

NAHUM

The Name and Background of Nahum:

The name Nahum occurs in the New Testament where it is found in Luke's genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹ It means "consolation," or "consoler," which can be considered symbolical for the content of this prophet's message to Judah.

Nothing is known of Nahum's personal life. He is called "the Elkoshite," that is, an inhabitant of Elkosh, but no one knows for sure where Elkosh was located. Some believe that it was Capernaum, since the meaning of that name is "Village of Nahum."

The Date of the Writing of the Book:

The message of Nahum deals with the fall of Nineveh, which occurred in 607-606 BC. We can pinpoint the date of the book because Nahum mentions the destruction of Thebes as an accomplished fact: "Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall."² According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* the expedition of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, against Egypt, which resulted in the fall of Thebes, occurred about 663 BC. Hence, the activity of Nahum must be placed somewhere between 663 and 607. The *Encyclopaedia* states: "There seems to be good reason, therefore, for assigning Nahum's activity to a date between 610 and 607 BC." *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "All surmises as to the prophet's date have been set at rest of late years by certain discoveries in the Assyrian inscriptions.... In ch. iii.8 our prophet speaks of the capture and destruction of No-Ammon, and the deportation of its inhabitants, as a recent and well-remembered event. No is Thebes, in Upper Egypt, called by the Greeks Diospolis, the capital of that part of the kingdom; and we now learn from the cuneiform records that Assurbanipal, the son and successor of Esarhaddon, took that city in his second expedition against Urdamani, or Rud-Amon, the successor of Tirhakah, and carried the inhabitants away. This invasion took place soon after the death of Tirhakah, which occurred B.C. 664. So we may reckon the date of Nahum's prophecy to have been within ten years of the fall of Thebes, during the reign of Manasseh, whose name was suppressed in the title of the book, owing to that king's evil reputation."

The Character of the Book:

The Pulpit Commentary has the following eloquent note about the character of the book Nahum: "Among the minor prophets Nahum hold the highest place. His prophecy is a poem, stately, orderly, and impressive, all the part of which are well arranged and mutually conducive to the unity of the whole. It is eminently tuneful and rhythmical, the words 're-echoing to the sense,' and hurrying the hearer away with the speaker in complete sympathy. The style is full of force, the coloring brilliant, the picturing lifelike. The majestic opening, in which are described the attributes of God, his mercy and justice, is equaled by the vivid representation of the sack and ruin of Nineveh, which he paints as if passing before his own eyes. The language is pure and classical, with a certain originality in words and forms which separates it from other writings. It is true that here and there may be found remembrances of Joel and Isaiah; but these expressions may be derived from sources common to all the prophets, and from which, unconsciously as it may be, they drew some materials. And this incidental indebtedness does not diminish the character of originality in treatment and execution which is claimed for Nahum's work. The variety of illustration, the force of imagery, the elegance of diction, the clearness of style, in spite of rapidity of transition, give a unique character to this poem, and differentiate it from all others in the collection. There are no Messianic references; nor is there room for any lengthened array of moral and religious ideas; but these are entwined in forcible, if concise, terms. God's existence, justice, and providence are everywhere asserted, witnessed to by the past, expected in the future; and from the coming judgment is drawn a lesson of comfort for the chosen people."

The Commentary further observes: "This prophecy, so precise and assured, was the result of no human prevision; it was the outcome of no glance or a far-seeing statesman's eye. It was something more definite than a general confidence in God's moral government, and the ultimate triumph of righteousness."

¹ Luke 3:25

² ch. 3:8

When Nahum prophesied Assyria was at the height of its prosperity. No enemy in its neighborhood was left unsubdued; the distant Egypt had submitted to its arms; Phoenicia and Cyprus owned its sway; Judea paid annual tribute; commercial enterprise had drawn unto it the riches of all nations. No one at this epoch could have foreseen the speedy end of this prosperity. Nahum needed a single-hearted courage and a full persuasion of the truth of his mission to denounce the crimes of this flourishing kingdom, and to proclaim its coming downfall. In fifty years the end came.”

Jonah and Nahum:

In his book *Explore the Book*, J. Sidlow Baxter writes: “Nahum’s oracle is given to one subject alone—the doom of Nineveh, capital of Assyria and (when Nahum wrote) the world’s greatest city. It is noteworthy that two of the books among the so-called Minor Prophets are devoted wholly to Nineveh. Over a century before Nahum, Jonah had lifted up his voice for Jehovah in the great thoroughfares of Nineveh; and the Ninevites had learned through him that ‘Jehovah is slow to anger’ (Jonah, iv. 2). Jonah would certainly preach this to the Ninevites, and it would strike a sharp contrast between Jehovah and the fierce-tempered deities of the Assyrians. To this strangely welcome compassion of Jehovah, uttered through His unique ambassador, the Ninevites had responded; but soon afterward they had presumed upon it, going to greater lengths of wickedness than ever before. They must now learn, therefore, through Nahum, that ‘Jehovah is a jealous God’ (i. 2), jealous, that is, of His rights over His creatures. They must now learn that wrath restrained (as in Jonah’s time) is wrath *reserved*, if there is willful return to wickedness (i. 2). Nahum, so to speak, takes up where Jonah left off. Like Jonah, he says, ‘Jehovah is slow to anger’ (i. 3), but he adds the other side of the truth – ‘and great in power, *and will not at all acquit the wicked.*’ ”

As was the case with Jonah’s announcement of judgment, so here also the primary purpose of the warning is mercy. We do not read, however, that Nahum went to Nineveh and preached in the streets of the city, and the question remains: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”³ For that reason we believe that, although mercy for Nineveh is not absent in Nahum’s message, the main purpose here is consolation for the people of Israel. God is merciful to them by meeting out justice to “the city of blood.” If Nineveh does not hear, Jerusalem will.

The City of Nineveh

Nineveh is first mentioned in Genesis as one of the cities founded by Nimrod. We read: “Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, ‘Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.”⁴ Its position, on the east side of the River Tigris, places it in the vicinity of the place where the Paradise used to be.

The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary notes the wealth of archeological date uncovered about Nineveh. We read: “In the years 1849-1851 archaeologist A. Layard unearthed the 71-room palace of Sennacherib. The mound also yielded the royal palace and library of Ashurbanipal, which housed 22,000 inscribed clay tablets. These tablets included Assyrian creation and flood accounts which furnished Old Testament scholars with valuable information for background studies on the Book of Genesis.”

The city grew over the centuries into one of the mightiest capitals of the ancient world that survived many assaults and captures. *The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* states: “Nineveh was at first only a fort to keep the Babylonian conquests around. It subsequently, with Rehoboth, Ir, Calah, and Resen, formed one great city, ‘Nineveh’ in the larger sense. Thothmes III of Egypt is mentioned in inscriptions as capturing Nineveh. Phraortes the Mede perished in attempting to do so (Herodotus i. 102). Cyaxares his successor, after at first raising the siege owing to a Scythic invasion (Herodotus i. 103,106) 625 B.C., finally succeeded in concert with the Babylonian Nabopolassar, 606 B.C.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia refers to “a legend that the city could not be taken until the river became its enemy. Arbaces, the Scythian, besieged it, but could not make any impression

³ Rom. 10:14

⁴ Gen. 10:8-12

on it for 2 years. In the 3rd year, however, the river (according to Commander Jones, not the Tigris, but the Khosr), being swollen by rains, and very rapid in its current, carried away a portion of the wall, and by this opening the besiegers gained an entrance. The king, recognizing in this the fulfillment of the oracle, gathered together his concubines and eunuchs, and, mounting a funeral pyre which he had caused to be constructed, perished in the flames. This catastrophe is supposed to be referred to in Nah 1:8: 'With an over-running flood he (the Lord) will make a full end of her place (i.e. of Nineveh),' and 2:6: 'The gates of the rivers are opened, and the palace is dissolved.' The destruction of the city by fire is probably referred to in 3:13,15. The picture of the scenes in her streets-the noise of the whip, the rattling wheels, the prancing horses, the bounding chariots (3:2 ff), followed by a vivid description of the carnage of the battlefield-is exceedingly striking, and true to their records and their sculptures."

Outline of the Book

The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary gives the following outline of the book:

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The Text

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| I. | The Destruction of Nineveh Is Decreed | ch. 1 |
| A. | The General Principles of Divine Judgment | 1:1-8 |
| 1. | God's Vengeance in Judgment | 1:1-2 |

1 An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

2 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.

Nahum's prophecy is called "the vision of Nahum." The KJV uses the words: "The burden of Nineveh." The Hebrew word is *massa'*, which means, "a burden," or "an utterance" specifically of doom. The word is sometimes used of the load carried by an animal, as in "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it."⁵ Here it is a visual revelation, a spectacle that God played before the eyes of the prophet 50 years before it happened. Nahum probably never lived to see it happen, but his prophetic eye saw it telescoped so clearly that he could describe it to us in vivid colors. Nahum saw what the human eye could not see. His experience was similar to John's when Jesus ordered him to write the book of Revelation.

Nahum describes God as jealous and avenging. Those are two of God's attributes. The Hebrew uses the words *qanno'* and *qanna'* for jealousy. The meaning of the words is practically identical. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains about *qanna'*: "The word refers directly to the attributes of God's justice and holiness, as He is the sole object of human worship and does not tolerate man's sin. One appearance is in Ex 20:5: '...for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers

⁵ Ex. 23:5

upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.’ ” Joshua uses the word *qanno*’ in his farewell speech to the people of Israel. We read: “Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.’” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth; better, *Jehovah is a jealous and avenging God*, as Exod. xx.5; Deut. iv.24; Josh. xxiv. 19. The threefold repetition of the name of *Jehovah* and the attribute ‘avenging’ gives a wonderful force to this sublime description of the Divine character. God is here called jealous ... anthropopathically, as ready to defend his honor against all who oppose him, as One who loves his people and punishes the oppressors.” For “the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath” the Hebrew reads literally: “The LORD takes vengeance and is master of fury.”

The words are addressed to the people of Nineveh, but as we said above, they are also spoken for the benefit of Israel. We usually think of jealousy in the context of a marriage relationship, when suspicion is aroused because of infidelity. The Book of Proverbs mentions jealousy and revenge in the same breath: “Jealousy arouses a husband’s fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.”⁶ The law provided for treatment of a suspicion of infidelity.⁷ As such we understand it when applied to the relationship between God and the people of Israel. But the main recipient of Nahum’s words was supposed to be Nineveh with whom God did not pretend to have any intimacy. The mention of God’s jealousy in relation to nations other than Israel leads to the conclusion that God seeks fellowship with all mankind, not only with the nation He had chosen to be the guardians of His revelation.

The mention of God’s jealousy is found in connection with idolatry, that is with the intercourse man has with evil spirits. In the above quotation of Exodus, we read: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”⁸ The influence of demons in the life of an individual or of a nation will pass on from one generation to another. This means that God’s jealousy can hover over a country or a people for centuries. Such may have been the case with Nineveh since its foundation by Nimrod.

Jealousy affects human relations, as does vengeance. The Bible does not forbid us to be jealous if there is a cause, but we are not allowed to avenge ourselves. God warned Israel that they would not get away with spiritual infidelity. We read in Deuteronomy: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.”⁹ Paul warns the Christians in Rome: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”¹⁰

The mention of God’s jealousy and vengeance toward Nineveh assumes that those people have knowledge of good and evil and that they can be held responsible for their acts. Nineveh was known for the cruel treatment of its captives. It is not without reason that Nahum addresses the city with the words: “Woe to the city of blood.”

The apostle Paul depicts the wrath of God as a constant factor in His attitude toward sinful man. In his Epistle to the Romans, we read: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”¹¹ Those words could easily be applied to Nineveh in the days of Nahum.

2. God’s Power in Judgment

1:3-8

⁶ Prov. 6:34

⁷ See Num. 5:11-31

⁸ Ex. 20:4,5

⁹ Deut. 32:35

¹⁰ Rom. 12:19; see also Heb. 10:30

¹¹ Rom. 1:18

3 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.

4 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.

5 The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.

6 Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.

7 The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him,

8 but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of [Nineveh]; he will pursue his foes into darkness.

Vs. 2 repeats the theme of God's vengeance three times, making it a rhythmic dance performed before our eyes. In vs. 3 the tempo slows down with the theme. The words "The LORD is slow to anger and great in power" contain a note of grace and a ray of hope, but also a warning. David understood the slowness of God's anger to be a sign of compassion. In one of his psalms he states: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."¹² Peter interprets this in the same way by affirming: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."¹³ Nahum may actually be referring to the time in Nineveh's history when Jonah preached there and the people had responded with repentance. At that time Jonah had prayed to God: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."¹⁴ With this indirect appeal to the city's history, Nahum leaves the door open to a renewal of repentance.

Barnes' Notes observes: "Divine long-suffering goes along with Divine power. God can be long-suffering, because He can, whenever He sees good, punish. His long-suffering is a token, not of weakness, but of power. He can allow persons the whole extent of trial, because, when they are past cure, He can end it at once. 'God is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and God wraths every day' (Ps 7:11). The wrath comes only at the last, but it is ever present with God. He cannot but be displeased with the sin; and so the Psalmist describes in the manner of men the gradual approximation to its discharge. 'If he (the sinner) will not return (from evil or to God), He will whet His sword; He hath trodden His bow and directed it: He hath prepared for him instruments of death; He hath made his arrows burning' (Ps 7:12-13). We see the arrow with unextinguishable fire, ready to be discharged, waiting for the final decision of the wicked, whether he will repent or not, but that still 'the Day of the Lord will come' (2 Peter 3:9-10). 'He will not at all acquit.'"

The Adam Clarke's Commentary explains the image of "the clouds are the dust of his feet": "This is spoken in allusion to a chariot and horses going on with extreme rapidity: they are all enveloped in a cloud of dust. So Yahweh is represented as coming through the circuit of the heavens as rapidly as lightning; the clouds surrounding him as the dust does the chariot and horses."

In the mention of the sea drying up and the rivers running dry we may see a reference to God's miraculous intervention in nature during the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Whether the Assyrians were familiar with this historical record, we don't know, but, as stated earlier, Nahum's prophecy over Nineveh was meant as much for the people of Israel as for that city. Bashan and Carmel were considered the essence of natural beauty and fertility. In the Song of Songs, the lover says to his bride: "The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon." The mention of the drying up of the sea and the rivers were references of God's intervention for the salvation of His children. The withering of the world's flower garden is an allusion to God's judgment. We don't know how "green" the city of Nineveh as at the height of its glory. The tendency to plant trees in big cities may be a modern phenomenon. A Dutch poet in the eighteenth century complained: "Where does one find oak trees in Amsterdam? O greedy wallet where never enough

¹² Ps. 103:8

¹³ II Peter 3:9

¹⁴ Jonah 4:2

comes in! How devoid of all savor this place is!" If God does this to the green trees of Lebanon, what will He do to the dead wood of Nineveh!

Verses 5 and 6 paint a picture of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Those are some of the most frightening manifestations of nature. The prophet depicts those natural phenomena as demonstrations of God's indignation. We speak rather glibly about natural disasters as "acts of God." Rarely, however, do we establish a direct link between corrupt human behavior and the ravages of a tornado or the destruction of an earthquake. In speaking about the end of the world, Jesus mentions some warning signs: "Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains."¹⁵

We have to remember that Nahum's condemnation of Nineveh was never meant to be a tool of panic but rather a warning that would turn people around and make them flee to the one who could save their lives and souls. Announcements of judgment are always acts of God's compassion. No one understood this better than Jonah. After having preached judgment over Nineveh, we read: "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.'"¹⁶

The picture of God's indignation as expressed in earthquakes and volcanic outbursts is meant to instill the fear of the Lord in sinful people. The apostle Paul states: "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men."¹⁷ The author of Hebrews reminds us: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."¹⁸

Nahum completes the picture of God's character in verses 7 and 8 by showing God's goodness as well as His enduring anger. It is up to man which side of God's nature he wants to encounter.

Most commentators interpret the first part that states that God is "a refuge in times of trouble" to apply to Israel and the second, which pictures God's wrath, to Assyria. The NIV inserts "Nineveh" in vs. 8. The Hebrew text only speaks of "the place." Actually, thus far Nineveh has not yet been mentioned in this prophecy, except in the heading. There is little doubt though, that "with an overflowing flood He will make an utter end of its place, and darkness will pursue His enemies," as the NKJV renders it, applies to the destruction of the city of Nineveh. The question is whether the preceding verse cannot also be applied to that city. The words: "The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him" can also be interpreted as an invitation to the inhabitants of Assyria's capital, leaving the door open to their repentance and salvation.

The Bible often presents the wrath of God in terms of a flood. David states in the psalms: "Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him."¹⁹ But in the case of Nineveh, the river of God's wrath over the city was not only a figure of speech. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "Ctesias (a Greek historian of the fifth century B.C.) recounts that while a drunken feast were going on in Nineveh, a sudden inundation of the Tigris River swept away the city gates and washed away the foundations of the palace, thus permitting the Babylonian army to enter and burn the city."

B. The Destruction of Nineveh and Deliverance of Judah

1:9-15

9 Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time.

10 They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble.

11 From you, [O Nineveh,] has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness.

¹⁵ Matt. 24:6-8

¹⁶ Jonah 4:1,2

¹⁷ II Cor. 5:11

¹⁸ Heb. 10:31

¹⁹ Ps. 32:6

12 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.

13 Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away."

14 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."

15 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.

On the accusation: "From you, [O Nineveh,] has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness," *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* mentions the names of the kings Pul, (2 Kings 15:10); Tiglath-pileser, (2 Kings 15:29); Shalmaneser, (2 Kings 17:6); and Sennacherib, (2 Kings 18:17, and 19:23). *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* observes: "The meditation of evil against Jehovah refers to the design of the Assyrian conquerors to destroy the kingdom of God in Israel, as the Assyrian himself declares in the blasphemous words which Isaiah puts into the mouth of Rabshakeh (Isa 36:14-20), to show the wicked pride of the enemy. This address merely expresses the feeling cherished at all times by the power of the world towards the kingdom of God."

The Pulpit Commentary suggests that the words: "Whatever they plot against the LORD" be translated as a question, as does the Septuagint: "What devise ye against the Lord?" *The Commentary* reads: "This is addressed not only to the Jews in the sense, 'Do ye think that he will not accomplish his treat against Nineveh?' but to the Assyrians also." "Trouble will not come a second time" implies that the destruction of Nineveh will be so complete that Sennacherib's invasion will never be repeated. Based upon these words, the early church fathers have conceived the doctrine that God does not punish man twice for the same sin. In the light of the New Testament, this means that God will not punish a person for sins for which Jesus has paid the price in His death on the cross. The apostle John, therefore, can state that God is just when He forgives our sins, since it would be unjust if He would require payment twice for the same sin. In John's epistle we read: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."²⁰

The thorns in vs. 10 can be seen as the impregnable defense of Nineveh, or as the moral entanglement of the city from which there is no escape. In a prophecy against Assyria, Isaiah records: "The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers."²¹ Again there is in this image a mixture of judgment and hope. The burning of thorns and briers of moral entanglement by the fire of God's holiness reduces the moral confusion to ashes and frees man of his bondage.

The NIV is the only version that renders vs. 12 "Although they have allies ..." The NKJV reads: "Though they are safe..." The KJV: "Though they be quiet..." The RSV: "Though they be strong ..." The Hebrew word is *shalem*, which means, "complete." It also has a connotation of being friendly. In most cases the word is rendered "perfect." The NIV's rendering here may be a little farfetched. The idea obviously is that, in spite of the fact that the Assyrian army is the greatest army in the world, it will be wiped out completely. *Barnes' Notes* observes about the passage: "[Though they be quiet and likewise many, yet thus shall they be cut down] Literally, 'If they be entire,' i.e., sound unharmed, unimpaired in their numbers, unbroken in their strength, undiminished, perfect in all which belongs to war; 'and thus many even thus shall they be mown down (or shorn), and he passeth away' (NOTE: So it seems better to render it, than, as in the English Version, 'and he shall pass through.' The word means alike 'pass away' or 'pass through,' but the act spoken of is later than the 'cutting down' of the army and so probably the passing away, or flight of its king, to his destruction or final passing away). With might outwardly unscathed, 'without hand' (Dan 2:34), and 'thus many,' i.e., many, accordingly, as being unweakened; as many as they shall be, 'so shall they be mown down, and he,' their head and king, 'shall pass away and perish' (compare Ps 48:4). Their numbers shall be, as their condition before, perfect; their destruction as their numbers, complete. It is wonderful how much God says in few words; and how it is here foretold that, with no previous loss, a mighty host secure

²⁰ I John 1:9

²¹ Isa. 10:17

and at ease, in consequence of their prosperity, all are at one blow mown down, like the dry grass before the scythe, are cut off and perish; and one, their king, 'passeth away,' first by flight, and then by destruction. As they had shorn the glory of others (Isa 7:20), so should they be shorn and cut down themselves."

Assyria at that time was, what in modern terms would be called, "the most powerful country in the world." This is the predicate commonly used for the United States of America. The impact of Nahum's prophecy upon Israel must have been the same as when, in modern times, someone would predict that the military power of the United States would be annihilated in a single moment. This would be deemed impossible, and the prophet would be considered to be a lunatic.

The NIV inserts "O Judah" in vs. 12 to indicate that the promise of no more affliction is addressed to Judah and not to Assyria. This, however, is not in the Hebrew text. However unlikely, it could be taken as pertaining to Assyria. The fact that its mighty army has disappeared could be seen as the best thing that ever happened to that nation. Would, for instance, the United States be better off if it were not the most powerful country in the world? It could be!

It is more probable, however, that those words are addressed to Judah. That makes certainly more sense in connection with the following about the breaking of the yoke. Many commentators believe that "the yoke" refers to the tax King Hezekiah had to pay to Sennacherib. The Scriptural record tells us: "The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."²² According to TLB, this amounts to \$.1,500,000. The problem in taking this prophecy to refer to Hezekiah's humiliation is that Hezekiah died in approximately 686 BC and Nahum's prophetic activity is supposed to have occurred between 663 and 607 BC. If Assyria's pressure would no longer be felt in Nahum's time, though, there would be no yoke to be broken from their necks.

Nahum's announcement that Nineveh would have no descendants to bear the name implies more than that the city will not survive. Ever since its foundation by Nimrod, Nineveh had been the symbol of human pride. The city that was to be destroyed was the city of the man who was "a mighty hunter before the LORD."²³

In the context of Nahum's prophecy, vs. 15 pertains to the fall of Nineveh, the victory of good over evil. The apostle Paul quotes this verse in his Epistle to the Romans in connection with the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We read: "And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"²⁴ There is no real contradiction between the two. For Israel, the destruction of Nineveh meant freedom from oppression. The result of the preaching of the Gospel means for us deliverance from fear of the power of Satan. The author of Hebrews summarizes the Gospel: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."²⁵ Isaiah had used similar words: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"²⁶

Barnes' Notes believes that the message is conveyed "from mountain-top to mountain-top by beacon-fires [to] spread the glad tidings." *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* sees "The messengers of joy appear upon the mountains, because their voice can be heard far and wide from thence." The image reminds me of the way news was broadcasted via "the jungle vine" among the tribes people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. One could in fact hear a voice shouting from a mountaintop and the sound would be picked up by one who heard it on the next slope to pass it on to the valley below. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "The tidings of this great deliverance shall be published and welcomed with abundance of joy throughout the kingdom, v. 15. While Sennacherib prevailed, and carried all before him, every day brought bad news; but now, behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, the feet of the evangelist; he is seen coming at a distance upon the mountains, as fast as his feet will carry him; and how pleasant a sight is it

²² II Kings 18:14

²³ Gen. 10:9

²⁴ Rom. 10:15

²⁵ Heb. 2:14,15

²⁶ Isa. 52:7

once more to see a messenger of peace, after we have received so many of Job's messengers! We find these words made use of by another prophet to illustrate the mercy of the deliverance of the people of God out of Babylon (Isa 52:7), not that the prophets stole the word one from another (as those did, Jer 23:30), but speaking by the same Spirit, they often used the same expressions; and it may be of good use for ministers to testify their consent to wholesome truths (1 Tim 6:3) by concurring in the same forms of sound words, 2 Tim 1:13. These words are also quoted by the apostle, both from Isaiah and Nahum, and applied to the great redemption wrought out for us by our Lord Jesus, and the publishing of it to the world by the everlasting gospel, Rom 10:15. Christ's ministers are those messengers of good tidings, that preach peace by Jesus Christ. How beautiful are the feet of those messengers! How welcome their message to those that see their misery and danger by reason of sin! And observe, He that brings these good tidings brings with them a call to Judah to keep her solemn feasts and perform her vows."

The whole picture in this prophecy brings back to me vivid memories of the breaking of the news of the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany that ended the Second World War in Europe. We had been for five years under the yoke of Nazi occupation in the Netherlands. I can still see myself jumping in the air and shouting for joy. What a feast it will be for the redeemed when the devil will be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur and his reign of terror will end for good.

As far as the beautiful feet of the messenger of the Gospel is concerned, his message is rarely received with the kind of enthusiasm that Nahum portrays here. When Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi, the Macedonian man Paul had seen in his dream, who had begged: "Come over to Macedonia and help us,"²⁷ was nowhere to be found. Soon after their arrival, they were thrown in prison. When the first missionaries penetrated the habitat of the Stone Age tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, their lives were threatened. Yet, the tribes people had cherished for centuries the hope that the Creator would send back to them eternal life that had been lost in ancient history. And after Paul and Silas sang Gods praises in the jail, a field that was ripe for harvesting opened up before them.

The admonition to celebrate the feast and fulfill the vows sounds premature. The first meaning is probably that the conditions in the land would improve to the point where the people could again travel to Jerusalem to observe the prescribed celebrations in the temple. No longer would there be any foreign army to restrict their freedom of travel. But Judah, at that time was far from being out of the woods. During the reign of the evil king Manasseh, the curtain was drawn again on the fulfillment of God's promises.

The fulfillment of Nahum's prophecy is closely related to the coming of the Messiah, although this is not mentioned here. Isaiah makes the connection more clearly when he predicts: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."²⁸ The final stage will not be reached until the church of Jesus Christ will be completed in triumph in heaven.

II. The Destruction of Nineveh Is Described ch. 2

A. The Call to Battle 2:1-2

1 An attacker advances against you, [Nineveh]. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength!

2 The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines.

²⁷ Acts 16:9

²⁸ Isa. 9:2-7

Again, the name “Nineveh” does not appear in the Hebrew text but the NIV’s insertion here is logical. The KJV renders this verse: “He that dasheth in pieces is come up before thy face: keep the munition, watch the way, make thy loins strong, fortify thy power mightily. For the LORD hath turned away the excellency of Jacob, as the excellency of Israel: for the emptiers have emptied them out, and marred their vine branches.” This is almost a literal reading of the Hebrew text. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* translates these verses: “A dasher in pieces comes against thee. Keep thy fortress! Look out upon the way, fortify the loins, exert thy strength greatly! For Jehovah returneth to the eminence of Jacob as to the eminence of Israel; for plunderers have plundered them, and their vines have they thrown to the ground.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments on this: “Here is an alarm of war sent to Nineveh, v. 1. The prophet speaks of it as just at hand, for it is neither doubtful nor far distant: ‘Look about thee, and see, he that dashes in pieces has come up before thy face. Nebuchadnezzar, who is noted, and will be yet more so, for dashing nations in pieces, begins with thee, and will dissipate and disperse thee;’ so some render the word. Babylon is called the hammer of the whole earth, Jer 1.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* detects a tone of mockery in Nahum’s words. We read: “In irony and bitter mockery Nahum addresses Nineveh, advising her to put forth every possible effort and to strengthen every fortification in order to withstand the approaching army of the Mede, Cyaxares, and the Babylonian, Nabopolassar. To be sure, all would be unavailing, for the Lord himself had decreed the downfall of Assyria. The sarcasm and mockery serve to bring out the hopelessness of the enemy of Judah in more forceful manner.”

Prophecies similar to the one pronounced against Nineveh are found in the Scriptures addressed to Babylon. Jeremiah announces: “ ‘Before your eyes I will repay Babylon and all who live in Babylonia for all the wrong they have done in Zion,’ declares the LORD.”²⁹ Ultimately, this judgment pertains not to the human agencies that were instruments of oppression but to the powers behind them, Satan. John captures the essence of judgment in his description of the fall of Satan. We read in Revelation: “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”³⁰ And: “The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” God’s righteousness will prevail in the end.

Vs. 2 obviously offers some problems to the translator. The KJV, for instance instead of reading “The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel,” gives this verse a negative connotation: “For the LORD hath turned away the excellency of Jacob, as the excellency of Israel: for the emptiers have emptied them out, and marred their vine branches.” The Hebrew word rendered “turned away” or “return” is *shuwb*, which can have either meaning. The same word is used in the verse: “Then the LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’”³¹ Even more clearly, the same word is used by Moses: “The LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.”³² The Septuagint supports the idea of God restoring His favor to His people. The amazing feature of this prophecy of restoration is, in the words of *Barnes’ Notes*: “A long captivity was still before Judah, yet the destruction of the Assyrian was the earnest that every ‘oppressing city should cease.’ ”

We must be careful not to rapidly spiritualize prophecies of restoration, but we conclude that at the return from captivity, Israel never attained the glory it had during, for instance, the reign of King Solomon. The small struggling group of survivors, who rebuilt the temple under the leadership Zerubbabel and the wall under the direction of Nehemiah, never attained the splendor promised in this verse. Paul’s description of the church of Jesus Christ is more fitting to them: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may

²⁹ Jer. 51:24

³⁰ Rev. 12:9

³¹ Gen. 18:10

³² Deut. 30:3

boast before him.”³³ But yet the Bible describes the ultimate condition of the bride of Christ as: “[She] shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”³⁴ There will be splendor beyond imagination.

B. The Destruction of Nineveh 2:3-13

3 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.

4 The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares. They look like flaming torches; they dart about like lightning.

5 He summons his picked troops, yet they stumble on their way. They dash to the city wall; the protective shield is put in place.

6 The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses.

7 It is decreed that [the city] be exiled and carried away. Its slave girls moan like doves and beat upon their breasts.

8 Nineveh is like a pool, and its water is draining away.

"Stop! Stop!" they cry, but no one turns back.

9 Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! The supply is endless, the wealth from all its treasures!

10 She is pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale.

11 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?

12 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.

13 "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."

The Pulpit Commentary has an interesting comment on the red shields of the advancing army: “The shields of the early Assyrians were usually circular or oval in shape, formed of wicker-work, with a central boss of wood or metal. In the latest period they were made straight at bottom and rounded only at top.... Some bronze shields have been brought to England from Nineveh; these are circular, about two feet and a half in diameter, the rim bending inwards, and forming a deep groove round the edge. The handles are of iron, and fastened by six bosses or nails, the heads of which form an ornament on the outer face of the shield.... There were used also in sieges tall oblong shields, sufficient to protect the entire body, constructed of wicker-work or the hides of animals.... The shields are said to be ‘made red,’ because they were really so colored (though the monuments have not confirmed this opinion), or else because of the polished copper with which they were sometimes covered. ... Red or purple seems to have been the favorite color of the Medes and Babylonians (Ezek. xxiii.14), blue or violet that of the Assyrians (Ezek. xxiii.6; xxviii. 23, etc).”

Barnes' Notes suggests about the red color of the shields: “[Is reddened] Either with blood of the Assyrians, shed in some previous battle, before the siege began, or (which is the meaning of the word elsewhere (NOTE: The form m'adaam ... is used five times in Exodus of the artificial color of the dyed ram skins. But there is no proof of any such custom as to the shields. If reddened by actual blood, it must have been in a previous battle, since Nahum is thus far describing the preparations. The gleaming of the brass of the shields in the sun (1 Macc. 6:39) could hardly be called ‘their’ being reddened), an artificial color, the color of blood being chosen, as expressive of fiery fierceness. The valiant men are in scarlet, for beauty and terror, as, again being the color of blood It was especially the color of the dress of their nobles..., implies that they were costly treasures which Cyrus distributed.) one chief color of the Median dress, from whom the Persians adopted theirs.... ‘The chariots shall be with flaming torches,’ literally, ‘with the fire of steels..., or of sharp incisive instruments. Either way the words seem to indicate that the chariots were in some way armed with steel. For steel was not an ornament, nor do the chariots appear to have been

³³ I Cor. 1:26-29

³⁴ Rev. 21:11

ornamented with metal. Iron would have hindered the primary object of lightness and speed. Steel, as distinct from iron, is made only for incisiveness. In either way, it is probable, that scythed chariots were already in use. Against such generals, as the younger Cyrus... and Alexander... describes their terrible vehemence, when not evaded. Uneven ground naturally disordered them. ...They were of no avail; but they must have been terrific instruments against undisciplined armies.”

The Matthew Henry's Commentary suggest that: “The shields of his mighty men are made red, and probably their other arms and array, as if they were already tintured with the blood they had shed, or intended hereby to signify they would put all to the sword; they hung out a red flag, in token that they would give no quarter.”

Nahum gives a very vivid and colorful picture of the siege of Nineveh. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “This is one of the finest descriptions of a siege in literature, if not the finest.” The word “fine” deserves some definition in this context! There is, of course, nothing beautiful in the carnage that would take place. The defense of the city presents a chaotic scene to the eye of the prophet in which speed and color make the deepest impression. It is not easy to determine which is the best translation of some sentences. The NIV, for instance, reads: “The spears of pine are brandished,” but the KJV translates: “The fir trees shall be terribly shaken.” The realization that the mighty city, which up to that day had been the capital of the world, would be captured and destroyed, throws the population in a state of panic. Evidently, some Bible students have seen in the description of the chariots storming through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares, looking like flaming torches and darting about like lightning, a prophecy about traffic in a modern city. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments on this: “It serves no good purpose to see here a reference to the modern automobile, as some do. Such handling of Scripture is not worthy of the serious student of Scripture.”

We cannot underestimate the impression Nahum’s prophecy about the fall of the greatest city in the world of his day must have made. Those who took his words seriously must have felt like the kings and merchants of the earth will feel in the end of time when the center of world economy collapses. For the fall of Nineveh reminds us of the destruction of the city John calls in Revelation: “the great city of Babylon.” We read: “Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said: ‘With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again. The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No workman of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again. The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world’s great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth.’ ”³⁵ The fall of Nineveh would also mean the end of cultural beauty, of commerce and industry, and of romance and the tenderness of marital bliss.

The general panic in the city of Nineveh even affects the elite royal troops of the empire. Their usual discipline disintegrates and they tumble over each other in their effort to defend the city. The actual collapse of the city, as we saw earlier, was caused by the flooding of the River Tigris, which is predicted in: “The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses.”

Vs. 7 has been another teaser for translators for centuries. The NIV reads: “It is decreed that [the city] be exiled and carried away.” The KJV translates: “And Huzzab shall be led away captive.” The Hebrew uses the word *Huzzab*, about which *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Interpreters are still divided as to whether this word is to be taken as a proper noun, or is the verb meaning ‘it is decreed’ (so ASV and RSV marg.). No queen of Nineveh is known by this name, nor an Assyrian goddess. The passage is clear if the verb form is allowed. Led away captive. As God had determined, the city was to go into captivity, while the handmaids, the people of the metropolis, would lament the fall of their beloved city.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “Perhaps Huzzab means the queen of Nineveh, who had escaped the burning mentioned above by Diodorus. Since there is no account of the queen being burnt, but only of the king, the concubines, and the eunuchs, we may, therefore, naturally conclude that the queen escaped; and is represented here as brought up and delivered to the conqueror; her maids at the same time bewailing her lot. Some think Huzzab signifies Nineveh itself.” TLB offers the following, rather crude, paraphrase: “The queen of Nineveh is brought out naked to the streets and led away, a slave, with all her maidens weeping after her; listen to them mourn like doves and beat their breasts!” From a prophetic perspective, the concept of the city in the form of a woman who is disgraced would be quite fitting. As in the case of the description of the fall of Babylon in

³⁵ Rev. 18:21-24

Revelation, more is involved than the conquest and ruin of a city; it is the emblem of evil, corruption, and immorality that is destroyed.

The Pulpit Commentary argues against the idea that Huzzab would be the name of a queen, but it also does not accept the rendering “it is decreed.” We read: “We may dismiss the idea that *Huzzab* is the name of the queen. Such a personage is unknown to history; and there is no reason why she should be mentioned rather than the king; and persons are not introduced by name in prophecy except for some very special reason, as Cyrus (Isa. xlv. 28). The alternative rendering, ‘it is decreed,’ adopted by Keil, Pusey, and many modern commentators, is unexampled, and comes in baldly, and not at all according to the prophet’s manner. Henderson joins the clause with the preceding, thus; ‘The palace is dissolved, though firmly established.’ ” As the variety of opinions suggests, it is impossible to determine the exact meaning of the sentence. Choice is a matter of personal preference. The presence of the slave girls would lead us to think that the queen is meant. The most likely meaning, the one that appeals to me, is that *Huzzab* stands for “queen,” but that the queen is the city. I am reminded of a poem by a seventeenth century Dutch poet about the city of Amsterdam: “There, between the Amstel and the Ei³⁶, is displayed with splendor, she, who as empress, wears the crown of Europe.”

The panic reaches its peak when the water carries away the city gates. Vs. 9 does not specify who cries: “Stop! Stop!” but the words come probably from the mouths of the citizens of Nineveh. Mere words cannot halt nature’s catastrophes. The destruction of Nineveh was an act of God who allowed the River Tigris to flood and inundate the city. The despair of the cry is an expression of the depth of man’s fall. Natural disasters were not part of God’s original plan of creation. When God appointed Adam to rule the world, He endued him also with the power to speak authoritatively. If sin had not entered the human heart, the words “Stop! Stop!” would have halted the waters of the Tigris. We see this original authority of man displayed in Jesus’ command to the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee. Mark records the incident of the crossing of the lake of Jesus and the disciples: “Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’ They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’ ”³⁷ In that scene, Jesus demonstrates what man’s position of authority ought to be. The disciples were even more afraid of this original power of man as God wanted him to be, than they had been of the wind and the waves. The pathetic cries of “Stop! Stop!” in the mouth of Nineveh’s people are a reminder of who deeply man has fallen.

The words: “Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! The supply is endless, the wealth from all its treasures!” can be taken to be spoken by the invading army of the Babylonians, or they can come from the mouth of God. If the latter interpretation is correct, we have a similar situation as described in Revelation where John writes: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.’ ”³⁸ The gruesome scene in Revelation borrows the language of a terrestrial battlefield to depict a spiritual reality, but Nahum’s prophecy pertains to a literal looting of the wealth of Nineveh.

The conquest of Nineveh by the Babylonians and the subsequent pillaging of its wealth was no less a crime than any other murder or theft. The idea that war sanctions this kind of action is spurious. Babylon’s capture of Nineveh was a case of “dog-eats-dog.” Ultimately, Babylon’s turn would also come when the Medes and Persians would do to them as they had done to others. All this is evil to the extreme, yet it is evil that God uses for His own good. This is a mystery beyond explanation. It is best expressed in Joseph’s words to his brothers who, at one point, had meant to kill him: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

In the context of Nahum’s prophecy, the prediction of Nineveh’s destruction is, as we have already seen, the light at the end of the tunnel of darkness that Israel, at that point, had no yet entered.

³⁶ Names of the two rivers that stream on either side of the city

³⁷ Mark 4:36-41

³⁸ Rev. 19:17,18

On the words: "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 Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "Nineveh, the seat of empire of the rapacious and destructive warriors of various ranks, [is] typified 'by the 'lions,' 'young lions,' 'old lion' (or lioness...), and 'the lion's whelp.' The image is peculiarly appropriate, as lions of every form, winged, and sometimes with the head of a man, are frequent in the Assyrian sculptures. It was as full of spoils of all nations as a lion's den is of remains of its prey. The question, 'where,' etc., implies that Yahweh 'would make an utter end of the place,' so that its very site could not be found (Nah 1:8). It is a question expressing wonder, so incredible did it then seem." *The Keil Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* states: "This description is subordinate in sense to the leading thought, or to the question contained in the previous verse. Where is the city now, into which the Assyrians swept together the booty of the peoples and kingdoms which they had destroyed? In form, however, the verse is attached poetically in loose apposition to v. 12b. The lion, as king of the beasts, is a very fitting emblem of the kings or rulers of Assyria. The lionesses and young lions are the citizens of Nineveh and of the province of Assyria, the tribe-land of the imperial monarchy of Assyria, and not the queens and princes, as the Chaldee explains it. [The Hebrew word] *Choorim*, holes for hiding-places, or caves, not only applies to the robbers, in which character the Assyrians are exhibited through the figure of the lion..., but also to the lions, which carry their prey into caves."

The statement directed to Nineveh: " 'I am against you,' declares the LORD Almighty" stands in complete opposition to Paul's triumphant exclamation: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"³⁹ The ultimate security in a human life is the fact that God is for us and with us. The essence of the Incarnation is expressed in the name " 'Immanuel'-which means, 'God with us.' "⁴⁰ But how terrible it is for man to find out that the enemy he faces is the Lord Almighty. The author of Hebrews states: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁴¹ Nineveh, of all places, could have known this. The memory of Jonah's appearance, although almost one century earlier, could not have disappeared completely from the records of history. More important even, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."⁴²

The burning of the chariots that is foretold deserves attention. The Assyrians were evidently inordinately proud of their chariots. *Barnes' Notes* describes some archeological finds: "The Assyrian sculptures attest how greatly their pride and strength lay in their chariots. They exhibit the minute embellishment of the chariots and horses. Almost inconceivably light for speed, they are pictured as whirled onward by the two or, more often, three powerful steeds with eye of fire, the bodies of the slain under their feet, the mailed warriors, with bows stretched to the utmost, shooting at the more distant foe."

The words: "I will burn up your chariots in smoke" sound like strange poetry. Calvin explains this as: "As soon as the flame catches, and the fire smokes, by the mere smoke I will burn her chariots." It could very well be that the material of which the chariots were constructed emitted an unusual amount of smoke when consumed by fire.

The silencing of the voice of the messengers probably refers to the episode when Sennacherib's army approached Jerusalem and the king sent his messenger to King Hezekiah. The prophet Isaiah gave at that time the following prophecy, which also mentions the chariots: "Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your messengers you have heaped insults on the Lord. And you have said, 'With my many chariots I have ascended the heights of the mountains, the utmost heights of Lebanon. I have cut down its tallest cedars, the choicest of its pines. I have reached its remotest parts, the finest of its forests. I have dug wells in foreign lands and drunk the water there. With the soles of my feet I have dried up all the streams of Egypt.' "⁴³

³⁹ Rom. 8:31

⁴⁰ Matt. 1:23

⁴¹ Heb. 10:31

⁴² Rom. 1:20

⁴³ II Kings 19:22-24

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary points out the following spiritual lessons drawn from Nahum's prophecy:

"(1) The destroying nations which from time to time appear on the stage of the world's history are God's battle-axe wherewith He executes judgment on the guilty (Nah 2:1). After He hath employed these nations, as Nineveh and Babylon, for a time to fulfill His purpose, He lays them aside. But in the case of His elect people, as Jacob and Israel, after having inflicted the chastisements in full which were needed for their discipline and correction, He restores them to His favor again (Nah 2:2).

(2) God sees in His own people, because of His own sovereign grace to them, an 'excellency' which He sees in no other people. Let us take care that we be among 'the excellent, in whom is all God's delight' (Ps 16:3). So shall He make us, with the true Israel, 'an eternal excellency' (Isa 60:15).

(3) How unavailing are all men's efforts, if the Lord, the only true 'defense' (Nah 2:5), is departed from them! In vain proud sinners count over their 'worthies.' They alone are accounted 'worthy to escape all those things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man' (Luke 21:36), who have sought the Lord with an unfeigned repentance and living faith.

(4) If Nineveh had mourned with the dove-like spirit of penitence, and had smitten on her breast, like the self-condemning publican, in time, she would not too late have mourned with bitter self-reproach and despair, led by her 'maids with the voice of doves, tabering upon their breasts' (Nah 2:7). Her very means of defense, the waters which almost surrounded the city, were turned against her (Nah 2:8). Her silver, gold, vessels of desire (Nah 2:9, margin), and store, were of no profit to her in the day of wrath. So shall it be with all transgressors. If they would mourn for sin now, they would not have to mourn on account of punishment hereafter. If they would make to themselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness now, when they die, the latter would receive them into everlasting habitations (Luke 16:9). If they would seek the dove-like Spirit, the Holy Spirit, whom the Son sends from the Father to all who truly pray, they would at last, through the merits of the Savior, and through sanctification by the Spirit, be made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.

(5) Emptiness and desolation are the ultimate end of all mere worldly greatness (Nah 2:10). A guilty conscience makes cowards of the most hardy (Nah 2:8-10). 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth' (Prov 28:1). The lion-like nature and brute courage of Nineveh (Nah 2:11-12) failed her in the hour of her need; and her den of iniquity, the storehouse of rapine, was utterly laid waste, because 'the Lord of hosts' was 'against' her (Nah 2:13). And then the voice of her imperious 'messengers' was hushed in the stillness of death forever. Let us remember all the pomp and glory of the world are similarly soon coming to an end, that so we may learn not to be dazzled by the tinsel glare; but to act on the principle, 'He that doeth the will of God abideth forever' (1 John 2:17)."

These comments were written long before the fall of Hitler's Third Reich. What happened to Nineveh is the expression of an eternal principle that has repeated itself through all of world history. David expressed this in the psalm: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath..."⁴⁴ Assyria's thirst for world hegemony was ultimately nothing but a conspiracy against the Lord. And behind this human lust for power looms the shadow of the enemy of God and man whose sole desire is to usurp the throne of the universe.

III. The Destruction of Nineveh Is Deserved

ch. 3

A. The Reasons for the Destruction of Nineveh

3:1-11

1. Nineveh's Great Ungodliness

3:1-7

1 Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!

2 The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots!

3 Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses-

4 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.

⁴⁴ Ps. 2:1-5

5 "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.

6 I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.

7 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?"

Nahum depicts a shocking scene in rather explicit terms of God's judgment over the city of Nineveh. It is probably from this prophecy that John gets his vision of the city of Babylon as "the great prostitute, who sits on many waters," with whom "the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."⁴⁵ Nineveh and Babylon flourished in different periods of world history, but apart from that there is very little that distinguish them. Nimrod who was the epitome of rebellion against the Lord founded both.⁴⁶ The same spirit of lust for power inspires any city in this world that is not a replica of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The description of Nineveh is breathtaking. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes about, "Woe to the city of blood": "Nineveh: the threatenings against which are continued in a strain of invective, astonishing for its richness, variety, and energy. One may hear and see the whip crack, the horses prancing, the wheels rumbling, the chariots bounding after the galloping steeds; the reflection from the drawn and highly polished swords; and the hurled spears, like flashes of lightning, dazzling the eyes; the slain lying in heaps, and horses and chariots stumbling over them! O what a picture, and a true representation of a battle, when one side is broken, and all the cavalry of the conqueror fall in upon them, hewing them down with their swords, and trampling them to pieces under the hoofs of their horses! O! Infernal war! Yet sometimes thou art the scourge of the Lord."

The city of blood is the city that murders men. Jesus pronounces the same kind of judgment over Jerusalem that Nahum predicts here over Nineveh. The Lord called Jerusalem the city that kills its prophets and He says: "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."⁴⁷ God keeps account of every murder, beginning with Cain's murder of his brother to the last drop of blood that will be spilled on earth. The full burden of guilt will be accredited to everyone who does not repent of his sin. The inhabitants of Jerusalem had not killed Abel, yet God held them accountable for his death. In the same way the blood that covered the streets of Nineveh will be on our hands, unless the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ is imputed to us.

The use of the word "harlot" in connection with Nineveh does not suggest that the city was known for her sexual sins. Prostitution is mentioned in connection with witchcraft, which means that the people had surrendered themselves to demons. God calls it prostitution when a person abandons fellowship with Him in order to commit idolatry. He warned the people of Israel against the idolatry of the inhabitants of Canaan by saying: "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same."⁴⁸ To Israel He says: "I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people."⁴⁹ The Bible always uses the image of sexual intimacy in a marriage as a figure of a spiritual relationship. Paul writes to the Ephesians: " 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery-but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See Rev. 17:1,2

⁴⁶ See Gen. 10:8-11

⁴⁷ Matt. 23:35

⁴⁸ Ex. 34:115,16

⁴⁹ Lev. 20:6

⁵⁰ Eph. 5:31,32

Nineveh is said to have “enslaved nations by her prostitution.” The image speaks of more than just the Assyrian conquests in which people were literally carried away as slaves. *Barnes’ Notes* correctly observes: “People [are no] less sold and enslaved, because they have no visible master. False freedom is the deepest and most abject slavery. All sinful nations or persons extend to others the infection of their own sins. But, chiefly, the ‘wicked world,’ manifoldly arrayed with fair forms, and ‘beautiful in the eyes of those who will not think or weigh how much more beautiful the Lord and Creator of all,’ spreads her enticements on all sides ‘the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life,’ ‘her pomps and vanities,’ worldly happiness and glory and majesty, and ease and abundance, deceives and sells mankind into the power of Satan. It is called well-favored (literally, good of grace), because the world has a real beauty, nor ... ‘unless there were a grace and beauty in the things we love, could they draw us to them.’ They have their beauty, because from God; then are they deformed, when ... ‘things hold us back from God, which, unless they were in God, were not at all.’”

There is an enslavement of the senses to the glitter of power. Nineveh, as the most powerful city in the world, attracted people by appealing to their desire to be overawed. John describes the harlot Babylon in Revelation as a woman who is richly adorned. We read: “The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.”⁵¹ John contrasts her with the other city, “the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem.” The angel said to John: “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he reports: “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”⁵²

Verses 5-7 describe Nineveh’s disgrace in rather explicit terms. As her power derived from witchcraft was pictured as spiritual prostitution, so is her fall described in sexual terms. The shame of nakedness dates from the day sin entered the human heart. Adam’s first words to God after he had sinned were: “I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”⁵³ There is no logical explanation for the feeling of shame of nakedness. It is obvious that the real sense of shame goes well beyond embarrassment about certain parts of the human body. Since our sexual organs are instruments of intimacy, the real issue of shame is the nakedness of the soul. We are correctly ashamed about the shameful condition of our soul. We do not want others to know what we really think and feel. The uncovering of Nineveh’s nakedness exposed the rotten core of the city’s soul.

When John sees the picture of Babylon in Revelation as a prostitute sitting on a scarlet beast, he writes: “When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: ‘Why are you astonished?’”⁵⁴ John’s astonishment came from the fact that he had never seen the mystery of evil for what it really was. The glitter of gold, precious stones, and diamonds had taken his breath away and had temporarily blurred his vision. It was a mystery to the angel who was John’s guide that a man, who knew Jesus intimately as John did, could be duped by Satan to the point that, when he saw evil, he did not recognize for what it was. The lifting up of Nineveh’s skirts is not a lewd act on the part of God but an eye opener for mankind, which allows us to peek into the soul of evil and produce disgust that would make us shrink from it.

God reacts to the sight of Nineveh’s nakedness by pelting her with filth. TLB renders vs. 6: “I will cover you with filth and show the world how really vile you are.” The Hebrew word translated “filth” is *shiqquwts*, which means “something disgusting.” It is rendered “abomination” by the KJV, almost exclusively in connection with idols. God’s throwing dirt on Nineveh obliterates the glitter that covered the city before. Inward and outward corruption is now identical and more easily understood. The result is that people will recognize evil for what it is and recoil from it in disgust.

The danger of evil is in its deceptive appearance. There is an intoxicating lure in evil that covers the stench of death. Sin and death entered the world in the form of a delicious looking fruit. The Genesis record describes the first temptation as: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to

⁵¹ Rev. 17:4

⁵² Rev. 21:9-12

⁵³ Gen. 3:10

⁵⁴ Rev. 17:6,7

her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”⁵⁵ Over against this stands John’s stern and powerful warning: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”⁵⁶

There will be no mourners over Nineveh’s death and no eulogy at her grave. Nineveh is wiped off the earth without leaving a trace. In this Nineveh is the picture of the death of man of whom David says: “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”⁵⁷

2. Comparison of Nineveh to No Amon

3:8-11

8 *Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall.*

9 *Cush and Egypt were her boundless strength; Put and Libya were among her allies.*

10 *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.*

11 *You too will become drunk; you will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy.*

The prophet makes a comparison between Nineveh and the ancient Egyptian capital Thebes, called in other versions “No-Amon,” or simply “No.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “ ‘No Amon,’ the Egyptian name for Thebes in Upper Egypt; meaning the portion or possession of Amon, the Egyptian Jupiter (whence the Greeks called the city Diospolis), who was especially worshipped there. The Egyptian inscriptions call the god Amon-re-i.e., Amon the Sun; he is represented as a human figure with a ram’s head, seated on a chair (Jer 46:25; Ezek 30:14-16). The blow inflicted on No Amon, described in Nah 3:10, was probably by the Assyrian Sargon, who, being provoked by the alliance of So or Sabacho II with Hoshea, the Israelite king, who had revolted from Assyria, proceeded, after having destroyed Samaria, and having led the ten tribes captive, to attack Egypt and Ethiopia, to which latter at this time belonged No Amon of Upper Egypt. The Assyrian inscriptions tell us of his receiving tribute from a Pharaoh of Egypt, and of his destroying in part No Amon: thereby they confirm Nahum and Isa 20. Sargon reigned 722-715 B.C. ... As Thebes, with all her resources, was overcome by Assyria, so Assyrian Nineveh, notwithstanding all her might, in her turn, shall be overcome by Babylon. The English version, ‘populous,’ if correct, implies that No’s large population did not save her from destruction.”

Barnes’ Notes devotes a lengthy section to Nahum’s comparison of the two cities, from which we copy the following: “The prophet’s appeal to Nineveh is the more striking, because No, in its situation, its commerce, the sources of its wealth, its relation to the country which lay between them, had been another and earlier Nineveh. Only, as No had formerly conquered and exacted tribute from all those nations, even to Nineveh itself, so now, under Sargon and Sennacherib, Nineveh had reversed all those successes, and displaced the Empire of Egypt by its own, and taken No itself. No had, under its Tothmoses, Amenophes, Sethos, the Ouseresens, sent its messengers (Nah 2:13), the leviers of its tribute, had brought off from Asia that countless mass of human strength, the captives, who (as Israel, before its deliverance, accomplished its hard labors) completed those gigantic works, which, even after 2000 years of decay, are still the marvel of the civilized world. Tothmosis I, after subduing the Sasou, brought back countless captives from Naharina Tothmosis III, in 19 years of conquests, (1603-1585 B.C.) ... ‘raised the Egyptian empire to the height of its greatness. Tothmosis repeatedly attacked the most powerful people of Asia, as the Routen (Assyrians?) with a number of subordinate kingdoms, such as Asshur, Babel, Nineveh, Singar; such as the Remenen or Armenians, the Zahi or Phoenicians, the Cheta or Hittites, and many more. We learn, by the description of the objects of the booty, sent to Egypt by land and sea, counted by number and weight, many curious details as to the industry of the conquered peoples of central Asia, which do honor to the civilization of that time, and verify the tradition that the Egyptian kings set up stelae in conquered countries, in memory of their

⁵⁵ Gen. 3:6

⁵⁶ I John 2:15-17

⁵⁷ Ps. 103:15,16

victories. Tothmosis III. set up his stele in Mesopotamia, 'for having enlarged the frontiers of Egypt.' Amenophis too is related to have ... 'taken the fortress of Neni (Nineveh). ... 'He returned from the country of the higher Ruten, where he had beaten all his enemies to enlarge the frontiers of the land of Egypt' ... 'he took possession of the people of the South, and chastised the people of the North:' 'at Abd-el-Kournah' he was represented as ... 'having for his footstool the heads and backs of five peoples of the S. and four peoples of the North (Asiatics).' ... 'Among the names of the peoples, who submitted to Egypt, are the Nubians, the Asiatic shepherds, the inhabitants of Cyprus and Mesopotamia.' ... On the sphinx of Gizeh: ... 'The world in its length and its breadth' is promised by the sphinx to Tothmosis IV. He is represented as ... 'subduer of the negroes.' "

The question: "Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her?" requires a negative answer. The similarity between the two cities consists in two points: 1. They both used water as a defense system and 2. in both cases their defense proved to be no protection against being conquered. Nineveh considered herself of course to be better than Thebes because the Assyrian army had conquered that city. At the peak of her power, Nahum prophesies that it will be done to Nineveh as she had done to others. In a way, Thebes had this advantage over Nineveh that it had allies in other countries on the African continent, whilst Nineveh had no friends among the nations. She had been a cruel master to the countries she had conquered.

The ruthless treatment of the vanquished people of Thebes was probably what Nineveh had meted out and which would fall back upon her own head. The brutal murder of infants seems to have been a common practice in war in the ancient world. The prophet Elisha wept as he foretold Hazael, the future king of Damascus: "You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women."⁵⁸ Evidently, Babylon was guilty of the same practice, as is obvious from the psalm the Jews composed in captivity: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us-- he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."⁵⁹ For those who think that mankind has become more civilized over the centuries, there are reports that the Nazis treated some Jewish infants similarly. Nowhere does sadism become so repulsive as in the treatment of children. In his book *Night*, the author Eli Weiss recounts how the guards of the concentration camp in which he was killed a young cherub-looking boy by slow strangulation. He cried out in his heart: "Where is God?" His conclusion was that God was killed on those gallows. In a sense, Weiss was right. Whenever little children are murdered, God is killed. When King Herod committed the atrocity of the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, Matthew quotes the ancient prophecy of Jeremiah: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."⁶⁰ The Holy Spirit wept over this bloodbath centuries before it occurred.

The casting of lots over the nobles and their being carried away in chains is a vivid picture of people taken into slavery. These are not the lower classes of the people but the cream of the nation. It is a picture of the complete abolition of all human dignity. *Barnes' Notes* believes that the words: "You too will become drunk" apply to the drinking of God's wrath, as pictured in Revelation where John states: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath."⁶¹

The NIV reads the second part of vs. 11: "You will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy." The KJV had the reading: "Thou shalt be hid, thou also shalt seek strength because of the enemy." The Hebrew word translated "strength," or "refuge" is *ma'owz* which means, "a fortified place." Evidently, the idea is not that Nineveh would hide in fear but in an effort to defend herself. Nahum predicts, with some sarcasm, that Nineveh will hide herself so well that she will never again be found. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "Nahum had foretold her complete desolation: he had asked, where is she? Here he describes an abiding condition; strangely fulfilled, as perhaps never to that extent besides; her palaces, her monuments, her records of her glorious triumphs existed still in their place, but hidden out of sight, as in a tomb, under the

⁵⁸ II Kings 8:12

⁵⁹ Ps. 137:8-9

⁶⁰ Matt. 2:18

⁶¹ Rev. 14:9,10

hill-like mounds along the Tigris.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The Lord writes his lessons large on the pages of human history. Nineveh had failed to discern God’s warning in the doom of No-amon. It was not that she would be overtaken in the midst of drunk orgy, but she would drink to the full the cup of God’s wrath.”

B. The Destruction of Nineveh Is Inevitable

3:12-19

1. Nineveh’s Strongholds Are Weak

3:12-15

12 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.

13 Look at your troops- they are all women! The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed their bars.

14 Draw water for the siege, strengthen your defenses! Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork!

15 There the fire will devour you; the sword will cut you down and, like grasshoppers, consume you. Multiply like grasshoppers, multiply like locusts!

Once again, we have to remind ourselves that, when the prophet pronounced this sentence on the city, Nineveh was still at the zenith of her power. This makes the sarcasm of this prophecy even more biting. The picture of the weakness of Nineveh’s fortifications is drawn in vivid lines. The suggestion is that Nineveh is ripe for judgment, but also that it would take no effort for Nineveh’s enemies to overrun her. The impressive walls that ought to have been impregnable turn out to be like fig trees shaken in the wind that drop their fruit right into the mouth of the eater. The people who gather them do not even have to make the effort of picking them. John puts the image in a more cosmic perspective in his description of the end of the world. We read in Revelation: “The stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.”⁶² This makes the fall of Nineveh symbolic for the crumbling of all that has put up defenses against the truth of God. Nineveh’s figs are the first fruit and in Revelation the harvest has come to an end. This reminds us of Paul’s words to the church in Corinth: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.”⁶³ The strongholds of the heart are more resistant than the fortifications of Nineveh, but the Holy Spirit can demolish both although with different means. During the rebuilding of the temple, when the obstacles were piling up around the people of Jerusalem, the prophet Zechariah prophesied: “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground.’”⁶⁴

The comparison of Nineveh’s mighty army to women is no reflection on the female section of the human race. It is a fact of nature that, generally speaking, men are physically stronger than women, but that is not the point here. There are many instances in which women have outshined men in physical strength and endurance. It is the male machismo that is under attack here. *Barnes’ Notes* describes the man of Nineveh as: “Fierce, fearless, hard, iron men, such as their warriors still are portrayed by themselves on their monuments, they whom no toll wearied, no peril daunted.” The greatest insult to such characters would be to call them women. David taunted Abner, the general of Saul’s army, who had slept through the incident when David penetrated the camp and stole Saul’s spear and water jug: “You’re a man, aren’t you? And who is like you in Israel? Why didn’t you guard your lord the king?”⁶⁵ God mocks the male image of the Assyrian army, not because He disrespects women but because the men of Nineveh were unduly proud of their macho image.

Most commentators see in “The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies” a reference to the mountain passes north of the city, which could be easily closed by a small number of warriors, holding back a large army. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “In the pass called ‘the Caucasian gates,’ there were, over and

⁶² Rev. 6:13

⁶³ II Cor. 10:4-6

⁶⁴ Zech. 4:6,7

⁶⁵ I Sam 26:15

above, doors fastened with iron bars.” And *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* explains “the gates of your land” to be: “Northeast of Nineveh there were hills, affording a natural barrier against an invader; the guarded passes through these are probably ‘the gates of the land’ meant.” Occupying those passes made the siege of the city an easy task for the invaders, who built fires in front of the gates of the city wall.

Vs. 14 and 15 continue the vivid, though sarcastic, description of the siege. The water supply was probably not only needed to keep the population from dying of thirst during the siege but also to keep the fires lit by the enemy from devouring the gates. The hasty repair work done to the city walls is expressed in the words: “Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork!” We can see it happen before our eyes.

2. Nineveh’s Leaders Are Weak

3:16-19

16 *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.*

17 *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.*

18 *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.*

19 *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?*

The image of the population of the city as a swarm of grasshoppers brings the prophet to further flights of prophetic imagination. Nahum uses the image in a virtuoso way to portray both the besieged population of the city and the invading army. The Hebrew uses two different words to describe the insects, *yekeq* and *arbeh*, which are respectively translated “cankerworm,” or “caterpillar” and “grasshopper,” or “locust.” The NIV also translates *yekeq* also with “grasshopper.” But it does not appear that one word is used for the people of Nineveh and the other for the invaders. The locust is a well-known insect in the Bible, often used to describe judgment, as in the Book of Joel.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary quotes a report from an eighteenth century traveler, a certain Dr. Shaw, who saw locusts in Barbary: “I never observed the mantes, bald locusts, to be gregarious. But the locusts, properly so called, which are so frequently mentioned by sacred as well as profane writers, are sometimes so beyond expression. Those which I saw in 1724 and 1725 were much bigger than our common grasshopper; and had brown spotted wings, with legs and bodies of a bright yellow. Their first appearance was toward the latter end of March, the wind having been for some time south. In the middle of April their numbers were so vastly increased that, in the heat of the day, they formed themselves into large and numerous swarms; flew in the air like a succession of clouds; and, as the prophet Joel expresses it (Joel 2:10), they darkened the sun. When the wind blew briskly, so that these swarms were crowded by others, or thrown one upon another, we had a lively idea of that comparison of the psalmist (Ps 109:23), of being ‘tossed up and down as the locust.’ In the month of May, when the ovaries of those insects were ripe and turgid, each of these swarms began gradually to disappear; and retired into the Mettjiah, and other adjacent plains, where they deposited their eggs. These were no sooner hatched in June, than each of these broods collected itself into a compact body of a furlong or more in square; and, marching immediately forward in the direction of the sea, they let nothing escape them; eating up everything that was green and juicy, not only the lesser kinds of vegetables, but the vine likewise; the fig tree, the pomegranate, the palm, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, Joel 1:12; in doing which they kept their ranks like men of war; climbing over, as they advanced, every tree or wall that was in their way. Nay, they entered into our very houses and bedchambers, like so many thieves. The inhabitants, to stop their progress, made a variety of pits and trenches all over their fields and gardens, which they filled with water; or else they heaped up in them heath, stubble, and such like combustible matter, which were severally set on fire upon the approach of the locusts. But this was all to no purpose, for the trenches were quickly filled up, and the fires extinguished, by infinite swarms succeeding one another; while the front was regardless of danger, and the rear pressed on so close, that a retreat was altogether impossible. A day or two after one of these broods was in motion, others were already hatched to march and glean after them; gnawing off the very bark, and the young branches, of such trees as had before escaped with the loss only of their fruit and foliage. So justly have they been compared by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:3) to a great army; who further observes, that ‘the land is as the garden of Eden before

them, and behind them a desolate wilderness.' Having lived near a month in this manner ... upon the ruin and destruction of every vegetable substance which came in their way, they arrived at their full growth, and threw off their nymph state by casting their outward skin. To prepare themselves for this change, they clung by their hinder feet to some bush, twig, or corner of a stone; and immediately, by using an undulating motion, their heads would first break out, and then the rest of their bodies. The whole transformation was performed in seven or eight minutes, after which they lay for a short time in a torpid and seemingly languishing condition; but as soon as the sun and air had hardened their wings, by drying up the moisture which remained upon them, after casting their sloughs, they reassumed their former voracity, with an addition both of strength and agility. Yet they did not continue long in this state before they were entirely dispersed, as their parents were before, after they had laid their eggs; and as the direction of the marches and flights of them both was always to the northward, and not having strength, as they have sometimes had, to reach the opposite shores of Italy, France, or Spain, it is probable they perished in the sea, a grave which, according to these people, they have in common with other winged creatures."

Dr. Shaw stated that fire would not deter the advance of the locusts and that a good number would be burned to death while the next regiment would advance over the charred bodies of their forerunners. Nahum picks up on this by describing how the fire that is intended to keep the enemy away kills the people it was meant to defend. The camera moves from the besieged city to the besieging army and then back again to the city, capturing both parties in the same image of the locusts. He may have wanted to express that what happens to the Assyrians is what they themselves had done to others. The picture the prophet presents about the behavior of the locust is very compatible with Dr. Shaw's scientific observations. The comparison of human beings with insects is, of course, not very flattering. The sarcasm is obviously intentional. The booming economy of the city is compared to the extraordinary multiplication of the insects, but the guards and city officials whose task it is to protect the city are covered with the same image when they fly away like locusts to save their skin.

Barnes' Notes furnishes us with a lengthy explanation of the extend of Nineveh's economy of which we copy the following: "The commerce of Nineveh was carried back to prehistoric times, since its rivers bound together the mountains of Armenia with the Persian gulf, and marked out the line, by which the distant members of the human family should supply each others' needs. 'Semiramis' they say, 'built other cities on the Euphrates and the Tigris, where she placed emporia for those who convey their goods from Media and Paratetace. Being mighty rivers and passing through a populous country, they yield many advantages to those employed in commerce; so that the places by the river are full of wealthy emporia.' The Phoenicians traced back their Assyrian commerce (and as it seems, truly) to those same prehistoric times, in which they alleged, that they themselves migrated from the Persian gulf. They commenced at once, they said, the long voyages, in which they transported the wares of Egypt and Assyria. The building of 'Tadmor in the wilderness' (1 Kings 9:18) on the way to Tiphach (Thapsacus) the utmost bound of Solomon's dominions (1 Kings 5:4 (4:24)), connected Palestine with that commerce. The great route for couriers and for traffic, extending for 1,500 or 1,600 miles in later times, must have lain through Nineveh, since, although no mention is made of the city which had perished, the route lay across the two rivers, the greater and lesser Zab, of which the greater formed the Southern limit of Nineveh. Those two rivers led up to two mountain-passes which opened a way to Media and Agbatana; and pillars at the summit of the N. pass attest the use of this route over the Zagros chain about 700 B.C. Yet a third and easier pass was used by Nineveh, as is evidenced by another monument, of a date as yet undetermined. Two other lines connected Nineveh with Syria and the West. Northern lines led doubtless to Lake Wan and the Black Sea. The lists of plunder or of tribute, carried off during the world-empire of Egypt, before it was displaced by Assyria, attest the extensive imports or manufactures of Nineveh (... 'Dishes of silver with their covers; a harp of brass inlaid with gold; 823 pounds of perfumes; 10 pounds of true lapis lazuli, 24 pounds of artificial lapis lazuli; vessels laden with ebony and ivory, precious stones, vases; beside many other articles, which cannot yet be made out'); the titles of 'Assyrian nard, Assyrian amomum, Assyrian odors, myrrh, frankincense ... , involve its trade with the spice countries: domestic manufactures of hers apparently were purple or dark-blue cloaks, embroidery, brocades, and these conveyed in chests of cedar; her metallurgy was on principles recognized now; in one practical point of combining beauty with strength, she has even been copied A line of commerce, so marked out by nature in the history of nations, is not changed, unless some preferable line be discovered. Empires passed away, but, at the end of the 13th century A.D., trade and manufacture continued their accustomed course and habitation. The faith in Jesus had converted the ancient paganism; the heresy of Mohammedanism disputed with the faith for the souls of men; but the old material prosperity of the world held its way. Mankind still wanted the productions of each others' lands. The merchants of Nineveh were to

be dispersed and were gone: itself and its remembrance were to be effaced from the earth, and it was so; in vain was a new Nineveh built by the Romans; that also disappeared; but so essential was its possession for the necessities of commerce, that Mosul, a large and populous town, arose over against its mounds, a city of the living over-against its buried glories; and, as our goods are known in China by the name of our great manufacturing capital, so a delicate manufacture imposed on the languages of Europe (Italian, Spanish, French, English, German) the name of Mosul (... 'All those cloths of gold and of silk which we call `muslins' ... are of manufacture of Mosul.' 'The manufactures from fine transparent white cotton, like the stuffs now made in India under that name and like the bombazines manufactured at Arzingan, received in the following centuries the name `muslins;` but not the silk brocades interwoven with gold, which had their name Baldachini from Baldak i.e., Baghdad, and perhaps were manufactured at that time at Mosul, unless indeed this name `muslin` was then given to gold-brocades as wares of Mosul.' ... 'There is a very urge deposition of merchandise (at Mosul) because of the river, wherefore several goods and fruits are brought thither from the adjacent countries both by land and water, to ship them for Baghdad.' ... Niebuhr still witnessed 'the great traffic carried on there, as also linen manufactures, dyeing and printing (of stuffs)'). Even early in this century, under a mild governor, an important commerce passed through Mosul, from India, Persia, Kurdistan, Syria, Natolia, Europe (...In 1766, one caravan, in which Niebuhr traveled, had 1,300 camel-loads of gall-apples from Kurdistan. It supplied yearly 2,000 centners of them. ...). And when European traffic took the line of the Isthmus of Suez, the communication with Kurdistan still secured to it an important and exclusive commerce. The merchants of Nineveh were dispersed and gone. The commerce continued over-against its grave."

The last two verses of the book are like the taunt Isaiah intones against the king of Babylon.⁶⁶ As Isaiah's derision, Nahum's "ode" is also addressed to the potentate of the kingdom of darkness that rules behind the scenes of every empire.

The image of the sheep that are scattered because of the negligence of the shepherd originates with Moses who prayed: "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."⁶⁷ It was further used by the prophet Micaiah who foretold the death of King Ahab with the words: "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'"⁶⁸ Jesus saw the crowds that followed Him in similar fashion. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."⁶⁹ The image mixes compassion in the sarcasm of the taunt of the prophet over the fate of Nineveh. The king of Assyria may have been inflicted fatal injuries, which cause mankind to clap its hands, but the scattered sheep are the victims of it all. God had said to Jonah: "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"⁷⁰ His compassion over lost souls has not changed over the centuries. He is still "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."⁷¹

Conclusion:

As was observed earlier, Nahum's prophecy is a brilliant account of judgment over a nation still at the zenith of its power. The prophet uses graphic descriptions to startle the readers and wake them out of their lethargy. The prophecy was both a call for repentance to the Assyrian empire and a consolation to the victims of Nineveh's might, among which were Israel and Judah. We saw in our introduction that the

⁶⁶ See Isa. 14:4-20

⁶⁷ Num. 27:16,17

⁶⁸ I Kings 22:17

⁶⁹ Matt. 9:36

⁷⁰ Jonah 4:11

⁷¹ II Peter 3:9

meaning of the prophet's name was "consolation." So the main thrust of the book is a message of hope for the oppressed.

We have seen that the prophecy was uttered before the decline of the Assyrian empire set in, when Nineveh was still at the summit of its power. It was not a statement about a situation the end of which could be predicted by telltale signs of degeneration. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes a certain Dr. Newton who wrote in his dissertation: "These extraordinary circumstances may strike the reader more strongly by supposing only a parallel instance. Let us then suppose that a person should come in the name of a prophet, preaching repentance to the people of this kingdom,⁷² or otherwise denouncing the destruction of the capital city within a few years. 'With an overflowing flood will God make an utter end of the place thereof; he will make an utter end: its place may be sought, but it shall never be found.' I presume we should look upon such a prophet as a madman, and show no further attention to his message than to deride and despise it. And yet such an event would not be more strange and incredible than the destruction and devastation of Nineveh; for Nineveh was much the larger, stronger, and older city of the two. And the Assyrian empire had subsisted and flourished more ages than any form of government in this country; so there is no objecting the instability of Eastern monarchies in this case. Let us then, since this event would not be more improbable and extraordinary than the other, suppose again, that things should succeed according to the prediction; that the floods should arise, and the enemies should come; the city should be overthrown and broken down, be taken and pillaged, and destroyed so totally that even the learned could not agree about the place where it was situated. What would be said or thought in such a case? Whoever of posterity should read and compare the prophecy and event together, must they not, by such an illustrious instance, be thoroughly convinced of the providence of God, and of the truth of his prophet, and be ready to acknowledge, 'Verily, this IS the word which the Lord hath spoken; verily, there IS a God who judgeth the earth?' "

Nahum made prophecy into an art. His use of the Hebrew language is masterful and beautiful. There is beauty, even in God's judgment. This book expresses that God is glorious even when man is lost. It is a terrible thing that the glory of the Lord can be man's undoing, but this dims God's glory in no way.

The comparison between Nahum and Jonah helps us to understand that God's offer of pardon cannot be ignored without eternal consequences. The salvation of the generation that responded to Jonah's preaching could not save the following generations. Each age has to work out its own salvation with fear and trembling. Salvation is not hereditary.

Nahum depicts God as a God of vengeance. But the prophecy also exposes threads of compassion in the revelation of God's anger of man's unrighteousness. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁷³ But at the same time: "The eternal God is [our] refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."⁷⁴

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary concludes its comments on Nahum with the following remarks:

"(1) God visits transgressors with judgment in kind. Nineveh, the 'city of blood,' was doomed to be given bloodshed to satiety. The blood of her choicest citizens was to flow in torrents: and there was to be 'none end of their corpses' (Nah 3:3). She who never ceased to make a prey of the weak was in her turn to become a prey to the stronger. All whosoever acquire wealth by fraud are preparing enemies for themselves, and laying in store an awful retribution.

(2) The love of gain acts on multitudes as it were with the fascination of 'witchcraft' (Nah 3:4), luring them to spiritual 'whoredom' against God. This was the spell wherewith Nineveh enticed the 'nations' to partake in her idolatries, and ultimately to become her slaves. And this was the chief reason why 'the Lord of hosts' declared, 'Behold, I am against thee (Nah 3:5); and I will show the nations thy nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame' How we, who are called after the holy name of Christ, should be on our guard continually against the enticements and pollutions of the world and Antichrist, which are the spiritual antitypes to Nineveh and Babylon!

(3) Nineveh, once the admiration of the world, was doomed for her sin to become its 'gazing stock' (Nah 3:6). Unwept and unlamented, she perished without a 'comforter' (Nah 3:7). Such is the final portion of all who live for self, and not for the glory of God and the good of their fellowmen. They who might have

⁷² The author evidently means Great Britain

⁷³ Heb. 10:31

⁷⁴ Deut. 33:27

the Holy Spirit as their Comforter now, and the Lord as their eternal portion, shall be stripped of all the meretricious adornments (Nah 3:5) in which once they gloried, and for which they were admired, and shall have wailing and gnashing of teeth, without any to comfort them forever.

(4) How vain are all the defenses of sinners when the Lord is against them! No-amon or Thebes was one of the grandest and most magnificent cities of the earliest ages. Yet her rampart and sea wall, with her seemingly 'infinite strength,' were of no avail to save her 'young children' from being 'dashed in pieces,' and 'all her great men' from being 'bound in chains' (Nah 3:8-10). Such was to be the doom of Nineveh likewise. God acts on the same unchanging principle in all ages, and in the case of all nations. Unrighteousness toward man, and impiety and idolatry toward God, bear the same bitter fruits everywhere, however for a time transgressors may seem to prosper. Let us as a nation remember that our safety consists not in our fleets and armies, nor even in the 'multiplication of our merchants above the stars of heaven' (Nah 3:16), 'Riches,' like the 'canker-worm' (Nah 3:16), or the 'great grasshoppers' (Nah 3:17), 'certainly make themselves wings; they fly away' (Prov 23:5). The 'strong-holds' (Nah 3:12) on which we rely would fall before the invader as easily as the ripe fruit 'into the mouth of the eater,' if God were against us (Nah 3:12). The 'nobles' and 'captains,' who are the glory of England,⁷⁵ would soon be abased in the dust (Nah 3:17-18). Our security, therefore, depends upon our godliness. 'Wickedness' persevered in 'continually' (Nah 3:19) would bring on us a 'grievous wound,' not to be 'healed:' and the very nations now in alliance with us would 'clap the hands over' us, exulting in the tidings of our fall. Let us therefore repent of our sins as a nation, as families, and as individuals, and bring forth worthy fruits of repentance."

Davenport, IA, 10/1/2003

⁷⁵ This commentary dates from the time when England was still the British Empire