

Nahum 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Nahum chapter 3. Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder, no end to the prey. The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot, horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end, they stumble over the bodies, and all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms. Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and will make nations look at your nakedness, and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you, and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle, and all who look at you will shrink from you, and say, Wasted is Nineveh, who will grieve for her? Where shall I seek comforters for you?

Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, and water her wall? Cush was her strength, Egypt too, and that without limit. Put and the Libyans were her helpers. Yet she became an exile, she went into captivity. Her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street, for her honoured men lots were cast, and all her great men were bound in chains.

You also will be drunken, you will go into hiding, you will seek a refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with first ripe figs, if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater.

Behold, your troops are women in your midst, the gates of your land are wide open to your enemies, fire has devoured your bars. Draw water for the siege, strengthen your forts, go into the clay, tread the mortar, take hold of the brick mould. There will the fire devour you, the sword will cut you off, it will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust, multiply like the grasshopper. You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens, the locust spreads its wings and flies away. Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold. When the sun rises they fly away, no one knows where they are. Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria, your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt, your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you? For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil? The coming downfall of

Nineveh and the Neo-Assyrian empire has been the subject of the entirety of the book of Nahum. Treatment of this continues in Nahum chapter 3, the final chapter of the book. Within the chapter, Nineveh and Assyria are ridiculed for the humiliation of their hubris and the collapse of their former cruel might. The chapter opens with an oracle of woe, within which the causes of the destruction of the city of Nineveh are presented. Nineveh was the heart of a cruel, violent and bloodthirsty empire which ravaged other nations through treacherous political schemes and its despoiling of and exacting of vast sums in tribute from its foes. Now, however, the Lord's judgment has come upon it.

[3 : 21] Verses 2 and 3 could be taken as a description either of the army of the Medes and Babylonians that is coming up against Nineveh, as in the preceding chapter, or as a depiction of the brutal power that Nineveh and the Assyrians once represented. It's more likely that it represents the latter, flashes of sight and sound evocatively characterising the violent and bloody force of Assyria and its war machine, much as in the depiction of the Medo-Babylonian army overwhelming Nineveh in the preceding chapter. In verse 2 we see the chariots of Assyria in their din and rapid motion, a blur of thundering metal and the snorting of war horses. This terse, staccato and kinetic portrayal of the Assyrian army continues in verse 3, where we also see the carnage left in its wake, the heaped corpses that were a matter of pride for the brutal Assyrians. Assyria is compared to a prostitute, deceitfully drawing in other nations by its wiles, yet proving treacherous and perverse. Nineveh was a place of idolatry and sorcery. The Lord would defile her, humiliating her before the nations that she had once cruelly dominated in her might. We encounter similar depictions of Jerusalem at key points in the prophets, for instance in Jeremiah chapter 13 verses 26 to 27, where the same shocking imagery of lifting up the adulteress's skirts over her face is used.

I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd whorings, on the hills in the field.

Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean? The point of this action is exposure, the manifestation of once-hidden sin, the humiliation of the former haughtiness of the wicked, and rendering former oppressors vulnerable.

Another similar statement is found in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 36 to 38. Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.

The stripping of the prostitute in public humiliation is here used to illustrate the shaming of Nineveh in the eyes of the surrounding nations, who had formerly been terrorized by her. The uncovering of her nakedness would be a cathartic spectacle for those who had formerly suffered at her hands. Finally delivered from her terror and her thrall, the contempt of all of the nations for Assyria would be revealed. Nineveh considered itself impregnable and inviolable, but the Lord reminds Nineveh of the great Egyptian city of Thebes, which despite its military strength, its fortifications, its key alliances, and its location in the south of Egypt, had fallen to Ashurbanipal in 663 BC. Over the period prior to 663 BC, Assyria had steadily been extending its dominance over regions formerly under Egyptian hegemony. This had provoked Egyptian Levantine campaigns in response. After an earlier failed invasion, in 671 BC, Esarhaddon made a successful assault upon Egypt itself, taking Memphis and beginning a period of Assyrian dominance in the region. In 663, his successor Assyrian Banipal took the city of Thebes, a city that would formerly have been considered absolutely secure. Nahum describes Thebes in a manner that invites comparisons with

[7 : 10] Nineveh, not least by describing the place that water had and its infrastructure and defences. Although Assyria had brought down Thebes, Nineveh, the centre of Assyria's own might, would suffer a similar fate. Nineveh is reminded of the violence that it had employed against Thebes. It would soon be at the receiving end of such brutality. Assyria may not realise it, but it is ripe for destruction.

Assyrians are ripe for destruction. In addition to their strongholds, the Assyrians would have trusted in the might of their army. And yet, in verse 13, we are told that their military might would become like women, a much weakened force, insufficient to defend itself, or anyone else for that matter.

They must draw water for the siege, ensuring that they have enough water for when they are surrounded by their enemies. To reinforce their fortifications, they must prepare bricks. And so they get clay for the bricks, they prepare the mortar, and they get the brick mould ready to form the bricks within it. However, the process is not finished. Before the preparations have been made, they will be devoured by fire, cut off by the sword. They are compared to locusts about to be devoured, and that image is picked up and expanded in the verses that follow. Assyria has been like a vast swarm of locusts, multiplied over the whole face of the earth. However, while locusts can devour the land and cause considerable destruction, the locusts in such a vast swarm can vanish without a trace. While a Neo-Assyrian empire may have covered much of the face of the known world, its time would soon pass and it would be nowhere to be found. The final two verses of the chapter and of the book present us with a mocking dirge for Assyria and its rulers. The king and his nobles, the nobles here being described like shepherds, slumber while their people are scattered like an unguarded flock.

A question to consider, what are some of the characteristics of the Lord's judgment and justice that can be illustrated in the downfall of Nineveh?