

Nahum 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Nahum chapter 2. The scatterer has come up against you. Man the ramparts, watch the road, dress for battle, collect all your strength. For the Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel, for plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches.

The shield of his mighty men is red, his soldiers are clothed in scarlet, the chariots come with flashing metal on the day he musters them, the cypress spears are brandished, the chariots race madly through the streets, they rush to and fro through the squares, they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning, he remembers his officers, they stumble as they go, they hasten to the wall, the siege tower is set up, the river gates are opened, the palace melts away, its mistress is stripped, she is carried off, her slave girls lamenting, moaning like doves and beating their breasts, Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away, halt, halt, they cry, but none turns back, plunder the silver, plunder the gold, there is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things, desolate, desolation and ruin, hearts melt and knees tremble, anguish is in all loins, all faces grow pale, where is the lion's den, the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb, the lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses, he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh, behold I am against you declares the lord of hosts and I will burn your chariots in smoke and the sword shall devour your young lions,

I will cut off your prey from the earth and the voice of your messenger shall no longer be heard.

Nahum chapter 2 continues the prophetic warning of the lord's approaching judgment upon Nineveh, vividly describing the manner of its downfall and the aftermath of its ruin.

The chapter begins with the alarm, the scatterer has come up against Nineveh, it's an army of Medes and Babylonians advancing against it and all must ready themselves for battle, soldiers must man their various stations and brace themselves for the coming onslaught.

The verses that follow dramatically portray the movement of the army up to Nineveh, through the streets of the city's suburbs, up to its wall, their breaching of the citadel and their despoiling of its palace and temple, and then the plunder of the victors and the unspeakable anguish of the defeated Assyrians in the ruins and the wreckage that remains.

[2 : 36] This passage refers to the downfall of the city of Nineveh in 612 BC at the hands of a Median and Babylonian army. Rather than merely telling us what's going to happen, it paints a picture for us, an arresting portrayal in snapshots and cutscenes of how the downfall of Nineveh will appear.

The rapidity of the movement is expressed through curt imperatives, from the way in which the imagery moves swiftly from the beginning of the battle to its aftermath. The action against Nineveh is also an action for Jacob.

The relationship between the expression the majesty of Jacob and the majesty of Israel here might allude back to the story of the Lord's wrestling with Jacob in Genesis chapter 32, as Daniel Timur suggests.

There Jacob had received the name Israel and a blessing from the Lord. Alternatively, this could be a reference to the restoration of the territory of Judah and Israel. There was now the hope of reclaiming territory that had formerly been lost to the Assyrians.

This restoration of Jacob is seen as those who had plundered them are themselves plundered. The description starting in verse 3 works heavily with visual imagery. In verse 3 it's the colours, the red of the shield, presumably leather shields, and the clothing of the soldiers and scarlet.

[3 : 48] The colour of the shields and of the soldiers reminds us of the fact that these are coming for blood. Chariots, presumably those of the invading army, are racing through the streets of Nineveh. The suburbs outside the citadel walls had wide streets, down which chariots could race.

The great city is being overrun, and its citadel surrounded. Timur helpfully describes the city of Nineveh at this time. The 7th century BCE city of Nineveh proper consisted of a central walled area roughly 5 kilometres or 3 miles long, and averaging 1 kilometre .65 miles in width.

The palace, other royal buildings, temples, and relatively wealthy residential areas were located within this area, which was surrounded by an immense stone wall, roughly 15 metres or 50 feet thick, and 20 metres or 65 feet high.

This main wall was pierced by at least 15 gates. 18 are attested in written sources, but not all have been positively located, some of which were 5 to 7 metres, 16 to 23 feet wide, before being narrowed in the years leading up to 612 BCE, and all were easily accessed by stone ramps. Further, at two points the river Tigris ran under the city's wall, and on its course through the city, ran close enough to the royal palace that Sennacherib built a river wall to protect the citadel on which the palace was built from erosion.

[5 : 10] Verse 5 likely refers to the king of Nineveh, summoning his officers to the wall, they stumble to get there in time, and yet despite their efforts, the siege towers are set up, and the wall is breached.

Many have speculated on the grounds of verse 6, and what we know of the river works around the city of Nineveh, that water played some part in the city's downfall. Some ancient Greek historical accounts, such as that of Xenophon, may lend support to this, although the Babylonian accounts of the fall of the city, which were nearer to the event itself, do not mention a flood or the involvement of water.

Considering the proximity of the river to the palace in the city, it is possible that if some of the infrastructure were destroyed, that the foundations of the palace might have been undermined by the influx of water into the city.

There is no reason why we have to take the imagery that way, however. Such imagery, as we see elsewhere in scripture, is often used to describe an overwhelming force. As the citadel is breached, the palace is overthrown, and also the temple of the city is overthrown.

Verse 7 likely describes the despoiling of the temple of Ishtar and the carrying away of her statue. Nineveh is compared to a pool whose banks have been breached, so that all of its water flows away.

[6 : 20] Nineveh is hemorrhaging its forces, and commanders and officials can't summon them back to their posts. In the aftermath of the destruction, the plunderers are themselves plundered, stripped of all that they had gained from others, and left utterly desolate.

In verses 11 and 12, the former glories of Nineveh are compared to a lion's den, a place for the pride and the young lions, a place that no one would dare approach, and a place that was utterly secure.

It was the place to which the lion brought, and in which he devoured his prey. But now the place where the lion was once at his most secure has been overcome. No more can he gather his prey within the den of Nineveh.

Nineveh is no more. In the final verse of the chapter, the Lord declares his challenge to Nineveh. He is going to destroy the Assyrian war machine, which had been based upon the power of the chariot.

He is going to devour their young lions. The strength of their nation, the royalty officials and warriors, are going to be devoured by the sword. Their predatory activities will be put to a halt, and their voices of victory will be silenced.

[7 : 24] A question to consider. How does the Lord's vengeance upon Nineveh restore the majesty of Jacob?