

Notes on
Nahum
2002 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

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

We know nothing about Nahum ("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 is 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 Nahum somehow managed to return to Judah later.¹ 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."²

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 it. The prophet predicted the fall of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, which happened in 612

¹Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, pp. 7-8.

²*Ibid.*, p. 11. The canonicity of Nahum has never been seriously challenged, and the Hebrew text has been well preserved.

B.C., so he must have written this book between 663 and 612 B.C. Nineveh fell to a combined force of Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians.³

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.⁴ Thus a date of composition between 660 and 650 B.C. seems most likely.

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.

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.

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."⁵

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

³See any good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia for the history of Nineveh.

⁴Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary*, pp. 30, 34-37.

⁵Patterson, p. 53.

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.

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 was a poet. He has been called "the poet laureate among the Minor Prophets."⁶ 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."⁷

"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."⁸

⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁷J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 147.

⁸Maier, p. 20.

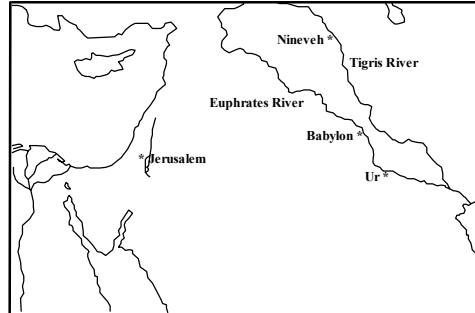
OUTLINE

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Exposition

I. HEADING 1:1

The writer introduced this book as an oracle concerning Nineveh. An oracle is a message from Yahweh that usually announces judgment. It is sometimes called a "burden" because it frequently contains a message that lay heavy on the prophet's heart. 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."⁹

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.¹⁰

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

⁹Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 796.

¹⁰It 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.

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)."¹¹

"The seventh-century minor prophets focused on the justice of God as exhibited in powerful judgment on an international scale."¹²

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. Why was God so angry? The rest of the oracle explains that it was the behavior of the Ninevites that had aroused His anger.¹³

"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."¹⁴

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).¹⁵ This accounts for His allowing the Assyrians to abuse the Israelites for so long. 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

¹¹Carl E. Armerding, "Nahum," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 460. This writer 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.

¹²Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 413.

¹³This 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 v. 3, the overwhelming flood and the uninhabitable ruin in v. 8, the sheep slaughterer in v. 12, and the Assyrian yoke in vv. 12-13. The metaphor of the might weapon appears in 2:1 and that of the consuming locust swarm in 3:16-17. See Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:633 (January-March 2002):21-45.

¹⁴Chisholm, p. 462.

¹⁵About a century before Nahum prophesied, God sent Jonah to warn the Ninevites. This is an evidence of His being slow to anger.

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 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.¹⁶

- 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, 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.¹⁷ 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. The Assyrians should have learned this truth when God destroyed their army, as it surrounded Jerusalem, in one night (2 Kings 18). 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

¹⁶Nahum frequently used Yahweh's name throughout the book.

¹⁷Nahum did not mean that the final destiny of God's enemies is annihilation. He meant that no one can survive His unchecked wrath.

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.¹⁸ This could and probably does describe an unrestrained army invasion (cf. Isa. 8:7-8; Jer. 47:2; Dan. 9:26; 11:40). However, when the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians jointly overthrew Nineveh, its rivers overflowed and washed away part of Nineveh's walls.¹⁹

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).

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.

B. YAHWEH'S PLANS FOR NINEVEH AND JUDAH 1:9-11

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 chiasmic 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

¹⁸Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:632 (October-December 2001):415-36, showed that Nahum's maledictions are unique among the prophets and probably key off the Neo-Assyrian treaty curses, which were unusually brutal in the ancient Near East.

¹⁹*The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Nineveh," by D. J. Wiseman.

God's people was really opposition to Him, and He did not permit it to succeed. Once Nineveh fell, it was never rebuilt.²⁰

- 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 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.

- 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.
- 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 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. 32:1-7; Isa. 37:27-38).

3. The termination of Nineveh 1:14

The subject reverts back to Nineveh.

Yahweh had commanded His heavenly host to manage the world's affairs so Nineveh's name (or perhaps the king of Nineveh's name) would not continue forever. This does not mean that succeeding generations would be completely ignorant of Nineveh and its

²⁰Ibid.

rulers.²¹ But the residents, particularly the king, would have no surviving descendants (heirs).

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 to demonstrate the superiority of their gods over those of the conquered. The conquering Medes, however, despised idolatry and did away with multitudes of images that existed in Nineveh.²² Yahweh would prepare Nineveh's grave since He would bury 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."²³

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.

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

1:15 This is the first verse of chapter 2 in the Hebrew Bible. Nahum called his audience to give attention. Someone was coming over the mountains with a 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, 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.

"So complete was its [Nineveh's] destruction that when Xenophon passed by the site about 200 years later, he

²¹We know more about Assyrian literature than that of any other ancient Semitic people except the Hebrews. See *ibid.* 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.

²²Charles Lee Feinberg, *Jonah Micah and Nahum*, p. 132.

²³Raymond Calkins, *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets*, p. 82.

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."²⁴

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."²⁵

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 would scatter 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, but Nahum was speaking ironically.

"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 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."²⁶

Even though the Ninevites did all these things they could not escape overthrow. The invader proved to be Cyaxeres the Mede and Nabopolassar the Babylonian.²⁷ 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

²⁴Elliott E. Johnson, "Nahum," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1499.

²⁵Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2:67.

²⁶Armerding, p. 472.

²⁷For 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.

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 nations experience, reflecting its patriarch's names and life experience.²⁸ 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 devastator of Israel had been Assyria and it would be 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, really, a favorite color of the Median and Babylonian armies.²⁹ However, they may have been red with blood and or from the copper that they used to cover both shields and uniforms.³⁰ 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.³¹ Spears made out of cypress (pine) were long and straight, and Nineveh's invaders would brandish them showing their readiness for battle.³²
- 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.³³

²⁸See C. F. Keil, "Nahum," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:19.

²⁹Feinberg, p. 136.

³⁰Johnson, p. 1500

³¹Feinberg, p. 136.

³²See also Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, pp. 4-5, 294-95, 452.

³³Maier, p. 243.

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 to deflect the attacker's arrows, spears, and stones.³⁴

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 river."³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.

"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."³⁷

The palace the prophet saw washed away was perhaps that of Ashurbanipal, which stood in the north part of Nineveh.³⁸ 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 her treasures and they and their possessors would be carried off 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

³⁴Yadin, p. 316.

³⁵Armerding, p. 476.

³⁶Maier, p. 253.

³⁷Johnson, p. 1495. 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. *Ibid.*, p. 1500.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1501.

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.³⁹ 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 to stop, perhaps to defend the city, but no one would turn back.
- 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.⁴⁰ It was the richest city in the ancient Near East in the seventh century B.C.⁴¹
- 2:10 The invaders would empty Nineveh of her treasures, and it would become a desolate wasteland.⁴² Hearts would melt and knees knock when people would observe its overthrow. Anguish would grip the whole body of observers and 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 in that they had 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.'

³⁹This 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.

⁴⁰See D. D. Luckenbill, ed., *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1:181, 211, 263; 2:20, 133, 205; Pritchard, ed., 274-301.

⁴¹Armerding, p. 477.

⁴²The 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.

Lions were frequently pictured in Assyrian reliefs and decorations."⁴³

- 2:12 Lions normally kill only what they need to eat, but the Assyrians killed many enemies not just to sustain their own needs but for the joy of conquest. They were unusually vicious toward their enemies and notorious in the ancient world as cruel.⁴⁴ Yet lions, while vicious, are not known for being excessively so.
- 2:13 Nahum closed this message with a word from Yahweh in which the Lord verbalized His antagonism toward Nineveh. What a terrible fate 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 her instruments of warfare. Invading armies would slay her young 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.⁴⁵

- 3:1 Nahum pronounce woe on Nineveh, a city characterized by bloodshed. Here, as often elsewhere (e.g., Isa. 3:9), "woe" announces impending doom.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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. He 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

⁴³Johnson, 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.

⁴⁴See 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; Maier, pp. 281-83.

⁴⁵See Patterson, pp. 81-82.

⁴⁶Sometimes "woe" is an expression of grief (e.g., Isa. 6:5), but that is only its secondary meaning here.

⁴⁷See Maier, p. 292.

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 seemed 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.

- 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 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 up 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 they would be glad that she got what she deserved. Mourners over her demise would not be found because people would rejoice, not sorrow, over her humiliation (v. 19). Even 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.⁴⁸

- 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 Sargon the Assyrian in 663 B.C.⁴⁹ Its solid and liquid defenses did not protect it, and Nineveh's 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, 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 (modern Libya) was to the west.⁵⁰ 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).⁵¹ 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. They too would lose their powers of self-defense and self-control. This would happen through their excessive wine-drinking (cf. 1:10) but also in a metaphorical way because they 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

⁴⁸See Patterson, pp. 93-94.

⁴⁹Jeremiah and Ezekiel had predicted its fall (Jer. 46:25; Ezek. 30:14, 16).

⁵⁰Some 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.

⁵¹See Armerding, pp. 484-85, for a short history of the fall of Thebes.

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."⁵²

As noted above, the ancients could not find Nineveh after its destruction, and modern archaeologists, Botta and Layard, first found physical evidence of Nineveh's existence in the mid 1800s. 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 In 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 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."⁵³

3:15 However if the Ninevites did strengthen their defenses, fire would consume them where they went to draw water and the sword would cut them down as they built.

"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

⁵²J. B. Bury, et al., eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 3:130.

⁵³Johnson, p. 1503.

clearly defined in places on the southeast side about the level of the Sargon pavement."⁵⁴

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 invading locust-like soldiers.⁵⁵

- 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. 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. 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 regather 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.

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 Nineveh's sins and can expect her fate.

⁵⁴R. Campbell Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, *A Century of Exploration at Nineveh*, p. 77.

⁵⁵Another 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.

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