

SESSION TEN

THE BOOK OF NAHUM

An Oracle of Judgment on Nineveh

I. INTRODUCTION

This is one of the three books of the Old Testament prophets that deals primarily with Gentile powers rather than YHWH's covenant people:

Obadiah - Edom
Jonah - Nineveh
Nahum – Nineveh

The author of the book is Nahum the Elkoshite (1:1) though very little is known of him. Apparently, he did live in Judah, since he writes with a heart for Judah (1:15). His name (נְחֻמַּיִם) means "comfort," and the destruction of Nineveh would be a comforting message to the nations oppressed by her.

God's judgment on Nineveh is the primary topic of the book. Nineveh was one of the great cities of the mighty Assyrian Empire. Nineveh's fall in 612 BC marked the collapse of the Assyrian empire. In 3:8, mention is made of No-Amon by the Nile. This is a reference to Thebes, the city of Amon, located in upper Egypt. Thebes fell to Ashurbanipal in 663 BC. Consequently, the book of Nahum was written sometime during the period 663-612 BC in anticipation of Nineveh's fall.

It should not surprise us that God would place in Scripture a book dealing with this pagan power, for Nineveh and the Assyrians were significant topics of God's previous revelation. Jonah was sent to Nineveh in the 8th century BC, and God graciously removed judgment from them due to their true repentance. In the book of Isaiah, Assyria was commissioned as God's rod for executing discipline upon other nations, particularly Israel and Judah. However, God promised to punish Assyria for abusing her calling (Isa 10:5-14; cf. Isa 14:24-25; 30:31-33; 31:8-9; Ezek 32:22-23; Zeph 2:13-15; Zech 10:11). Whereas Obadiah prophesied the destruction of Edom and Habakkuk the destruction of Babylon, Nahum prophesied the destruction of Assyria.

II. BACKGROUND ON ASSYRIA

Assyria became the dominant power of the Ancient Near East during the 9th-7th centuries BC. They took the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 BC, and Judah was often a vassal state of Assyria from 732 BC onward, responsible for paying tribute to the Assyrian kings. Many of the Assyrian kings had their palace at Nineveh, so that Nineveh often functioned as the principle city.

Nineveh had been fashioned into the gem of the Assyrian Empire by Sennacherib (704-681). He had nearly tripled the size of the city and made it his capital...¹

¹John Walton, *Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1991), 397.

Yet the city of Nineveh fell to the combined armies of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians in August, 612 BC.

Nineveh had been the capital of one of the cruelest, vilest, richest, most powerful, and most idolatrous empires in the world. The Assyrians were great warriors, continuously going on raiding expeditions. Their notorious brutality made the surrounding nations shudder. The Assyrians employed various modes of execution. According to George Rawlinson in his writings on the ancient monarchies, impalement on a sharpened stake was a favorite method of execution, doubtless employed by the Assyrians because of its extreme cruelty. A pointed stake was placed in the ground, and the victim was then impaled upon it through his stomach, the stake penetrating inwardly up to his breastbone. Another common mode of executing captives was by crushing the kneeling victim's skull with a mace; others were put to death by beheading them with a sword, or by burning them alive in the fire. Assyrian bas-reliefs from excavated ruins also depict executioners flaying the prisoners with a knife. The victim was tied by his wrists and ankles to stakes in the ground, while the skin was removed from his body with a knife. Mutilation of prisoners was not uncommon with the Assyrians, who cut off their victim's ears, nose, blinded them with hot irons, or plucked out the tongue by the roots.²

The cruelty afflicted upon her enemies was one of Assyria's most noteworthy characteristics. Johnson records the following interesting accounts in which Assyrian kings boasted of their cruelty:³

Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) boasted, "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountain I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. . . . The heads of the warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire" (Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1:148). Regarding one captured leader, he wrote, "I flayed (him), his skin I spread upon the wall of the city . . ." (ibid., 1:146). He also wrote of mutilating the bodies of live captives and stacking their corpses in piles.

Shalmaneser II (859-824) boasted of his cruelties after one of his campaigns: "A pyramid of heads I reared in front of his city. Their youths and their maidens I burnt up in the flames" (ibid., 1:213). Sennacherib (705-681) wrote of his enemies, "I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives (as one cuts) a string. Like the many waters of a storm I made (the contents of) their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. . . . Their hands I cut off" (ibid., 2:127).

Ashurbanipal (669-626) described his treatment of a captured leader in these words: "I pierced his chin with my keen hand dagger. Through his jaw . . . I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him and made him occupy . . . a kennel" (ibid., 2:319). In his campaign against Egypt, Ashurbanipal also boasted that his officials hung Egyptian corpses "on stakes (and) stripped off their skins and covered the city wall(s) with them" (ibid., 2:295).

Through the influence of the evil king Manasseh of Judah, the Southern Kingdom was introduced to the official cult of the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kgs 21:1-18; 23:8-9; 2 Chr 33:3). During the reign of Josiah (639-609 BC), as Assyria was weakening, the heathen cult was abolished and the suzerainty of Assyria ended.

²George Rawlinson, *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, 1:278-80.

³Elliott E. Johnson, "Nahum," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary (OT)*, ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1494.

III. NINEVEH'S DESTRUCTION

The city was destroyed by the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians in 612 BC. According to the ancient historian, Diodorus Siculus, the Scythians led by Arbaces besieged the city for three years but with no effect. In the third year the Khosr River, which ran through the city, was swollen by rains which caused the floodgates to be overrun and a section of the city wall to be destroyed. This confirms these statements in the book of Nahum:

"But with an overflowing flood He will make a complete end of its site, and will pursue His enemies into darkness" (1:8), "The gates of the rivers are opened, and the palace is dissolved" (2:6), and "The gates of your land are opened wide to your enemies (3:13b).

The destruction of the site was so complete that when Alexander the Great fought the battle of Arbela in 331 BC, he did not know there had been a city there. When Xenophon (430-354 BC) and his army of 10,000 passed by 200 years later (about 401 BC), he supposed the mounds were the ruins of a Parthian city. When Napoleon camped near its site, he too was not aware of it.

In 1845 the English archaeologist Henry Layard identified the site known as Kuyunjik as being the site of Nineveh. The circumference of the inner wall is about eight miles. Allotting each inhabitant fifty square yards (as Felix Jones did in 1854), the city population would have been 174,000. However, if the reference in Jonah 4:11 to 120,000 persons who cannot discern their right hand from their left refers to children only, then the population of the city would have been about 600,000. Therefore, it is supposed that the city metropolis extended outside the walls. Ruins stretch along the Tigris River south to Nimrud (Calah) and north to Khorsabad. The "three-day journey" required to traverse Nineveh (Jonah 3:3) may refer to the outer extensions of these "suburbs" from Hatra, to Khorsabad, to Nimrud, which may have been up to sixty miles.

V. PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Purpose Stated

to announce the fall of Nineveh and thereby comfort Judah with the assurance that God is in control of the nations that afflict her.

Significance

Assyria had committed terrible atrocities on the nations of the Ancient Near East, including Israel in 722 BC. Judah also had felt the oppression of Assyria, since the latter defeated much of the land and had besieged Jerusalem itself in 701 BC in Hezekiah's day. Judah often had to pay tribute to Assyria, from the days of Ahaz through the reign of Manasseh.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIVES

Tucked away in a book whose dominant theme is wrath and judgment is a comforting verse found in 1:7: "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him." Assyria's wrath and God's wrath are both awesome and frightening, but God's wrath is controlled by His righteous character. His wrath only falls on those who have rejected the refuge He has provided for them in Himself. Assyria was unmerciful in executing her wrath, but our LORD is good: He does not discharge His wrath without holding out the opportunity of mercy for those who seek refuge in Him. How great our God is, for He is indeed good . . . infinitely good! O LORD, our God, we gladly take our refuge in You!