

NAHUM – THE PROPHET AND HIS MESSAGE

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The Book of Nahum, a collection of prophecies on the fate of Nineveh, has baffled commentators. From the superscription we learn that these prophecies have been written down in the form of a book. This would imply that Nahum's message has been held in high esteem, warranting such preservation and eventually inclusion in the canon. Yet, many commentators have felt that Nahum was nothing more than a propagandist, a false prophet, a court lackey, or just a poet. The purpose of this paper is to present Nahum as a prophet dedicated to a goal, rather than to assess his compliance with moralizing standards that commentators expected of the literary prophets.

The sole purpose of Nahum's prophecy was to breach the wall of hopelessness, and persuade his listeners that there is light at the end of the tunnel, that salvation is coming, and that a complete downfall of Assyria is in the making. The seemingly invincible oppressor, who had overwhelmed the entire region from the Tigris to the Nile, left very little hope for freedom and independence. This monumental task apparently had completely absorbed Nahum, emotionally and intellectually. It required dedication of his energy, poetic capability, and logical and theological reasoning to make his case and convince his audience. Was he successful? We do not know. But only with true prophetic zeal, insight, and perspective could he undertake this formidable task of conveying a meaningful consolation.

NAHUM THE PERSON

Little is known about the man Nahum. His name means "consoled," "comforted," or "reassured." It occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible, and it is not clear whether the name is original or a later appellation characterizing the effect of his prophecy on the nation. The identification of Nahum as "the Elkoshite" also fails to enlighten.

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There is no textual evidence for determining whether "the Elkoshite" is a patronymic, "the son of Elkosh," or whether it refers to a hometown "from Elkosh." It has been generally assumed that "the Elkoshite" refers to Nahum's place of origin.¹ A late local tradition links Nahum with Kfar Nahum [Capernaum], the "village of Nahum."

J.M.P. Smith describes Nahum as an enthusiastic and optimistic patriot. K. Spronk thinks that the Book of Nahum was written in Jerusalem, by a talented, faithful royal scribe, who used the pseudonym Nahum as an indication of his purpose: to encourage the people of Judah groaning under the yoke of Assyrian tyranny.² Indeed, there is inner-textual evidence for considering Nahum a well- educated man, with access to royal files, and Judah's intellectual and military elite. As a citizen of Judah and a sensitive prophet, his feelings of sorrow and revulsion for the state of both kingdoms under Assyrian despotism must have been magnified by several factors. He represents the state of mind of the average man of his times, who has been rankled by the long-lasting oppression and humiliation of his people, and who's faith in God's goodness and power had been tested daily.

The prospect of a speedy overthrow of the Assyrian tyrant, who had undone the Northern Kingdom of Israel, dominated the daily life of the Southern Kingdom of Judah making it most intolerable, has naturally brought great relief to Nahum. When he saw in his prophetic vision the end of Assyria, indignation and despair gave way to an explosion of exuberant joy and a return of hope. At last, Assyria was to receive its due for all her evil deeds. God has again revealed His closeness to His people. The dawn of a new bright day was breaking. Nahum gave vent to these consoling, uplifting and comforting prospects with his best literary capability.

Yet in R.H. Pfeiffer's view:

Nahum was not a prophet – neither a reforming prophet like his contemporary Jeremiah nor an optimistic "false prophet" like Haniah (Jer. 28). He was a poet There is nothing specifically religious in this exultant outburst of joy over the inevitable downfall of the Assyrian Empire.³

A number of commentators assumed a cultic background for Nahum's prophecies, but there is little agreement on which cult. J. Blenkinsopp, for example, called Nahum "the spokesman for the Temple cult in the service of the [Josianic] nationalistic revival."⁴ But R.R. Wilson believes, "As a central prophet Nahum helped to preserve the social structure by expressing the nationalistic values of the royal cult."⁵ Obviously, the cult could have offered a convenient podium and audience for delivery of Nahum's message as a prophet enlisted in a campaign of prayer for victory against foreign enemies.⁶ However, one would be hard pressed to provide textual proof showing that Nahum was a member, or functionary, of any specific cult, whether of the Temple or the royal court. He certainly does not come through as some hired-hand propagandist, or a personality co-opted for nationalistic purposes, as can be construed from the presented opinions.

Nahum has failed in the eyes of many scholarly readers to attain a level of moral and theological greatness on a par with typical classical prophecy found in the Hebrew Bible. His descriptive mastery has been hailed, but his prophetic message was belittled.

Why was Nahum only concerned with revitalization of Judah and not its chastisement like the other prophets? One could explain this feature of the Book of Nahum as being accidental. Another possibility is that this book contains only oracles that were transmitted in a vision, as the superscription indicates. It is also possible that we may be in possession of only those portions of Nahum's prophecy that were written down for possible impact in the future. The rabbis said: "Prophecy that was needed for the generations to come was written down; that which was not needed for the generations to come was not written down" (TB Megillah 14a). J.J.M. Roberts says:

His book simply preserves Nahum's comments on this one issue, and one should be hesitant to criticize the range of Nahum's theology on this limited basis. The prophet may not emphasize Judah's sin in these oracles or call his people to repentance, but he is aware that what has befallen Judah has been due to the Lord's punishment (1:12).⁷

Finally, it should be borne in mind that other prophets, such as Jonah, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, have also not condemned the Israelites. Nahum's

exultation would not seem out of line after a century-long Assyrian oppression of Judah as a vassal state. He saw his task to reassure Judah that the Lord has seen His people's affliction and deliverance will come, for soon the Lord will repay the oppressor in full for his evil deeds, and the faithful will find refuge (1:7).

Nahum's message does contain typical prophetic precepts, G. Fohrer points out. Nahum perceives God as Lord of all nations, speaks of Assyrian commission to punish Judah, and excoriates Assyrian policies as being against God's will, for which reason the announced upheavals will take place. However, these theological views are colored by strong feelings of nationalism. When the Lord acts it is exclusively with Judah in mind, and for Judah's benefit, in order to realize the hope of all Israel. Particularly inappropriate in Nahum's prophecy, in Fohrer's view, is "the gloating mockery in 3:8-17 . . . that does not even mention God, and the idea of vengeance that even threatens the destruction of the enemies' children (3:10)."⁸

The basis for the "gloating mockery" is the Egyptian city No Amon (3:8-9) (modern Karnak or Luxor, some 318 miles upstream from Cairo), which was destroyed by Assyria in 663. As No Amon was defeated, so could Nineveh be defeated, and suffer the same fate. Nahum's text can be read as a logical argument based on topographic similarity and historical fact, rather than a gloating over piteous circumstances.

True, Nahum does not express sublime thoughts. He does not confront the Lord with questions of justice in the universe, or provide insight into truth and life, or bemoan societal inequalities and moral decadence. Rather, Nahum comes across as a prophet who is steeped in the tradition of literary prophecy and its genre. His poetry is unique in the Hebrew Bible in its rich and lively imagination. His greatness is his descriptive capabilities, the power of his imagery, which are unrivaled by any other prophet of the Hebrew Bible. In clear, rhythmical language he presents his original descriptions and perceptions, bringing to life entire scenes with a few words. Smith observed:

His constructive imagination lays hold of the central elements of a scene and with realistic imagery and picturesque phraseology recreates it for his readers. Accurate and detailed observation assists in

giving his pictures verisimilitude. Through the whole scene there moves a mighty passion and a great joy, which lift the narrative out of the commonplace into the majestic and make of it great literature.⁹

THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Since the superscription of the book, "A Pronouncement on Nineveh," gives no information about the time of Nahum's prophetic activity, any judgment on the date of the book, or of the individual oracles contained in it, is totally dependent on internal evidence found in the oracles themselves. Among the historical pointers in the text are:

1. Allusion to King Manasseh's imprisonment in 1:11 (cf. II Chr. 33:11), and to Manasseh's release in verses 2:1 (cf. II Chr. 33:12-20) and perhaps 2:3.

2. The *Shadenfreude* over the fate of Nineveh in Chapters 2-3. Reference to the fall of Nineveh in 612, explicitly in verse 2:9, and implicitly in the entire book, together with the graphic details in the description of Nineveh's destruction.¹⁰

3. Reference to the fall of No Amon in 663 as a well-known event (3:8-10).

4. Similarity between Nahum 2:1 and Isaiah 52:7.

According to the midrashic historical treatise *Seder Olam Rabbah* (second-third century CE), Nahum prophesied during the time of Manasseh, about 700-640, but Manasseh's name does not appear in the superscription because he was not fit to be mentioned (*S. Olam Rab.* 20).

Manasseh is described in both II Kings and II Chronicles as an avid idolater, who was bent on abandoning the Law of Moses in his private worship as well as in the public cult. He is accused of causing Judah to do *what is displeasing to the Lord* and spilling innocent blood. The Hebrew Bible includes the longest list of misdeeds of any it ever assembled against a king. Josephus says: "He barbarously slew all the righteous among the Hebrews; nor would he spare the prophets, for he every day slew some of them."¹¹ The Talmud counts Isaiah among those who perished at that time (TB Sanhedrin 103b; TB Yevamot 49b).

I assume that Nahum prophesied during the second half of Manasseh's

reign (686-642). This period is broad enough to encompass the impressive fall of No Amon (663), but not of Nineveh (612). Placing Nahum's prophecy in this timeframe explains his book's emphasis on Assyrian power.¹² The Assyrian Empire was forged in the crucible of invasion, war and conquest. The land-holding upper classes consisted almost entirely of military commanders who grew wealthy from the spoils taken in war. The army was the largest standing army ever seen in the Middle East or Mediterranean. The Assyrians' iron swords, lances, metal armor, chariots, and battering rams made them an awesome and fearsome enemy. This military elite and Assyrian military promoted a policy of military activism. Continued military campaigns and extensive building projects were, however, very expensive. Much of the cost of Assyrian imperialism and architectonic grandeur had to be shouldered by its vassal states.

Assyrian excellent administration saw to it that no evasion from the imposed tributes was possible (1:13, 2:10, 13-14, 3:1, 4, 17). Judah became destitute, despondent, and hopeless, fearing a fate not unlike that of its northern sister-kingdom Israel. The elation of Nahum upon receiving an oracle about the Assyrian fall can thus be appreciated. It can be understood why this prophecy completely absorbed him, becoming the crown of his prophetic creativity, preserved for posterity.

Placing Nahum's prophecy during the second half of Manasseh's reign explains Nahum's prophetic anticipation of Nineveh's fall *sans* a feel for the identity of the causing agent, an unmarred happiness about the return of a changed Manasseh from captivity, and rejuvenation of some religious and national spirit. Some of the verses point, in my view, to events that occurred during the rule of Manasseh: desecration of the Temple (1:14, 2:1), summons of the King to Assyria (1:11), and return of the King from captivity in Babylon (2:1,3). Nahum's announcement of disaster for Nineveh implies that it was still standing in his time. Thus, the *terminus ad quem* for his oracles is provided by the fall of Nineveh in 612, after the close of the Book of Nahum.

NAHUM'S MESSAGE

The prophecies of Isaiah, Zephaniah and Jonah are the backdrop for Nahum's prophecy. Probably the earliest texts are those in Isaiah (746-

681), in which the king of Assyria was considered an instrument of God against Judah (Isa. 7:17). However, the Hebrew prophets have never seen this heavenly mandate given to any nation as a license for unbridled oppression and cruelty to others. Once such a nation lost what the prophets believed to be the proper theological purpose, it became a subject of the Lord's anger and punishment. That was the case with Assyria. Isaiah attests that Assyria attributed its success to its own capabilities (Isa. 10:13). As a Hebrew prophet he could not comprehend such arrogance (10:15).

The Book of Zephaniah (640-609) also attests to this tradition about Assyrian haughty self-image. Yet, this prophetic tradition that castigated Assyria for its self-pride, and predicted its doom and destruction, was not indifferent to a change of heart and repentance, as described in the Book of Jonah. Nahum steps in when the Lord's attribute of "slow to anger" has been exhausted, and the attribute of *absolve He will not absolve* sets in (Nah. 1:3). His ferocious language is warranted, because the last phase in the traditional process of forbearance has to be enacted. Nahum is not concerned with an indictment of Assyria's practices, but rather with its punishment.

To communicate his message to the people of Judah, Nahum uses theology, pathos, and irony. Assyria is undoubtedly a mighty empire, but the Lord is infinitely stronger. Nahum uses the hallowed Thirteen Attributes, well known to all, to make the point that the situation reached a stage beyond God's famous tolerance. God is angry, God is seeking vengeance, and God is capable. Anyone in Judah could agree to that. Nahum does not declare that Judah is worthy of salvation. His argument is that Assyria became God's enemy. Anyone in Judah could agree to that too. In this confrontation between Assyria and the Lord it is obvious who will lose. This theological premise for the entire prophecy Nahum had to present up front.

The message that follows, except for some remarks addressed to Judah, is entirely focused on Assyria and its king. Nineveh is on the brink of destruction and its destruction will be total and irreversible. Nothing is offered in way of an explanation for its defeat. Did Assyria overextend itself? Did its policy of population transfers create a non-homogeneous population, which lacked national cohesion? Was its leadership inept? Did Babylon finally mature into a worthy opponent? We have to conclude from the ar-

rangement of the material that Assyria became God's enemy, and He is exacting His vengeance against it using an unnamed but successful enemy.

For Nahum, the vision of Nineveh's demise is a "dream come true," a hope long wished for. His prophecy that came down to us reflects his extraordinary description of this unique historic event. Yet, this very ecstatic, single-minded fixation on a single topic also sets him apart from other prophets.

Nahum has been criticized harshly by many because they could not find in his prophecy what *they* felt should be there. Smith asserts:

The contrast between the message of Nahum and that of Jeremiah, his contemporary, is striking. To the prophet of larger vision and deeper insight the event which filled Nahum's entire range of vision was of relatively slight importance. The passing of the Assyrian dominion is not even mentioned by Jeremiah, nor does the name of Nineveh once appear in his utterances. The two men belonged to different political parties. If Nahum was not in active opposition to Jeremiah, he was at least indifferent to his efforts. Instead of grieving over the sin of Judah and striving with might and main to warn her of the error of her ways that she herself might turn and live, Nahum was apparently content to lead her in a jubilant celebration of the approaching death of Assyria. Jeremiah was too overwhelmed by sorrow and alarm for his own people to obtain any solace from the misfortune of another, which could bring no relief to the desperate situation of Judah.¹³

Comparing Jeremiah's thematic range expressed in 52 chapters with Nahum's expressed in 47 verses appears grossly unfair. Indeed, it may well be asked why Jeremiah does not mention an event of such geopolitical significance as the downfall of an empire such as Assyria. It is not belonging to different parties that separates the political perspectives of the two prophets, but different time-frames. If Nahum's prophetic activity took place at the end of Manasseh's rule, it would explain his preoccupation with Assyria and Jeremiah's complete lack of interest in Assyria. Positing that Nahum prophesied close to the destruction of Nineveh, obviously casts Nahum in the role of an intoxicated patriot "beating a dead horse."

It is not the mending of Judah's ways that brings its salvation. Judah's sins

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are not even mentioned, because in the grand correlation of nations Assyrian excesses placed it in the status of "God's enemy," dooming it to its fate. This appears to be the theological essence of Nahum's prophetic message, worthy of the best of the biblical prophets. Nahum is not expressing any personal feeling of vindication over some hurt by the oppressor, nor even a nationalistic chauvinism that pagan nations must be punished. Rather, the Lord is applying His universal standard against evil, no matter who is responsible (cf. Amos 1:3, 2:16).

CONCLUSION

Nahum prophesied at a critical time in the history of the Israelite people. The nation was split, part in exile and part under the harsh Assyrian rule and internal despotism of Manasseh. The long Assyrian tyranny, coupled with Manasseh's long reign, and constant fear of a fate similar to that of the Northern Kingdom, have created an atmosphere of hopelessness. Nahum brought hope to the downtrodden nation. He consoled it when it was despondent. Nahum's prophecy, imbued with a strong sense of God's sovereignty and lordship over history, resonated well with the fundamental precepts of the nation and its prophetic tradition. Nahum used his extraordinary poetic capability to convey realistic scenes of the fall of a seemingly invulnerable empire. His prophecy pounds: "It can be! It is possible! God will make it happen!" And, he was right.

Nahum's comforting message transcends the specific historical situation, which was the cause for its announcement. His eternal message is one of hope, which gives comfort to anyone oppressed by a long-lasting and seemingly invulnerable tyrant. He clearly presents the normative theological position held by the biblical prophets: the Lord is powerful, and applies His power to counter evil and protect the righteous.

NOTES

1. A.S. Van der Woude, "The Book of Nahum: A Letter Written in Exile," *Oudtestamentische Studien* 20 (1977) p. 121. Woude maintains that Elkosh refers to a place in the Northern Kingdom. Rudolph saw a possible Edomite connection in the name 'el qoš, "the God Qoš," an Edomite deity (W. Rudolph, *Micha-Nahum-Habakuk-Zephanja*. Kommentar zum alten Testament 13:3. Gütersloh: Mohn (1975) p. 149).
2. J.M.P. Smith, "Commentary on the Book of Nahum," in J.M.P. Smith W.H. Ward and J.A. Bewer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habak-*
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kuk, *Obadiah and Joel*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) p. 280. K. Spronk, *Kok Pharos* (1997) p. 1.

3. R.H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. (New York: Harper, 1941) p. 595.

4. J.A. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy In Israel*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) p. 149. See also: A. Haldar, *Studies in the Book of Nahum*. (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell 1947) p. 139. J.H. Eaton, *Vision in Worship*. (London: TBC, 1981) p. 15; J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit. Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testaments* 35 (1970) p. 19.

5. R.R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) p. 277.

6. R.H. Coggins, "An Alternative Prophetic Tradition?" in *Israel's Prophetic Tradition*, eds. R.J. Coggins, A. Phillips, and M. Knibb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 92.

7. J.M.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1991) p. 39. Edelkoort argued that the prophet does not mention the sins of Judah because he addressed himself to a pious minority in Judah, who suffered from persecution during the reign of Manasseh (A.H. Edelkoort, *Nahum, Habakuk, Zefanja. Drie profeten voor onzen tijd*. [Amsterdam: Albertus Hendrik, 1937] p. 39). However, Nahum's prophecy of weal (2:1) concerns Judah as a whole, not one faction of it. Similarly, the text in 1:7-8a cannot be used in support of a small audience of pious because of its tenor of general validity (Van der Woude, 109). Others argue that Nahum prophesied during the reformation of Josiah, a time when even Jeremiah refrained from internal criticism (cf. D. Deden, *De kleine profeten: uit de grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd*. Roermond-Maaseik: J.J. Romen & Zonen [1953] p. 235; Th. H. Robinson and F. Horst, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*. Handbuch zum Alten Testament I/14. Tübingen [1938] pp. 153-154; K. Elliger, *Das Buch zwölf Kleinen Propheten* II. Das Alte Testament Deutsch 25. Göttingen [1959] p. 2). However, it is clear from the text that Assyria was at the peak of its power when Nahum prophesied against its capital (1:12-13, 2:14, 3:1-4, 8), which was not the case during the reign of Josiah.

8. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 451.

9. Smith, pp. 273-274.

10. The date of Nineveh's destruction is usually taken as 612 BCE. Some determine the date from the Stele of Nabonidus, where he states that he restored the temple of Sin at Haran 54 years after its destruction. Since the restoration occurred in 553 and Nineveh was destroyed about the same time as Haran, it would mean that Nineveh was destroyed about 607.

11. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 10:38.

12. Assyria originally comprised the small triangular-shaped land lying between the Tigris and Zab Rivers. Later, through conquests, its boundaries extended as far north as Armenia; to Media on the east; to northern Syria and to the country of the Hittites, on the west; and to Babylon and Elam on the south and southeast, occupying almost the entire Mesopotamian valley.

13. Smith, p. 281

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