

THE PROPHET NAHUM

BY

Arno Clement Gaebelein

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Introduction

Nahum's history is unknown. All we know of him is that he was an Elkoshite. His name means "comforter." Some have identified Elkosh with a village of similar name which is in existence today, not far from the site of ancient Nineveh, on the eastern banks of the Tigris. There the grave of Nahum is shown, adored alike by nominal Christians and the followers of Mohammed. But careful research has shown this to be absolutely without any foundation whatever. No one knew anything about that grave till about the sixteenth century of our era. It is the Elkosh which existed in Galilee and which is still known as a little village. Nahum, like Jonah, was a Galilean.

The Date of Nahum

The opening verse does not give a hint as to the time Nahum lived and prophesied. Critics, on account of some Assyrian expressions found in the book have put the date later. From internal evidences we can ascertain the date without difficulty. Judah and not Israel is addressed by Nahum. There is no reason to assume that he lived in exile and uttered his prophecy in the land of Assyria. He spoke in the land of Israel, probably in Jerusalem. The most significant passage which gives us important information is chapter 1:11: "There is one come out of thee (out of Assyria) that imagineth evil against the LORD, a wicked counsellor." Who was this wicked counsellor, who imagined evil against the Lord? There can be but one answer. A wicked counsellor came out of Assyria, the mouthpiece of its reigning King Sennacherib. His name was Rab-shakeh. He blasphemed and defied the God of Israel. His vile words are recorded in 2 Kings 18:26-27. The description of Nahum fits this Assyrian villain. We are justified in placing Nahum in the period of Hezekiah; he was therefore contemporary with Isaiah and Micah.

There is an interesting link between Jonah, Micah and Nahum. Jonah was sent with the message to Nineveh about one hundred and fifty years before Nahum prophesied. Through his message Nineveh turned to the Lord. Isaiah and Micah prophesied concerning the same Assyrian power, the capital of which was Nineveh. They witnessed the Assyrian attack upon Jerusalem and Jehovah's intervention in behalf of His people. They saw the downfall of the kingdom of Israel through Assyria and were well

acquainted with the wickedness of the Assyrian. And then came Nahum from Galilee, and the Spirit of God gave through him the great message of the coming complete destruction of Nineveh.

Assyrian History

A knowledge of Assyrian history, and its great capital, Nineveh, is needed for a better understanding of Nahum's prophecy. It is strange that ancient writers like Ctesias, the physician of Artaxerxes, Mnemon, and Diodorus Siculus have but little to say about Assyria, and many identified Assyria with Babylonia. The infidel critics have seen their defeat in this respect. Not believing the Bible, they trusted in the historical accounts of pagan writers, and assuming that they were right discredited the Word of God, only to find out afterward that the Bible is right and the heathen historians were wrong. For instance, Isaiah mentions in chapter 20 Sargon, king of Assyria. Because the secular historians know nothing of such a king, they sat in judgment upon the Word of God. They denied that such a king ever existed, thinking that the statement by Isaiah is an invention. It was then proven that Sargon was a great warrior, the father of Sennacherib, and that Isaiah gave a true record.

Hezekiah, the King of Judah, under whom Nahum as well as Isaiah and Micah prophesied, had paid tribute for many years to Assyria. When he revolted an Assyrian army appeared in the land, by which over forty Judean cities were captured. Jerusalem itself was saved by divine intervention (Isa. 37:36). Sennacherib, who had sent the expedition against Jerusalem, being murdered by his own sons in 681 B.C. (Isa. 37:38). His successor was Esarhaddon, who besieged Sidon and carried its treasures to Nineveh. Assurbanipal succeeded him to the throne and made his son Shamash-shumukin regent of Babylon, for Babylon was then an insignificant power. Here we must remember that when Babylon was next to nothing in world history, Isaiah had predicted its coming greatness and conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian power. Under Assurbanipal the ancient and great capital of Upper Egypt was captured, which is mentioned by Nahum in chapter 3:8, 10; that is, No-Amon is Thebes. Assurbanipal conquered many countries and nations; he razed Susa, and immense treasures were carried off to Nineveh. During his reign every year saw a cruel war, and ruin and carnage were spread in every direction. The captives were treated in a horrible manner, with all kinds of torture. The nations suffered terribly under this wicked monarch, so that when finally Assyria fell the nations rejoiced, as mentioned by Nahum at the conclusion of his prophecy. "All that hear the bruit of thee shall clap hands over thee; for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?" After Assurbanipal Assyria declined. He was followed by Assur-etil-ilani and Sin-shar-ishkun, and finally Assyria and its great and proud capital were conquered by Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar and Cyaxares. This happened about 625 B.C., just about ninety years after Nahum announced the destruction of Nineveh.

The Message of Nahum

His prophetic message concerns exclusively Nineveh. Critics have put question marks over against certain parts of this book, while other critics have contradicted their fellow critics. In fact, if one wishes to find theories and assumptions, wild guesses and fanciful hypotheses, the camp of the rationalist is the place. The unity and integrity of the

prophecy of Nahum is beyond controversy. As the opening verse announces, it is the burden of Nineveh.

Typically Nineveh stands for the world powers to the end of the times of the Gentiles, and its overthrow foreshadows the overthrow of the final world powers.

The Division of Nahum

The three chapters of which Nahum is composed give us the correct division of his prophecy. In the first chapter we find the purpose of God is dealing in judgment with the oppressor of Israel. The second chapter describes the overthrow, the plundering, and destruction of Nineveh. The third chapter shows the guilt and the well-deserved judgment and ruin of Nineveh.

Analysis and Annotations

CHAPTER 1

The Purpose of God in Dealing with the Assyrian Oppressor

1. The superscription (1:1)
2. Jehovah's majesty in judgment (1:2-6)
3. His people comforted and assured (1:7-13)
4. The judgment of Assyria and the result (1:14-15)

Verse 1. The burden of Nineveh; it means that there is to follow a weighty prophetic oracle concerning the great world city of Nineveh whose dimensions are given by Jonah, which have been confirmed by excavations. The next sentence gives us the definite information that what follows in the book is the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

Verses 2-6. It is a sublime description. God is a jealous God. The jealousy of God has for its source the love of His elect people. (See Zech. 1.) "For thou shalt worship no other god; for the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God" (exodus 34:14). He is jealous over His people lest they serve other gods. And because He is a jealous God, a holy, a sin-hating God, He must be an avenger of what is against His character. He will take vengeance on His adversaries and reserveth wrath for His enemies. Destructive criticism has invented an infidel theory as if the God of wrath and vengeance were the product of the mind of man, and that Jehovah is some tribal deity, corresponding to the tribal gods of the surrounding heathen nations. Thus criticism rejects the Jehovah of the Bible and invents its own god, rejecting the threatenings of coming wrath and judgment as taught in the Old Testament and in the New in connection with the coming of the Lord, branding these revelations the result of the false apocalyptic teachings of the Jews. God is the God of Love, as much as He is the God of Wrath. He must be that or He would not be the God of Light and Holiness. He cannot afford to let evil go on forever. He is the Lord slow to anger. His patience is great, but He will not acquit the guilty, who continue to sin and do evil. Verses 2 and 3 describe His righteous government. Then follows a beautiful poetic description of His majesty, a description suited to the finite mind of man.

In whirlwind and storm is His way,

And clouds are the dust of His feet.
He rebuketh the sea and drieth it up
And empties all the rivers.
Carmel, Bashan, and Lebanon are thinned out,
And the Flower of Lebanon languisheth.
Mountains quake before Him
And all the hills melt away;
And the earth is consumed in His presence,
The world and all that dwell therein.
Before His indignation who can stand?
And who can abide His fierce anger?
His fury is poured out like fire.
And the rocks are thrown down by Him.

What to the mind of man is more imposing than the towering storm-clouds, and what more terrifying than the onrushing whirlwind, which lays low the forest? Man, the creature of the dust, steps upon the dust of the earth, to which man returns in the hour of death. But Jehovah has the clouds as the dust of His feet. If He arises in His righteous wrath all will be swept before Him, and the mountains, symbolical of the kingdoms of the earth, will quake before Him, and the pride of man will be humbled in the dust. (Isa. 2).

Verses 7-13. While in the foregoing section God speaks of His own character in dealing with evil, He now gives comfort and assurance to those who trust in Him, that is, to His people. He knoweth them, the comfort all His people have at all times, the Lord knoweth them that are His, and as our Lord said, "I know my sheep." For such the Lord is good and a stronghold in the day of trouble. But His enemies will feel His wrath. "But with an overrunning flood He will make an utter end of the place thereof (Nineveh) and darkness will pursue His enemies."

In the prophetic application we must look beyond the horizon of Nahum's time and the judgment of Nineveh. The day of the Lord brings the final overthrow of the proud world powers, and the remnant of His people will have in the Lord a refuge, while the judgment floods sweep over the earth (see Psa. 46).

On the ninth verse many expositors have erred in their interpretation. It is also addressed to Israel. "What do ye imagine against the LORD?" Do you imagine that the Lord is not going to do it? Will He repent of His judgment purpose? No! He who has spoken "will make an utter end," and to His people it is spoken "affliction shall not rise up the second time."

Then a description of the Assyrian in verse 10. They are entangled like thorns, so that they will find no escape when the judgment overtakes them, while they are drunk with wine in their carousings. Like the dry stubble are they to be devoured. Rab-shakeh, as mentioned in our introduction, is the one who came out of Assyria against Jerusalem with evil imaginations. The better translation of verse 12 is, "Though they be strong, and likewise many, even so shall they be cut down, and he (the Assyrian) shall pass away."

The second half of the twelfth verse concerns His people. "Though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more." One can see at once that the "no more" demands a future fulfillment. For, while it is true,

the Assyrian did no longer afflict Israel, yet affliction upon affliction has been their lot. But there comes the day when all afflictions will cease. "For now I will break his yoke (the yoke of the Assyrian) from off thee (Israel) and I will burst thy bonds asunder."

Verses 14-15. The fourteenth verse gives the judgment commandment as to Assyria and Nineveh. They are vile, and the God who declared His character in the beginning of this message, is going to act accordingly.

The result is stated in the last verse of this chapter. "Behold, upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows; for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off." The prophet beholds how the messengers rush over the mountains with the good news. Judah and Jerusalem are delivered. Peace has come. Praise and thanksgiving are heard in Zion.

We must not overlook the similar passage in Isaiah 52:7. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! ... Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; for the LORD hath comforted His people, He hath redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." This was spoken in connection with Babylon's overthrow, but its wider application and meaning is future. The overthrow of Babylon and Nineveh did not result in the glorious things spoken of by Isaiah and Nahum. Not then did the ends of the earth see the salvation of God, nor was Jerusalem redeemed, nor God as King enthroned in Zion. It is all yet to come. When that day comes, the messengers will go forth from Jerusalem and declare the good tidings to the nations of the world. The good news of the kingdom will be heralded far and wide, in the beginning of the millennium, and then the abiding, abundant peace will come, so that all the nations see the salvation of the God of Israel. The wicked, opposing powers of the world will then be no more.

CHAPTER 2

The Overthrow, Plundering and Destruction Of Nineveh

1. The capture of Nineveh announced and described (2:1-10)
2. The completeness of the judgment (2:11-13)

Verses 1-10. This great prophecy was literally fulfilled some ninety years after Nahum had spoken. When these words were spoken Nineveh was in the zenith of her glory. Who told Nahum the Elkoshite that the proud world city would undergo such a sack and be completely wiped out? Who moved his pen to give such a vivid description of what would take place? There is but one answer--the Spirit of God. How was the prophecy fulfilled? Cyaxares of the Medes had surrounded Nineveh in the north. Nabopolassar of Babylon entered into an alliance with Cyaxares against the Assyrians, which was sealed by the marriage of the daughter of Cyaxares, Amunia, with the son of Nabopolassar, that is, Nebuchadnezzar, who appeared then as the colleague of his father, till the Lord called him as the instrument of judgment upon Jerusalem and he

became the head of the Babylonian monarchy (Dan. 1:1). They made an assault upon Nineveh. The Assyrian king, a son of Assurbanipal, collected all his forces into the lower part of the immense city. Three times the forces of the Assyrian sallied forth from the city and inflicted severe punishment upon the besieging armies, and Nabopolassar had great difficulty in keeping the Median forces from flight. The Assyrians after these successes abandoned themselves to great carousings, as stated in Nahum 1:10. But during that night they were attacked by the besiegers and driven back behind the walls. Then the troops which were under the command of the brother-in-law of the Assyrian king were routed and driven into the river Tigris. The main part of Nineveh was still safe. In the third year of the siege the river which surrounded the city became its enemy. Great rains had fallen and suddenly there was a tremendous flood which broke down the walls surrounding the city. This was predicted by Nahum in this chapter in the sixth verse. The king despaired of saving his life. He had sent his family north, and when all hope was gone he shut himself up with all his treasures in the royal citadel and burned himself with them. Then the victors entered into the city, and, after securing an immense booty, which was carried to Babylon and Ecbatana, the Babylonians set fire to the sacked city, and destroyed it completely by fire.

The prophet in the beginning of this chapter addresses Nineveh; he urges that she make ready to defend herself, for he that dasheth into pieces has appeared before her walls. It was the Lord who had used the Assyrian to bring judgment upon Israel and upon Jacob, but now the time had come for the restoration of their former excellency. The Authorized Version gives the wrong sense, and the second verse is correctly rendered: "For the LORD bringeth again the excellency of Jacob, as the excellency of Israel; for the emptiers have emptied them out, and marred their vine branches." Then the besieging army is described. Here we read of their glittering arms, their fast racing chariots, which dash along like lightning.

We have heard even reputable Bible teachers make the statement that Nahum predicted the automobiles racing along our streets. Such fanciful, far-fetched and arbitrary applications of the Word of God do immense harm. Nahum does not anticipate the automobile, but gives a picture of the besiegers of Nineveh with their chariots, drawn by swift horses.

In verse 5 the Assyrian king is seen turning to his army, as he sees the chariots dashing along the highways and broadways which lead to the city; he counts his worthies, his generals and captains. And the army suddenly called, in making haste stumbled along in disorder and made haste to reach the walls. As stated above, the sixth verse was fulfilled when the river became a flood and undermined the foundations of the walls, so that the besiegers could enter in. And when Babylon fell, under the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, the river also was the means of defeat, for the enemy had diverted the river Euphrates and through the dry river-bed entered the city.

The word "Huzzab" in the seventh verse has led to a great deal of discussion. Some claim that it is the name of the queen of Nineveh; others that it is a symbolical name of the city; archaeology throws no light upon its meaning. We believe the word "Huzzab" should be translated, "it is determined." Then the sentence reads, "It is determined; she is made bare and led away captive; and her maids moan

like the doves, smiting upon their breasts."

The flight of the population of Nineveh is pictured in the eighth verse. Like as a pool of water empties when the sluices are opened, so they flee. The soldiers cry "Stand! Stand!" but there is a panic. They rush away and none looks back.

In the next two verses the plundering of the city is predicted. Silver and gold is taken away. There seems to be no end of all the glorious things which were heaped together in Nineveh. The city is emptied; hearts melt, courage is gone; there are tottering knees and pale faces.

Verses 11-13. Is it a sarcastic question which is asked, "Where is the den of lions?" What has become of her proud boastings of being the Queen-City of the nations?

Then Jehovah speaks of the completeness of her judgment and overthrow. "Behold, I am against thee, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will burn her chariots in the smoke, and I will cut off thy prey from the earth, and the voice of thy messengers shall no more be heard."

CHAPTER 3

Nineveh's Guilt and Well-Deserved Judgment

1. The great wickedness of Nineveh (3:1-7)
2. Her fate to be like the fate of No-Amon (3:8-13)
3. Her well-deserved and complete judgment (3:14-19)

Verses 1-7. Nineveh was a bloody city, for her kings never knew peace, but were constantly at war. The Hebrew Ir-Damim means "city of blood drops." They boasted of making the blood of their enemies run like rivers. It was a city full of lies and rapine. Her word could not be trusted; she broke truces and covenants and deceived nations with lying promises of help and protection. As stated in the second chapter, she was ferocious as a lion and the prey never departed.

But she received as she had sown. The next two verses give again the scenes of carnage during her judgment hour.

The cracking of the whip;
And the noise of the rattling wheels;
The prancing of the horses,
And the dashing chariots.

The horseman mounting,
And the flashing sword,
And the glittering of the spear
And the multitude of the Slain;
And the heaps of the corpses.
There is no end of dead bodies;
They stumble over their corpses.

And why? "Because of the multitudes of the whoredoms of the well-favored harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations

through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts." She made herself attractive as a harlot does, to ensnare and beguile weaker nations. Like all these ancient cities she was filled with witchcrafts, that is, sorceries. The power of darkness manifested itself in the dominion of evil spirits, which Nineveh courted. Spiritism, as advocated today by men of research and culture, of the type of Oliver Lodge and Conan Doyle, and a multitude of others, is not a new thing. Egypt, Babylon, and Nineveh and other centers of paganism were filled with occultism, the practice of which hastened their doom; as the doom of our age will be consummated through the influence of the same evil powers.

Then Jehovah speaks again, as the God of retribution and judgment. These are solemn words.

Behold! I am against thee, saith the Lord of hosts;
And uncover thy skirts over thy face,
And display to the nations thy nakedness,
And to kingdoms thy shame!
And I will cast vileness upon thee,
And disgrace thee
And make thee a gazing-stock.
And it shall come to pass,
That all that look upon thee
Shall flee from thee,
And say, Nineveh is laid waste;
Who will lament over her?
Whence shall I seek comforters for her?

She had acted the harlot and now she receives the punishment of a harlot, which consisted in exposing her in public. She would be a gazing-stock for nations and kingdoms, as the righteous God stripped her of all and exposed her shame. There would be no one to lament over the vile mistress of witchcrafts.

Verses 8-13. "Art thou better than No-Amon that dwelt by the rivers? Waters were round about her; her bulwark was the sea and her wall was of the sea. Ethiopia and Egypt were her strength, and there was no limit; Put and Lubim were thy helpers." No-Amon was an Egyptian city, known to the Greeks by the name of Thebes. The judgment of No-Amon, or, as it is also called, "No," was announced by the prophet Jeremiah. "The LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel saith, Behold I will punish the multitude of No, and Pharaoh and Egypt, with their gods and their kings, even Pharaoh and them that trust in him" (Jer. 46:25). Ezekiel likewise had spoken of this great Egyptian city (Ezek. 30:14-16). There existed an immense temple there in honor of the god of No, the building had great facades and columns and covered a large space; the ruins which are left are still most wonderful to look upon. It was situated on the upper Nile some four hundred miles from Cairo, and was built along the river front. On the other side of the river was the city of the dead, the Necropolis, with a long line of temples, devoted to the worship of former Pharaohs, and behind these temples were thousands of tombs, many of which have been uncovered by the spade of the explorer. The cuneiform monuments tell of the fate of Thebes. Though she was defended by the strong men of Ethiopia and of Egypt and Phut, and the Libyans, nothing could avert her doom. She was carried into captivity, her young children were dashed in pieces, and her great men were bound in chains. Could then Nineveh hope to escape? The fate of No-Amon was a prophecy of Nineveh's fate. She was

even more wicked than the Egyptian city. Her fate is described in verses 11-13.

Verses 14-19. Dramatically the prophet calls upon Nineveh to draw water for the siege, to secure clay for brick to repair the breaches in the wall. But all would be useless, for the Almighty had decreed her downfall. The fire would devour the proud city, the sword do its havoc in cutting them off. Let them be as numerous as the cankerworm (see annotations of Joel 1), make thyself as many as the locusts, which come in immense swarms, and it will be all to no avail. Her great commerce, her merchant-princes, were a vast host, like the stars of heaven, but all would soon be devastated, as the cankerworm spoileth and then flies away. Their crowned ones, the chiefs in authority, would all be scattered just as the sun-rise scatters the locusts and swarms of grasshoppers to a place unknown. Their shepherds, the leaders and rulers, under the King of Assyria, would sleep in death, while the population wandered homeless over the mountains, with none to gather them.

Nineveh's ruin is complete and irreparable. All who hear of her fall rejoice and clap their hands.

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