

Nahum 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nahum chapter 1, an oracle concerning Nineveh, the book of the vision of Nahum of Elkash. The Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry. He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, the bloom of Lebanon withers, the mountains quake before him, the hills melt, the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble. He knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness. What do you plot against the Lord? He will make a complete end. Trouble will not rise up a second time. For they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink. They are consumed like stubble fully dried. From you came one who plotted evil against the

Lord, a worthless counsellor. Thus says the Lord, though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you, and will burst your bonds apart. The Lord has given commandment about you.

No more shall your name be perpetuated. From the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image, and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile. Behold upon the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace. Keep your feasts, O Judah. Fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you. He is utterly cut off. Nahum, the seventh prophet of the book of the twelve, is a seventh century prophetic book written by a Judean prophet foretelling the downfall of Nineveh. However, despite its most immediate concern with Nineveh, explicit reference to Nineveh is rare within the text. Thomas Wrens notes that there are only two such references in the entire book, in chapter 2 verse 8 and chapter 3 verse 7. One of the effects of this reticence in naming Nineveh and Assyria is that the universal relevance of the message of the book is more clearly seen. As Brevard Charles has argued, especially within their context within the biblical canon, prophecies can often exhibit a degree of abstraction from the immediacy of their original historical context. They speak across times to people in very different situations. For instance, within the book of the twelve, we can see the exploration of broader eschatological themes, such as the day of the Lord, even while the immediate instance of judgment being focused upon can vary. In dating the book of Nahum, as Daniel Timmer argues, we have two key dates between which we can date the book.

The downfall of Thebes is referenced in chapter 3 verse 8. As this occurred at the hands of Assyria in 663 BC, the book must be dated sometime before that. The downfall of Nineveh itself in 612 BC, at the hands of the rising power of Babylon, is the obvious second temporal reference. The prophecy also seems to have been delivered at a time of greater Assyrian power, probably nearer to the earlier date of the downfall of Thebes than the later date of the downfall of Nineveh. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Sennacherib had come up against Jerusalem in 701 BC and nearly defeated it. While he had failed in this, he had defeated 46 fortified cities of Judah. The prophet Jonah addressed a context about 100 years earlier.

Assyria was a brutal power and had greatly harmed Israel and Judah, wiping out the former kingdom and bringing the latter to its knees and reducing it to vassal status. Judah's power was much diminished during this period. It lost territory, cities and many men to the Assyrians. However, Assyria's days were numbered. A new power was about to dominate in the north. After the death of

Assyrian Banapol, the Neo-Assyrian Empire went into decline. The Babylonians successfully revolted against their rule. Assyria fell to Median forces in 614 BC, then Nineveh to Median and Babylonian forces in 612.

[4 : 37] Haran fell in 609 BC and then in 605 BC the Babylonians would defeat the Egyptians and the remnants of the Assyrian forces in Carchemish, spelling the end of the Egyptian power in the region and the establishment of the Babylonian hegemony, which would last for around the next 70 years. Beyond the very slight details that we receive at the beginning of the book, we lack further biographical data concerning Nahum. We don't know anything for certain about the identity of Elkush, for instance. It might be a clan name or it might be a place name. Commentators have several different speculative suggestions for its referent of varying degrees of likelihood. We don't know the king or the kings during whose reign Nahum prophesied. Manasseh, Ammon and Josiah were the kings during the relevant period. Manasseh was distinguished for the extent of his idolatry and his perversion of the religious life of Judah.

After the brief reign of his son Ammon, also renowned for his idolatry and wickedness, Josiah, a godly reforming king, came to the throne around 640 BC. While Nahum's prophecy concerns Nineveh, it is directed to Judah, or perhaps more specifically to the faithful within that nation. It is possible that it was also delivered to Assyrians, but quite likely that it never was. Nahum's proclamation of the coming downfall of the Assyrians, while they were still the dominant power in the region, might have surprised many of his hearers. However, the message was a reminder of the Lord's sovereignty over the nations. Timur draws our attention to the presence of an acrostic, where the first and last letters of the lines from the second half of verse 1 to halfway through verse 2 to 3, spell out the Hebrew for I with the first letters, and Yahweh with the last letters.

There is a further acrostic pattern that Timur identifies in verses 2 to 8, with a partial yet broken acrostic, following the first half of the Hebrew alphabet at the start of successive lines.

Renz notes that some scholars dispute the presence of an acrostic here. However, he does not find their arguments compelling, believing that the elements of the pattern that we do see would be unlikely to arise merely by chance. Timur suggests that the broken character of the acrostic is possibly designed to give a sense of incompleteness. The final resolution has yet to arrive. The prophecy of Nahum begins by grounding its message in the Lord's own character, referring to some of the most important historical witnesses that the Lord gave to himself in the Ten Commandments and in the Theophany given to Moses in the aftermath of the sin with the golden calf. The acrostic in the opening verses, which yields, I am Yahweh, makes good contextual sense when we consider that the verses that follow are developing those statements in which the Lord declares his name to his people. Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous guard, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. In Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed,

[7 : 47] The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation. Significantly, the book of Jonah also reflected upon Exodus chapter 34, as Jonah referenced the Lord's declaration of his name and gave the Lord's relenting from disaster as a reason for his desire to flee to Tarshish in chapter 4 verse 2.

And he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

Jonah had quoted the Lord's declaration in a way that foregrounded the elements of the Lord's self-revelation that focused upon forgiveness and the passing over of iniquity, purposefully downplaying elements of judgment. Micah also concludes with a reflection upon the statements of the Lord concerning his identity in chapter 7 verses 18 to 20 of his prophecy.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.

You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham,

as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old. Considering the unity of the book of the twelve and the way that three successive prophets within it, Jonah, Micah and Nahum, contain contrasting reflections upon Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 34 verses 6 to 7 might lend support to the idea that they have been ordered as they have within the book of the twelve, precisely in order to foreground this theme for the hearers. The fact that Nahum focuses upon the dimension of judgment and downplays the dimension of forgiveness is all the more interesting by contrast with Jonah and Micah's reflections upon it, within both of which grace and forgiveness is foregrounded, albeit in very different ways. As the jealous God, the Lord has a love that will not tolerate rivalry or dispossession.

[10:14] He will not let his people go. He will not give his glory to another. The Lord's relationship with his people must be exclusive. The Lord's enduring wrath against his enemies could be seen as a corollary of his enduring love for his people. God's judgment is not merely the application of an abstract system of punishments and rewards, but is relational, driven by love, by wrath and by jealousy. Yet the Lord's wrath and jealousy is not like the fickleness and volatility of human passions. The Lord is slow to anger and his wrath endures. He does not shift with passing moods. The power of the Lord is accented in the theophanic imagery that is introduced from the end of verse 3. The theophanic imagery in this passage should be familiar to us from elsewhere in scripture. Isaiah chapter 66 verses 15 to 16 for instance.

For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword with all flesh, and those slain by the Lord shall be many. Psalm 18 verses 6 to 15. In my distress I called upon the Lord, to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked. The foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth.

Glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down. Thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew. He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him. Thick clouds dark with water. Out of the brightness before him hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows and scattered them. He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. The advent of the Lord unsettles the entire creation. It rocks the world on its foundations. When the Lord comes on the scene, things that once seemed secure and firm are weakened and they melt. This is the power that he manifested in the original creation. But it is also seen in the great deliverances of Israel's history, especially the founding event of the Red Sea crossing.

No one is able to resist or stand before it. All creation shrinks away. The boundaries drawn in the original creation no longer hold. The sea is dried up, and an overflowing flood engulfs the land. The Lord decisively ends all rebellion, manifesting its utter futility and stupidity, consuming adversaries like dry stubble. However, in the midst of this tumult and storm, there is a calm eye, the steadfast goodness of the Lord, and the security that he provides to all who take refuge in him. Verse 11 seems to be a bridge between the two sections, the one that proceeds in verses 1 to 10, and the one that follows in verses 12 to 14. The natural question that arises is whom is being addressed. Is this addressed to Jerusalem? If it's a reference to Jerusalem, then maybe it's a reference to Sennacherib's departure from Jerusalem in 701 BC. However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to Nineveh, with the one plotting evil against the Lord, the worthless counsellor, referring to Nineveh's king. In verses 12 to 14, the Lord speaks concerning the judgment that will come upon Nineveh.

[13:59] It currently looks as if Nineveh and the Assyrians are at their full strength. However, in no more than a few decades, Nineveh and the Assyrians will be cut off. At the height of the Assyrians' power, Judah had been greatly afflicted by them, and the Lord had been behind all of this. The Assyrians were the acts of the Lord's anger that was raised against his people. But now he declares that he would break the yoke of the Assyrians and deliver his people from it. The Lord speaks directly to the Assyrians and to Nineveh in verse 14.

Their name and their idols would be cut off, and as a nation they would be brought down to the grave. The Lord here describes them as vile, perhaps on account of their extreme brutality. The concluding verse of the chapter, verse 15, describes the joy that comes with the messenger of Nineveh's downfall. With the news of Assyria's collapse comes the promise of peace and a resurgence of hope for the people. Rennes draws attention to the extensive festivities of the Passover of the 18th year of Josiah's reign. As the power of Assyria waned, faithful Israelites were freed to feast and to celebrate. An interesting and important feature of this verse is its close resemblance to Isaiah chapter 52 verse 7.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, your God reigns. Scholars debate the relative priority of these prophecies in Nahum and Isaiah. As he is introduced to us, Isaiah is an 8th century prophet, and Nahum a 7th century prophet. If we believe that the prophet Isaiah was the author of the entirety of the book that bears his name, then that seems to settle the question. Unless, of course, both Isaiah and Nahum were drawing upon a third source, perhaps some lines from a well-known liturgy. In the book of Isaiah, the good news seems to be the breaking of the yoke of Babylon. In Nahum, it's the earlier news of the breaking of the yoke of Assyria. Rennes writes, If Isaiah chapter 52 came first, we are invited to see the fall of Nineveh as a first installment of the end of exile. If Nahum came first, as argued here, the end of the Babylonian exile is a further instance of, I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. A question to consider. Comparing and contrasting the reflections upon Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 34 verses 6 to 7, in Jonah chapter 4 verse 2, in Micah chapter 7 verses 18 to 20, and at the beginning of this chapter, what deeper aspects of their meaning might come to light?