

Nahum

Nahum 1:1-3:19

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2020-02-02

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I. Historical background to Nahum

Nahum is the second book whose dominant focus is Assyria, and especially its capital, Nineveh. Jonah's earlier rebuke resulted in Nineveh's repentance and salvation. This rebuke resulted in irrevocable judgment. And both salvation and judgment glorify God. We tend to forget that, thinking that God is glorified only when nations are saved. But we will see in this book that both mercy and judgment are essential characteristics of God.

And we need to delve into a bit of historical background in order to understand this book. On Floyd Nolan Jones' chronology, this book comes 180 years after Jonah. That's a long time, and a lot can happen to an empire in 180 years. We saw that Nineveh was completely converted under the ministry of Jonah. And it appears that it remained faithful for at least 40 years. We don't know for sure who took over, but we have archeological evidence that the later emperors did not like the king in the book of Jonah and that there are at least two kings (if not more) who were erased from their chronicles. And the Biblical record shows that Assyria returned to its evil, cruelty, and treacherous ways, and did so with a vengeance.

But a lot of things had happened to Israel and Judah as well. Shalmaneser of Assyria had invaded Israel and taken most of its citizens into captivity. It then besieged Samaria (the capital of northern Israel) for three years (2 Kings 17:3-23; 18:10-13; cf. Hos. 10:3,7,15), and his successor, Sargon, completed the destruction of Israel in 721 BC (see "they" in 2 Kings 18:10). He deported most of the population, and Israel no longer existed as a nation after 721 BC. The region was assimilated into Assyria. So that is a pretty major change that happened in the north.

Between Jonah and Nahum there were four other prophets - Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. And you can see Nahum alluding to Isaiah a lot.

While there is debate on where Nahum lived (some saying in Judah and others saying in Galilee) I tentatively side with those who say that he was part of the remnant of believers who lived in Galilee (see 2 Kings 23:15-20). And that is based on his residence in Nahum 1:1. Since Galilee was under Assyrian domination, his prophecy would have been incredibly dangerous to

give. He was prophesying at the height of Assyrian power - or as some translate Nahum 1:12 - when Assyria was at “full strength.” And Assyria did not tolerate criticism. It would actually take a great deal of faith to believe that this prophecy would soon happen. The fall of Assyria seemed absolutely impossible.

So that all happened in the north. But there was a lot that happened in the south as well in the previous 180 years. Five new kings of Judah had been on the throne: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and wicked king Manasseh. 2 Chronicles 33:9 says that “Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel.” He had adopted the religion of Assyria and became an incredibly wicked king. Ironically, the king of Assyria took him into exile, humiliated him, but for some strange reason, suddenly returned him to Israel after Manasseh repented to God, and set him up on his throne again. Wicked king Manasseh’s conversion and restoration to the throne was almost as astonishing as Nineveh’s conversion in Jonah. So even during the time of Nahum there is both judgment and mercy. Anyway, the last five years of Manasseh’s life were spent in bringing Biblical reform to Judah, which may explain why Judah is not condemned by Nahum. I believe that Nahum prophesies during these last years of Manasseh.

Not everyone agrees. However, there are certain boundaries that the dating can’t go beyond. Assyria was overthrown in 612 BC, so Nahum couldn’t be written after that. And Thebes was destroyed in 663 BC, and since Nahum mentions that as a past event, the book had to have been written after that event.¹ But O. Palmer Robertson is probably correct that it had to have been somewhere between 647 and 642² - the last five years of Manasseh, when he was a true believer. Some place this during the reign of the next king, Josiah, and just before Assyria fell in 612 BC. But that doesn’t fit a lot of the evidence in the book. Since the book makes clear that Assyria was in its heyday, this has to be dated to the last years of Manasseh. So that is the historical background to this book.

II. Overview of why this dark book is actually an encouragement

Why is this such a dark book? And the answer is that it is dealing with a very dark situation - the evil empire of Assyria. I saw a very clever overlay of

¹See Floyd Nolan Jones charts.

²For a fascinating unraveling of this puzzle, see Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: James Family, 1959)

images from one of the Star Wars movies with the text of Nahum,³ and it was remarkable how well the evil empire of Star Wars corresponded to the evil empire of Assyria. And it beautifully shows why all nations would rejoice when Assyria fell. When I went through the book of Jonah we got a pretty good picture of how incredibly evil the Assyrian Empire was. Let's skim through the book of Nahum and look at just a few descriptions of what went on in Assyria.

Chapter 1:2 - "Violence."

Verse 3 - plundering and violence. This is a recurring theme, and I won't keep repeating it.

Verse 4 - "justice never goes forth." That's astonishing. Most nations have at least some justice, but Assyria had gotten to the place that treachery was fun and justice was absent. It had become so demonic that justice never goes forth.

Chapter 3:1 lays out a number of things that describe the essence of Assyria: Nah. 3:1 Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery. Its victim never departs. Virtually all commentators appeal to history and archeology to prove that Assyria was the most bloodthirsty nation of the ancient world. They not only delighted in torture and cruelty, but they seemed to have a blood lust. Just as one example, right next to the king and queen's banqueting table was a fruit tree with the king of Elam's severed head dangling from a branch. You would have to be pretty hardened to enjoy eating next to such a gruesome spectacle.

The second thing the verse highlights is that Nineveh was full of lies. To be full of lies indicates that lying was the norm, not the exception. You sometimes see individuals this way - lying is such a part of their life that they believe their lies; they don't know when they are lying or when they are telling the truth. Commentators like Maier detail the lies, broken promises and broken treaties that kings not only engaged in, but actually boasted of. They boasted of how many people they had deceived. They didn't hide the fact that they deceived. Like the Sawi tribe in the book, Peace Child, the Assyrians actually saw lying and treachery as a virtue. And there are biblical examples of kings being completely duped by Assyria. 2 Chronicles 28:20 says that Ahaz trusted the king of Assyria and entered into a treaty with him, only to have Assyria treacherously turn on Ahaz the moment the treaty was signed.

The third thing characteristic of the empire was robbery. The amount of

³<https://spark.adobe.com/page/kaFM3Qm0miJHG/>

plunder they collected was apparently astonishing, and Babylon inherited it all. But since this book sets up Assyria as an example of God's judgments in every era, there are a lot of descriptors in this book of what God's attitudes toward later empires will be.

The fourth evil that Nahum accuses Assyria of was that it constantly victimized people. The literal Hebrew is tearing of prey.

So those are four pretty big evils. Maier says of all four characteristics in this verse,

This is no exaggeration. [It is] a summary of the practically ceaseless pillaging and endless rapine which marked particularly Tiglathpileser and the Sargonide dynasty.⁴

Verse 4 (and I'll end with this one):

4 Because of the multitude of harlotries of the seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries.

Commentators who have dug into this have pointed out that Nineveh is described as a madame of prostitutes who combined sex and the occult to keep its own citizens and other nations in bondage. The last clause, "who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries" involves both seductive religion which brought people into demonic bondage and human trafficking of sex slaves that brought people into another kind of bondage. Assyria was guilty of both, and Manasseh (the king of Judah who adopted Assyria's religion) is a prime example of a king who had been demonically seduced into both Assyria's religion and their sexual practices.

So where Jonah shows how God is glorified through the salvation of such people, this book shows how God is glorified through the judgment of such people. And wow, were they ever judged. They got a taste of their own medicine when the Babylonians attacked them. Of course, the Babylonians were fed up with their own suffering under Assyria.

Chapter 2 is a poetic description of what it will look like for Babylon to march in orderly formation up to the walls of Nineveh, completely destroy her after looting her plunder. God mockingly challenges Assyria to fortify itself and do its best to defend itself, but it would be overrun by the Babylonians. He gives an awesome description of the shields and chariots and weapons of the Babylonians charging the fortified city, overwhelming it, putting its citizens either to the sword or into slavery.

Chapter 3 moves on to the entire empire's complete fall to Babylon. Just as Assyria had devastated Egypt, Babylon will devastate Assyria, put the king to death, and the chapter ends by saying, "All who hear news of you will

⁴Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: James Family, 1977), p. 293.

clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?” All of this was fulfilled to a T in 612 BC.

And you might think, “Why are we getting a history lesson on some irrelevant ancient empire? Well, it is not irrelevant. Let’s go back to chapter 1 and notice some intriguing hints that the book continues to be relevant for all generations.

The first hint is actually only seen in the Hebrew - unless you have a study bible, and they tell you about it. There has been a lot of ink spilled over the partial acrostic that is used in verses 2-8, where each line starts with the next letter of the alphabet. We have seen in previous books that where acrostics cover the entire alphabet, it symbolizes completeness. But this acrostic is neither complete nor perfectly regular. And it is deliberate on both counts. Liberals try to claim that parts of that poem were lost, but many conservatives have shown a perfect symmetry in the poetry and structure of the book. Nothing was lost. So this incompleteness in the acrostic is very deliberate.

And the best explanation I have seen is by scholars who say that the judgment upon Assyria that is being described is only the beginning of many ungodly empires that God will have to take out. Assyria is not the A-Z of evil empires. Assyria is only A-I. After Assyria comes Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and other empires that will demonically dominate and that will also be doomed. And the irregularity is deliberate as well, showing that we don’t always know God’s timing for when an empire will be taken down by God. It’s a beautiful artistry in the Hebrew. And I suspect that the absence of one of the letters represents the conversion of Nineveh under Jonah. I won’t be dogmatic on that, but it is intriguing.

The second hint that this book relates to all evil empires is that verse 3 is a direct quote from Exodus 34:6-7, where God declares His very nature and being in these words: “Yehowah is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.” That is not only true in Assyria; it is true in all times. And then the poem goes back and forth between the fate of the nations that are in rebellion against Him and the fate of God’s faithful remnant who cling to Him despite persecution. There is judgment and mercy that goes side by side and both reflect God’s abiding character. These contrasts make clear that the judgments upon the pagan nations are actually a demonstration of God’s loving provision toward His people. For example, verse 7 says, “Yehowah is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him.” The word “know” could also be translated as intimately knows or loves. It is an incredibly comforting promise for

those who face any evil empire. God's got everything in control.

But the third hint that we find in chapter 1 is that Assyria or Nineveh is nowhere mentioned in chapter 1 after the initial title for the whole book. Instead, the rest of chapter 1 simply points to God's judgments against bad guys (hinting that even Babylon will eventually get its comeuppance).

The last hint is that he describes this judgment on the bad guys with words identical to Isaiah 52:7, which shows that the good news of the Gospel is the answer to the bad news in every age. Take a look at verse 15. Nahum's use of Isaiah here is absolutely fascinating. The first clause is a verbatim quote of Isaiah 52:7.

15 Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!

This is the most obvious reference to Jesus in this book. And keep in mind, that the New Testament says that every Old Testament book points to Jesus in some way. If you don't find Jesus here, I challenge you to find Jesus elsewhere. Romans 10:15 quotes this verse and says that it is a prophecy of the New Covenant Good News being rejected by Israel, and that Israel is being treated as another Assyria. In other words, Paul's point is that anyone who rejects the good news will suffer the same kind of judgment.

Well, Nahum 3:15 goes on to pronounce the New Covenant trajectory that the Good News will be so pervasive that eventually there will be no more wicked people:

O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows. For the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off.

So commentators point out that these four hints in chapter 1 are setting us up to realize that the rest of the book is simply going to use God's judgment of Assyria as an example of what will happen to all nations that defy God in any age. These evil empires simply will not endure, and when the A-Z of evil empires is finished (and we don't know when that will be - when the last evil empire will be overthrown - whenever it is), God's victory will be so extensive that eventually there will be no more unbelievers to convert. It's an incredibly encouraging message.

So the upshot is - don't see national judgments as a bad thing. They are a part of God advancing His perfect plans. See them as God's goodness at work. God hates the evil in this world much more than we do, and He fights against evil by either conversion (as in the case of the book of Jonah) or by judgment (as in the case of Nahum). And many times He grows His kingdom even through the judgments, as he did with the conversion of emperors in Assyria and Babylon and conversions of countless Gentiles

during the post-exilic period. Theologians call these redemptive judgments. It's a beautiful doctrine.

The book of Nahum is thus an abiding memorial to the truth that God will bring down the bloodthirsty and arrogant regimes to come, whether those regimes are the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, which was guilty of the death of over a million people, or the Soviet Regime, which was guilty of somewhere between 3 million and 60 million people, according to various estimates. Nahum 1:2 says, "God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; the LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies." And He does not make exceptions for America. He reserves wrath for His enemies. All enemies. No matter how mighty China might appear to be, that murderous country will face God's judgment or salvation. Either way, God will not allow evil to triumph forever. Even the name "Nahum," which means "comfort" or "consolation" shows that when read rightly, the judgments of this book are a comfort. So that really is the story of Nahum in a nutshell.

III. Meditating on God's character (1:1-14)

But let me end by giving some brief meditations on the unchanging character of the God displayed in Nahum 1:1-14. Verse 2 says, God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; the LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies; I just want to highlight two characteristics of God from this verse.

A. He is jealous (1:2)

First, God is jealous. He is jealous for his bride. He is jealous when the bride is unfaithful. He is jealous when others attack his bride. The jealousy of God is an incredibly comforting doctrine. Remember that I said that Manasseh was converted and began a Reformation that was continued by Josiah. Converted Manasseh had revolted from Assyria - an absolutely insane and suicidal move from an atheistic perspective. But since Manasseh now wanted to please God more than anything else, Manasseh refused to think pragmatically. If God forbade treaties with wicked empires like Assyria, he was going to break that treaty. The Reformers routinely repented of their ungodly vows of celibacy and blind loyalty to the church and broke those vows. Yes, it is a sin to break vows, but it is an even greater sin to keep ungodly vows. So they repented of the vows and moved forward.

And God honored Manasseh for doing this, and when Assyria planned retribution and destruction, God was now jealous for His faithful bride, and was going to defend His bride. Jealousy is a comforting doctrine if it is a

godly jealousy that imitates God. Exodus 34:14 says, “you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” There is security in a husband’s jealousy to protect the marriage covenant, and there is security in knowing that God is jealous on behalf of His bride.

B. He avenges (1:2)

Coupled with this is that God avenges. When Assyria threatens to rape His bride, God threatens to kill Assyria. Avenging is a sign of love. Defending those who are being attacked is a sign of love.

C. He is slow to anger (1:3), but no one can stand before His wrath (1:6)

So Christians sometimes wonder, why then does God not take out the wicked sooner? And the answer is given in verse 3: “The LORD is slow to anger...” We might wish He wasn’t slow, but consider this: If He wasn’t slow to anger, you would be in trouble. If He wasn’t slow to anger and He wiped out all evil people today, their elect descendents would not come into existence and God’s gracious plans would be frustrated. If He wasn’t slow to anger, America would long ago have perished. We can praise God that His slowness in judging is a perfect slowness. But this is balanced with the next two characteristics in verse 3:

D. He is great in power (1:3)

The next phrase says that He is “great in power.” This means that His failure to judge is not because He lacks the ability to judge. He could take out the enemies any time He chose to. The fact that He has not taken them out means that we should look at ourselves to see why God has allowed the pain of these enemies into our lives. In the case of Israel and Judah, God used Assyria to discipline and purify His people. But when we call upon God, we can be absolutely assured that the God who made the universe in six days has plenty of power to fulfill His plans. The Illuminati cannot frustrate God’s plans. The Deep State cannot frustrate God’s plans.

E. He does not overlook evil (1:3)

The second characteristic that balances out this slowness to anger is that God does not overlook evil. Verse 3 goes on to say, “And will not at all acquit the wicked.” They will get their just deserts, whether in this life or the next. God’s slowness to anger has nothing to do with overlooking evil. He hates the evil in this world much more than we do. But God’s self control is shown in that all His attributes are in the service of His perfect decrees and plans.

He doesn't just fly off the handle. His wrath is meted out perfectly.

F. He controls nature (1:3-6)

The next encouraging characteristic is that God controls nature. Listen as I read verses 3-6 and see if you can recognize some of the parts of nature that God is personally governing. He doesn't wind up a clock and then forget about it. God is actively controlling and governing nature to work together for our good and His glory. Starting half-way through verse 3:

3 ...The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet. 4 He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, And dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, And the flower of Lebanon wilts. 5 The mountains quake before Him, The hills melt, And the earth heaves at His presence, Yes, the world and all who dwell in it. 6 Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, And the rocks are thrown down by Him.

In those verses God controls storms, inland seas, rivers, mountains, flowers, volcanoes, earthquakes, and the whole world. And if that is true, we have no excuse for not trusting Him in difficult times - especially given the next attribute.

G. He is good (1:7) in contrast to Assyria

Verse 7 says, "The LORD is good..." When people lose money in the stock market they are tempted to doubt God's goodness - or at least that God is good to us. But in the midst of pain we must cast off such doubts, rebuke ourselves and say, "No. I will not think that way. God is good; always good."

H. He is a fortress and protector of those who trust Him (1:7)

And that is why we should run to Him rather than to the things of this earth to find security and comfort. Verse 7 goes on to say, "A stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him." God is your stronghold, fortress, high tower, and refuge. And since He loves those who trust in Him, we should run to Him for help in times of trouble rather than trusting creation to be our rescue. We should not so much as take an aspirin without asking God to help that to work. How we use medicine, finances, or anything else is a test of where our trust is really placed. Is our strong tower in America, or is our strong tower in God?

I. He will utterly destroy His enemies (1:8)

Verse 8 affirms that God will utterly destroy His enemies. And when you read histories of conspiracies, you realize that our age is not the only age that

has conspiracies against God's rule. There have been thousands of conspiracies in the past, and every one has failed. Verse 8 says, "But with an overflowing flood He will make an utter end of its place, and darkness will pursue His enemies."

J. It is useless to conspire against Him (1:9-14)

This means that it is useless to conspire against God. Verse 9 tells Assyria's leadership, "What do you conspire against the LORD? He will make an utter end of it. Affliction will not rise up a second time." And then in verses 10-14 God makes several statements about the absolute futility of every conspiracy against Him. They are very encouraging verses. If you have allowed the conspiracies of this world to shake your faith, you are acting like the ten spies who went into the land of Canaan instead of acting like Caleb and Joshua. Caleb and Joshua saw the same problems and the same giants, but they saw God as being bigger.

K. He brings redemptive judgments (1:15)

Verse 15 has already been dealt with. It is the prophecy of the Gospel of the New Covenant going forth to the ends of the earth and guaranteeing an eventual end to wicked people. But it highlights the fact that even God's judgments usually have a redemptive theme to them - while bringing judgment to some, they are bringing salvation to others. While being bad news to some, they are good news to others. If God takes down America, we can be in the position of helping to pick up the pieces and leading disillusioned Americans to the true source of hope - Jesus. It's because good news almost always accompanies bad news in God's economy.

L. Nothing is a match for God - even Nineveh

But the book as a whole brings one final encouragement - that nothing is a match for God; not even Nineveh. People feared Assyria and the Assyrians themselves boasted that they would last forever. One of the later emperors, Esarhaddon, said this:

I am powerful, I am all powerful, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honored, I am magnified, I am without equal among all kings.

When I read that inscription, do you know what image came into my mind? It was from the movie, The Avengers, where Loki tells the Hulk to stop, "I am a god, you dull creature." And the Hulk grabs him by the feet and smashes him all over the pavement. As he walks away he says, "Puny god." That's the best line in the whole movie as far as I'm concerned. Assyria was pretty impressive to Israel and to many other nations, but in God's sight the

emperor was puny. Assyria was no match for God.

Sadly, many in Israel treated Assyria as being invincible. They were not walking by faith. Instead they were walking by site. And what they saw was an immense unbeatable empire. At the time of Nahum's prophecy, Nineveh ruled the world, from Lybia and Ethiopia to Babylon and beyond. The capital city, Nineveh, was much better fortified than even the painting in your your outlines shows. The inner wall around this gigantic city was 100 feet tall and 50 feet thick. That's just the inner wall. The towers on the wall were 200 feet tall. It then had a 150 foot wide moat and other walls. It's most vulnerable side didn't seem very vulnerable as the enemies would face the first massive wall that was strengthened with detached forts, then two deep ditches, and two more walls. The distance from the inner massive wall to the outer massive wall was 2,007 feet, where any enemies who miraculously made it over the first wall would be totally vulnerable. Historians who have studied this are somewhat mystified how Babylon was able to sack the city. But because God decreed it would happen, it happened, and it happened with amazing speed. The Assyrian emperor was shown to be a puny god.

And so the last lesson that we can learn from this book is that nothing, nothing, nothing is a match for God. If you are discouraged over the political scene in America, don't be. If anything, be discouraged over the church's lack of faith. If the church continues to support pragmatic US presidents like the Judeans did before the time of Nahum, then you too deserve domination by evil. Keep in mind that God is just as glorified by the judgment and discipline brought by evil empires as He is by salvation. God will keep cranking up the pressure. But if there is a repentance and a major turnaround of the church in America like happened in the last five years of Manasseh and during the reign of Josiah, then even impossible things can easily transpire. Our God is a God of impossibilities. Let us trust Him rather than putting our trust in princes. Amen.