noses at Him and vilify and harm His people will pay a dear price for their stubborn wickedness. The final verse is such a comfort to Judah! Paul quotes it in Romans 10:15 to declare the joy of good news coming.

GOD JUDGES THE WICKED, BLESSES THE JUST **THE SUPREME POWER OF YAHWEH**

1), 2) The people of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms since not long after Solomon's death. The northern ten tribes, known as Israel (as opposed to "Judah" in the south), had been ruled by a succession of wicked kings, men with few redeeming qualities. Their rebellion against God for two centuries had led to their defeat and deportation by the ruthless Assyrians. Nineveh, the city of Jonah's prophecy, was the capital of Assyria. Whereas Jonah's story is one of salvation for a repentant Nineveh, Nahum's prophecy is an oracle, a burden, a judgment against her for her sins. In verse two, Nahum speaks of God's jealousy, revenge, and wrath. Yahweh is jealous of that which belongs to Him, and Israel is His wife, His chosen nation. Men are instructed not to take vengeance, but to give place to God's wrath. God said, "*Vengeance is mine...*" By her unmitigated cruelty against Israel, Assyria had made herself Yahweh's enemy, adversary. And she would feel the weight of His retribution when the time was right. While Assyria was God's rod of chastening for Israel, this wicked empire would not escape justice from the Almighty.

3) Three characteristics of Yahweh are put on display here: (1) **patience** (Jonah, 4:2, had complained that God was "*slow to anger*" [about punishing Nineveh], but the patience of God had

run its course); (2) **power** - the next few statements in the context illustrate His might; (3) **justice** - it may appear that the guilty escape punishment, but that is only an appearance. They will not get a pass forever, as Abraham said to Yahweh, Genesis 18:25, *"shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* Know this, dear Reader, God's justice is absolute, and your sin will not be passed over lightly. However, since He has judged your sins in Jesus at Calvary, He can forgive you, justify you, and remain the just God that He is (Romans 3:26).

4) This Mighty God had dried up a pathway in the midst of the Red Sea to save the Israelites escaping Egypt (Exodus 14:21, Psalm 66:6). He had done the same to the Jordan to allow the Israelites passage into the Land (Joshua 3). His power is so great, His authority over His creation is so complete, that the lush green forests of Bashan and Carmel would wither at His breath. Even Lebanon, known for its magnificent cedar trees, would wither at His command. Since He commands that kind of sway, Nineveh must not expect that He cannot bring her down.

5) The stately mountains of any region are emblems of stability. No effort of man can bring down the Himalayas or the great Rocky Mountains of our west. Yet in an earthquake, God Who made the mountains can cause them to tremble. When He wills it, some of them open at their peaks and spew forth volcanic lava. As it descends the mountainside, it consumes all in its path. Such is the power of God when He chooses to put it on display. Let none think they are secure apart from God, Who makes the earth heave like sick man, regurgitating like one who is ill.

THE SAD PLIGHT OF REBELS AGAINST YAHWEH

6) At the end of a conflict, the one(s) left standing are seen to be the victors. Know this, no one can stand against the LORD in the day of His wrath. The Psalmist (1:5) declared that *"the wicked will not stand in the judgment."* The strongest empire the world had seen to this time would crumble before the Almighty. As huge boulders are smashed when He makes the earth quake, so Assyria will fall apart at His command. If you, dear Reader, want to *"stand before Him"* then, you must be willing to "bow before Him now." Submit in faith, cry out to the crucified, risen Christ for forgiveness, or you will surely perish!

7), 8) Yahweh's attitude and actions toward those who trust Him and those who choose to be His foes are quite different. To the people of faith, ever set upon by the faithless, He is a place of refuge in the time of distress. His care for them is a wonder of human experience; that we should matter to the great God of the universe is awe-inspiring indeed. On the other hand, He is poised to send the flood of His wrath against the wicked Ninevites for their guilt in opposing Him by their incomparable cruelty to His people. He will chase them into outer darkness and bring them to a just and timely end. O, today, will you turn from rebellion against God in whatever form you practice it, and will you allow Him to be your Refuge rather than your Judge. It is His heart's desire to bless, to save; it grieves Him to judge and punish.

9) The second Psalm speaks of those who *"set themselves against the Lord"* and who do so in vain! The Omnipotent God of heaven and earth will hold such in derision and laugh at their feeble efforts to unseat Him from His throne! When He judges, those judged are not able to rise and make a second attack on Omnipotence. It is as if Yahweh says to Assyria, "I will not give you a second opportunity to destroy Jerusalem and thus make a complete end of Judah." And to Judah we hear His say, "And you, my children, do not worry about Assyria coming against you again - it will not happen." God will make a complete end of Assyria rather than Assyria making a complete end of Judah.

10), 11) This Nineveh, capital of Assyria, considered itself as impenetrable as a thorn-patch to the bare feet of men. In their confidence, they held a drunken feast, not unlike that of Belshazzar in Daniel 5. And like him, they awoke from their stupor to find themselves vanquished by an enemy. Confidence is only safe and right when it is placed in the LORD! Again, I refer to Psalm 2, where the

exact expression, “*against the Lord*,” is seen. There, as here, such counsel is seen to be futile. One who advises “against the Lord” is ever a “*worthless counselor*.” We do well in this present age to avoid those worthless counselors, people whose advice is not in keeping with the principles of Scripture. Biblical counseling is the best in pursuing a course of action for the believer. How important it is for us to listen to and have our children and grandchildren listen to Him Whom Isaiah called the “*Wonderful Counselor!*”

THE SALVATION PROMISED BY YAHWEH

12) “*Thus says the Lord...*” What a thrilling concept - that the God of eternity would deign to speak to men in time. I thrill that this God has spoken to me in His blessed Word, illuminated by His Holy Spirit. The Assyrian hordes may be at an all time high in numbers, and they may have the latest in weaponry, but Yahweh will see to it that they are cut down. We learn here that the power of the wicked shall be broken, and we further glean that the oppression of the just will end. From speaking of Assyria in the third person (“they”), Yahweh now speaks to Judah in the second person (“you”). Destruction will come to Assyria, and deliverance will be the lot of Judah. God will make all things right!

13) Assyria had placed bonds upon the people of the Northern Kingdom, making them prisoners. And they had placed a yoke upon their shoulders, reducing them to servitude. God had a set time at which he would break that yoke and burst those bonds. Israel would be free when Assyria fell to Nebuchadnezzar and the warring, conquering hordes of Babylon! It was God’s plan for Israel to be His servants, He did not wish them to be enslaved by some foreign entity at the present time.

14) All idols are summed up in the expressions “carved image” and “metal image.” Idolatry is an abomination to God, and His judgment on Assyria was because of their treatment of Israel and their flaunting idolatry in the face of Israel’s God. Yes, Yahweh had chosen to use Assyria as His rod of discipline for Israel, but He did not in so doing express any thought that Assyria was a morally superior nation. They were not! Their worship of false gods was a stench in the nostrils of Him Who is the true and only God. The God of heaven becomes a digger of graves on earth - opening a massive tomb for Assyria. Their once-feared name will be forgotten in the grave, as they are judged for being “vile.” Ezekiel would later write (32:22), “*Assyria is there, and all her company, its graves all around it, all of them slain, fallen by the sword...*”

15) Assyria never conquered Judah, but not for lack of trying. Once the news of the fall of Nineveh (Assyrian capital) was brought to Judah, they could rest easy and resume normal life, religious activity and otherwise. When someone arrives at a place, it may be said that “their feet are at the door.” On some occasions, they bring bad news, like those who told David of Absalom’s death. At other times, the news is blessed, as when the angels told the shepherds of Christ’s birth. The expression that opens the verse has been borrowed by Paul in Romans 10:15 (as Nahum may have borrowed it from Isaiah 52:7), the Apostle using it to speak of those who bring the gospel! The concept of beautiful feet belonging to the one which delights anyone who proclaims the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen Lord.

CHAPTER 2

Nahum describes the destruction and fall of Nineveh in terms that paint word pictures. The reader can see the action taking place, the unfolding of the undoing of the once mighty, ever so proud Nineveh! All that he wrote prophetically took place just a few decades later, historians tell us, in 612 B.C.

THE FALL OF ASSYRIA

COMMANDS TO THE WARRIORS

1) These statements come in short, staccato-like impulses:

“Man the ramparts;”

“watch the road;”

“dress for battle;”

“collect all your strength!”

These are battle cries, shouted to the warriors of the next empire, Babylon. Assyrian troops for decades had been “gathering” captives together for decades; they had been pulling national entities within the expanding borders of their empire. Now the time for “gathering” is over, replaced by a time of “scattering.” The phrase “up against you” is akin to our expression “in your face,” “not a term of endearment! What the Assyrians did for so long to so many weaker foes was now being done to them by one made stronger by God, in part to conquer Assyria, and in part to prepare for punishing Judah some decades down the road.

COVENANT PEOPLE RESTORED

2) Throughout several monarchies in Assyria (Pul, Tiglath-Pileser, Shalmaneser, Sennacherib) and several in Israel and Judah (Menachem, Ahaz, Hoshea, Hezekiah), the great empire had made the Jews her tributaries, exacting great wealth from them. Part of what God is doing here is restoring the majesty of the northern and southern kingdoms by devastating the empire who looted them so long. The ultimate restoration of Israel will be in the millennial kingdom, but it may be seen as foreshadowed here.

CHARIOTS ATTACK NINEVEH

3) The fact of red shields for these Babylonian attackers has been corroborated by the discovery of ancient sculptures. The spade of the archaeologist verifying God’s Word again, as it always does and will. These shields covered in red dyed leather, coupled with the scarlet apparel of the soldiers would make them an awe-inspiring sight to be sure. On they came in chariots reflecting the sun’s rays and brandishing the spears made of cypress wood. Certainly, fear would be struck in the hearts of the Assyrian defenders.

4) Were the Assyrians thinking, “How did these chariots get past outer defenses and into the streets of Nineveh?” Again, their quick movements with shiny metal flashing in the sun would be an awesome sight to behold! The streets and highways once safe for the Ninevites are now overrun by an invading enemy! Those who caused hearts to fear in so many other cities now know fear in their own citadel, which is no longer a safe fortress.

5) Nineveh’s king summons his best and bravest troops to the wall to defend against a siege tower, but it is too late. They stumble as they go, vainly trying to mount a defense. The wall is breached, the rubbish impairs their efforts to move into positions for defense. Dead bodies are multiplying in number, and these “worthies” may soon be among the dead.

CONQUEST ACHIEVED

6) Was it divine intervention that sent the flooding Tigris to destroy a portion of the wall? Or was it just keen military action, as the Babylonians dammed up the Tigris at the beginning of the siege, then threw open the “flood gates” which allowed such a powerful surge of water that the palace was wiped out in a moment of time?

7) Is Nineveh here personified as the empire’s “mistress?” She surely is catastrophically defeated, and she who has carried away so many captives is now exiled herself! These handmaids now moan and beat their breasts in anguish over this cataclysmic turn of events. The lovely young ladies who so often led the celebrations at the returning victors, perhaps beating tambourines, now

walk in shame, moaning like doves, and beating their breasts. It was so very different now that they were the vanquished and not the victors. Turnabout was not so pleasant.

8) The prophet describes this once great city metaphorically as a pool. It had grown in size, and its walls were high, and it was filled with people and treasure to overflowing. Now a breach has come in the pool's wall, and the "water" inside is running away in all directions. People flee the destroyed city in droves, taking what they can scavenge as they run. Someone cries out to stop the massive departure, but no one listens or turns back; the pool is quickly emptied as the inhabitants become refugees. They have lived well off of cruel dealings, but now cruelty is dealt to them.

9) Now Nahum envisions a second set of people, not the escaping refugees this time, but the conquering invaders. "To the victor belong the spoils," has been an enriching mantra for Nineveh for ever so long. Now a new "victor" is in town - Babylon - and the spoils are his. The silver and gold, the treasure and precious things now belong to the new kid on the block. Could they hear the words once written by the wise man (Proverbs 23:5), *"Riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven."*

10) Again we see a picture of how quickly things can change. The once proud Assyrian, master of all he surveyed, owner of treasures beyond counting, is proud no more. He is master of nothing - if he lives, he will be a slave. His wealth is now in someone else's possession. His knees tremble on the outside, and his heart melts on the inside. The horror of his reversal of fortunes brings anguish to his loins, and it robs his face of blood, making him as pale as snowfall. Is not this the future of those who reject Israel's Messiah? Will not all be lost from those who say "No" to Jesus' offer of salvation? *"What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"* (Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36).

COLLAPSE OF NINEVEH

11), 12) The history of Nineveh was one of bloody conquests. Nahum now metaphorically describes the city as a lair of lions. The warring men had been out so often like lions on a hunt. They usually returned with lots of treasures for their wives and children - the lioness and the cubs. The caves and dens of the lions had been filled with treasure gained by shedding much blood, and they were so powerful that no one disturbed them. But where are they now that Babylon has been on a successful "lion hunt?" How radically things had changed for those who were so cruel!

13) The Assyrians had set themselves **against** the LORD (see 1:9); now Yahweh Sabaoth sets Himself **against** them! Woe unto those against whom the LORD sets Himself. *"If God be for us, who can stand against us?"* is a great New Testament quote. But if God be against us... well, there is just no help to be had. These warring men will see their military implements destroyed by fire. The swords they had so cruelly wielded will now strike down their own young. No longer will you **"have a prey,"** but now you will **"be a prey."** In Hezekiah's day, messengers from Assyria made bold threats against Jerusalem, and they almost conquered it, but God stopped them short. Their messengers threatened the Jews, and they mocked the power of Israel's God. The Rabshakeh will taunt nations no longer - there will be no more messengers of doom!

CHAPTER 3

The prophet reviews the destruction and conquest of Nineveh, Assyria's capital. There is a good deal of plain language describing the collapse of the once great empire, and it is mingled with some symbolic descriptions, as well. As Nineveh sowed, so must she reap; the sins of Nineveh bring about her harvest. The iniquity of Nineveh made her destruction inevitable. The record here is a vindication of God's (and man's) vengeance against a wicked empire. Here Nineveh's judgment

is explained and it is justified.

NINEVEH - STRIKING EXAMPLE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT HOW UNDERSTANDABLE IS HER SHAME

1) Nahum graphically pictures the Assyrian kingdom with its capital city, Nineveh, as an empire of violence (bloodthirsty), deceit (completely full of lies), greed (pillage, plunder), and aggression (never having enough victims, prey). Whole communities would commit suicide at their approach, rather than be taken alive and subjected to their sadistic ways. No wonder Jonah feared and hated them so! This **“city of blood”** earned that name by the atrocities described by so many historians and commentators. Heads lopped off were impaled and made into totem poles, or they were piled by city gates to instill horror and fear. Bodies were dismembered and or burned.

2), 3) If Nahum were capturing the action he describes on video, it would be the lead story on any American news program. It has many of the elements our media loves to portray, and our public loves to consume. The scene he paints with terse, sharp words is one of violent attacks of war machinery, with all the sights and sounds you would expect in ancient warfare. The horses gallop, the whips crack, the chariot wheels roll, the bodies fall in such numbers that men and horses stumble over the dead. This is fast-moving, fierce combat that was typical of the Assyrians and Babylonians as they rolled across the ancient East, conquering those in their path. As Nineveh had ruthlessly done to others, so God would have others unmercifully do to them. And Nahum views the scene in the eye of prophecy. Babylon mirrored her cruelty in her treatment of Nineveh.

4), 5) It is no wonder that Yahweh sets Himself against these people! Look at the list of their offenses: Nineveh, that great city, like a beautiful harlot, has used its attractiveness to seduce other nations away from God. What nation wouldn't want to be like her? Powerful in military might, wealthy in commerce, fabulous in architecture, she was all anyone could want to be, humanly speaking. Yet while the gullible nations fell into enslavement through her sorceries, the God of Heaven knew the truth and stood against her. Yahweh of hosts (LORD Sabaoth) will expose her in shame to the nations. They will then see her for what she really is, not a beautiful woman to be loved, but a wicked vixen to be avoided. “Like sin, like punishment.” She had shamed nations; now she would be shamed.

6), 7) God promises this alluring beauty, so fragrant with her perfumes and lotions, that He will pelt her with human excrement. He will punish her by making her as abhorrent to others as she had been attractive in seducing them. Where once men gazed at her for her beauty, now they will look upon her in disdain. Her unattractive inner being will shine through so that even in her destruction and distress, her former lovers will offer her no comfort. They will not even bemoan her reduced circumstances, and only her **circumstance** changed, her sinful **condition** now clouds her former beauty. Blasted by God, she is now forsaken of men.

HOW UNAVOIDABLE IS HER FATE

8) Four hundred miles south of Cairo, on the banks of the Nile River, the city of Thebes is used as an illustration by Nahum. The many canals from the Nile served as hindrances for conquest, as they made it difficult for enemies to get to the heart of the city. Those waterways were in some ways like walls of protection. With all this on her side, Thebes was conquered by these same Assyrians in 663 B.C.

9) Several close allies helped protect Thebes: Cush, Put, Egypt, and Lybia were among them. In the day of God's judgment on Assyria, such allies were inconsequential. That is quite a surprising truth, given Egypt's great resources. In a similar vein, having Egypt as a potential ally was described in Isaiah 36:6 as a broken reed that would pierce through the hand of the one trusting her. God's people should always trust Him as opposed to making foreign alliances.

10) She who had taken so many into captivity was so taken herself. Exiled from home became her lot, even as she had imposed such on so many others. She had been cruel in her treatment of others, and now it is her infants who are “*dashed into pieces*” by her attackers. What Assyria had done to Thebes, she now had done to her. It is as if Yahweh was speaking to Assyria through the prophet to say, “If your mighty rival Thebes fell, do you think destruction cannot come to you?”

11) Yes, Assyria, with your proud capital Nineveh, you will seek escape through drunkenness, and you will go into hiding from the mighty foe I send against you. Others have cowered before your onslaughts, and now you will seek refuge from your own enemy! Liquor will not provide you with relief from the vengeance of Yahweh inflicted upon you by the Babylonian hordes.

HOW USELESS ARE HER DEFENSES

12) First ripe figs, such a delicacy then and now, are easily shaken from their branches. So easily will Nineveh’s defenses fall into the hands of the conquerors from Babylon. In 612 B.C. the Ninevites would crumble and fall to the armies of Babylon, Scythia, and Media.

13) In the ancient world, women did not participate in war. It was proverbial that men who ran in fear from battle were like women (Isaiah 19:16, “*In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them.*”). So, Nahum borrows the simile as he looks ahead to the cowering of the Assyrians. And added to that, he sees with the eye of prophecy that her protective gates are flung open wide before the enemy, the bars having been consumed by fire.

14) One way to defeat a city without breaching its gates or walls is to cut off its water supply and wait for them to surrender. So, Nineveh was charged by the prophet to “*draw water for the siege.*” Since breaches would indeed occur, Nahum charges them to make more bricks to re-fortify their defenses (was he being sarcastic?).

15) Archaeologists say that Nineveh’s ruins show the effects of raging fire that destroyed the palace and more. Between the burning fire and the enemy sword, so many Ninevites will perish. The destruction will be as complete as in an orchard or a wheat field when the locusts have come and completely denuded them of any foliage.

16), 17) The wealth of Nineveh was immense, as she had by commerce and conquest brought so much into her coffers. The image changes from wealth in chests to fruit in fields, and those fields are attacked by the locusts who strip away all that has been accumulated. The princes who controlled the wealth, and the scribes (accountants?) who chronicled the wealth, will have disappeared like locusts flying away when all has been eaten. Some will have perished, and others will have fled for their lives. In either case, the wealth will now have changed hands, belonging to the victors, the new masters of the known world.

18) A single leader, even a great monarch, cannot hold an empire together without the help of many wise and capable people around him. Nahum sees prophetically that the people are scattered, the shepherds are asleep, and the nobles have joined them in slumber. There is no hope of holding the empire together, and defeat is complete, so says the forward-seeing prophet.

19) No doubt along the way people who were suffering at the hands of the Assyrians wondered if God would ever recompense these wicked people for their sins. Nahum sees it happening, as it did indeed come to pass. And when it happened, all those who had been the objects of her sinful aggression would now applaud at her devastation. Nineveh’s wound would be fatal, her injury, incurable. They had set themselves against God, and now He had set Himself against them - the result being their total destruction.