

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of NAHUM

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THE BOOK of NAHUM

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We turn to the prophecy of Nahum at 'this point, not as being next in chronological order, but because it has as its subject 'the burden of Nineveh' and therefore is of particular and special interest after our study of Jonah. The contrast it presents to the message of the latter is one which in itself affords much food for thought.

A cursory reading of the book will make it clear that the doom of Nineveh, which it predicts, is regarded as imminent. We know, in fact, that Nineveh was sacked and destroyed about 612 BC. Also, in 3:8, the destruction of 'populous No', which was Thebes, in Egypt, is spoken of as having already taken place. The date which scholars assign for this is 666/ 665 BC. Nahum's prophecy therefore dates between 665 and 612 BC, and in all probability nearer the latter date. This places him, then, as a rough contemporary of Zephaniah, in the reign of good king Josiah, considerably more than a hundred years after the time of Jonah. His ministry in the time of Josiah may perhaps explain why there is no mention in his writings of Judah's sins, or any danger of captivity, such as looms largely in the other prophetic books, for Josiah initiated sweeping reforms, and a movement of real spiritual awakening swept through Judah in the earlier years of that reign. It was only later that it was seen to be insufficient to stem the tide of judgment that had begun to run against God's people. At all events, the prophet's vision was turned upon the enemies of Judah, and this fact requires some comment in relation to the very different story in the book of Jonah. We shall turn to this point in the next Note.

1) 1:1-6

The attitudes towards Nineveh expressed in Jonah and Nahum respectively are so different as to make us think at first that they are quite incongruous, not to say incompatible. But this would be superficial judgment. The fact is, there is an inner consistency between the two pictures of the Assyrian power that makes Nahum's prophecy not only credible but inevitable. Bear in mind first of all, that Jonah prophesied more than a hundred years before Nahum, which means that the latter is prophesying to an entirely different generation. Why should it be considered contradictory that an earlier generation should receive mercy and a later, none? We have only to remember that in Judah's own history there came a time (in Manasseh's reign) at which God decided that His people had passed the point of no return, and that the judgment of captivity was now fixed for them, to realise that the same must have happened in the case of Nineveh. In Jonah's time, the cup of wrath was not yet full, and opportunity still remained for repentance, and therefore mercy. But - as was also the case with God's own people - one generation can turn in repentance and obedience to God, while the next may revert to the former evil ways and wax worse and worse beyond any remedy, and bring divine judgment inevitably upon itself. National repentance in any generation requires to be consolidated and improved upon, otherwise the last state becomes worse than the first. To take a modern parallel, the fact that England was saved from revolution in the eighteenth century by the Wesleyan revival does not mean that judgment is unthinkable in the twentieth, nor does it give us any justification for supposing that spiritual awakening is inevitable just because it is so desperately needed. It is possible for nations in the modern world to go too far also.

2) 1:1-6

One statement in these verses merits close attention. In 3, Nahum says, 'The Lord is slow to anger'. This should not be forgotten, as it sometimes is, in the study of prophetic literature. It is true that much that we read in the prophets is gloomy and full of foreboding, but we see it out of perspective if we do not realise that the judgments of God are set in the context of His long patience and forbearance, and the unaccountable delay in punishing wickedness because of His longsuffering love. Assyria had been for many generations a particularly cruel and harsh taskmaster to all the nations she had conquered. Nothing was too wicked for her to do. She had already sacked Samaria and taken Israel, the northern kingdom, captive, and had steadily filled up the measure of her sins to the uttermost. Only then did God bring about her ruin and downfall. It is perhaps significant that so far from thinking of God as swift and strong in judgment, the Old Testament itself is rather puzzled and perplexed at His seemingly interminable delay in avenging wrong and wickedness in the heathen nations. One whole prophetic book, Habakkuk, is devoted to a consideration of this mystery. So different is the biblical mind from our modern temper of thought, which refuses to countenance the idea of judgment in any shape or form! The story of God's judgments in the Scriptures is a story invariably prefaced by His long-suffering grace. When judgment falls, it does so only after grace, mercy and forbearance have been long extended and spurned.

3) 1:7-8

Here is a contrast to the previous verses so startling that we might at first think that 7 had strayed into the text from another place. It hasn't, of course; it is the 'other side', full of grace and tenderness, and belongs just as much to the biblical revelation of God. The message of Jonah should have convinced us of this, the men of Nineveh proved the truth of 7 in their own experience when they repented of their sins at his preaching. Now the men of this later generation were to prove something very different because they had transgressed the limits of the divine forbearance. Consider, then, Nahum's words: It is the Lord, the God of judgment, stern and terrible, who is 'good, a stronghold in the day of trouble'. This is very wonderful. Stern parents do not always have the love and confidence of their children, but this is because their sternness lacks humanity and is the expression of some psychological disharmony in themselves. The wonder and mystery about God is that He can be feared, and loved and trusted at the same time, with, as the hymn says, 'deepest, tenderest fears'. This remarkable combination of fear and love, awful sternness and infinite tenderness, in the divine character is seen perhaps most clearly and graphically in Christ, Who is both the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Lamb of God, the Flaming Judge Who whips the traders out of the temple and the compassionate Lover of souls Who says to the fallen, 'Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more'. What we must realise is, we cannot have the one without the other.

4) 1:9-11

The language of these verses reminds us of Psalm 2:1, 'Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine, a vain thing?' Indeed, the thought of the Psalm as a whole is very close to Nahum's here, even to the grim ease with which the Lord will bring His enemies low (10). It is in fact men's opposition 'against the Lord' that spells their final doom. Evil in its very nature must be seen to have a focus; it is not an impersonal thing, but vitally and positively ranged against all that God holds most dear. Not only so; its opposition is headed up in an individual. This is the point in 11, where Nahum seems to see the wickedness of the Assyrian empire summed up in the person of one of their leaders. Who this leader was, to whom Nahum refers, is uncertain. Ashurbanipal was king until about 627 BC and was succeeded by his son Sardanapalus who perished in the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC. Either of these may have been in the prophet's mind. On the other hand, G.A. Smith, who renders the verse in the past tense, 'Out of thee came the plotter of evil' maintains that the reference is to Sennacherib, who died in 681 BC. If this suggestion is correct, then Nahum must be recalling the proud arrogance of that king in his assault on Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah, during Hezekiah's reign. The meaning would then appear to be that Assyria sinned beyond hope then, and sealed her ultimate doom (in Josiah's time), which came in 612 BC. 'The mills of God grind slowly'! Either way, the lesson for us is to recognise that evil does not exist in disembodied form, nor does opposition against God, but is incarnated in individuals who lead it against the people of God.

5) 1:12-14

The language is again reminiscent of Psalm 2 (compare 13 with Psalm 2:3; also 2:2 with Psalm 2:9 - can this be accidental?). In 12 and 13, the Lord is speaking to His people, but in 14 He addresses the Assyrians themselves. The stark simplicity of these pronouncements is almost awesome. Think of the situation in which they were spoken: the great heathen empire had lorded it over the entire ancient world for generations; there was no country under her vassalage that did not fear and loathe her; her power and might were still great and impressive; yet God said, 'I will make thy grave, for thou art vile', and Assyria was no more, replaced on the world scene by Babylon the great. A modern parallel to this displacement of empires may be our own world-scene, in which China even now bids fair to challenge Russia in Communist world-hegemony. We were looking at some old Notes published in November 1961 on 1 Kings, in which reference was made to the arrogant and blasphemous pretensions of the Soviet leader, Krushchev, strutting about on the stage of the world challenging the nations of the West to a test of strength. We said then, 'As sure as God's Word is true, he will be humbled to the dust, in a debacle which will perfectly match his pride and ambition. It will be grimly interesting to watch how God does it, and when'. Well, when these words were written, it seemed little likely that Krushchev would come toppling down so soon; but he has, and is now no more, as a world leader. And, great as the might of Russia today, we may well see, in the not too distant future, the eclipse of her power and the emergence of a new peril in the East. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown', we sometimes say and uneasier still the nation that assumes dictatorial powers with which to tyrannise the world of men, when God gives a commandment concerning it!

6) 1:15

There are two points to note in this verse. The first is the publishing of the message of peace to Judah. This follows naturally upon the destruction of Assyria; peace would be the blessed result not only for Judah but also for all the countries round about that had suffered from the Assyrian oppression. But this is also illustrative of the gospel; for it is on the basis of the victory Christ has won over the powers of darkness that oppress mankind that the proclamation of the message of peace can be made. And, significantly, the restoration of the solemn feasts and the payment of the vows follow. Just as Judah was set free that she might fulfil her highest duty in the proper worship of God, so also in the gospel we are set free, not that we might live to ourselves, but to Him, in lives marked with the peace and order He has won for us in Christ. But there is another construction we may put on the latter part of the verse, and it is this: Nahum was prophesying; the fall of Nineveh was not as yet accomplished; but the assurance that God was on the throne, and that one word from Him would bring proud Assyria low, in His own good time, is sufficient encouragement to God's people to maintain their testimony in quiet faithfulness and hope. In every dark world-situation, we are not to be dismayed, but go on quietly with the work; there is a witness to be borne, a life of faithfulness to be lived. Why should we suppose that world crises will hinder His work, when He can turn the wrath of men to praise Him? God is on the throne, and that is sufficient justification for keeping on, whatever conditions or circumstances may be.

7) 2:1-6

These verses describe the siege of Nineveh. The language is graphic and telling. It is almost as if Nahum were an eye-witness, or giving an account of it after it had happened. So clear is the vision God gives His servants. The personage referred to in 1 is the king of the Medes. The important and significant thing for us to see is that the description here is given in terms of the doom and havoc Assyria herself had wreaked upon so many nations. Here again is the grim humour in the justice of God, as He makes the punishment of Assyria fit her crimes. The passage aptly describes the way of the Lord 'in the whirlwind' (1:3) and the 'over-running flood' (1:8). The reference in 6 is said to be an ancient prophecy to the effect that Nineveh would never be captured until her river turned against her. During the siege, the river is said to have been dammed by the Medes and then released against the city, suddenly bursting into it, breaching its walls and leading to its capture, when it was razed to the ground. It was a total destruction, and the city was literally no more.

This, then, is what happens to those who persecute and oppress the people of God. He who touches them touches the apple of His eye. Remember Hitler and Nazi Germany. It was not merely that Hitler oppressed the nations of the western world; it was that he committed such fearful atrocities against the Jews that his final doom was sealed and assured. No one touches God's people with impunity!

8) 2:7-10

We can only consider these verses in meditative and contemplative vein along the lines of the previous Note. Huzzab is thought to be Nineveh's queen, taken with her maidens and ladies-in-waiting as plunder and booty by the exultant conquerors. Nineveh, once rich and opulent as a pool into which streams from every quarter pour their waters, is drained dry and made a parched desert, despoiled of all that made her great. One can only marvel at the manner in which this proud and seemingly impregnable empire was brought down to the dust and devastated. We have seen in our introductory studies in Isaiah how the opulence and wealth of Judah had its inevitable expression in the luxurious living of her women. It is ever so when proud and godless empire vaunts its power and spends itself in sinful self-indulgence. Every great empire of old crumbled and crashed to ruin because moral decadence accompanying its luxurious living, sapped its vitals until it was unable any longer to stand. It is perhaps some indication of the moral distemper of societies that have not as yet crumbled - and perhaps a shadow of what is to come - that it is precisely these status symbols - luxury, finery, the endless round of social engagements, and the squalid and vulgar aspirations of middle-class snobbery - that people set such store by today. We do not know if the men of Nineveh suffered from diseases such as coronary thrombosis and other stress illnesses, but it is certain that in the relentless social 'rat-race' of our day, with the insatiable desire to 'keep up with the Joneses' many men are driven to collapse by their women who, having once tasted the sweet prizes of affluence, are determined not only to have more, but to have more than their neighbours. When society has degenerated into this, is it not time it was purged by fire, and made clean?

9) 2:11-13

The prophet's imagery now changes, and he pictures the fall of Nineveh in its next stage. The siege is over, the enemy's triumph complete, and the hapless city is compared to a lion's den that has been destroyed. Graphically, Nahum describes the lion dragging its prey into its den, laying up carrion ready for devouring, providing for the young lions. Rude and terrible as is the scene, the Lord declares He will raid that lion's den, and snatch from it its mangled prey, and destroy the lion, mate, cubs and all. The young lions are specifically mentioned since Nineveh is to be no more, and there is to be no possibility of a successor rising up to occupy that throne and to continue and repeat the reign of horror and terror, is the finality of the judgment that the prophet means us to grasp; the 'no more' in 13 is emphatic. Nothing is so striking in the history of ancient empires as the utter annihilation of their power and indeed the blotting out of their existence, when their downfall was ordained of God. Not even the king of the forest may continue his reign (this is the force of the metaphor) when He touches them. This, then, is the comfort and patience of the saints in every age when persecuted by lawless might. Look at the Jews: What people have endured such persecution as they? Yet they still remain, as a people, today, while Hitler and Nazism are no more. Is God not able to do with other, even greater, tyrannies as He did with Germany? Are there lions in Russia, China, that are too strong for Him? Watch them; their hour will come.

10) 3:1-3

The scholars tell us that in the original these verses are written in the form of an ode, with short, staccato phrases which give force to the thought they express. As an example of this, G. Adam Smith renders the first part of 3 thus: 'Cavalry charging, Flashing of sabres, Lightning of lances, a multitude slain'. This certainly serves to emphasis the sharp throb of terror and distress in the siege of Nineveh, and give a graphic and dramatic picture of the horror of doom that came upon it. As another commentary puts it, it is 'a superlative example of Nahum's powers of description, and form one of the most vivid battle scenes in Hebrew literature. The confusion and noise as the chariots and horsemen attack, the glint of the sun on armour and weapons, the huddled dead lying in heaps about the streets, so thickly strewn that the advancing troops stumble over the bodies. What a grim picture it is!' Once again we are faced with the precise justice of God at work in the punishment of the wicked city. As Nineveh had so often exacted its terrible tribute from her hapless victims, so now in retribution God pays her back in her own coin. All that is written here could have been written earlier of Assyria's own conquests; nothing was done to her but what she had done to others. Let us not be afraid of the idea of righteous retribution. It is only in vindictive mortals that it is normally reprehensible. 'Vengeance is Mine', saith the Lord, 'I will repay'. 'And shall not the judge of all the earth do right?'

11) 3:4-7

The reference to harlotry in 4 is said to be to the gross sensuality that accompanied the religious rights of Assyria, but others incline to the view that Nahum is speaking of the corrupting and seducing influence Assyria had upon the nations she had conquered. This latter may be nearer the truth for in fact Assyria had become a great trading power, and Nineveh its centre had drawn into itself a motley population of traders intent upon making gain. The subtle seductions attendant upon a rapidly rising standard of living had beguiled the former strength of a warlike people, in much the same way as the character and honour of men can be betrayed by harlotry. And, in men and nations alike, discovery and exposure are ultimately inevitable, since the moral structure of the universe instinctively makes its protest against something that is so alien to it, and the antithesis of all it stands for. We do well to reflect on this awful nemesis that came on Nineveh, and to realise that sin has within itself not only the seeds of its own ultimate destruction but also that which will bring upon those who commit it certain and humiliating exposure. It may well be that the Apostle John owes something in his graphic descriptions in Revelation 18 to Nahum's words here, and the two passages should be compared. The fact that such similar descriptions fit both ancient Nineveh and ancient Babylon and also their more modern equivalents like John's Babylon, Rome, is evidence that the devil is not very original in his ways, but rather repeats his well-worn seductions again and again.

12) 3:8-10

No, or No-Amon, was the city of Thebes, the capital of upper Egypt, a city of great wealth and beauty, which had been sacked by the Assyrians themselves, in the reign of Assurbanipal in about 666 BC. There is a sense in which Nahum's question in 8, 'Art thou better than populous No?' might seem to the Assyrians to require an answer in the affirmative, for had the latter not conquered it, thus proving their superiority over the Egyptians? But the man of God views the situation differently. Thebes fell not by the hand of Assurbanipal, but by the hand of God, and Nahum is really asking, 'If No fell for her sins, can Nineveh expect to stand, when she has sinned as much, and more?' Indeed, to the prophet, the fall of the one was an earnest foreshadowing, of the fall of the other. Thus, he compares the circumstances of each, and draws his inevitable conclusion. If Nineveh is protected by her rivers, so was Thebes by the Nile, that 'sea' of waters with its numerous canals, yet she fell. If Nineveh is surrounded by her numerous satellite tributaries, was not also Thebes by Ethiopia, Put and Lubim (9), and yet she fell. Shall these considerations serve to protect Nineveh, when they failed to save Thebes, asks Nahum? There is something tremendously thrilling about this prophecy, grim as it is. Nahum was speaking from within a nation that had had good cause to fear the terrible Assyrian might, a nation smaller and weaker than any of those he has mentioned. Yet there is no trace of the cowed dispiritedness that so often characterises the down-trodden and the fearful, only exultant confidence in a God Whose mighty hand can touch a nation and bring it to nought in His appointed time. O for such a faith, in such a world as ours!

13) 3:11-15

The opening words of 11 are emphatic 'Thou also', to ruin. The drunkenness referred to here comes from drinking the cup of God's wrath. Nineveh shall reel and stagger like a drunk man under the stroke of the living God. The next phrase, 'thou shalt be hid' may mean either that the glory of Nineveh shall be clouded over and hidden, or that she will become faint (so G.A. Smith) or that she will be hid from recollection so that men shall ask, 'Where is Nineveh?' The word 'strength' means 'fortress' and the idea is that they shall seek shelter and escape from the invading foe, but in vain, for every possible place of refuge will be like fig-trees (12) which the enemy will simply shake, to bring the fruit down into their greedy hands and mouths. The reference to 'women' in 13 is meant to suggest not effeminacy but panic-stricken-ness in face of the overwhelming strength of the enemy. In 14, the commentators think Nahum is speaking ironically in advising the people of Nineveh to make preparation for a long siege. The point seems to be that whatever they might do, whatever lengths they might go to, the fire and the sword would still cut them off. Nothing will avail, when once the hand of the Lord is raised against them. The rout will be as complete as the devastation made by a plague of locusts in a field of grain.

14) 3:15b-17

Nahum's riotous exuberance of metaphor makes graphic reading; but it is also some indication of the thoroughness of the doom that is to fall on Nineveh, and indeed of the justice of it. The reference to the locusts in 15a ('grasshopper' and 'cankerworm' represent varieties of locust) prompts the thought that Assyria has herself been like a locust-pest to the world around her, and Nahum's figure changes as he now compares the destruction of Nineveh to the disappearance of a locust-swarm. Locusts huddle together in the cold, the scholars tell us, while a sudden burst of sunshine will induce them to take flight and disappear. Thus does Nahum picture the men of Nineveh in their panic and dread, huddling together against the might of the enemy, and suddenly flying in all directions as the stroke falls on them. Thus completely will they be destroyed, without trace. This double comparison in the locust metaphor, the devastation of the city on the one hand, like a grain field stripped bare, and on the other the disappearance of the entire swarm with dramatic rapidity, is very telling, and the finality of the resultant desolation is borne out by the subsequent history of the place. G.A. Smith comments, 'The site bears little trace of disturbance since the ruin by the Medes, except such as has been inflicted by weather and the wandering tribes around'. When God makes an end of wickedness, it is a final one.

15) 3:18-20

This finality is yet again underlined in the closing words of the prophecy, under another metaphor. Now it is the picture of lost sheep scattered upon the mountains, with no shepherd to gather them. The 'shepherd' figure in the Old Testament generally applies to political and military leaders rather than to spiritual, and it bears this sense here. It is the leaders of Nineveh, its chief men and nobles and princes, that have been destroyed. Once again we see the grim justice of God at work against them; how often had Nineveh done just this to her hapless victims! We have only to turn to the record in Kings of Israel's captivity to realise that it was precisely her chief men and nobles that were transported into captivity, leaving a forlorn remnant of leaderless people to wander hopelessly by themselves. And it was this that made her recovery so impossible. (Israel, the northern kingdom, never returned from exile). This is the force of Nahum's word in 19 - 'there is no healing of thy bruise'. For Assyria there is no hope of restoration after judgment: for her it is the end. And all who have suffered from her cruel barbarities will clap their hands over her.

Ah, what comfort to know that God has the last word in the affairs of men and nations. Evil empires have their little day, but right is right as God is God, and right the day must win. This is our rest, and the patience and comfort of the saints.