

# Notes on Nahum

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

## Introduction

### TITLE AND WRITER

The title of the book comes from the name of its writer.

We know nothing about Nahum ("compassion," "consolation," or "comfort") other than what we read in this book. His name proved significant since he brought comfort and consolation to the Judeans with his prophecies. He was "the Elkoshite" (1:1), so he evidently came from a town named Elkosh, but the location of such a town has yet to be discovered. Scholars have suggested that it stood near Nineveh, in Galilee, near Capernaum (City of Nahum?), east of the Jordan River, or somewhere in Judah. Since he was a Jewish prophet and evidently lived after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C., a location in Judah seems most likely to me. Perhaps the Assyrians had carried his family away to Mesopotamia when they conquered the kingdom of Israel and large parts of Judah, and Nahum somehow managed to return to Judah later.<sup>1</sup> This may explain Nahum's familiarity with things Assyrian.

### UNITY

Some scholars have tried to prove that someone other than Nahum wrote sections of the book (1:1; 1:1—2:3; 1:2-10; 2:4—3:19), but their arguments are largely speculative. Jewish and Christian authorities have long held that Nahum was responsible for the whole work.

"Every one of the forty-seven verses of this short prophecy has been attacked by higher critics as being spurious. Contemporary critical scholarship tends to hold that at least one-third of the material was written by someone other than Nahum."<sup>2</sup>

The canonicity of Nahum has never been seriously challenged, and the Hebrew text has been well preserved.

### DATE

Nahum mentioned the fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes (3:8), so we know he wrote after that event, which took place in 663 B.C. The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal conquered

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<sup>1</sup>Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

it. The prophet predicted the fall of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, which happened in 612 B.C., so he must have written this book between 663 and 612 B.C. (Josephus wrote that Nineveh fell 115 years after Nahum's preaching.<sup>3</sup> But that seems incorrect.) Evidently, Nineveh fell to the Medes.<sup>4</sup>

"There is some ambiguity in the Babylonian and later descriptions of the fall of Nineveh (Zawadzki 1988), but it appears to have been the Medes who actually destroyed the city. Indeed, the Babylonians were very careful in their records to distance themselves from the general looting of the city and especially the temples of this great city. However, it is clear that the Medes were either uninterested or unable to keep the city for a permanent possession, and it fell to their allies, the Babylonians, to possess it."<sup>5</sup>

There is some evidence that points to Nahum writing shortly after Thebes fell. First, Nahum's description of Nineveh (1:12; 3:1, 4, 16) does not fit the city as it existed between 626 and 612 B.C. when Ashurbanipal's sons, Ashur-etil-ilani (626-623 B.C.) and Sin-shar-ishkun (623-612 B.C.), ruled over it. Second, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was under the yoke of Assyria when Nahum wrote (1:13, 15; 2:1, 3), a condition that marked the reign of Manasseh (697-642 B.C.) more than that of Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Third, if Nahum wrote after 654 B.C., his rhetorical question in 3:8 would have had little or no force since Thebes rose to power again in that year.<sup>6</sup> Thus a date of composition between 663 and 654 B.C. seems most likely. This means he probably ministered during the reign of wicked King Manasseh of Judah (697-642 B.C.). Leon Wood dated Nahum a bit later, namely, about 630 B.C., during the reign of good King Josiah (640-609 B.C.).<sup>7</sup>

Nahum and Zephaniah both prophesied after Isaiah and Micah finished prophesying. Isaiah prophesied between about 740-680 B.C. Nahum prophesied from about 660-650 B.C. Zephaniah probably prophesied between 640 and 612 B.C. Jonah, Hosea (both from Israel), and Amos, Isaiah, and Micah (from Judah) were all eighth-century B.C. prophets. Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah were all seventh-century B.C. prophets. The dating of Obadiah and Joel is debatable.

### **PLACE OF COMPOSITION**

No one knows for sure where Nahum was when he wrote the book, and our lack of knowledge of his hometown complicates the task of discovering the place of composition. However, traditionally Nahum lived and ministered in Judah, so most conservative scholars assume he wrote somewhere in that kingdom.

<sup>3</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9:11:3.

<sup>4</sup>See any good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia for the history of Nineveh.

<sup>5</sup>Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 459. Their reference is to S. Zawadzki, *The Fall of Assyria and Median-Babylonian Relations in Light of the Nabopolassar Chronicle*.

<sup>6</sup>Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary*, pp. 30, 34-37.

<sup>7</sup>Leon Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 316.

### **AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE**

Nahum was a Jewish prophet and wrote primarily for the Jewish people. While the main subject of his prophesying was Nineveh, his message was for the Jews. Similarly, Jonah wrote about Nineveh and Obadiah wrote only of Edom, but they also wrote for the Jews. Both Nahum and Obadiah probably served as preaching prophets in Judah, as well as writing prophets, as Jonah did in Israel.

"Nahum's prophecy was the complement to Jonah, for whereas Jonah celebrated God's mercy, Nahum marked the relentless march of the judgment of God against all sinners world-wide."<sup>8</sup>

This book claims to be an oracle (1:1, an uplifting and or threatening prophecy). While most of the book threatens Nineveh with destruction, there are also words of comfort for the people of Judah (1:12, 15; 2:2). Nahum revealed that Yahweh would destroy Nineveh as punishment for the Assyrians' cruelty to many nations, including the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in 722 B.C., and Judah. This was a comforting message for the remaining Jews who were presently living under Assyria's shadow in Judah. Assyria had destroyed many Judean cities and had even besieged Jerusalem, unsuccessfully, in 701 B.C. The purpose of Nahum's book, then, was to announce Nineveh's fall and thereby comfort the Judean Jews with the assurance that their God was indeed sovereign and just.

"God is a just governor of the nations who will punish wicked Nineveh and restore His own people."<sup>9</sup>

"Even though God has chosen Assyria to act as his instrument of punishment against the rebellious and recalcitrant Israel (Is. 7:17; 10:5-6), he holds that nation corporately responsible for the excesses and atrocities committed in fulfilling this role (Is. 10:7-19; cf. Zp. 2:14-15)."<sup>10</sup>

### **LITERARY FORM**

Nahum contains a prophecy of the future destruction of a city that did fall. Critics of the Bible who do not believe that the prophets could possibly predict the future have tried to explain what Nahum wrote as a description of the fall of Nineveh after the fact. Some of them consider the book as a piece of liturgy written for the Israelites' annual "enthronement festival" in Jerusalem. This festival supposedly celebrated Yahweh's enthronement over His people, though there is no biblical evidence that it ever occurred. Other ancient Near Eastern nations conducted similar enthronement festivals. The Book of Nahum was, according to this view, a collection of writings of various literary types that an editor compiled to magnify Yahweh's greatness by reflecting on Nineveh's destruction.

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<sup>8</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 221.

<sup>9</sup>Patterson, p. 53. See also Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 840.

<sup>10</sup>David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, p. 23.

While conservatives reject this low view of prophecy, it is obvious that the book does consist of several different types of literature, as do most of the other prophetic books. We believe that God guided Nahum to express the messages He gave him in a variety of ways using several different forms of expression.

"Nahum, unlike many prophecies that are based on the structure of an anthology (such as Micah), has a well-delineated literary form."<sup>11</sup>

"The main body of the prophecy, which is introduced with the words 'This is what the LORD says,' exhibits a chiasmic structure:

- A Assyrian king taunted/Judah urged to celebrate (1:2-15)
- B Dramatic call to alarm (2:1-10)
- C Taunt (2:11-12)
- D Announcement of judgment (2:13)
- E Woe oracle (3:1-4)
- D' Announcement of judgment (3:5-7)
- C' Taunt (3:8-13)
- B' Dramatic call to alarm (3:14-17)
- A' Assyrian king taunted as others celebrate (3:18-19)"<sup>12</sup>

Nahum was a poet. He has been called "the poet laureate among the Minor Prophets."<sup>13</sup> He wrote in a very vivid and powerful style.

"Nahum was a great poet. His word pictures are superb, his rhetorical skill is beyond praise."<sup>14</sup>

"None of the minor prophets . . . seem to equal Nahum in boldness, ardour and sublimity. His prophecy . . . forms a regular and perfect poem: the exordium is not merely magnificent, it is truly majestic; the preparation for the destruction of Nineveh, and the description of its downfall and desolation, are expressed in the most vivid colours, and are bold and luminous in the highest degree."<sup>15</sup>

"Nahum's poetry is fine. Of all the prophets he is the one who in dignity and force approaches most nearly to Isaiah. His descriptions are singularly picturesque and vivid . . .: his imagery is effective and striking . . .; the thought is always expressed compactly; the parallelism is regular."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Tremper Longman III, "Nahum," in *The Minor Prophets*, p. 769.

<sup>12</sup>Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 428. See also Gordon H. Johnston, "A Rhetorical Analysis of the Book of Nahum," (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992) for a thorough analysis of the book's structure.

<sup>13</sup>Patterson, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 147.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, pp. 239-40.

<sup>16</sup>S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Bible*, p. 336.

"His reverence for the almighty, trust in divine justice and goodness, condemnation of national iniquity, positive conviction that God will keep His word—these are qualities of true greatness. Add to that Nahum's mighty intellect, his patriotism and courage, his rare, almost unequaled, gift of vivid presentation, and he indeed looms as one of those outstanding figures in human history who have appeared only at rare intervals."<sup>17</sup>

The "Minor Prophets" were minor only in word count, compared with the longer "Major Prophets," not in their literary quality or theological relevance.

### OUTLINE

- I. Heading 1:1
- II. Nineveh's destruction declared 1:2-14
  - A. The anger and goodness of Yahweh 1:2-8
  - B. Yahweh's plans for Nineveh and Judah 1:9-14
    - 1. The consumption of Nineveh 1:9-11
    - 2. The liberation of Judah 1:12-13
    - 3. The termination of Nineveh 1:14
- III. Nineveh's destruction described 1:15—3:19
  - A. The sovereign justice of Yahweh 1:15—2:2
  - B. Four descriptions of Nineveh's fall 2:3—3:19
    - 1. The first description of Nineveh's fall 2:3-7
    - 2. The second description of Nineveh's fall 2:8-13
    - 3. The third description of Nineveh's fall 3:1-7
    - 4. The fourth description of Nineveh's fall 3:8-19

### MESSAGE

The story that Nahum told is a story of the utter and irrevocable destruction of a great city and a great people. Nahum told the story as prophecy, but what he predicted is now history. Nahum lived when Assyria was threatening Judah's existence. The prophet predicted that God would destroy the proud and cruel capital of the Assyrian Empire: Nineveh. So thorough was Nineveh's destruction that for centuries travelers passed over its ruins without knowing that this mighty and terrible city lay buried beneath their feet. Only in fairly modern times (1842, to be exact) have archaeologists laid bare its ruins.<sup>18</sup> Such was the literal and complete fulfillment of Nahum's prophecy.

The message of Nahum is quite compact. It is clear in statement, logical in argument, and definite in its declarations. In form, it is a vision, a vision of Yahweh, of Yahweh's anger,

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<sup>17</sup>Maier, p. 20. See also J. S. Cochrane, "Literary Features of Nahum" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1954), pp. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup>See Jack Finegan, *Light From the Ancient Past*, p. 211.

and of Yahweh acting in anger. Its permanent value is its unique picture of the wrath of God. The prophet begins the revelation of his vision by painting an angry Yahweh (1:2).<sup>19</sup> This is not an aspect of God's character that is popular in our day, but it is one that is prominent throughout the Bible.

Notice first the prophet's vision of God. All the prophets were impressed with a characteristic of God that shaped their prophecies. Isaiah saw God's holiness. Jeremiah saw God's judgment. Ezekiel saw God's glory. Micah saw God's leadership. And Nahum saw God's wrath.

Nahum used four words to describe God's anger that we could translate "furious," "avenging," "wrathful," and "angry." They all occur in a very brief passage, 1:2-3, heightening the solemnity of Yahweh's anger. The Hebrew word that I have translated "furious" presupposes love and expresses an emotional, subjective action. God's *jealousy* is not self-centered or petty, but instead it expresses His zealous concern for the welfare of those He loves. "Avenging," which occurs three times in these two verses, does not mean taking revenge, but rather the executing of retribution: paying back to someone what that one deserves. It expresses a volitional action, an objective rather than a subjective response.

"Wrathful" suggests a change in God's attitude. The word comes from a root meaning to cross over, and it was used to describe the Israelites crossing the Jordan River. This word suggests the idea that God crossed over from His typical attitudes of tenderness and compassion to an unusual attitude, for Him, of judgment. "Angry" has the idea of being flushed with anger, red in the face, if you will. It occurs in the dual form in Hebrew, suggesting the two nostrils that flare when one gets angry. So Nahum used four words for anger, and one of them three times, for a total of six expressions of God's anger, in these two verses alone.

Four Hebrew words that describe anger occur in this short description of Yahweh in 1:2-3. The total impression Nahum wanted to create was that of a very, very angry God. This was not, however, just a piece of rhetoric in which an extremely agitated prophet projected onto God feelings that were in his own heart. It is a careful and remarkable description of the character of God.

As the revelation unfolds, we move from a threefold description of the anger of God to an exposition of that threefold description. The name "Yahweh" appears three times in verse 2, and then it appears three more times in the next six verses. In verse 2, we have the proclamation describing what God is like. Then, in verses 3-8, we have the explanation. Consider first Nahum's proclamation concerning the character of God.

Yahweh is jealous and avenging (1:2a). The order of these aspects of God's anger indicates that His passion precedes His action. The second proclamation is that He is avenging and wrathful (1:2b). Here the order is reversed; God's action grows out of His passion. The third proclamation, that Yahweh takes vengeance on His adversaries and

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<sup>19</sup>See the Appendix "The Impassibility of God" at the end of these notes for a discussion of if and how human actions affect God.

reserves wrath for His enemies (1:2c), reveals that God directs His passion and action discriminately, not carelessly or capriciously.

This is a very important revelation of God's anger, because it is the reverse of what usually characterizes human anger. People are often controlled by their anger, but God controls His anger. God's passion leads to action, but only against those whom God chooses to make the objects of His wrath.

The explanation of God's anger follows in verses 3-8. Verse 3a explains that Yahweh is a jealous and avenging God (cf. v. 2a). His passion precedes His action. "He is slow to anger and great in power, and will by no means leave the guilty unpunished." Verses 3b-6 explain that Yahweh is avenging and wrathful (cf. v. 2b). His action grows out of His passion. Verses 7-8 explain that Yahweh takes vengeance on His adversaries and reserves wrath for His enemies (cf. v. 2c). His anger is discriminating.

Often human anger is out of control. Anyone near it gets hurt, not just the object of one's anger. Human anger often results in other mistakes that the angry person makes: the fallout of his anger. That is never true of God's anger. He is slow to anger; He never "explodes" or "looses His temper." His anger is measured; He is never out of control. His anger is focused on the particular object or objects of His wrath. Innocent people never suffer because of His anger. He never makes mistakes because He is angry. He is always in full control of Himself and of everything that happens when He is angry.

We turn now from Nahum's vision of the anger of God to his vision of the vengeance of God. Nahum revealed: *why* God acts in vengeance—the *reason* for divine judgment; *when* God acts in vengeance—the *time* of divine judgment; and *how* God acts in vengeance—the *method* of divine judgment.

Why does God act in judgment? According to Nahum, there is a God-ward reason and a man-ward reason. In 1:11 we have the sin against God: pride. This was the fundamental sin of the Assyrians against God. We see it clearly in Sennacherib's invasion of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 36). Pride, expressed in rebellion against God's sovereign control over His creation, was one of Nineveh's greatest sins. The other sin, for which God judges, is man-ward: cruelty. We see this in 3:1-4. The Assyrians were notorious for their oppression and cruelty toward their fellow men.<sup>20</sup> These were the two great sins of Assyria—Godward and manward—and they are the primary reason God gets angry and acts in judgment. It is interesting that these two sins almost always go together, as they did in Assyria. Where there is pride against God, there is usually cruelty toward other people. Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments were to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). When people do this, they are not proud or cruel. Why does God judge? He judges to punish pride and to protect people.

The second question about the judgment of God that Nahum answered was: *When* does God judge? What is the timing by which God judges? Again, we can look at the answer to this question from two viewpoints: God's and man's. God judges after He exercises

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<sup>20</sup>See Erika Bleiblreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17:1 (January/February 1991):52-61, 75.

long patience. A hundred years earlier, God had sent Jonah with a message of repentance to Nineveh. The people had repented, and God had relented. But then the people repented of their repentance. They returned to their former pride and cruelty. Now, after long waiting, God was about to avenge. From the human viewpoint, God judges when sin has become exceedingly sinful. He waits for people to repent, but if they do not, He steps in to judge (3:18-19; cf. Gen. 15:16; 1 Cor. 11:31; 2 Pet. 3:9).

*How* does God act in vengeance? The answer reveals God's method. He used natural and supernatural forces to destroy Nineveh. The Babylonians invaded the city through a breach in the wall that the flooding Tigris River opened up. God supernaturally controlled weather conditions so that the walls gave way. He then led human soldiers to storm through that opening and take the city.

We turn now to the abiding message of this book, for our own age and for every age.

One aspect of the message of Nahum is what it says about God. Nahum teaches the reader that to believe in God's love is to be sure of His wrath. If God is never angry, He does not really love. His anger grows out of His love. Can you look at sin, pride, oppression, and cruelty and not be moved? Then you do not love. Do you not care that Christians are being persecuted for their faith and are being killed daily in over 50 countries in the world? Do you not care that pride is keeping people from acknowledging their need for God in your country? Do you not care that women are being abused and children neglected by fathers who are so selfish that they think only of their own pleasures? If not, you are incapable of love. If God cannot burn with hatred, He is a God incapable of love. To believe in His love is to be sure of His wrath.

Henry Ward Beecher, the famous preacher said, "A person who doesn't know how to be angry doesn't know how to be good." Thomas Fuller wrote, "Anger is one of the sinews of the soul. He who lacks it has a maimed mind."<sup>21</sup>

A corollary to this revelation is another truth about God that Nahum reveals: God's love always interprets His wrath. Whenever we observe some instance of God's vengeance, we must remember that it springs from His love. We cannot always make the connection, and we may not be able to explain the connection to ourselves and others, but there is a connection. God's vengeance proves the depth of His love. Parents who love their children discipline them. Likewise, God disciplines because He loves.

The message of this book also concerns people. One sin against which God acts in vengeance is pride, which says: "I don't need Him. I am sufficient in myself. I am greater than others." If people persist in this sin throughout their lives and refuse to bow the knee to God, they will experience His eternal wrath. If believers lift themselves up in pride, God will bring them down in His hot anger.

Another sin that God judges is cruelty toward our fellowman. Fascination with violence reflects both pride and cruelty. Pride and cruelty are even worse, when, after people have turned from these sins in repentance, and then *repented of their repentance*, they return to

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<sup>21</sup>Cited by Warren W. Wiersbe, "Nahum," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 407.



practice them again with greater zeal than ever. These were the great sins of the ancient Assyrians, and they are the sins of modern man.

There is a message of hope in Nahum as well. It is the revelation that God's wrath is discriminating. God is absolutely just. He will not punish the innocent with the guilty (cf. Gen. 18:23-32). He will not lose control when He judges. Nahum 1:7 reminds us that "Yahweh is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him." The Book of Nahum was an encouragement to the Israelites, and God intended it to encourage all of His people.

I would express the message of the book this way: God's discriminating anger and vengeance against pride and cruelty arise from His great love for people.<sup>22</sup>

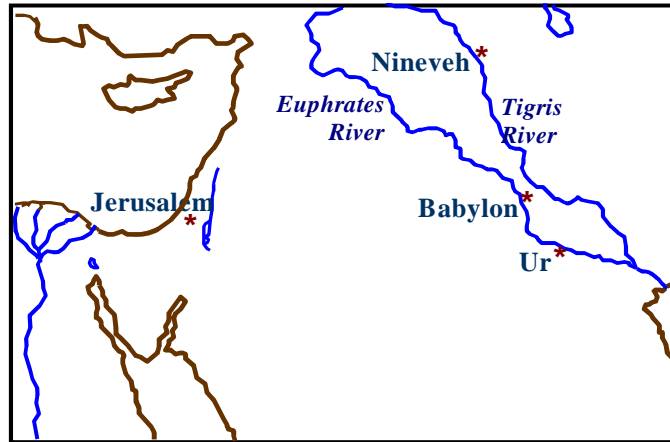
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<sup>22</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:257-71

## Exposition

### I. HEADING 1:1

The writer introduced this book as an "oracle of (concerning) Nineveh." An oracle is a message from Yahweh that usually announces judgment. It is sometimes called a "burden," because it frequently contained a message that lay heavy on the prophet's heart, and came across as a "heavy" message. In this case it is a "war-oracle."<sup>23</sup> This book records "the vision" that "Nahum the Elkoshite" received from the Lord.



"Having been founded by Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-12), Nineveh had a long history. It was located on the east bank of the Tigris River, which formed the western and southern boundaries of the city. A wall extended for eight miles around the northern and eastern boundaries. The section of the city within the walls was nearly three miles in diameter at its greatest width, and it held a population that has been estimated to have been as high as 150,000. The three days' walk required to traverse Nineveh (. . . Jon. 3:3) is no exaggeration."<sup>24</sup>

As noted above, the location of "Elkosh" is presently uncertain. The two most likely general locations are Mesopotamia or Canaan. I tend to think that Elkosh was in Judah, since all the other Old Testament prophets were from Canaan, and Nahum prophesied during the history of the surviving kingdom of Judah (ca. 650 B.C.).

Nahum evidently used "Nineveh," the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to stand for the whole empire in some places, as well as for the city in others. In some texts, the city is definitely in view, as is obvious from the fulfillment of the prophecy, but in others, all of Assyria seems to be in view. It is common, especially in prophetic and poetical parts of the Old Testament, for the writers to use the names of prominent cities to represent their countries. The most frequent example is the use of Jerusalem in place of Judah or even all Israel. This is an example of the common figure of speech called metonymy, in which a writer uses the name of one thing for that of another associated with or suggested by it.

<sup>23</sup>Longman, pp. 771, 786.

<sup>24</sup>Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 796.

## **II. NINEVEH'S DESTRUCTION DECLARED 1:2-14**

The rest of chapter 1 declares Nineveh's destruction in rather hymnic style, and chapters 2 and 3 describe its destruction. Each of these major parts of the book opens with a revelation of Yahweh.

### **A. THE ANGER AND GOODNESS OF YAHWEH 1:2-8**

"The opening verses of Nahum form a prologue dominated by the revelation of God's eternal power and divine nature in creation (cf. Rom 1:20). As in Romans 1:18-32, this revelation is characterized preeminently by God's justice, expressed in retribution (v. 2) and wrath (vv. 2-3, 6) that shake the entire creation (vv. 3-6)."<sup>25</sup>

Armerding made much of the similarities between this section and the Exodus event, God's self-revelation at Mt. Sinai, His appearance to Elijah at Mt. Horeb, and parallels in Isaiah.

"The seventh-century minor prophets focused on the justice of God as exhibited in powerful judgment on an international scale."<sup>26</sup>

"In the Book of Psalms there are three types of Divine Warrior hymns: those sung before a battle, calling on God's aid (Ps. 7); those sung during a battle, focusing on the Lord's protection (Ps. 92); and those celebrating the victory God has won for his people (Ps. 98). Nahum 1:2-8 bears a remarkable similarity to the last type of psalm, the original function of which was to sing the praises of Israel's Warrior God in the aftermath of a victory. What is significant, then, is the placement of Nahum's Divine Warrior hymn. The victory is celebrated before the battle is actually waged. The victory of God against Nineveh is certain. So much so, that the prophet could utter the victory shout years before the battle [cf. Rev. 5:9]."<sup>27</sup>

1:2 Nahum drew a picture of Yahweh as a God who is "jealous" for His chosen people (cf. Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9). That is, He greatly desires their welfare (cf. Deut. 6:15). He is also an "avenging" God who "takes vengeance" on all who violate His standards of righteousness (what is right), though not with human vindictiveness. Third, He is full of "wrath" against those who oppose Him and disregard His grace, those who set themselves up as His "adversaries" and "enemies" (cf. Deut. 32:35, 41). The repetition of avenging, vengeance, and wrathful in this verse creates a strong impression of an angry God. The word "wrath" (Heb. *hemah*) means "to be hot" and describes burning rage and intense fury.

<sup>25</sup>Carl E. Armerding, "Nahum," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 460.

<sup>26</sup>Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 413.

<sup>27</sup>Longman, p. 788.

Why was God so angry? The rest of the oracle explains that it was the behavior of the Ninevites that had aroused His anger.

This is an unusual collection of anthropopathic descriptions of God (i.e., God described as having human feelings). Some students of Scripture have denied that God feels anything, and that descriptions of Him, like this one, only present God as exhibiting the appearance of anger. One example of this view follows.

"Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry toward sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience; because God, whenever he is exercising judgment, exhibits the appearance of one kindled and angered."<sup>28</sup>

I find this explanation unsatisfying, because it robs God of emotion, which is an essential component of personality. Significantly, Calvin excluded emotion from the faculties of the soul, believing that the soul consists only of understanding and will.<sup>29</sup> I believe that God does feel anger, as well as love and every other emotion, and that emotions are part of the image of God in man.

This is the first of several rhetorical allusions to uniquely Neo-Assyrian conquest metaphors in the book. The figure of a destroyer of mountains and seas continues through verse 6, and the figure of the self-predicating warrior extends through verse 8. Other metaphors are the raging storm and the overwhelming dust cloud in verse 3, the overwhelming flood and the uninhabitable ruin in verse 8, and the Assyrian yoke in verses 12-13. The metaphor of the mighty weapon appears in 2:1, and that of the consuming locust swarm in 3:16-17.<sup>30</sup>

"Verse 2 lays a foundation for the entire prophecy: all that follows is rooted in this revelation of the justice and burning zeal of the Lord exercised on behalf of his people."<sup>31</sup>

1:3            However, Yahweh was not out of control in His anger. His "anger" was "slow" in coming to the boiling point (cf. Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18). He waited as long as possible to pour out His judgment (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). About

<sup>28</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:17:13.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:15:7.

<sup>30</sup>See Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:633 (January-March 2002):21-45.

<sup>31</sup>Chisholm, "A Theology . . .," p. 462.

a century before Nahum prophesied, God sent Jonah to warn the Ninevites. This is an evidence of His being slow to anger. God's patience accounts for His allowing the Assyrians to abuse the Israelites for such a long time. Patience is sometimes a sign of weakness, but not so with the Lord. He is also "great in power," which makes the prospect of His releasing His anger terrifying (cf. Deut. 8:17-18). He will not pass over any guilty person and leave him or her unpunished, but will bring them to judgment eventually. Whirlwinds and storms manifest this angry aspect of God's character and His power (cf. Job 9:17). He is so great that the clouds are for Him what the dust on the ground is for humans (cf. 2 Sam. 22:10; Ps. 18:9). The great "clouds" overhead are "like dust" particles to the great God who resides in the heavens.

Verses 2 and 3 repeat "Yahweh" five times. This literary device has the effect of underlining the identity of Israel's covenant God. There should be no mistake whom Nahum was describing, even though he drew attention to characteristics of the Lord that were not the ones that His people liked to think about. Nahum frequently used Yahweh's name throughout the book.

- 1:4 A simple word from Yahweh can cause the humanly uncontrollable "sea" and the "rivers" to "dry" up. The Lord had demonstrated this power when He parted the Red Sea and stopped the Jordan River from flowing (Exod. 14:21; Josh. 3:16). It can make "Bashan," "Carmel," and "Lebanon," which were normally lush, productive regions—wither away. The Lord had likewise sent many droughts on various parts of Canaan to encourage His people to return to Him (cf. 1 Kings 17—18). It is heat that causes bodies of water to dry up and bodies of land to wither away, but it is the heat of God's wrath in judgment that is sometimes behind this physical heat.
- 1:5 Yahweh produces earthquakes and landslides, other evidences of His awesome power. "Mountains" are the most stable physical features on this planet, yet God can move them. Mt. Sinai quaked when God revealed Himself there (Exod. 19:18). "His" very "presence" can cause the entire "earth" and "all" its "inhabitants" to convulse and upheave. The vast Assyrian Empire, therefore, was not too much for Him to overthrow.
- 1:6 No one can continue to exist if Yahweh is indignant with him or her. Nahum did not mean that the final destiny of God's enemies is annihilation. He meant that no one can survive His unchecked wrath. The Hebrew word translated "indignant," *za'am*, means to be enraged, like boiling water. *No one* "can endure" Yahweh's "burning . . . anger." Nahum made these points strongly by using two rhetorical questions.

"Unlike a regular question, which is soliciting information, a rhetorical question assumes the answer is already known by both the asker and the asked. Instead of the statement

which could have been used in its place, the rhetorical question forces the hearer to get actively involved in the discussion. . . . The technique is used elsewhere in Nahum (2:11; 3:7-8) and in other prophetic texts."<sup>32</sup>

The Assyrians should have learned this truth when God destroyed their army, as it surrounded Jerusalem, in one night (2 Kings 18—19). Yahweh's "wrath" pours out "like fire," and then even solid "rocks" break up (cf. 1 Kings 19:11). How much less will human flesh and manmade walls stand against His anger!

1:7 In contrast, Yahweh is also "good," not just angry and vengeful (cf. Rom. 11:22). He Himself is a more secure hiding place than any mountain, hill, or great city, like Nineveh, when people face trouble (cf. Ps. 27:1; 37:39; 43:2; 52:7). Furthermore, "He knows those who take refuge in Him" by drawing near to Him and resting their confidence in Him. He takes note of those who trust in Him—as well as those who incur His wrath. Whereas the previous revelations of God reflect His imminent dealings with the Assyrians, this aspect of His character (name) should have encouraged the Israelites to trust and obey Him.

1:8 Nahum returned to the wrathful aspect of God's character because that was the focus of his oracle. Without identifying Nineveh, the prophet described Yahweh destroying it totally and permanently, as with a tidal wave. Johnston showed that Nahum's maledictions are unique among the prophets, and probably imitate the Neo-Assyrian treaty curses, which were unusually brutal in the ancient Near East.<sup>33</sup> Nahum probably described an unrestrained army invasion (cf. Isa. 8:7-8; Jer. 47:2; Dan. 9:26; 11:40). Remarkably, when her enemies overthrew Nineveh, its rivers overflowed and washed away part of Nineveh's walls—a parallel and literal fulfillment of prophecy!<sup>34</sup>

Using another figure, Yahweh said He would pursue His enemies until He caught up with them and killed them, even if it took all night. Normally battles ceased at nightfall and resumed at daybreak because fighting became so difficult at night. But the Lord would not let night stop Him from pursuing and slaying His enemies. They would not escape from Him simply because time passed. "Darkness" also has the metaphorical connotation of evil, spiritual lostness, and eternal judgment (e.g., Job 17:13; Ps. 82:5; 88:12; Prov. 4:19; 20:20; Isa. 8:22; 42:7; Jer. 23:12; Matt. 4:16; 8:12; John 3:19; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9; Jude 6; Rev. 16:10).

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<sup>32</sup>Baker, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup>Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:632 (October-December 2001):415-36.

<sup>34</sup>*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by D. J. Wiseman.

The Lord is angry with those who abuse others, especially those who abuse His people, and He will punish them. This section stresses the justice, power, and goodness of Yahweh.

"We must keep in mind that the message of Nahum is not concretely applied to Assyria and Judah until later in the book. The psalm that occurs at the beginning of the book [1:2-8] presents a picture of God applicable for all times—he is the Warrior who judges evil."<sup>35</sup>

The first eight verses of Nahum are a partial acrostic.

"If an entire acrostic conveys completeness, half an acrostic may well be a prophetic way of indicating completeness with still more to come. Assyria faces imminent judgment, but only half of what is eventually in store for her."<sup>36</sup>

### **B. YAHWEH'S PLANS FOR NINEVEH AND JUDAH 1:9-14**

Whereas the previous section assured Nineveh's doom, the primary focus of attention in it was the character of Yahweh and His ability to destroy His enemies. Now the focus shifts more directly to Nineveh. Three sections reveal Yahweh's plans for Nineveh (vv. 1-11, 14) and Judah (vv. 12-13) in chiasitic form.

#### **1. The consumption of Nineveh 1:9-11**

- 1:9 Yahweh will frustrate and destroy all attempts to thwart His will. Even though they may appear to succeed at first, they will not endure. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, had besieged Jerusalem once (1 Kings 18), but the Assyrians never did so a second time. Their plan to oppose God's people was actually opposition against *God Himself*, and He did not permit it to succeed. Once Nineveh fell, it was never rebuilt.<sup>37</sup>
- 1:10 "Tangled (Heb. *sebukim*) thorns" are tough to penetrate, but they are no match for fire. Likewise the Ninevites, as confused as they would be when their city was under attack, would be no match for the consuming fire of Yahweh's wrath (cf. v. 6). Many of the Ninevites were confused because they were drunk (Heb. *sebu'im*). Yahweh would destroy them as easily and quickly as fire burned up the dead stalks left in fields after harvest.
- 1:11 Since the Lord will destroy any plot against Him and His people (v. 9), the Assyrians were in trouble. "One of the Assyrians" had gone forth "who plotted evil" against Him. This is probably a reference to Sennacherib. He

<sup>35</sup>Longman, p. 776. See idem, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982):290-307; and Kevin J. Cathcart, "The Divine Warrior and the War of Yahweh in Nahum," in *Biblical Studies in Contemporary Thought: The Tenth Anniversary Commemorative Volume of the Trinity College Biblical Institute 1966-1975*, pp. 68-76.

<sup>36</sup>Duane L. Christensen, "The Acrostic of Nahum Reconsidered," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87 (1975):25.

<sup>37</sup>*The New Bible* . . . , s.v. "Nineveh."

was "wicked" and worthless because He had opposed Yahweh (cf. 2 Kings 18).

## **2. The liberation of Judah 1:12-13**

Emphasis now shifts from Assyria to Judah.

"In the form of an oracle (v. 12, *This is what the Lord says*) to two parties in a legal dispute, God pronounces his verdicts alternately to Judah, for her acquittal and hope (vv. 12-13, 15; 2:2), and to Assyria, for her destruction (v. 14; 2:1)."<sup>38</sup>

1:12 Yahweh declared that, even though the Assyrians were powerful and numerous, He would "cut" them "off," and they would pass off the stage of history. This must have been hard for many Israelites to believe, since the Assyrians had been their dreaded enemy for centuries. Even though the Lord had "afflicted" the Israelites, He would "afflict" them "no longer." Evidently He meant that He would not afflict them *with the Assyrians* any longer, since other nations *did afflict* them after Assyria passed off the scene. This is the only place in the prophecy where, "Thus says the LORD," occurs, guaranteeing that what He said would definitely happen. This verse is the clearest indication that Nahum ministered before the decline of Assyria as a military and political state.<sup>39</sup>

"In the context the expression 'quiet, and likewise many,' [AV; 'at full *strength*, and likewise many' NASB; 'unscathed and numerous' NIV] although a literal translation of the Hebrew, does not seem to make much sense. Actually the Hebrew here represents a transliteration of a long-forgotten Assyrian legal formula. Excavation in the ruins of ancient Nineveh, buried since 612 B.C., has brought to light thousands of ancient Assyrian tablets, dozens of which contain this Assyrian legal formula. It proves, on investigation, to indicate joint and several responsibility for carrying out an obligation. Nahum quotes the LORD as using this Assyrian formula in speaking to the Assyrians, saying in effect, 'Even though your entire nation joins as one person to resist me, nevertheless I shall overcome you.' As the words would have been equally incomprehensible to the later Hebrew copyists, their retention is striking evidence of the care of the scribes in copying exactly what they found in the manuscripts, and testifies to God's providential preservation of the Biblical text."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Baker, p. 32.

<sup>39</sup>Longman, "Nahum," p. 798.

<sup>40</sup>*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 950-51.



1:13 The Lord promised to "break" Assyria's oppression of the Israelites, as when someone removed a "yoke" from the neck of an ox, or the chains ("shackles") that bound a prisoner. For years the Israelites had to endure Assyrian oppression—including invasion, occupation, and taxation (cf. 2 Kings 19:20-37; 2 Chron. 32:1-23; Isa. 37:27-38).

### **3. The termination of Nineveh 1:14**

The subject reverts to Nineveh.

Yahweh had commanded His heavenly host to manage the world's affairs in such a way that Nineveh's "name" (or perhaps Nineveh's king's "name") would not continue forever. This does not mean that succeeding generations would be completely ignorant of Nineveh and its rulers. More is known about Assyrian literature than that of any other ancient Semitic people except the Hebrews.<sup>41</sup> But the residents, particularly the king, would have no surviving descendants (heirs).<sup>42</sup>

The Lord also promised to destroy Nineveh's idols and remove them from their temples. The Assyrians often carried off the idols of the nations they conquered, in order to demonstrate the superiority of *their* "gods" over those of the conquered, as did other ancient Near Eastern nations (cf. 1 Sam. 5). The conquering Medes, however, despised idolatry and did away with multitudes of images that existed in Nineveh.<sup>43</sup> Yahweh would "prepare" Nineveh's "grave," since He would likewise bury—metaphorically—the contemptible city. It was a great curse in the ancient Near East to have no descendants, and it was a great humiliation to have no gods, but both fates would befall Nineveh.

### **III. NINEVEH'S DESTRUCTION DESCRIBED 1:15—3:19**

This second major part of Nahum contains another introduction and four descriptions of Nineveh's destruction. Having revealed general statements about Yahweh's judgment, Nahum next communicated more specific descriptions of Nineveh's demise. As in the previous section, he also gave promises of Israel's restoration.

"Nahum portrays [the] siege, reproduces its horrors and its savagery, its cruelties and mercilessness, in language so realistic that one is able to see it and feel it. First comes the fighting in the suburbs. Then the assault upon the walls. Then the capture of the city and its destruction."<sup>44</sup>

The section begins, as the first major one did (cf. 1:2-8), with an emphasis on Yahweh—who contrasts with the human destroyer of Nineveh. Humans can destroy, but it takes Yahweh to deliver. This section is also chiasmic, as was 1:9-14.

<sup>41</sup>See Longman, "Nahum," p. 798.

<sup>42</sup>For a chart of the historical fulfillments of Nahum's prophecies, see *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1495. Patterson, pp. 105-7, also catalogued some fulfillments.

<sup>43</sup>Charles Lee Feinberg, *Jonah Micah and Nahum*, p. 132.

<sup>44</sup>Raymond Calkins, *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*, p. 82.

### A. THE SOVEREIGN JUSTICE OF YAHWEH 1:15—2:2

1:15 This is the first verse of chapter 2 in the Hebrew Bible. It is a *janus*, a transition that looks back to what precedes and forward to what follows.

Nahum called his audience to give attention. Someone was coming over the "mountains" with a "good news" message of "peace." Consequently the people of Judah could "celebrate" their "feasts"; they had a future. They should "pay" their "vows" to the Lord, because He had answered their prayers. The "wicked" Assyrians would "never again . . . pass through" their land, as they had done in the past. The message was that they had been "cut off completely," like a piece of a garment, and so would be no threat in the future. The prophet spoke as if Nineveh had already fallen—and a messenger had just arrived with the news! The same statement appears in Isaiah 52:7, where the messenger announces the defeat of Babylon.

"So complete was its [Nineveh's] destruction that when Xenophon passed by the site about 200 years later, he thought the mounds were the ruins of some other city. And Alexander the Great, fighting in a battle nearby, did not realize that he was near the ruins of Nineveh."<sup>45</sup>

The Apostle Paul quoted the first part of this verse in Romans 10:15, in reference to those messengers who bring similar good news, namely: the gospel.

"The message is one of peace, a peace from external oppression and a new kind of peace with the God who is the giver of all life."<sup>46</sup>

2:1 Nahum turned from addressing the people of Judah to the people of Nineveh. He used the Hebrew prophetic perfect tense, which predicts future events as though they were past, to heighten belief in their certainty. "One who scatters" would "come up against" Nineveh. "Scatterer" is a common figure for a victorious king (cf. Ps. 68:1; Isa. 24:1; Jer. 52:8). Consequently, the Ninevites should "man" their "fortress," "watch the road" for the coming invader, and "strengthen" themselves. These measures would prove futile because the Lord would destroy the city. Nahum was speaking sarcastically. This section has been called "a taunt song."<sup>47</sup>

"Sennacherib had spent no less than six years building his armory, which occupied a terraced area of forty acres. It was enlarged further by Esarhaddon and contained all the

<sup>45</sup>Elliott E. Johnson, "Nahum," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1499.

<sup>46</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:67.

<sup>47</sup>Longman, "Nahum," p. 801.

weaponry required for the extension and maintenance of the Assyrian empire: bows, arrows, quivers, chariots, wagons, armor, horses, mules, and equipment (cf. Ezek 23:24; 39:9). The royal 'road' had been enlarged by Sennacherib to a breadth of seventy-eight feet, facilitating the movement of troops."<sup>48</sup>

Even though the Ninevites did all these things, they could not escape overthrow. The "invader" proved to be Cyaxares the Mede and Nabopolassar the Babylonian.<sup>49</sup> However, the "scatterer" behind them was Yahweh.

2:2 Turning back to Judah again (1:15), the prophet repeated that Yahweh would restore Israel to its former glory. Whereas a destroyer would destroy Nineveh (v. 1), Yahweh would restore Judah. Its fate would be the opposite of Nineveh's. Nineveh presently enjoyed great glory, but would suffer destruction, while Israel, having experienced devastation, would become splendid again. "Israel" was a name connected with Israel's glory, while "Jacob" recalls the perverse aspects of the nation's experience, reflecting its patriarch's names and life experience.<sup>50</sup> The invading Assyrians doubtless destroyed many of Israel's grapevines, but "vine branches" also symbolized the Israelites (cf. Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7). The devastators of Israel had been Assyria, and later the Babylonians. The promise probably looks beyond Israel's restoration, after the Assyrians' devastation, to her restoration after all her devastations throughout history. This restoration will take place in the Millennium.

### **B. FOUR DESCRIPTIONS OF NINEVEH'S FALL 2:3—3:19**

The rest of the book contains four descriptions of Nineveh's fall that were evidently messages that Nahum delivered at various times in Judah.

#### **1. The first description of Nineveh's fall 2:3-7**

The first message sees the details of the siege of Nineveh taking place in the city when the enemy attacked, and it ends with the reaction of a segment of the populace (v. 7).

2:3 Nahum again focused on the destroyer (scatterer) of Nineveh (cf. v. 1). He described the siege and capture of Nineveh. "The shields" and uniforms of the soldiers who invaded Nineveh would be "red." This was, in fact, a favorite color of the Median and Babylonian armies (cf. Ezek. 23:14).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Armerding, p. 472.

<sup>49</sup>For an ancient account of the battles that resulted in Nineveh's fall, see D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times*, p. 76; or James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 303-5.

<sup>50</sup>See C. F. Keil, "Nahum," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:19.

<sup>51</sup>Feinberg, p. 136.

However, they may have been red with blood and or from the copper that they used to cover both shields and uniforms.<sup>52</sup>

"These images speak of blood, violence, and warfare. Isaiah refers to the custom the Assyrians had of rolling their outer garments in blood before a battle (see Is. 9:5) to strike terror in the hearts of their opponents. Here the tables would be turned. While others would have 'shields,' 'chariots,' and 'spears,' the people of Nineveh would be bathed in blood—their own blood."<sup>53</sup>

Nahum saw the invading "chariots . . . flashing" with "steel." Scythed chariots were in use at this time in the ancient Near East, chariots with steel blades protruding from them and their wheels.<sup>54</sup> Spears made out of "cypress" (pine) were long and straight, and Nineveh's invaders would brandish them showing their readiness for battle.<sup>55</sup>

2:4 The invaders' "chariots" would "race" through Nineveh's "streets" and "squares." So gleaming with red and steel would they be, that they would look like "torches" or "lightning" darting to and fro. Since Nahum described the enemy advancing toward the city walls (v. 5), he may have seen these chariots darting through the suburban streets and squares outside the walls.<sup>56</sup>

2:5 The Assyrian king would call on his "nobles" to defend the city, but they would "stumble" in their haste to do so. They would "hurry" to Nineveh's walls to set up some type of protective shield ("mantelet") to deflect the attackers' arrows, spears, and stones.<sup>57</sup>

2:6 The Tigris River flowed close to the walls of Nineveh, and two of its tributaries, the Khosr and the Tebiltu, passed through the city. Virtually all of Nineveh's 15 gates also contained passages for the waters from one of these tributaries or its canals. They were called "gates of the rivers."<sup>58</sup>

Sennacherib had built a double dam and reservoir system to the north of the city to control the amount of water that entered it and to prevent flooding.<sup>59</sup> Nahum may have seen the invader opening these dam gates and flooding the city. However, ancient historians wrote that flooding from heavy rains also played a role in Nineveh's fall.

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<sup>52</sup>Johnson, p. 1500

<sup>53</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1516.

<sup>54</sup>Feinberg, p. 136.

<sup>55</sup>See also Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, pp. 4-5, 294-95, 452.

<sup>56</sup>Maier, p. 243.

<sup>57</sup>Yadin, p. 316.

<sup>58</sup>Armerding, p. 476.

<sup>59</sup>Maier, p. 253.

"Diodorus wrote that in the third year of the siege heavy rains caused a nearby river to flood part of the city and break part of the walls (*Bibliotheca Historica* 2. 26. 9; 2. 27. 13). Xenophon referred to terrifying thunder (presumably with a storm) associated with the city's capture (*Anabasis*, 3. 4. 12). Also the Khosr River, entering the city from the northwest at the Ninlil Gate and running through the city in a southwesterly direction, may have flooded because of heavy rains, or the enemy may have destroyed its sluice gate."<sup>60</sup>

Other possibilities are that Nahum saw fortified bridges, the city gates that lay below the nearby Tigris River, sluice gates that emptied water into moats, other breaches in Nineveh's walls made by water, or floodgates that controlled the Khosr within the city.<sup>61</sup>

The "palace" the prophet saw washed away ("dissolved") was perhaps that of Ashurbanipal, which stood in the north part of Nineveh.<sup>62</sup> However, Nineveh contained many palaces and temples, and the Hebrew word *hekal*, used here, describes both types of structures. Assyria had ruined many enemy cities, palaces, and temples, but now this fate would befall Nineveh.

2:7 The Lord's judgment of Nineveh had been determined. The city would be "stripped" of its treasures, and they and their possessors would be "carried away" to other places. Even the slave girls, the bottom of the social scale, as well as the nobles (v. 5), the top, would lament the fall of the city. They would make mournful sounds and beat "their breasts" like "doves" that cooed and flapped their wings. Normally, one would expect slaves in a city to rejoice at its destruction, since that would mean their liberation. But life in Nineveh was good for some foreigners taken there as captives.

## **2. The second description of Nineveh's fall 2:8-13**

The second description of Nineveh's fall is more philosophical than the first one, and ends with a statement by Yahweh that gives the reason for its fall (v. 13).

2:8 "Nineveh" had been as placid as the waters around the city for most of her history. This is the first explicit reference to Nineveh since 1:1, yet because of 1:1 we know that the prophet's revelations of destruction dealt with Nineveh. Nahum now saw it *inundated* with water, and enemy soldiers and its inhabitants fleeing in panic, like water gushing from a broken dam. Someone might call to them "Stop, stop," perhaps to defend the city, but "no one" would turn back.

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<sup>60</sup>Johnson, p. 1495.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 1500.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 1501.

2:9 The prophet called the invading soldiers to "plunder" Nineveh, to take for themselves its vast "wealth" of "silver," "gold," and other valuable treasures. Nineveh had accumulated her wealth through centuries of conquests, taxation, and trading.<sup>63</sup> It was the richest city in the ancient Near East in the seventh century B.C.<sup>64</sup>

"According to historical records, the Medes were the first to breach the defenses of Nineveh. Later, the Babylonians successfully attacked it. The Medes, however, were not interested in a long-term occupation of the area, but in a quick profit."<sup>65</sup>

2:10 The invaders would empty Nineveh of her treasures, and it would become a desolate wasteland. The Hebrew words in the first part of this verse sound like water flowing out of a bottle when read aloud, a literary device called onomatopoeia. Even the sound of the description of Nineveh's fall reinforced the prophecy. Hearts would melt and knees knock when people observed its overthrow. "Anguish" would grip "the whole body" of observers "and all their faces" would go "pale." If Nineveh could fall, would anything be secure?

2:11 After Nineveh's destruction, the people who remained would taunt the Assyrians by comparing Nineveh to a lion's "den" and nearby "feeding" grounds. They would also compare its inhabitants to "lions." Assyria's leaders were lion-like, and its youths like young lions, having plundered and preyed on others. But their once-secure haunts were now desolate.

"Assyrian kings prided themselves in their ability to kill lions in lion hunts. And the kings likened their own ferocity and fearlessness to that of lions. For example, Sennacherib boasted of his military fury by saying, 'Like a lion I raged.' Lions were frequently pictured in Assyrian reliefs and decorations."<sup>66</sup>

2:12 Lions normally kill only what they need to eat, but the Assyrians "killed" innumerable enemies, not only to sustain their own needs, but just for the pleasure of conquest. They were unusually vicious toward their enemies, and notorious in the ancient world for being cruel.<sup>67</sup> Yet lions, while vicious, are not known for being excessively so.

<sup>63</sup>See D. D. Luckenbill, ed., *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1:181, 211, 263; 2:20, 133, 205; and Pritchard, ed., 274-301. For brief histories of Mesopotamia in the seventh century B.C., see Longman, pp. 767-68; and E. von Voightlander, "A Survey of Neo-Babylonian History" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963).

<sup>64</sup>Armerding, p. 477.

<sup>65</sup>Longman, "Nahum," p. 807.

<sup>66</sup>Johnson, p. 1501. See also Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to the Neo-Assyrian Lion Motif," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:631 (July-September 2001):287-307.

<sup>67</sup>See Pritchard, ed., p. 285; idem, ed., *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, p. 373; Feinberg, p. 141; Hobart E. Freeman, *Nahum Zephaniah Habakkuk*, pp. 36-38; and Maier, pp. 281-83.

2:13 Nahum closed this message with a word from Yahweh in which the Lord verbalized His antagonism toward Nineveh. What a terrible fate it is to have Almighty Yahweh say, "I am against you!" (cf. 3:5; Jer. 21:13; 50:31; 51:25; Ezek. 5:8; 13:8; 26:3; 28:22; 39:1; Rom. 8:31). He promised to destroy Nineveh's instruments of warfare. Invading armies would slay her "young lions" (men). She would no longer devour other peoples like a lion does its prey. And "messengers" would "no longer" leave Nineveh with threats and to demand submission and taxes (cf. 2 Kings 18:17-25; 19:22; Isa. 37:4, 6).

### **3. The third description of Nineveh's fall 3:1-7**

This description explains further the "why" for Nineveh's fall, whereas the first two descriptions in the previous chapter gave more of the actual events, the "what" of it. There is much similarity between the descriptions of the siege in 2:3-4 and 3:2-3, however. This section has been called a woe oracle because it pronounces doom on Nineveh in typical woe oracle fashion (cf. Isa. 5:18-19; Amos 5:18-20; 6:1-7; Mic. 2:1-4).<sup>68</sup>

3:1 Nahum pronounced woe on Nineveh, a city characterized by bloodshed. Here, as often elsewhere (e.g., Isa. 3:9), "woe" announces impending doom. Sometimes "woe" is an expression of grief (e.g., Isa. 6:5), but that is only its secondary meaning here. As noted earlier, the Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty that included cutting off hands, feet, ears, noses, gouging out eyes, lopping off heads, impaling bodies, and peeling the skin off living victims.<sup>69</sup> Nahum saw the city as completely "full of lies" (cf. 2 Kings 18:31) and "pillage" (cf. 2:9). Nineveh always had "prey"; she was constantly on the prowl looking for other nations to conquer.

3:2-3 Again the prophet described the sounds and sights that would accompany the battle in which Nineveh would fall (cf. 2:3-4). Whips could be heard as soldiers urged their horses forward. Nahum heard the sound of chariot wheels and the hoofs of horses bearing cavalry soldiers clattering on the pavement. "Horsemen" were "charging," "swords" were "flashing," and "spears" were "gleaming" in the light. The large number of "corpses" on the scene of battle impressed Nahum. They seemed to be "countless," so many that they appeared to cover the ground completely. The living soldiers had trouble moving about because they kept tripping over dead bodies. This was a scene that someone might have seen had they visited the site of one of the Assyrian army's battles, but this one was taking place in Nineveh and the dead were mainly Ninevites.

"God has allowed Nahum to witness the fall of Nineveh even though it is years, perhaps even decades, away."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup>See Patterson, pp. 81-82.

<sup>69</sup>See Maier, p. 292.

<sup>70</sup>Longman, "Nahum," p. 813.

"No passage of Hebrew literature surpasses this for vividness of description."<sup>71</sup>

- 3:4 This devastation was coming on Nineveh because of her wickedness. She had played the harlot often by luring unsuspecting nations and then harming them. For example, King Ahaz had been attracted to Assyria and had appealed for her to come and help Judah (2 Kings 16:7-18), but when she did, years later, she came to destroy rather than assist (cf. Isa. 36:16-17). The Ninevites were also practitioners of sorcery; they appealed to the spirit world for power to determine and control their destiny and that of their victims. The pagan worship of the Assyrians involved occultism, sexual perversion, and human degradation. Assyria had lured other nations, then, with immoral attractions and magical arts. These practices resulted in the enslavement of many nations and people groups; Nineveh sold them into slavery.
- 3:5 Almighty Yahweh repeated that He was "against" Nineveh (cf. 2:13). He would expose her shamefulness because of her shameless acts, as when someone lifted the skirt of a lady over her head so high that he covered her face with it (cf. Isa. 47:1-3; Jer. 13:26-27; Ezek. 16:37; Hos. 2:3-5; Rev. 17:15-16). "Nakedness" was a great shame in the ancient world. She who had enslaved the nations (v. 4) would have her own nakedness exposed to them.
- 3:6 As the Assyrians had made many other people detestable, the Lord would do the same to them. Nahum's picture is that of God covering Nineveh with human excrement and then lifting her up for all to behold, a disgusting sight indeed.
- 3:7 It is no wonder then that everyone who saw Nineveh would recoil from her and remark on her devastated condition. No one would grieve over Nineveh's destruction because all would be glad that she got what she deserved. Mourners over her demise would not be found, because all the people would rejoice, not sorrow, over her humiliation (v. 19). At least a few mourners would attend any funeral in the ancient Near East, even if relatives had to pay them to attend. But no one would agree to weep for Nineveh, even if paid to do so. This is hyperbole, but the point is clear: the world would rejoice when Nineveh fell.

#### **4. The fourth description of Nineveh's fall 3:8-19**

This section, evidently another message that Nahum delivered concerning Nineveh's fall, begins by comparing it to the fall of another great city. Nahum proceeded to use many figures of speech to describe how various segments of Ninevite society would respond to the coming invasion. The literary form of the section is that of a taunt song.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Charles L. Feinberg, "Nahum," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 867.

<sup>72</sup>See Patterson, pp. 93-94.



- 3:8 Nineveh was similar to the Egyptian capital, "No-amon" ("city of [the god] Amon," Gr. Thebes). Thebes had been the capital of Upper (southern) Egypt and had stood at the site of modern Karnak and Luxor, 400 miles south of Cairo. Water from rivers, tributaries, canals, and moats surrounded this city, as it did Nineveh, and both were capitals of mighty kingdoms. However, Thebes had fallen to Ashurbanipal the Assyrian in 663 B.C. Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted its fall (Jer. 46:25; Ezek. 30:14, 16). Just as Thebes' solid and liquid defenses did not protect that city, so Nineveh's defenses would not protect it, either.
- 3:9 In contrast to Nineveh, Thebes had several allies. "Ethiopia" (Cush) was the country No-amon ruled over. It was a territory that included parts of modern southern Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and northern Ethiopia along the Red Sea. "Egypt" (Lower Egypt) in Nahum's day was a separate country to the north of Ethiopia, and Ethiopia was the stronger of the two powers. "Put" evidently lay farther to the south, reaching as far as present-day Somalia on the eastern tip of Africa, and "Lubim" (part of modern Libya) was to the west. Some references to Put in ancient literature seem to put it in the same area as modern Libya (cf. Gen. 10:6; 1 Chron. 1:8; Jer. 46:9; et al.), but the location described above seems more likely.<sup>73</sup> Thus Thebes' allies surrounded her for many miles, but that did not guarantee her security.
- 3:10 No-amon had become "an exile" and had gone "into captivity" to Assyria (cf. 2:7).<sup>74</sup> Instead of taking infants into captivity, however, the Assyrians simply slaughtered them where they found them, even at street corners (cf. Hos. 13:16). The "honorable men" of Thebes suffered the humiliation of being auctioned off as slaves and dragged away to Assyria in chains.
- 3:11 The same fate would befall Nineveh. It too would lose its powers of self-defense and self-control. This would happen through excessive wine drinking (cf. 1:10), but also in a metaphorical sense, because the Ninevites would imbibe a cup of wrath from Yahweh. They would vanish from the world.

"The disappearance of the Assyrian people will always remain an unique and striking phenomenon in ancient history. Other, similar, kingdoms and empires have indeed passed away, but the people have lived on. Recent discoveries have, it is true, shown that poverty-stricken communities perpetuated the old Assyrian names and various places, for instance on the ruined site of Ashur, for many centuries, but the essential truth remains the same. A nation which had existed two thousand years and had ruled a wide area, lost its independent character."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup>See Maier, p. 322; and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, p. 25.

<sup>74</sup>See Armerding, pp. 484-85, for a short history of the fall of Thebes.

<sup>75</sup>J. B. Bury, et al., eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 3:130.

As noted above, the ancients could not find Nineveh after its destruction, and modern archaeologists, the Frenchman Botta and the Englishman Layard, first found physical evidence of Nineveh's existence in 1842. In the past, many people had sought to hide from the invading Assyrians, but when Nineveh fell, the Ninevites would try to hide.

- 3:12 Nineveh's "fortifications" would prove as weak as "fig trees" laden "with ripe fruit." Ripe figs fall off their trees of their own accord, and so easily would Nineveh's fortifications fall. Though the city's walls were large and impressive, they would crumble under their own weight when water eroded their foundations (cf. 2:6). The inhabitants, too, would drop like ripe fruit into the hands of their enemies.
- 3:13 The Ninevites would prove to be as defenseless, vulnerable, and fearful as "women"—in contrast to lion-like soldiers (cf. Isa. 19:16; Jer. 50:37; 51:30). Their "gates" would be so weak that they could have been left open, rather than bolted shut, because "fire" would consume them (cf. Isa. 10:16-17).
- 3:14 With irony (cf. 2:1), Nahum urged the Ninevites to "draw" plenty of "water" so they would have enough to drink, and so they could extinguish the fires that would burn their gates and city. They should "strengthen" their "fortifications," and make more bricks to build their walls and battlements higher and stronger, and "mortar" to fill in the holes the enemy would punch in them.

"Nineveh's ruins include traces of a counter-wall built by the inhabitants to defend the city near places where the enemy had broken down some of the city's defenses."<sup>76</sup>

- 3:15 However, if the Ninevites did strengthen their defenses, "fire" would "consume" them wherever they went to draw water, and "the sword" would "cut" them "down" as they built. The walls of Nineveh would become the walls of her tomb rather than her defense.

"There was no question about the clear traces of the burning of the temple (as also in the palace of Sennacherib), for a layer of ash about two inches thick lay clearly defined in places on the southeast side about the level of the Sargon pavement."<sup>77</sup>

The city's destruction would be like a "locust" invasion. A hoard of invading soldiers would descend on Nineveh and leave nothing remaining (cf. Joel 1:2-13). Nahum ironically encouraged the Ninevites to multiply their numbers like locusts since they would have to face a swarm of

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<sup>76</sup>Johnson, p. 1503.

<sup>77</sup>R. Campbell Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, *A Century of Exploration at Nineveh*, p. 77.

invading locust-like soldiers.<sup>78</sup> Another interpretation is that Nahum was addressing the invading soldiers and encouraging them to increase their number so they would be successful. This seems less likely to me since the references to "yourself" are to the people of Nineveh in the context, and an ironical word to them makes sense.

- 3:16 Assyrian "traders," seemingly "more" numerous "than the stars," had increased their country's wealth. However, they would be like locusts when the invasion came, in that they would fly away in vast numbers rather than defending Nineveh.
- 3:17 Assyria's guards also reminded Nahum of locusts. There were huge numbers of them, but when the heat of battle came they would run away. Locusts do the same thing. They take their places on walls in the cool of the day, but when the hot sun beats on them they desert their posts and seek more comfortable surroundings.
- 3:18 Nahum addressed the king of Assyria who would rule after Nineveh's downfall (in 612 B.C.). This turned out to be Ashur-uballit, who tried for three years to hold the empire together from the city of Haran. The prophet told the king that Assyria's "shepherds" (leaders) and "nobles" were not providing leadership for their people. They were lying down on the job, asleep at the switch (cf. Isa. 5:26-27). The ordinary citizens were "scattered" all over, rather than being under the direction of the leaders, like sheep without shepherds. No one was available to re-gather them into the imperial fold.
- 3:19 Addressing Nineveh again, in conclusion, Nahum reiterated that the "breakdown" of Assyria would be impossible to repair. She had a fatal illness from which she would not recover. Everyone who heard about her demise would rejoice because her long practice of wickedness had touched everyone.

Only two books in the Bible end with rhetorical questions, Jonah and Nahum, both of which focus on Nineveh. Jonah ends on a note of compassion for Nineveh, but Nahum ends with assurance that God's patience had run out and the destruction of Nineveh was now certain.

Is this book only about God's judgment on Nineveh and the Assyrians, or does it have a broader message? The reasons God brought Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire down are the same reasons He will humble any similar people. Any nation or city that lusts for conquest, practices violence and brutality to dominate others, abuses its power, oppresses the weak, worships anything but Yahweh, or seeks help from the demonic world—shares in Nineveh's sins and can expect her fate.

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<sup>78</sup>Longman, "Nahum," p. 825.

## Appendix

### The Impassibility of God

Many theologians have held the doctrine of "divine impassibility" over many centuries. This doctrine is as follows. Nothing in the created universe, external to God Himself, can cause Him to suffer or to be affected at all. See, for example, William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 2:387.

This truth may raise questions in the minds of some concerning God's responses to His people's obedience, on the one hand, and our disobedience, on the other. Does man's obedience make God happy? And does our disobedience make Him sad? This is the impression that most people would draw just from reading the Bible.

Certainly the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) portrays God, as the father in the story, rejoicing over his younger son's repentance and return to home. It pictures a "happy" God. Likewise, the Flood account presents God as "sorry" He had made man (Gen. 6:6). These are only two of many examples of the biblical text presenting God as happy or sorry that human beings made certain decisions. They picture God as responding to human activity.

Yet because God is who He is, many theologians have concluded that He acts completely independent of any human influence. When Scripture describes God as responding to human actions, they say, it uses anthropomorphic expressions (i.e., descriptions of God in human terms even though He is not a human—apart, of course, from His incarnation in Christ). God was sorry He made man only in the sense that humankind's rebellion was an evil thing. It did not make Him sorry in the sense that man's action elicited a *response* of sorrow from God.

These theologians believe that when we read in the Prophets, for example, that the sins of the Israelites grieved God's heart, or that God was angry with people, we need to understand such statements as in no way contradicting His impassibility. They are simply descriptions of God as though He were a human responding. Actually, they say, He does *not respond*; in other words, He does not react to man's acts on the basis of or with emotion. His orientation toward sin is consistently negative, and His orientation toward righteousness is consistently positive, regardless of any human activity.

Other theologians view statements of God's responses to human actions as genuine responses. While there are admittedly many anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible, these theologians believe some references to God responding, while anthropomorphic, are descriptions of how God really does respond. These texts indicate that He does respond to some human actions.

I tend to agree with the second position. I have found nothing in Scripture that tells the reader to understand God as not truly responding to human actions, including prayer. Rather I find much that leads the reader to conclude that God does indeed respond to some (not all) human activity. It seems to me that the doctrine of impassibility rests on a

philosophical deduction concerning God, rather than on solid Scriptural revelation. Nowhere does God say in Scripture that He does not respond to human action, though, being holy, He is of course not *subject* to sin or sinful human beings. On the contrary, the writers of Scripture wrote repeatedly that He does respond to human activity.

Open theists take the fact that God responds to some human activity too far. They believe that there are things that God does not know until humans act. This view goes beyond the biblical revelation to the opposite extreme. It denies the omniscience of God and limits the sovereignty of God. Process theologians take this even further than Open theists. They believe that God is in the process of developing as a result of human activity.

(See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr.'s discussion of this subject in his commentary on *Lamentations: A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, pp. 59-62.)

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