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Nahum: a Poet-Prophet

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Abstract: This article discusses the prophet Nahum.

NAHUM

a Poet - Prophet

*Thy shepherds slumber; O king of Assyria:
Thy nobles shall dwell in the dust:
Thy people is scattered upon the mountains,
And no man gathereth them. —Nahum 3:18.*

Nahum was a poet. When he saw in vision¹ the end of Assyria, he poured forth in unrestrained and picturesque Hebrew² the relief felt by his people. In many ways his poetry vents the wrath, sighs the relief, and bespeaks the hope of all who have been oppressed when the oppressions at last have ceased and the oppressor is no more. But Nahum was also a prophet; and he saw in Assyria's downfall an example of the hand of God in justice reaping with a vengeance all the enemies of good, while He preserves in mercy and with patience those who try to do good.

The subject of Nahum's poetry is the doom of Assyria, its capital, and its king. Assyria was a mighty empire in the seventh century B. C. It had grown up from a mere city-state in the course of a thousand years, until its commerce, its conquests, and its control extended from Babylon to Ethiopia. Most of its domain had been built up since the 900's B. C., although artifacts attest existence of the Assyrian forebearers as early as the 1900's, and show expansion of trade to the Mediterranean by the thirteenth century B. C. After control of the highlands north and east of the Tigris River was established, the Assyrians moved westward to the sea and then southward toward Syria and

Israel. In 853 B. C., Shalmaneser III was only stopped by a combination of peoples, including Israel, at Karkar. Internal difficulties slowed expansion for a century; and it is likely that during that time, in the early 780's B. C. the Prophet Jonah performed his mission.³

In such a time of threats and overthrows, a worried king may well have heeded a "foreign oracle" such as Jonah. Then in 745 came Tiglath Pileser III and conquered Philistia, Syria, and part of northern Israel. Ahaz of Judah preserved himself by offering to become tributary in spite of the Prophet Isaiah's advice.⁴ In 721 the next Assyrian king, Sargon II, finished the conquest of Israel and removed, according to his own record, 27,290 exiles of the ten northern tribes, replacing them with a mixed populace who became the "Samaritans" of later Bible history.⁵ These ten tribes were "lost" until a latter day.⁶ Judah also felt the hand of the Assyrian when Sennacherib laid siege and took away many people to slavery and death, but Jerusalem was spared, thanks to Isaiah's inspired advice to King Hezekiah and Hezekiah's good sense in listening to the word of the Lord.⁷

During the century of her might, Assyria was challenged by unending attempts of people from Egypt to Elam to break away to freedom. Finally, after the death of Assurbanipal, the decline of power was rapid. In 614 B. C. the Medes with the Neo-Babylonians overthrew the old mother-city, Asshur, and two years later entered the fabulous capital, Nineveh. The Neo-Babylonians gained ascendancy, and in the battle of Carchemish in 605 B. C., Assyria was vanquished, Egypt quelled, and the captive peoples hoped for a new and better age.

Envisioning the overthrow of this cruel and mighty empire, whose kings in their own records boast of the captives they have maimed, the realms they have subjected and the treasures they have confiscated, Nahum tells how the doom of the mighty and the wicked is decreed, deserved, and done.

His book begins with an acrostic, with one strophe (stanza) for each of the first fifteen letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with two alterations of the sequence. The first seven strophes (verses 2-5 in English) emphasize God's power over nature and over His enemies; but the third (verse 3a) interrupts to tell of His goodness and justice. The second seven strophes emphasize His power over all enemies and evils, but again tells by contrast in

the third of the series (verse 7) of His goodness and His mercy to those who take refuge in Him. The fifteenth and final strophe (verse 10) provides a summary and a transition to the next subject to be treated: the castigation of Nineveh.

Assyria and Judah are alternately addressed in the next poem (verses 11-14); the one is to be punished and the other to be redeemed. It concludes with a hopeful verse, speaking of a peaceful age in terms that seem to herald the Messianic age when all oppressors shall have ceased.⁸

Chapter 2 of Nahum's book is a taunt-song about Nineveh, but told in terms that typify the destruction of all evil. The first few lines (verses 1-4) depict the preparation and beginning of the siege; in the next (5-7), siege is laid; the defenders flee (verse 8); and the spoils are taken (verses 9, 10). The poem ends with three verses (11-13) about the royalty of Nineveh, who are as a den of lions that are vanquished and destroyed.

The final poem (chapter 3) opens with a prelude on the evils of the oppressive city, Nineveh. Her lies, rape, and sorcery; her prey in thousands slain; her harlotry and witchcraft and the seduction of the nations all are told. Because of all this, the prophet says she shall become detestable (verses 5-7). Like all others strong but wicked, Nineveh shall fall (verses 8-11); all her defenses shall be useless when her leaders flee like locusts (verses 12-17). Her end has come; there remains for the prophet but to write the epitaph (verses 18-19):

*Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria,
Thy worthies are at rest;
Thy people are scattered upon the mountains,
And there is none to gather them.
There is no assuaging of thy hurt,
Thy wound is grievous;
All that hear the report of thee
Clap the hands over thee;
For upon whom hath not thy wickedness
passed continually?⁹*

Nahum's message is still true: decadence ends in destruction. Although the Lord is "slow to anger," He is also "great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked."¹⁰ His mercy shall not rob justice, but neither will justice rob His mercy. "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him."¹¹

—Ellis T. Rasmussen.

1 Nahum 1:1.

2 Although the Hebrew strophes and rhythmic accents are not evident in our common English translation, some of the parallelism and imagery they employed are evident, as is also the pattern sometimes employed. Note this in the poem of 1:1-9.

3 Assuming that the Prophet Jonah, son of Amittai of Jonah 1:1, is the same as he of II Kings 14:23-25, of the time of Jeroboam II.

4 See II Kings 16 and Isaiah 7.

5 II Kings 17:22-24 (and verses following).

6 Isaiah 5:25, 26; 11:11, 12; 43:5-7; Jeremiah 3:12-18; 16:14-16, and many other prophecies including such in latter days as Doctrine and Covenants 133:24, 25.

7 II Kings 18, 19; compare Isaiah 36, 37.

8 Compare with Isaiah 52:7.

9 Nahum 3:18, 19, quoted from the English translation of the Holy Scriptures, 1946 edition; The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

10 Nahum 1:3.

11 Nahum 1:7.



THE PICTURE

The well-deserved downfall of Assyria's wicked capital was welcome news to those who had been miserably oppressed. Hands clapped for joy and relief express the Prophet Nahum's feelings. Artist Eugene Spiro's conception of Nahum's vision of the doomed city and swarms of scarlet-clad soldiers looms in the background. For righteous people, this time of divine judgment and deliverance banished sorrow and brought rejoicing.

It reminds us to live so that judgments to come in our time will not find us fearful and remorseful, but rather will find us faithful and ready.

— *Virgil B. Smith.*