

Nahum

1. Introduction

1. Background

The name *Ashurbanipal* crops up again and again in the study of the prophecy of Nahum. Ashurbanipal was the last great king of the Assyrian empire. He was born in 685 BC, came to the throne in 669 BC and died in 627 BC. He was a king of exceptional cruelty, but during his reign the Assyrian empire became the largest empire the world had ever seen. Nevertheless, after his death the empire crumbled with remarkable speed. It is the crumbling of the empire, and especially the fall of Nineveh, the seat of power, of which Nahum prophesies.

Nahum's ministry can be dated between the fall of two great cities: after the fall of Thebes in Egypt in 663 BC, and before the fall of Nineveh in Assyria in 612 BC.

(a) *The Fall of Thebes (663 BC)*

Thebes was one of the main cities of Egypt, situated on the Nile about 400 miles upstream of the Nile delta. It enjoyed the divided the channels of the Nile as a natural defence (Nahum 3:8).

Egypt had been conquered by Esarhaddon of Assyria in 671 BC. When he died in 669 BC Egypt rebelled. The new Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, first secured his own kingdom and then marched south. He took Lower Egypt in 667 BC and the king of Egypt fled to Thebes. Three years later, the new Egyptian ruler tried to re-establish control of his own country, laying siege to Memphis in Lower Egypt. His campaign failed, and the Assyrians pursued him back to Thebes, which they then captured and plundered in 663 BC.

This was a shocking achievement. Thebes had been the capital of Egyptian power for over a thousand years. The ruins of Luxor and Karnak testify to its immense importance and fabulous wealth. Surrounded by the Nile, Thebes was thought impregnable. It is no wonder that Ashurbanipal boasts about his conquest: "This city, the whole of it, I conquered it with the help of Ashur and Ishtar. Silver, gold, precious stones, all the wealth of the palace, rich cloth, precious linen, great horses, supervising men and women, two obelisks of splendid electrum, weighing 2500 talents, the doors of temples I tore from their bases and carried them off to Assyria. With this weighty booty I left Thebes. Against Egypt and Kush I have lifted my spear and shown my power. With full hands I have returned to Nineveh, in good health."

Nahum, however, makes the fall of Thebes a pattern for the fall of Nineveh.

(b) *The Fall of Nineveh (612 BC)*

Assyria enjoyed a century of power from the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC) until the death of Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC). Once Ashurbanipal had dealt successfully with revolts in Babylon (652-648) and Elam (639), Assyria dominated all the nations from Elam to Egypt. But no sooner was Ashurbanipal dead than Babylon began to assert its independence under the leadership of

Nabopolassar (626-605 BC), the first king of the Neo-Babylonian empire. Cyaxares, king of the Medes, seized Ashur, the ancient capital of Assyria in 614 BC. Then in 612 BC a coalition of Medes and Babylonians laid siege to Nineveh.

Like Thebes, Nineveh enjoyed the protection of a river, the Tigris. It also had very strong walls which could not be breached by battering rams. However, in 612 BC heavy rains caused the Tigris to rise, inundating part of the city and destroying about 2 miles of one of its walls. Nineveh was pillaged, burned and razed.

In a cuneiform tablet, a Babylonian chronicle of Nabopolassar, recounts the wars of the Babylonians from 616-609 BC, and included the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. Part of the inscription says, “[They] launched a powerful attack on the city and in the month of Abu the city was taken. They made great [slaughter] of the princes. ...They took a heavy weight of booty from the city and the temple [and turned] the city into a mound and a ruin.”

The Assyrian empire limped on for another seven years, but succumbed to the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC.



The Assyrian Empire

(Map by Ningyou, based on “Atlas of the Bible Lands”, CS Hammond & Co., 1959)

(c) *The Kingdom of Judah during the reign of Ashurbanipal*

The reign of Ashurbanipal fits within the period of the Judean reigns of Manasseh (687-642 BC), Amon (642-640 BC) and Josiah (640-609 BC).

Manasseh was an especially wicked king. He was exiled to Babylon by Ashurbanipal possibly about the year 648 BC. On his release and restoration to Jerusalem he undertook a programme of reformation of religion. It was, however, “too little, too late”.

Manasseh’s son, Amon, may have been named for the Egyptian god Amon, whose temple Manasseh would have seen when Ashurbanipal forced him to accompany him on his campaign against Thebes. Amon was a bad king, and was assassinated after reigning only two years.

Amon’s son, Josiah, came to the throne aged 8. He proved to be a good king. In 628 BC, before the death of Ashurbanipal, he courageously asserted his Davidic right over the northern territory which had once been Israel but was now an Assyrian province. He also undertook a serious reformation of religion. Aged 39 he attempted to prevent Pharaoh Neco from assisting Assyria against Babylon, and died from wounds sustained in battle at Megiddo.

2. Theme: The LORD will by no means clear the guilty.

Nahum announces the fall of Nineveh. Strikingly, he picks up exactly the same revelation (Exodus 34:6-7) as Jonah and applies it in exactly the opposite way. Jonah understood that the gracious character of the LORD (Ex. 34:6) would, in the event of the repentance of Nineveh, lead to the deliverance of the city from disaster – “the LORD is slow to anger” (Jonah 4:2). One hundred years later, Nahum understood that the just character of the LORD demanded the execution of judgement on “the bloody city” – “the LORD is slow to anger” (Nahum 1:2-3, c.f. Ex. 34:7b).

So Nahum preaches the inevitability of God’s terrible judgement, and his theme is found in the punch-line of his opening words: “the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.”

3. Who was Nahum?

Nahum is called an “Elkoshite”. We do not know what an “Elkoshite” is, but it probably means “a resident of a town called Elkosh”. In the 4th century AD, the scholar Jerome was shown a small Galilean town by his guide which he identified as Elkosh. If this was indeed the hometown of Nahum then there is poetic justice in one of the remnant of Israel announcing the destruction of the great empire that had devastated and depopulated the Pleasant Land.

It is almost certain that Nahum ministered during the reign of Ashurbanipal, while Assyria was in its strength –probably in the region of 650-640 BC. The Assyrian empire had never looked so strong, nor Assyrian might looked so insuperable. So

Nahum's declaration, "Thus says the LORD, 'Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away'" (Nahum 1:12), is most remarkable – who could foresee such an unlikely demise?

The delivery of such a message would have required considerable courage. Ashurbanipal attributed his rise to power and his success in war to the gods of Assyria. He would have considered Nahum's prophecy a gross blasphemy against his gods. It is known that he executed cruel deaths on men who blasphemed the gods – what would he do to Nahum if he could lay hands on him!

And it is unlikely that Nahum would have found refuge at home. Manasseh maintained a pro-Assyrian stance. For one thing, the northern territory of Israel was organised as an Assyrian province – so Manasseh had the military might of the empire on his doorstep. For another thing, Judah enjoyed commercial benefits from the empire. Ashurbanipal had placed western Asia under one central government for the first time in 800 years, and commerce was flourishing throughout this vast area as never before. It was very much to Judah's advantage to maintain a policy of loyalty to Assyria, and Nahum's sharp denunciation of Assyria and his announcement that the empire was about to be entirely and irreparably overthrown could hardly have received official approval in the court at Jerusalem.

4. Structure and Content of Nahum

The following outline has been taken (and slightly adapted) from O.P. Robertson's commentary in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series.

Superscription (1:1)

Part 1 (1:2-14) ***The Public Announcement of Nineveh's Destruction***

- A. 1:2-6 The awesome terror of God's judgement
- B. 1:7-11 The specific target of God's judgement
- C. 1:12-14 The imminent character of God's judgement

Interlude (1:15) The announcement of Nineveh's judgement is joyful news

Part 2 (2:1-13) ***The Dramatic Depiction of Nineveh's Destruction***

- A. 2:1-7 The city is taken
- B. 2:8-10 The city is plundered
- C. 2:11-13 The city is humbled

Part 3 (3:1-19) ***The Certainty of Nineveh's Destruction***

- A. 3:1-7 Sure because of their sin
- B. 3:8-13 Sure just as the destruction of Thebes
- C. 3:14-19 Sure despite their strength

Nahum 1

2. The Announcement of Nineveh's Destruction

Before we go anywhere with the prophecy of Nahum, we need to consider the opening phrase: Literally, "The burden of Nineveh" (1:1). The announcement of the destruction of a people is not a light thing; it is not to be read flippantly. It is a burdensome message!

1. The awesome terror of God's judgement (1:2-6)

1:2 states three times that the LORD is "one who takes vengeance".

He is "a jealous God" – jealousy is his attitude to all rivals, and vengeance is his action because of that jealousy.

God is "wrathful" – literally a "master of wrath" – his anger is neither uncontrolled nor unjustified. He "reserves [wrath] for his enemies".

"The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty" (1:3) – compare Exodus 34:6-7. Jonah experienced (reluctantly) the reality of God's slowness to anger; 100 years later Nahum announced the awful reality that when sinners abuse God's patience, they are storing up anger.

Nahum describes God's coming with judgement. The LORD's approach cause nature to convulse (vv. 4-5). So how can you stand (v. 6)?

"The guilty sinner shall call for an avalanche of rocks to cover him not primarily as a way of escape from the pain inflicted on his body for his sin, but because of the awesome sense of rejection and repudiation emanating from the Presence before whom he must stand" (O.P. Robertson, p. 62).

2. The specific target of God's judgement (1:7-11)

Nahum has set forth God as Judge. Now he zeros in on the target of judgement.

But in this section God speaks to two parties – to his own people (to comfort and stir up faith), and to Nineveh (to dismay with the announcement of destruction).

God cares for his own people (v. 7) – those who "take refuge in him". God "knows those who take refuge in him" – i.e. he loves them (Ps. 1:6; 2:12). And that is why he judges: salvation and judgement must go hand-in-hand. Robertson suggests that the opening phrase of v. 9 may be translated "What do you think about the LORD?" Addressed to Israel, this is meant to stimulate faith.

Verse 8 describes God's judgement as an overflowing flood. Assyria had been an overflowing flood in the days of king Ahaz (Isaiah 8:7-8). Now Assyria would be swept away – sweet irony since she was surrounded by the waters of the Tigris – in fact, the flooding of the Tigris breached Nineveh's walls in 612 BC. Nineveh disappeared without trace ("trouble will not rise up a second time", v. 9!)

The word "darkness" (v. 8) signifies distress, terror, mourning, confusion, dread. It is reminiscent of the outer darkness of which Jesus speaks (e.g. Matt. 8:12).

The “worthless counsellor” of verse 11 is literally “counsellor of Belial”. “Sons of Belial” = scoundrels. “Belial” came to designate Satan; hence 2 Cor. 6:15. There are two kingdoms and two kings, but the kingdom of Belial is totally doomed. The “jealous, avenging God” of verse 2 will brook no rival.

3. The imminent character of God’s judgement (1:12-14)

In. v. 12 Nahum underscores the certainty of Nineveh’s overthrow with his one and only use of the prophetic formula “thus says the LORD”.

God isn’t going to wait for Nineveh to weaken – he will destroy it in its strength. He shall “pass over” Nineveh just as he “passed over” Egypt (Exodus 12:12-13).

Verse 13, “And NOW” – the time is determined, and will come soon and certain.

God’s judgement will be final. Verse 14 says “from your name none shall be sown”, i.e. Ashurbanipal will have no posterity, no one to follow and perpetuate his memory. He is “vile”, i.e. “light, brief, passing, of no significance”. This is just what happened – when the Greek historian Xenophon passed the site of Nineveh about the year 400 BC, even the name of the city had been lost.

4. God’s judgement means joyful news for Judah

The messenger has witnessed the fall of Nineveh and runs to proclaim the good news on the mountains of Judah. The LXX translates “who brings good news” with the word which means “to evangelize”.

Verse 15 is very similar to Isaiah 52:7. Isaiah relates to fall of Babylon; Nahum to Nineveh. In Romans 10:17 Paul refers Isaiah-Nahum to the triumph of Christ. There is “an innate oneness between the message which announced the fall of those great persecuting powers, and the erection of that Kingdom which was finally to supplant them...Thus Nahum’s predictions have a meaning for all time to come, so long as there remains aught in which the spirit of Nineveh survives – aught which has inherited its criminality and its hostility to God’s people. The doom of Nineveh shall attach in substance, if not in form, to all its successors. Not until the last foe of God and of human salvation shall be finally destroyed, shall it in its full import be accomplished” (WH Green quoted by Robertson, p. 84).

5. Applications

- Judgement is too awful to be treated lightly – it is a *burden*.
- We dare not abuse God’s patience. If God is patient, it is because he would have us come to repentance (Rom. 2:4). But if we presume upon his patience, we are only storing up wrath against ourselves (Rom. 9:22).
- God’s judgement is not arbitrary – he *knows* both those who take refuge in him and those who oppose him.
- Judgement is a necessary aspect of the gospel. Only when God has fully executed judgement on his enemies will the regeneration be consummated.

Nahum 2

3. *The Depiction of Nineveh's Destruction*

Nahum, ministering about 645 BC describes the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. It is like watching a film, and leaves us shocked: "The prophet plunges his reader into the midst of the struggle between Nineveh and its prophesied assailants. You chill at the shock of the first warning alert. You jar at the pulsating rumble of approaching war chariots. You panic in flight fro the warriors who have broken through the city's last defences. You watch through doleful eyes as the gleeful, sweaty victors weep down to gather the spoils...A world so accustomed to gratifying the desires of the flesh should take heed to this most vivid of warnings before it is too late!" (O.P. Robertson, p. 80).

Once the "film" of the fall of Nineveh has been "screened", the LORD of Hosts (the "director") comes forward himself and speaks against the city: "Behold, I am against you [feminine singular]" (2:13).

1. **Scene 1: the city is taken (2:1-7)**

Verse 1: the siege is announced. Nineveh had scattered – now a scatter is coming against her. Four rapid fire commands jolt the Ninevite army into action: Guard! Watch! Gird! Strengthen!

Verse 2: Nineveh had plundered and ruined Israel's majesty – right down to the very tender shoots. But The LORD will restore.

Verses 3-4: the assault troops rush on Nineveh. They dominate the battle.

Verse 5: the inhabitants resist. But the king is in a daze and his officers stumble as they run to the wall; they are too late to prevent the erection of siege towers.

Verse 6: the city is breached by the flooding of the Tigris – the temple/palace (the centre of power) is destroyed.

Verse 7: the city falls. "It is settled!" – the great city is stripped, carried away – nothing is left but a few handmaidens to lament her fall.

2. **Scene 2: the city is plundered (2:8-10)**

Verse 8: Nineveh enjoyed such privilege, but now the pool is breached and the waters run away. The inhabitants flee, wide-eyed with terror – "None turns back". The wealthiest of cities is quickly left empty, void and waste. The rout is total.

Verse 9: Nineveh had amassed great wealth through conquest – now she is stripped of it all – almost as though she had been allowed to plunder other nations so that she could now, in turn, be plundered.

Verse 10: the Hebrew words suggest the noise made when a bottle is poured out. The people are utterly terrified – hearts, knees, loins, faces – just as they had terrorised for generations.

3. Scene 3: the city is humbled (2:11-13)

Verses 11-12 The Assyrians had a long history of depicting their king and warriors as mighty lions or great lion hunters. The Bible also depicts the Assyrian warriors as roaring lions (Isa. 5:29).

Ashurbanipal engaged in lion hunting as a sport. Lions were captured and caged in the king's garden in Nineveh to be used for staged lion hunts. "I, Ashurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria, in my lordly sport, I seized a lion of the plain by his tail and at the command of Urta, Nergal, the gods, my allies, I smashed his skull with the club of my hand." Ashurbanipal boasts that kings and lions are powerless before him: "Among men, kings, and among the beasts, lions were powerless before my bow, I know (the art) of waging battle and combat."

Moreover, the cruelty of the Assyrian kings was like that of lions. They flayed their victims, cut off limbs, lips, ears; made piles of heads, etc.

But the lion hunters were now the hunted lions! "Oh where now...?" (v. 11) is mockery – it is the end of an era!

Verse 13: God himself stands against the tyrant. Military prowess (chariots) and royal prowess (young lions) will be brought to an end.

"The voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard." Is this a veiled allusion to the threats that Sennacherib's messengers had spoken before the walls of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah? The power of the word of the kings of Assyria to terrorize the nations will be no more.

4. Applications

- Nineveh's destruction illustrates the *Lex Talionis*, i.e. the equity of God's justice. Nineveh's punishment would be in terms of the crimes she had committed against other nations. God's justice is exact and precise – he is a "master of wrath" (1:2). No one has reason to complain to God that his judgement is unfair.
- The LORD is portrayed as sovereign in the history of the nations – history is not random or undirected – God says, "Behold, I..." Just as he had used Nineveh as chastening rod (Isa. 10:5) – even though the Assyrians themselves were guilty of pride and cruelty – so also he would use other nations (the Babylonians and Medes) to bring down Nineveh for her sins.
- We do not have a divinely inspired commentary on other nations of the earth, and as a result we cannot make definitive comment on how God is directing history. But we can be confident that he is directing history. And we know that he is doing so in order to establish his kingdom (2:2a).
- The horror of the scene of destruction ought to jolt us to take action – not to "man the walls", since resistance is clearly futile (2:5-6) – but rather to turn to God in repentance.

Nahum 3

4. *The Certainty of Nineveh's Destruction*

Nahum underscores the certainty of judgement. Each section of this chapter contains a rhetorical question. These questions force the Ninevites to ponder and acknowledge the certainty of their judgement – not to move them to repentance, but rather for the sake of the people of God, to spur their faith concerning the certainty of the judgement which shall deliver them from years of oppression.

1. **Sure because of their sin (3:1-7)**

“Woe!” (v. 1) is a cry of agony: Nahum not a dispassionate observer of Nineveh's destruction; his message is truly a burden (1:1). But he asks in v. 7 “Where shall I seek comforters [‘Nahum-ers!’] for you?” (the first rhetorical question). So many had suffered abuse from Nineveh – none will weep over her calamity.

Nineveh's sin is serious – she is “the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder – no end to the prey....countless whorings...deadly charms” (3:1,4) ⇒ cruelty, lies, profiteering, victimization, prostitution and sorcery.

- “The bloody city” – the city guilty of multiple blood sheddings. The Assyrians were notoriously cruel – illustrated by reliefs in Ashurbanipal's palace – they depict people being impaled, decapitated, flayed; people being made to grind the bones of ancestors, vultures plucking out eyes of the dead; a commander presenting a bracelet (a medal for valour) to a soldier who had decapitated the five or six heads at his feet. In Assyrian thinking, life was cheap.
- “All of it lies” – the word suggests “leanness” – despite her focus on wealth and luxury, Nineveh had “lived a lie” which only caused leanness – like a drug user.
- Plunder ⇒ tearing off ⇒ profiteering.
- “No end of prey” ⇒ victimising.
- “Whorings of the prostitute” – “By coarse, insulting language the Holy Spirit...tears away these pretences and lays bare the moral degradation of the inner recesses of the heart” (O.P. Robertson).
- “Deadly charms” – archaeology has uncovered thousands of tablets from Nineveh which attest to an intense interest in sorcery.

Verses 2-3 give a vivid depiction of the assault on the city. Three words for dead bodies: fatally wounded, collapsed, lying face down – graphic!

Verses 5-6: “Behold me!” The LORD himself takes the field. He will expose all Nineveh's shame, pelt her with filth, mock her and present her as a spectacle (something Ashurbanipal did to his victims).

2. **Sure as the destruction of Thebes (3:8-13)**

Consider what happened to Thebes (vv. 8-10). Thebes was devastated despite her many advantages. “Is Nineveh better than her?” (2nd rhetorical question).

Ashurbanipal had personal knowledge of Thebes (fell 663 BC). Thebes was capital of Egypt for 1,000 years. Located 400 miles up the Nile; attackers exposed to assault on both flanks. Had a perimeter of 27 miles. Set on the Nile; surrounded by rivers, streams, canals and lakes; when the Nile in flood it is 2-3 miles wide at Thebes. Massive stone monuments unrivalled in the ancient world.

Nineveh was in poor condition compared to Thebes – no supporters to compare to Cush, Put and Lubim; the Tigris not as impressive a defence as the Nile.

Thebes was humiliated: exile; genocide of the young; the aged sold into slavery.

Nineveh may expect the same (vv. 11-13). Five similes vivify the helplessness of the city: like a staggering drunk, a panicked fugitive, a trembling fig tree, a feeble woman, a city with its gates thrown open.

3. Sure despite their strength (3:14-19)

Nahum goads the Assyrians with the futility of every human effort to evade the coming judgement. Everyone is “enslaved”, performing duties that would normally have been for slaves only (v. 14).

“There!” (v. 15) is emphatic. “Precisely where man in revolt against God makes his greatest effort, there he is subject to the severest divine blow” (Robertson p. 124).

Numbers do no good (vv. 15b-16). Locusts: in the annals of his reign, Ashurbanipal described the Elamites he had defeated as a “dense swarm of grasshoppers”. The tables are turned!

Leadership does no good (vv. 17-18). Nahum address the king himself! He has failed in his main duty – his people are scattered on the mountains. Useless king, useless captains.

The final tragedy of persistent sin (v. 19). The person address is masculine – the king rather than the city – Ashurbanipal was one of the most cruel and despotic of the Assyrian rulers. “Upon whom has your cruelty not been inflicted continually?” (the last rhetorical question). Cf. the condition of humanity in Genesis 6:5.

Both Jonah and Nahum end with a question. Jonah’s proclaimed mercy; Nahum’s proclaims justice.

4. Applications

- God’s judgement is not on one or two sins – it is on persistent sin – whole lives devoted to sin (individuals); millennia of sin (the world-in-rebellion).
- Look at your own life. Do you see forms of cruelty, lies, profiteering, victimization, prostitution, sorcery? Are you a Ninevite, born and bred?
- Don’t you realize that you cannot escape judgement if you remain a Ninevite? Even your strengths will disappoint and turn against you on the Last Day.
- Part of the judgement of hell is separation – no one to comfort any other. The other part is the angry presence of God, the righteous “master of wrath”.