

The Message of Nahum

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When today's Messianic Believers approach the Book of Nahum, what do they think? In all likelihood, most of those within our broad Messianic faith community have not read, skimmed, or even opened the Book of Nahum for a good long while. *I confess this of myself, as much as the rest of us.* If it had not been for our Survey of the Tanach Bible study podcast started in January 2011, preceded by me putting together the summary entries on the composition of the Tanach or Old Testament books, I probably would not have read through the Book of Nahum, either. When one looks at what Nahum communicates, we see three short chapters of prophecy dating from the Seventh Century B.C.E., describing the downfall of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. By all accounts, what was prophesied in the Book of Nahum has come to pass, and there is no quantitative future occurrence to be anticipated by its words.

When studying the words of the Tanach Prophets, it is only to be expected that various oracles that we will encounter have already been fulfilled in past history. Obviously, those who believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, affirm that He came to Earth in fulfillment of a wide array of Tanach prophecies. Does this mean we do not study such fulfilled prophecies? Of course not. We study fulfilled prophecies for confirmation that Yeshua is the Messiah, *and* on a larger scale to have it confirmed in our hearts and minds that the Bible is reliable and trustworthy.

With this in mind, why would any of us not look at the Book of Nahum, and get familiar with it on some level? If Nahum's oracles of the downfall of Nineveh, and how the Southern Kingdom of Judah would benefit from it—has already been fulfilled—then we can surely review God's dealings in past history. Surely, no different than how by reviewing various fulfilled Messianic prophecies, our strength in the steadfastness of God's Word can be enhanced—then the same should occur when reviewing the Book of Nahum. At the very least, we might want to refer to the Book of Nahum as being prophecy-history, recognizing its words of Nineveh's downfall as largely fulfilled in the past, but surely necessary for study and reflection, as we consider the character of the Lord and His dealings with various Earthly powers.

The prophecies of the Book of Nahum are issued from Nahum, who is regarded as an Ekoshite (1:1). The town of Elkosh has never been discovered, and expositors have debated its location. It is safe to assume that it was probably somewhere within the territory of the Southern Kingdom, but beyond this, it is hard to tell. It cannot go unnoticed, though, that the Hebrew name of the prophet, *Nachum*, does mean "comfort" (cf. 3:7).

The oracles issued from Nahum begin with the Lord speaking forth statements of fierce rage and indignation against Nineveh, and how He considers the city to have plotted against Him:

"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of *Nineveh*; he will pursue his foes into darkness. Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble. From you, O *Nineveh*, has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness" (1:2-11).

This word is immediately followed by a statement regarding how Nineveh served as a heavy yoke for the Southern Kingdom of Judah to bear—yet it will be broken off and the people will be able to celebrate:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, *O Judah*, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.’ The LORD has given a command concerning you, *Nineveh*: ‘You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.’ Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, *O Judah*, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed” (1:12-15).

You should be able to notice a parallel between Nahum 1:15, and how earlier Isaiah 40:9 has said, “You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” Certainly, there are various words common throughout the Prophets, but here in Nahum 1:15, there is definitely something to be said about the salvation of God manifested in physical acts of deliverance. The very reason why the Southern Kingdom of Judah will be able to receive the message as good news, is because one of their worldly oppressors has been removed.

The Lord details the fall of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. In history, this occurred when Nabopolassar, first ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626-605 B.C.E.), allied himself with Medes and Sythians, attacking Nineveh in 612 B.C.E.:¹

“An attacker advances against you, *Nineveh*. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength! The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines. ‘The shields of his soldiers are red; the warriors are clad in scarlet. The metal on the chariots flashes on the day they are made ready; the spears of pine are brandished. The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares. They look like flaming torches; they dart about like lightning. He summons his picked troops, yet they stumble on their way. They dash to the city wall; the protective shield is put in place. The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses. It is decreed that *the city* be exiled and carried away. Its slave girls moan like doves and beat upon their breasts. Nineveh is like a pool, and its water is draining away. “Stop! Stop!” they cry, but no one turns back. Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! The supply is endless, the wealth from all its treasures! She is pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale. Where now is the lions’ den, the place where they fed their young, where the lion and lioness went, and the cubs, with nothing to fear? The lion killed enough for his cubs and strangled the prey for his mate, filling his lairs with the kill and his dens with the prey. I am against you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard’” (Nahum 2:1-13; cf. Zephaniah 2:13-15).

The final part of the Book of Nahum, ch. 3, details the Lord’s indignation by summarizing some of the humiliation that will occur to Nineveh and the Assyrians, humiliation that they have already inflicted upon others. This includes what the Assyrians had done to the city of Thebes in Egypt. Whatever the Assyrians try to do to defend themselves will come to naught, and there will be great rejoicing among those in the Ancient Near East—who were all affected by the Assyrians in some negative and unpleasant way, because of their cruelty:

¹ Cf. Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1498.

“Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses—all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft. ‘I am against you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, “Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?” Where can I find anyone to comfort you?’ Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall. Cush and Egypt were her boundless strength; Put and Libya were among her allies. Yet she was taken captive and went into exile. Her infants were dashed to pieces at the head of every street. Lots were cast for her nobles, and all her great men were put in chains. You too will become drunk; you will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with their first ripe fruit; when they are shaken, the figs fall into the mouth of the eater. Look at your troops—they are all women!² The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed their bars. Draw water for the siege, strengthen your defenses! Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork! There the fire will devour you; the sword will cut you down and, like grasshoppers, consume you. Multiply like grasshoppers, multiply like locusts! You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away. Your guards are like locusts, your officials like swarms of locusts that settle in the walls on a cold day—but when the sun appears they fly away, and no one knows where. O king of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (Nahum 3:1-18).

In reviewing this short summary of the Book of Nahum, it can be easily deduced that a power like the Assyrian Empire, chiefly seen by the fall of its capital Nineveh—is getting all of the things it deserves. These are the very crimes and humiliations that the Assyrians themselves have forced onto other peoples, and it would come with a considerable measure of relief for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Of course, Assyria had played a significant role in seeing many people from the Northern Kingdom of Israel taken into exile, and then widely assimilated, a problem which has still yet to be resolved given the various Tanach prophecies detailing a greater restoration of Israel.

What do you take from the Book of Nahum? That this is an important text to reflect upon, and that there are likely some interesting historical studies to be conducted, via a more detailed verse-by-verse review? That God’s judgments upon the enemies of His people, and those who have committed atrocities, is sure? That the Bible can be trusted, and that even though largely fulfilled, the Book of Nahum as prophecy-history has some important lessons worthy of consideration?

² This can be read as a kind of sexist remark, but it needs to be remembered within an Ancient Near Eastern Assyrian context. “Comparing troops to women was an insult, implying that the soldiers were weak and unable to stand against the invading armies” (Ibid., 1503). This kind of statement would be *entirely inappropriate* for any of us to make today, especially since women are allowed to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, and in the militaries of most Western countries.

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