



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 13 Issue 10

March 9, 2014

An Introduction to Nahum

Over the past few years we have examined eight prophetic books:

- Joel written to Judah circa 845 BC.
- Jonah written on account of Nineveh circa 780 BC.
- Amos written to Israel circa 765 BC.
- Hosea written to Israel circa 750 BC.
- Isaiah written to Judah circa 740 BC.

- Micah written to Judah circa 735 BC.
- Jeremiah written to Judah circa 627 B.C.
- Zephaniah written to Judah circa 622 BC.

This brings us to another important prophetic witness which God gave to His people which balances out the, at times, dark messages which the Lord gave to His people in this era with the writings of Jeremiah and Zephaniah.

Nahum 1:1-8, "The burden against Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite. 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; The LORD *is* slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all acquit *the wicked*. The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds *are* the dust of His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, And dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, And the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before Him, The hills melt, And the earth heaves at His presence, Yes, the world and all who dwell in it. 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. The LORD *is* good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him. But with an overflowing flood He will make an utter end of its place, And darkness will pursue His enemies."

For years, I have dated this prophetic work at 614 BC. I have been mistaken. While it is impossible to be dogmatic when it comes to the dating of this prophecy, nevertheless there is enough internal evidence to suggest an earlier date for Nahum. Accordingly, my current treatment of the prophetic witness is now proving to be out of its historical order. As we'll see, we should have looked at Nahum before Jeremiah!

This book serves to give balance to the collective witness of the prophets. Yes, the nation of Judah would most certainly perish and its fall would be great indeed! But it wasn't because Assyria or Babylon were so great and powerful. It would be because God is a mighty, awesome Being in whose hand lies the nations.

Isaiah 40:15, "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales..."

Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes."

Daniel 2:21a, "And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings..."

This is an important message that God's people needed to hear at this time and did hear on account of Nahum. In the words of C. E. Armerding:

When the forces opposing God are so firmly ensconced and the flickering lamp of God's people is at the point of extinction, however, it is easy for the remnant to forget. Nahum reminds us, as do the ruins of ancient Nineveh, that God himself is the ultimate Ruler. He will have the final word. (Armerding, 1985, p. 457)

Nahum 1:1, "The oracle [the burden] of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite."

The opening words of this short prophecy tell us two things:

1. The book of Nahum is a message of judgment, and
2. The message was from the Lord Himself.

Notice two key words:

- The burden/oracle is a common word in the Bible used over 600 times. It is one of many Hebrew words for "lifting" or "carrying" something. In the context of prophecy, it primarily denotes the idea of "bearing the burden" of judgment. Accordingly, Nahum begins this prophecy with, "The judgment burden of Nineveh!" But this wasn't his own opinion; rather, what he gave us here was by the hand of the Lord!
- The book/scroll of the vision of Nahum. The word for "vision" here is the technical term employed in the context of revelation when God gives a message to a prophet. Accordingly, what is before us is God's message of judgment, NOT the whim or will of a man!

With that notice, the passage gives a little biographical information on Nahum that he was an, "Elkoshite." Elko references to a city of which no one knows the location today. Earliest treatments of Nahum (4th century A.D.) place the city as a little village in Galilee. But even this is disputed. However, what is NOT disputed is that Nahum was a Judean living in the 7th century who came alongside the nation to minister to it on account of their many sufferings at the hand of the Assyrians¹! In fact, Nahum's name means "comforter," and in a certain sense his message comforts by announcing the destruction of Judah's most dreaded persecutor.

Now you will notice that the focus of Nahum concerns itself NOT with Judah and its many abuses (Jeremiah and Zephaniah were going to address these), BUT with the reckoning of God when it came to the greatly feared nation of Assyria, and its capital city, Nineveh (cf. 1:14; 2:8, 10; 3:7a). As that is the case, we need to know a little about the Assyrians and Nineveh to understand the occasion for this prophecy. The land which some day would be called Assyria was inhabited from prehistoric times. In fact the forefathers of this empire were highly influenced by the Sumerians, the Chaldeans/Babylonians, and Egypt. During the era of Saul and David, Assyria was a nation, but it was preoccupied with war on many fronts. This allowed Saul and David a large amount of freedom in their efforts at establishing the Kingdom of Israel.

Fast forward the clock about 200 years and Palestine began feeling the threat of this nation.

For example, during the regency of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) Ahab was forced to send soldiers to fund the Assyrian army (~853 BC). Later Jehu was forced to pay him tribute (~841 BC). Yet with the death of Shalmaneser III, Assyria fell into decline. The next few kings² spent most of their resources and efforts seeking to preserve the wealth and grandeur of the nation such that once again Palestine was free to develop as it wished (which is why Jeroboam II and Uzziah were able to grow their respective nations without the threat of a foreign power).

Yet the autonomy of that the nations of Palestine enjoyed at this time all ended with the regency of Tiglath Pileser III (744-727 BC) who extended his authority well into Judah! He was the first of many Assyrian Kings who maintained Assyria as a world power! Recall that during this time that the northern kingdoms of Palestine either were taken into exile or subjugated under the yoke of the Assyrians. The northern Kingdom of Israel at this time went into exile (722 BC). Also Judah became a vassal state such that God's people were forced to pay tribute to Assyria as well as worship their many gods and adopt their religion. Now Palestine experienced further depredations, before facing the full brunt of Assyria's hostility in the reign of Sennacherib (704–681) who invaded Judah in 701 B.C. Recall, this is the era of Hezekiah!

In the following century both Esarhaddon (681–669) and his son, Ashurbanipal (669–627), exercised dominion over Judah. In fact, it was Esarhaddon who humbled Manasseh, and it was Ashurbanipal who extended the influence of Assyria all the way to Egypt (conquering and destroying Thebes, cf. Nahum 3:8-10)!

In this regard, I need to make a couple of comments regarding Ashurbanipal. He was the last Assyrian monarch who ruled over the nation in its strength and power! During his regency, the southern Kingdom of Judah quaked in its boots! However, the stability of Ashurbanipal's long reign was followed by dynastic instability and the degradation of the nation. Soon a new world power would arise, Babylon! It would be with this nation that God's people would have to do!

Throughout all this time, Nineveh was one of the capital cities of the Empire³, holding the status of one of the largest cities at this time in the world. It has been estimated that in its hay day the population of Nineveh proper was 175,000 people (that is how many people lived within the city walls!); recall it took Jonah three days to traverse the city Jonah 3:3.⁴

Most notably, the last Assyrian king who reigned with absolute power, Ashurbanipal (there were other kings after him; yet they were all weak), made Nineveh his main residence. As such, it was from here that the atrocities that were perpetrated against God's people at this time came. Accordingly it was against this city that Nahum pronounced the judgment of this prophecy! In terms of the dating of this prophecy, we have four time-indicators which help to fix the date. First of all, Nahum 3:8-10a clearly references the fall of Thebes (in Egypt) which occurred in 664/3 B.C.

Nahum 3:8-10a, "Are you better than No-amon [ancient Thebes], which was situated by the waters of the Nile, with water surrounding her, whose rampart *was* the sea, whose wall *consisted* of the sea? Ethiopia was *her* might, and Egypt too, without limits. Put and Lubim

were among her helpers. Yet she became an exile, she went into captivity...”

The destruction of Thebes occurred in 664/3 B.C. ironically by the Assyrians! On account of Nahum’s reference to the destruction of this city we conclude that the book of Nahum couldn’t have been written before this time. Secondly, we know that Nineveh fell in August of 612 B.C.- so of course Nahum couldn’t have been written after this time. So the possible date range for Nahum is 664 B.C. to 612 B.C. Nahum was written somewhere in between these dates!

Third, because Nahum contains no rebuke of God’s people, many suggest that the prophecy most likely was written during one of the two religious revivals that occurred in Judah during this era- which limits it either to the last years of Manasseh’s reign (650-642 BC); recall he repented and endeavored to reform the religion of God’s people or the religious reforms under Josiah (628-609 BC).

Finally, it is obvious that Nahum was written at a time when Assyria was not in decline, but robust, strong, and certainly greatly to be feared.

Nahum 1:12-13, “Thus says the Lord [speaking of Nineveh], ‘Though they are at full *strength* and likewise many, even so, they will be cut off and pass away. [Now speaking to God’s people...] Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no longer. So now, I will break his yoke bar from upon you, and I will tear off your shackles.”

Now because the regency of Ashurbanipal began its decline around 640 B.C. (his regency ended in 627 BC), many suggest a dating for this prophecy sometime after 664 B.C. (the fall of Thebes) yet before 640 B.C. That would place this prophecy somewhere in the vicinity of 650 B.C. at the beginning of Manasseh’s revival when Assyria was at its strongest and God’s people most certainly at their weakest!

A Key Theme: Sovereignty of God over Life

Nahum 1:4-6, “He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; the blossoms of Lebanon wither. Mountains quake because of Him, and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken up by Him.”

Talk about a powerful sermon which needed to be heard amongst God’s people at this time! Indeed! THE nation which had subjugated God’s people for so long was as nothing before God! Just as God held Judah in His hand, so also He does the nations! Truly, God’s people needed to hear this; in fact so much so that another prophecy would be given during the exile which also would demonstrate God’s sovereignty over the decisions of even a secular king (Daniel).

The naturalist’s explanation of the downfall of Judah is that a greater nation arose and conquered a weaker nation. A theistic explanation of the downfall of Judah at the time was that the gods of

the Assyrians and Babylonians were more powerful than Yahweh! Yet God's people, which include us, must understand the truth. God is a sovereign Lord who does what He pleases! He lifts up nations and deposes kings. No one and nothing can stand in His path or thwart His will. Assyria therefore was nothing more than a tool in the hands of God (cf. Isaiah 10:5ff). As a result, God's people must fear God, not that or any nation! In the words of Paul, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:36)!

Notice there are many facets to God's Sovereignty (and so the theme of this book) that Nahum highlights here. The first is that God's sovereign rule is righteous.

Nahum 1:2, "A jealous and avenging God is the Lord; the Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies."

When the Bible speaks of God being "jealous" it is not ascribing to Him a sinful disposition (as "jealousy" typically is understood when used of man). Because of the doctrine of Creator Rights, the Lord alone has the right to be worshipped, served, and honored by His creation.

Revelation 4:11, "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created."

This means that God will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8) and if any part of His creation (no matter how small or large) refuses to serve the purpose for which it has been made (God's glory), then God will correct that part of creation. That is the point here! The "adversary" of God is anyone or thing that will not submit to Him or give Him glory. As such we read, "The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies."

How God's people needed to hear this! How we need to hear this! No one ever in any place will get away scotch free in their rebellion. All will face a day of reckoning. in this life and most assuredly the next!

So let the nations rage. Let the wicked and ungodly persecute the child of God. Let them have "their day"! But let them realize that the day is going to come when God has His! This was the encouragement Peter gave the persecuted church in his day.

1 Peter 4:4-5, "And in *all* this, they are surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign *you*; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."

2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

D. W. Baker wrote of our passage: "The correct response to an action, good or bad, will be given

by God; neither too little nor too much.” (Baker, 2009, pp. 27, Volume 27) This truth ought to make us a people NOT discouraged and downcast by the wicked and their prosperity. Rather, it must make us a people who live in trust and reliance upon God’s sovereign majesty! Listen to how Paul exhorted:

1 Corinthians 4:5, “Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men’s* hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.”

This was the first word of encourage that Nahum gave to His generation: God’s sovereign rule is righteous! The second word of encouragement was that God’s sovereign rule is patient.

Nahum 1:3a, “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power...”

The expression “slow to anger” is the opposite of being “quick tempered” (cf. Proverbs 14:17). Now as ones who have a relationship with God, this facet of God’s character is wonderful! Isn’t it? Think of God’s people in the wilderness:

Nehemiah 9:17, “And they refused to listen, and did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which Thou hadst performed among them; so they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness; and Thou didst not forsake them.”

We love this aspect of God’s character as He suffers-long with us in our sin. But when it comes to this aspect of God’s character as it relates to unrighteous and ungodly men (oppressors like the Assyrians), oh how we want justice, NOW! And when we don’t get it according to our time table, we unintentionally stop believing that sin comes at a great cost! Let us remember as Peter’s exhortation:

2Peter 3:8-9, “But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

We must see that God’s patience is not a sign of weakness on the part of God, but meekness! Notice how the text quickly qualifies it.

Nahum 1:3a, “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power...”

Family of God, let us understand once and for all that this world is not the final state! Don’t get too comfortable! And don’t conclude anything about God and His will by His providences. God is on the throne. God is patiently bringing this created order to its appointed end! Oppressors, evil and wicked men, and nations are someday going to stand before His Judgment Seat! This brings

us to a third truth Nahum stressed here that God's sovereign rule is just.

God's Sovereign Rule is Just

Nahum 1:3, "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished..."

Brothers and sisters, Nahum is highlighting a very important truth. Because of His grace, God suffers-long with sinners. Yet because God is Just, not one of their sins will be missed on the Day of Judgment! Christ proclaimed this message:

Matthew 12:36-37, "And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned."

Romans 2:5-6, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds."

The word for "storing up" is a banking term for "treasuring." What a twist! The wicked treasures power, success, pleasure, money, etc... Little do they recognize that these things are not items that can be saved ("naked we come from our mother's womb and naked we shall return there"). Yet in their pursuit of these things, they are treasuring up that which God does save and keep track of: wrath//due recompense! No good thing done in the name of Christ will be missed on the Day of Judgment. And no bad thing done will be neglected! God's sovereign rule is just such that "He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished!"

God's Sovereign Rule is Unpredictable and Foreboding

Finally we see that God's sovereign rule is unpredictable and foreboding.

Nahum 1:3, 3c: "...In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet."

This passage contains two expressions that are quite amazing. First, "in the whirlwind and storm is His way" anthropomorphically speaking, when God condescends from His heights of glory to this earth, the first realm of creation to be affected is that part of this world between heaven and earth. And so at the sensation of a breeze, Nahum would remind His generation that God is in fact quite active and moving in His purpose and will for the earth. For the moving swirl of wind must have a cause which ultimately is God! Yet who here can predict where the wind will come from and where it will go? Solomon put it this way:

Ecclesiastes 11:5, "Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all

things.”

Christ referenced this when it came to those saved according to the will of God:

John 3:8, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

This is the point of Nahum as he spoke about the Sovereign control of God over this world by which He raises up and deposes kings and kingdoms. We do not know what God is going to do next! He is unpredictable and most certainly NOT safe (in the words of C. S. Lewis)! Why in His providence has Assyria been allowed to do as it has done? We don’t know; but our sovereign God (who is working all things for our good and His glory) does! O. Palmer Robertson wrote of this verse:

The whirlwind or tempest... and the storm... appear totally arbitrary in their meanderings, striking first here and then there without rhyme or reason. But God is ordering them. Without confusion they follow the path of divine ordination. (Robertson, 1990 , p. 65)

The next expression, “clouds are the dust beneath His feet” show us Nahum employs the imagery of “clouds as the dust at God’s feet”, he paints a picture of vigorous movement in haste. Not gay, puffy, white clouds, but ominous storm clouds depict the motions of the Almighty. God strides across the expanse of heaven, stirring up the commotion of thunder and lightning as his attributes of holiness and righteousness move into action (think of Psalm 29:3–9)! In fact, in Palestine these storm clouds can be deadly in the winter as illustrated by this account in the early 1800’s:

Some friends of mine ... were coming down the hill ... when one of them called their attention to tall columns of mist over the marsh of the Huleh [a river valley north of the Sea of Galilee]. They came this way very rapidly, and soon broke upon them with awful fury.... Those who attempted to reach Khyam perished in the plain, although it is not more than two miles wide, and in full view of their houses. Thus ten men died in a few minutes from the mere chill of this wonderful wind. There was no snow, no frost, and not much rain; but the wind was perfectly awful, driving and upheaving everything before it. These cold winds draw out all animal heat with amazing rapidity. Not only were these men chilled to death almost instantly, but 85 head of cattle also perished before they could be brought to the village.” (Thomson, 1864, pp. 200-201)

These are the “clouds beneath the feet of God” clouds which someday, Nahum prophesies in this book, would decimate that strong and seemingly unconquerable nation of Assyria! When it would happen? How it would happen? This remained a mystery to Nahum. Accordingly, the nation must realize that looks are always deceiving! Nothing is certain until judgment! Realize that the world in which we live is ever and always under the direct control of our Sovereign God!

This was a needed message to Nahum’s generation as they remained under the yoke of Assyrian

and would soon receive the ministrations of Jeremiah and Zephaniah- both of which prophesied of the destruction of Judah! Yet, knowing that God was and is in control of all things, Nahum proclaimed a strong and timeless message of courage to the people of God: “Trust the Lord; His sovereign will for you in Christ cannot be thwarted!” When we hold to this conviction we can face the future with a holy boldness! Loraine Boettner put it this way:

This system [God’s absolute sovereignty as manifested in His predestinating all things], logical and severe though it may be, does not make one sad and silent, but courageous and active. Knowing himself to be immortal until his work is done, courage is a natural result. Smith’s estimate of the Calvinist is expressed in the following words: ‘His feet plucked from the horrible pit and planted on the Eternal Rock, his heart thrilled with an adoring gratitude, his soul conscious of a Divine love that will never forsake him and a Divine energy that in him and through him is working out eternal purposes of good, he is girded with invincible strength. In a nobler sense than Napoleon ever dreamed, he knows himself to be a “man of destiny. (Boettner, 1991, p. chapter 2)

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End Notes

¹ N.B. This prophecy was not intended for the Assyrians. This was written for the people of God.

² Sāamsûi-Adad V (823-811 BC), Adad-nirari III (811-783 BC), Shalmaneser IV (782-773 BC)

³ The other cities being Assur and Calah.

⁴ Though we must keep in mind he did so preaching which would have slowed him down considerably.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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