

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 51

Judah's Fall – Part Two (Nahum)

Will, our twenty-seven-year-old son, and I recently went on a light run. Truth be told, it was a light run for him; it wore me out! During the run, he was quizzing me on the Fall of Judah. As we worked through his questioning analysis of my studies and opinions, we got onto the subject of the prophetic voice in ancient Israel. Will was curious about the differing views on the role of prophets in the times of Judah under discussion and the views of such prophets today. He had solid, probing questions:

“Do theologians believe that God spoke through prophets in that manner only in that day?”

“What is the reasoning for the views that these prophets had special knowledge that God no longer dispenses today?”

“Is the idea that there was a greater need for the knowledge then and with the Bible now we don't need such insight?”

“Was the prophetic voice we read in the Old Testament the same idea or gift that the New Testament calls the gift of prophecy?”

Looking back at this, I can't decide if it made the run easier or harder. The questions are difficult to answer, especially when your body is shouting at you that you are not treating it right. Yet in the process of answering a thinking man's questions, you tend to forget how deplorable the run is making you feel! Compared to his questions, the run was suddenly easier to handle!

I like his questions and I like his questioning. The process of asking questions and the good, solid questions asked both push us to understand better God and his work. This lesson provokes consideration of these questions as we delve more deeply into the prophetic voice of Judah in the last days before its fall to the Babylonians. For centuries, God had spoken to his people through divine encounters of certain people. Both prophets and prophetesses came under the influence of God's Spirit, and whether through visions, dreams, or some other method, God's voice and words for the people were received and delivered.

God always demanded the treatment of his prophetic gifts with great respect. Unlike the pagan world, which usually sought to extract a reading from the gods through magical formulas or incantations, YHWH God was never at the people's

beck and call. Prophets were not the initiators; they were the receivers. Scripture speaks of God “raising up” prophets (Dt. 18:15ff). God choose his prophets before the womb, and God selected when and how the prophet would deliver God’s messages. God instructed the people that,

I [God] will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him (Dt. 18:18).

This understanding is clear in the New Testament where Paul speaks of the Old Testament as “the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). The writer of Hebrews held the same understanding when he wrote,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things (Heb. 1:1-2).

Scholars debate certain issues of authorship and composition of Old Testament books. If we have seen anything in this study thus far, it is that there are good questions and ripe areas for analysis on these issues. For example, there are place references in the Books of Moses that were not around when Moses was alive. Clearly, a later writer/editor placed at least those place names into the text. Similarly, other questions arise that indicate multiple authors in different places, as well as composite texts that are an accumulation of other materials we cannot access today.

Does this throw the authority of Scripture as God’s word into question? Absolutely not! The whole teaching of the Old Testament and New Testament is that the Old Testament books we are studying are the fruit of the prophetic voice. So when we read the historical stories in 1 and 2 Kings, we are reading the story of one or more Prophet Historians. When we read the Psalms, we are reading psalms that are the fruit of the Prophet’s voice, either through authorship or through selection. As we work through the Fall of Judah, we see the prophet’s voice at work, both in forecasting the coming fall and Israel’s eventual restoration. This was a critical test for how Israel could confidently gather the materials that were truly prophetic and not merely the musings of man. The work of those who passed the prophet test were those whose works (including their writings, their edits, their accumulation of other works) were reliable expressions of the voice of God. As Deuteronomy (the core of which was found at the time of Josiah and read in his presence) explained,

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a

word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him (Dt. 18:20-22).

This lesson brings the voice of one prophet we know by name (Nahum) together with the voices of unidentified prophets (the Prophet Historian of 2 Kings and the Prophet Chronicler of 2 Chronicles) as we continue the historical examination of Judah's fall.

NAHUM

In the last lesson, we examined the life of Josiah, the last good king of Judah, who reigned from 640-609 BC. Josiah reigned during the height of Assyria's power, but also during the waning days of Assyria. When Josiah first took the throne, King Ashurbanipal ruled Assyria. Ashurbanipal reigned from 668 to approximately 627 BC. He was not only a tremendous military leader, but was quite a scholar as well. His inscriptions note that he knew the full cuneiform writing art, was very good at mathematics, and could read difficult and ancient texts in Sumerian and Akkadian. Ashurbanipal built what history has thus far shown to be the greatest library up to his day. He stocked the library with all sorts of texts he had gathered throughout the world. His collection included bilingual lexicons, word lists of signs and symbols, medical texts, texts of omens and the supernatural, as well as works of literature. Discovery of his library was the key to most modern understanding of Assyria's history and practices.¹ Ashurbanipal ruled Assyria in its maximum extent, squashing rebellions like bugs.



¹ Roaf, Michael, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, (Equinox 1990), at 191.

The previous carving² comes from the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. Ashurbanipal is the figure on the right relaxing with his queen seated next to him. They are in their garden with the grapevines plush with fruit hanging overhead. Not to be missed is the pine tree on the left. At the top of the tree on the right hand side is hanging upside down the decapitated head of the King of Elam, recently defeated in battle. One must wonder if the king is regaling his queen of his wondrous victories in battle. (One also must wonder how many flies were buzzing around the decapitated head!) The later days of Ashurbanipal are cloaked in a bit of mystery, but he is generally believed to have died in 627. After his death, Assyria began to rapidly unravel, leaving Josiah with interesting political decisions to make.

As discussed in the last lesson, the repeated phrasings and parallel ideas between the narrative in 2 Kings and the prophetic book of Zephaniah, illustrates the likelihood that Josiah listened to prophetic voices of YHWH as he lived his life. Zephaniah had warned Judah of its own ruin, devastation, and gloom around the corner (Zeph. 1:15). He exhorted any who heard his message to “seek the Lord” and his “righteousness” as “humble” people, to “do his just commands,” to “seek righteousness [and] humility” in hopes of being “hidden” on the day of God’s judgment (Zeph. 2:3). The Prophet Historian writing 2 Kings 22:19 noted Josiah possessing those very traits as one who was “penitent” and who “humbled” himself. Josiah moved the country into at least surface obedience to God, re-establishing the Passover, and having the newly discovered law taught and followed.

Josiah also was the last king of Judah to expand his territory, no doubt seizing some of the opportunities brought about by Assyria’s waning power. As noted in the last lesson, Scripture indicates the territorial expansion, and archaeology shows it as well. Just as he had in his personal life, in expanding his kingdom’s borders, Josiah had the benefit of prophetic insight. In addition to the words of Jeremiah, which we will cover in a later lesson, Josiah had available to him the words of the prophet Nahum.

Nahum’s prophetic voice was active during these critical years of Judah. While Nahum does not date his prophetic ministry directly, several passages clarify the time of his declarations. Nahum 1:12 speaks of Assyria as still at a peak of its power and size:

Thus says the LORD, “Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away.”

² The picture comes from Roaf at 190.

This helps date the prophecy to sometime before Assyria began to lose substantial territory. By 625, Assyria had lost the area surrounding Babylon and eastward, so some date prior to that is reasonable. Also of use in dating is Nahum 3:8*ff*, which compares the coming fall of Nineveh to the fall of Thebes (Egypt) in the past:

Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her? ...
Yet she became an exile... and all her great men were bound in chains.

Assyria itself had conquered Thebes in 664/663, so we can easily conclude that Nahum must have declared these prophetic words *after* that date. This leaves us with a likely date of prophetic pronouncement either immediately prior to the reign of Josiah, or during his reign. Either way, this was a prophetic message that Josiah had benefit of as he considered his policies of expansion.

The prophecy of Nahum was a bold prediction! Nahum boldly proclaimed the downfall of the world's greatest superpower. Nahum did not do so vaguely or with ambiguity. His words are clear and concise. As noted above, Nahum confirmed that even though Assyria was "at full strength," they would soon "be cut down." Even more so, Assyria would "pass away." Assyria had existed for over 1,500 years! The Assyrian culture is one of civilization's oldest. Assyria's most recent re-emergence as a superpower had occurred almost 300 years earlier. Their activity was prominent in Judah's mindset as well.

Nahum prophesied during a time when the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, was exacting tribute from the nation. Ashurbanipal had exacted this tribute since taking the throne in 669. Before him, his predecessor Earshaddon (681-669) had exacted tribute from Judah. Before Earshaddon, his predecessor Sennacherib (705-681) had sacked all of Judah except Jerusalem and exacted a great deal of plunder and tribute. Sennacherib's two predecessors, Sargon II (722-705) and Shalmaneser V (727-722) had not only exacted tribute, but were responsible for ending the Northern Kingdom/Samaria and for deporting their citizens. Before those two, the Assyrian ruler was Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) who invaded the region and exacted tribute. Even before him, we know the prior two Assyrian kings, Adad-nirari III (811-783) and Shalmaneser III (858-824) were exacting tribute from Israel at least. In other words, save for the rare moment here or there, the Israelites had been subject to Assyria for hundreds of years. The bold proclamation that this nation was soon going to pass away was *shockingly* bold.

In the American legal system, there is a concept every first year law student learns called, "foreseeability." The doctrine is that one is liable for damage from one's own negligent actions when harm or damage is "reasonably foreseeable." Generally, juries decide what is foreseeable and what is not. There are rare occasions, however, where the consequences are so remote that the judge takes the decision out of the jury's hands and holds that there is *no* foreseeability as a matter of law. I suspect in the case of Nahum's prophecies, the court would do that very

thing. What Nahum saw coming, was not foreseeable by a reasonably prudent person! Even today it is hard to believe. Andre Parrot was not only the Director of the Mari Archaeological Expedition (Mari is another Ancient Near Eastern site), but he was also a professor at the *Ecole du Louvre* in Paris and the Curator-in-Chief of the French National Museums. In writing on the fall of Assyria, Parrot explained,

It is hard to understand why the fall of Assyria was so complete and so rapid. Never had the empire been so great or seemed so mighty. And indeed it was mighty. For one hundred and twenty-five years it had been sustained by continuous endeavor which had never relaxed. For six generations the throne had passed from father to son so that the kings, assured of that permanence on which the power of a dynasty depends, were able to survive all crises and to bring to completion a remarkable achievement...the enslavement of the world.³

Nahum emphasized the importance of this to Judah, explaining that this would end Assyrian conquests into Judah for good:

...never again shall the worthless [Assyria] pass through you (Nahum 1:15).

Just as important, one would think, to the king (and all of Judah) as the fact that the LORD would bring Assyria to naught, was *the reason* God was taking this action. Certainly I would want to know the reasons for God's actions to aid me in figuring out how to live my life!

Nahum begins his oracle against Assyria and its capital city of Nineveh setting out the reasons for the coming judgment. Even though God is slow to anger and patient toward his people and for the sake of his name, God is fiercely wrathful and certain to take action on his enemies and against evil.

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies (Nahum 1:2).

The avenging hand of the LORD doomed the Assyrians. These people had lived in evil, bloodshed, and lying corruption. Their capital city of Nineveh represented all that was the "kingdom" of Assyria. It was a "bloody city," that was "full of lies" and the "plunder" taken by force from others (Nahum 3:3). Assyria was like a prostitute betraying others with charms to get their valuables (Nahum 3:4).

Like the Egyptian capital Thebes before them, the Assyrian capital was destined for defeat. To any who had seen Nineveh, which would have included the

³ Parrot, Andre, *Nineveh and the Old Testament*, (Philosophical Library, Inc. 1955), at 71-2

Judahite kings that came to Nineveh annually to pay their tributes, this prophetic oracle must have seemed almost outlandish. Nineveh was the largest city in the known world.⁴ As the French scholar Andre Parrot wrote of Assyria at this time,

Assyria had never known a more brilliant epoch. Its palaces housed the hoarded wealth of the subject nations. Behind its double line of ramparts Nineveh seemed to be invulnerable. She continued to make the world tremble...⁵



Nahum details a vision of the battle for Nineveh that paints the scene in vivid color and graphic detail. The charging chariots with sunlight glinting off them are painted in words,

The chariots come with flashing metal... The chariots race madly through the streets... they gleam like torches; they dart like lightning (Nah-um 2:3-4).

The opposing army's shields and clothing would be blood red, giving the impression of great slaughter:

The shield of his mighty men is red; his soldiers are clothed in scarlet (Nahum 2:3).

The city would fall and its treasure taken:

... the siege tower is set up. The river gates are opened; the palace melts away... Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! ... Desolate! Desolation and ruin! ... Wasted is Nineveh (Nahum 2:5-10; 3:7).

Archaeology has shown how thoroughly correct Nahum's prophecy was. A famed archaeologist Austen Henry Layard was born in 1817. At that time, there was no "proof" that the Biblical city of Nineveh ever existed. Other than an early medieval reference to a battle around the area of Nineveh in 626, there was no ruin,

⁴ Russell, John Malcolm, *From Nineveh to New York: The Strange Story of the Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum*, (Yale 1997), at 24.

⁵ Parrot, Andre, at 29. The photo of Nineveh's walls now reconstructed are from Roaf at 187.

no artifact, or other tangible evidence of Nineveh. There was not even any direct evidence the Assyrian Empire existed as set forth in Scripture. That all changed with Layard.⁶

Layard was in his late twenties when he uncovered the ruins of Nineveh. In the 1840's and 1850's, multiple discoveries of the Assyrian Empire's ruins brought forth to academia a whole new discipline of study – Assyriology. This time period saw the discovery of thousands of cuneiform tablets from the library of Ashurbanipal, the decoding of cuneiform, as well as the discovery of Assyrian palaces and reliefs, and the acquisition by a foreign library of most of these valuable archaeological remains.



In its days, Nineveh stood on the left bank of the Tigris River where the smaller Khoser River intercepted it.

⁶ A thrilling narration of Layard's life and discoveries was written by UP correspondent and New York Times writer Arnold Brackman. *The Luck of Nineveh* (McGraw Hill 1978).



The Khoser actually flowed through the town⁷ through openings in the city's walls with floodgates north of town to control the river. Those floodgates may have been a principal cause for the rapid demise of Nineveh. Nineveh's fall in August, 612 came unusually rapidly, and some suspect that the opening of the flood gates after an unusual water build up could have sent a torrent of water that would have crashed the walls and gates of the city that bordered the river. This would either weaken them for siege machines, or open up avenues of intrusion for the invading armies. This was seen in Nahum's oracle of Nineveh's fall referenced earlier from Nahum 2:5,

the siege tower is set up. The river gates are opened; the palace melts away.

The archaeological remains confirm the desolation set out by Nahum. The palaces were sacked and burned. Battle details were better understood once a cuneiform tablet was deciphered in 1923. The tablet explained,

[In the fourteenth year] the king of Akkad ["Babylon"] mobilized his army... they went along the bank of the Tigris and ... in Nineveh... From the month of *Simanu* to the month of *Abu*, three times they battled(?)... a mighty assault he made upon the city. In the month of *Abu*, [the x day, the city was taken]... a great slaughter was made of the peoples and nobles. On that day Sin-shar-ishkun, king of Assyria, fled from the city (?)... Great quantities of spoil from the city, beyond counting, they carried off. The city [they turned] into a mound and ruin heap.⁸

Some Assyrian forces did escape and fought for several more years but by 609 BC, as prophesied by Nahum, Assyria was no more.

⁷ The picture on the following page is from Parrot, at 22.

⁸ This standard translation of the tablet was by C. J. Gadd and published under the title *The Fall of Nineveh, The Newly Discovered Babylonian Chronicle*. The tablet itself is in the British Museum, No. 21, 901, and Gadd's translation as included in this lesson is from the reproduction by Luckenbill, Daniel, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, (Greenwood Press 1968), Vol. 2, at 417ff.

In the final chapter of Nahum, we read the ending oracle of Nineveh's pride and its fall. The chapter begins with "hoy" (root of the Yiddish 'oy!'). This word means "Ah," or "alas," or "woe." It was a word the prophets used in a lament expressing sadness. Nahum uses it in an ironic way. Surely Judah would not lament the fall of its fierce Assyrian overlords and its capital Nineveh. Immediately following the *Hoy* is the biting reason: Nineveh was a "bloody city, all full of lies and plunder" (Nahum 3:1). Nahum ends this oracle, and thus ends the prophetic book with his real reaction – universal joy:

There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil? (Nahum 3:19).

CONCLUSION

As we study the Old Testament, we are not simply reading fictional or semi-accurate renditions of fables, stories, myths, legends, or fantasized histories. We are reading the composite work of prophets who were entrusted with the message and words God chose to impart to his people. That does not mean that over time there have not been editing, copying errors, and more that make it important to try and ascertain with the greatest precision the text as delivered by the prophets. Even more difficult at times is trying to understand the time and culture of many Biblical writings so that we can understand historically what they meant and then interpret it for our understanding today. That is what much of this class series is about. As we do so, however, we do so with confidence in the product as one that came from prophets who passed the test. Prophets who delivered the oracles of God that the people were able to confirm as days went by.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh*" (Nahum 1:1).

Scholars have debated for some time whether Nahum was from a place called Elkosh, or whether the Hebrew is making the play off the Hebrew word *elkoshi* which can mean "God is harsh!" Does Nahum (and does the Bible) portray God as harsh? Yes and no! God is very harsh toward evil. It has no place in his kingdom and it brings misery to his people. Nahum makes it clear that evil and the enemies of God will see his wrath and judgment:

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies (Nahum 1:2).

Yet in the midst of this, God shows his patience and mercy to sinners, always seeking for people to repent and turn to him. Nahum reminded his listeners,

The LORD is slow to anger... The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him (Nahum 1:3,7).

Thankfully through Christ, we have peace with God and are his children. His wrath reaches his enemies; his love covers his children! While Nahum says over and over “Behold, I am against you...” pronouncing the judgment of God, Paul reverses this for the believer. Paul proclaims that God is *for us!* And “if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:29). The answer? No one!

2. *“Thus says the LORD, ‘Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away’”* (Nahum 1:12).

We might consider Paul’s proclamation that no one can be against us contrary to our personal experiences. We certainly see people and things against us routinely and often unfairly. Jesus did say that we would face tribulation in the world:

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (Jn. 16:33).

This is the real point Paul is making as well. The things that come against us are the transitory things of this world. They may knock us down; they may leave us winded; they may bring forth tears and sorrow. But they will never conquer us! They will never remove us from Christ, his love, and his assured future. Everything along the way will be used to perfect in us his character and bring to fruition his plans. In that we rejoice! The tribulations of this world, like the mighty Assyrian Empire, will disappear!

3. *“Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile?”* (Nahum 3:8).

One aspect of Nineveh and Assyria that was of considerable evil was the arrogant and pride of the nation. They thought themselves invincible, beyond the reach of YHWH or man. This is in stark contrast to the virtue of humility called for by the prophet Zephaniah and exhibited by King Josiah. This same attitude was extolled in the Psalms:

The LORD lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground (Ps. 147:6).

James explains it with a slightly different emphasis in the New Testament:

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (James 4:6, 10).

Let us commit to humility and service, waiting on the day of the Lord, encouraged by the true words of his prophets, and confident in the love through Christ! Amen!

WANT MORE?

Next week, we cover Habakkuk. This is a prophet who dialogued with God and challenged God on some of God's actions! Read ahead and see what you think!