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Nahum: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Nahum, the seventh prophet of the Book of the Twelve, is a 7th century prophetic book, written by a Judean prophet, foretelling the downfall of Nineveh. However, despite its most immediate concern with Nineveh, explicit reference to Nineveh is rare within the text. Thomas Renz notes that there are only two such references in the entire book, in Chapter 2, verse 8, and Chapter 3, verse 7. One of the effects of this reticence in naming Nineveh and Assyria is that the universal relevance of the message of the book is more clearly seen.

As Brevard-Charles has argued, especially within their context within the biblical canon, prophecies can often exhibit a degree of abstraction from the immediacy of their original historical context. They speak across times to people in very different situations. For

instance, within the Book of the Twelve, we can see the exploration of broader eschatological themes, such as the Day of the Lord, even while the immediate instance of judgment being focused upon can vary.

In dating the Book of Nahum, as Daniel Timmer argues, we have two key dates between which we can date the book. The downfall of Thebes is referenced in Chapter 3, verse 8. As this occurred at the hands of Assyria in 663 BC, the book must be dated some time before that. The downfall of Nineveh itself in 612 BC, at the hands of the rising power of Babylon, is the obvious second temporal reference.

The prophecy also seems to have been delivered at a time of greater Assyrian power, probably nearer to the earlier date of the downfall of Thebes than the later date of the downfall of Nineveh. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Zennekarib had come up against Jerusalem in 701 BC and nearly defeated it.

While he had failed in this, he had defeated 46 fortified cities of Judah. The prophet Jonah addressed a context about 100 years earlier. Assyria was a brutal power and had greatly harmed Israel and Judah, wiping out the former kingdom and bringing the latter to its knees and reducing it to vassal status.

Judah's power was much diminished during this period. It lost territories, cities and many men to the Assyrians. However, Assyria's days were numbered.

A new power was about to dominate in the north. After the death of Aso-Banipal, the Neo-Assyrian empire went into decline. The Babylonians successfully revolted against their rule.

Assyr fell to Median forces in 614 BC, then Nineveh to Median and Babylonian forces in 612. Haran fell in 609 BC and then in 605 BC the Babylonians would defeat the Egyptians and the remnants of the Assyrian forces in Carchemish, spelling the end of the Egyptian power in the region and the establishment of the which would last for around the next 70 years. Beyond the very slight details that we receive at the beginning of the book, we lack further biographical data concerning Nahum.

We don't know anything for certain about the identity of Elkush, for instance. It might be a clan name or it might be a place name. Commentators have several different speculative suggestions for its referent, of varying degrees of likelihood.

We don't know the king or the kings during whose reign Nahum prophesied. Manasseh, Amun and Josiah were the kings during the relevant period. Manasseh was distinguished for the extent of his idolatry and his perversion of the religious life of Judah.

After the brief reign of his son Amun, also renowned for his idolatry and wickedness, Josiah, a godly reforming king, came to the throne around 640 BC. While Nahum's prophecy concerns Nineveh, it is directed to Judah, or perhaps more specifically to the

faithful within that nation. It is possible that it was also delivered to Assyrians, but quite likely that it never was.

Nahum's proclamation of the coming downfall of the Assyrians, while they were still the dominant power in the region, might have surprised many of his hearers. However, the message was a reminder of the Lord's sovereignty over the nations. Timur draws our attention to the presence of an acrostic, where the first and last letters of the lines from the second half of verse 1 to halfway through verse spell out the Hebrew for I with the first letters and Yahweh with the last letters.

There is a further acrostic pattern that Timur identifies in verses 2 to 8, with a partial yet broken acrostic following the first half of the Hebrew alphabet at the start of successive lines. Renz knows that some scholars dispute the presence of an acrostic here, however he does not find their arguments compelling, believing that the elements of the pattern that we do see would be unlikely to arise merely by chance. Timur suggests that the broken character of the acrostic is possibly designed to give a sense of incompleteness.

The final resolution has yet to arrive. The prophecy of Nahum begins by grounding its message in the Lord's own character, referring to some of the most important historical witnesses that the Lord gave to himself, in the Ten Commandments and in the theophany given to Moses in the aftermath of the sin with the golden calf. The acrostic in the opening verses, which yields I am Yahweh, makes good contextual sense when we consider that the verses that follow are developing those statements in which the Lord declares his name to his people.

Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6. In Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. Significantly the book of Jonah also reflected upon Exodus chapter 34 as Jonah referenced the Lord's declaration of his name and gave the Lord's relenting from disaster as a reason for his desire to flee to Tarshish in chapter 4 verse 2. And he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Jonah had quoted the Lord's declaration in a way that foregrounded the elements of the Lord's self-revelation that focused upon forgiveness and the passing over of iniquity, purposefully downplaying elements of judgment.

Micah also concludes with a reflection upon the statements of the Lord concerning his identity in chapter 7 verses 18 to 20 of his prophecy. Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not

retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us.

He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

Considering the unity of the book of the twelve and the way that three successive prophets within it, Jonah, Micah and Nahum, contain contrasting reflections upon Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 34 verses 6 to 7, might lend support to the idea that they have been ordered as they have within the book of the twelve, precisely in order to foreground this theme for the hearers. The fact that Nahum focuses upon the dimension of judgment and downplays the dimension of forgiveness is all the more interesting by contrast with Jonah and Micah's reflections upon it, within both of which grace and forgiveness is foregrounded, albeit in very different ways. But is relational, driven by love, by wrath and by jealousy.

Yet the Lord's wrath and jealousy is not like the fickleness and volatility of human passions. The Lord is slow to anger and his wrath endures. He does not shift with passing moods.

The power of the Lord is accented in the theophanic imagery that is introduced from the end of verse 3. The theophanic imagery in this passage should be familiar to us from elsewhere in scripture. Isaiah chapter 66 verses 15 to 16 for instance. The Lord's darkness is covering, his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water.

Out of the brightness before him hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows and scattered them.

He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. The advent of the Lord unsettles the entire creation.

It rocks the world on its foundations. When the Lord comes on the scene, things that once seemed secure and firm are weakened and they melt. This is the power that he manifested in the original creation.

But it is also seen in the great deliverances of Israel's history, especially the founding event of the Red Sea crossing. No one is able to resist or stand before it. All creation shrinks away.

The boundaries drawn in the original creation no longer hold. The sea is dried up, and an overflowing flood engulfs the land. The Lord decisively ends all rebellion, manifesting its utter futility and stupidity, consuming adversaries like dry stubble.

However, in the midst of this tumult and storm, there is a calm eye, the steadfast goodness of the Lord, and the security that he provides to all who take refuge in him. Verse 11 seems to be a bridge between the two sections, the one that proceeds in verses 1-10 and the one that follows in verses 12-14. The natural question that arises is whom is being addressed? Is this addressed to Jerusalem? If it is a reference to Jerusalem, then maybe it is a reference to Sennacherib's departure from Jerusalem in 701 BC.

However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to Nineveh, with the one plotting evil against the Lord, the worthless counsellor, referring to Nineveh's king. In verses 12-14, the Lord speaks concerning the judgement that will come upon Nineveh. It currently looks as if Nineveh and the Assyrians are at their full strength.

However, in no more than a few decades, Nineveh and the Assyrians will be cut off. At the height of the Assyrians' power, Judah had been greatly afflicted by them, and the Lord had been behind all of this. The Assyrians were the axe of the Lord's anger that was raised against his people, but now he declares that he would break the yoke of the Assyrians and deliver his people from it.

The Lord speaks directly to the Assyrians and to Nineveh in verse 14. Their name and their idols will be cut off, and as a nation they will be brought down to the grave. The Lord here describes them as vile, perhaps on account of their extreme brutality.

The concluding verse of the chapter, verse 15, describes the joy that comes with the messenger of Nineveh's downfall. With the news of Assyria's collapse comes the promise of peace and a resurgence of hope for the people. Renz draws attention to the extensive festivities of the Passover of the 18th year of Josiah's reign.

As the power of Assyria waned, faithful Israelites were freed to feast and to celebrate. An interesting and important feature of this verse is its close resemblance to Isaiah chapter 52, verse 7. Scholars debate the relative priority of these prophecies in Nahum and Isaiah. As he is introduced to us, Isaiah is an 8th century prophet and Nahum a 7th century prophet.

If we believe that the prophet Isaiah was the author of the entirety of the book that bears his name, then that seems to settle the question. Unless, of course, both Isaiah and Nahum were drawing upon a third source, perhaps some lines from a well-known liturgy. In the book of Isaiah, the good news seems to be the breaking of the yoke of Babylon.

In Nahum, it's the earlier news of the breaking of the yoke of Assyria. Renz writes, If Isaiah chapter 52 came first, we are invited to see the fall of Nineveh as a first instalment of the end of exile. If Nahum came first, as argued here, the end of the Babylonian exile is a further instance of, I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more.

A question to consider. Comparing and contrasting the reflections upon Exodus chapter 20, verses 5 to 6 and chapter 34, verses 6 to 7, in Jonah chapter 4, verse 2, in Micah chapter 7, verses 18 to 20, and at the beginning of this chapter, what deeper aspects of their meaning might come to light? Nahum chapter 2 continues the prophetic warning of the Lord's approaching judgment upon Nineveh, vividly describing the manner of its downfall and the aftermath of its ruin. The chapter begins with the alarm.

The scatterer has come up against Nineveh. It is an army of Medes and Babylonians advancing against it, and all must ready themselves for battle. Soldiers must man their various stations, and brace themselves for the coming onslaught.

The verses that follow dramatically portray the movement of the army up to Nineveh, through the streets of the city's suburbs, up to its wall, their breaching of the citadel, and their despoiling of its palace and temple. And then the plunder of the victors, and the unspeakable anguish of the defeated Assyrians in the ruins and the wreckage that remains. This passage refers to the downfall of the city of Nineveh in 612 BC, at the hands of a Median and Babylonian army.

Rather than merely telling us what's going to happen, it paints a picture for us, an arresting portrayal in snapshots and cutscenes of how the downfall of Nineveh will appear. The rapidity of the movement is expressed through curt imperatives, from the way in which the imagery moves swiftly from the beginning of the battle to its aftermath. The action against Nineveh is also an action for Jacob.

The relationship between the expression, the majesty of Jacob, and the majesty of Israel here, might allude back to the story of the Lord's wrestling with Jacob, in Genesis chapter 32, as Daniel Timmer suggests. There Jacob had received the name Israel, and a blessing from the Lord. Alternatively, this could be a reference to the restoration of the territory of Judah and Israel.

There was now the hope of reclaiming territory that had formerly been lost to the Assyrians. This restoration of Jacob is seen as those who had plundered them are themselves plundered. The description, starting in verse 3, works heavily with visual imagery.

In verse 3, it's the colours, the red of the shield, presumably leather shields, and the clothing of the soldiers in scarlet. The colour of the shields and of the soldiers reminds us of the fact that these are coming for blood. Chariots, presumably those of the invading army, are racing through the streets of Nineveh.

The suburbs outside the citadel walls had wide streets, down which chariots could race. The great city is being overrun, and its citadel surrounded. Timmer helpfully describes the city of Nineveh at this time.

The 7th century BCE city of Nineveh proper consisted of a central walled area roughly 5km or 3 miles long, and averaging 1km or 0.65 miles in width. The palace, other royal buildings, temples, and relatively wealthy residential areas were located within this area, which was surrounded by an immense stone wall roughly 15m or 50ft thick and 20m or 65ft high. This main wall was pierced by at least 15 gates, 18 are attested in written sources, but not all have been positively located, some of which were 5-7m, 16-23ft wide, before being narrowed in the years leading up to 612 BCE, and all were easily accessed by stone ramps.

Further, at two points the river Khosr ran under the city's wall, and on its course through the city ran close enough to the royal palace that Sennacherib built a river wall to protect the citadel on which the palace was built from erosion. Verse 5 likely refers to the king of Nineveh, summoning his officers to the wall they stumble to get there in time, and yet despite their efforts the siege towers are set up and the wall is breached. Many have speculated on the grounds of verse 6 and what we know of the river works around the city of Nineveh, that water played some part in the city's downfall.

Some ancient Greek historical accounts, such as that of Xenophon, may lend support to this, although the Babylonian accounts of the fall of the city, which were nearer to the event itself, do not mention a flood or the involvement of water. Considering the proximity of the river to the palace in the city, it is possible that if some of the infrastructure were destroyed, that the foundations of the palace might have been undermined by the influx of water into the city. There is no reason why we have to take the imagery that way, however.

Such imagery, as we see elsewhere in scripture, is often used to describe an overwhelming force. As the citadel is breached, the palace is overthrown, and also the temple of the city is overthrown. Verse 7 likely describes the despoiling of the temple of Ishtar and the carrying away of her statue.

Nineveh is compared to a pool whose banks have been breached, so that all of its water flows away. Nineveh is hemorrhaging its forces, and commanders and officials can't summon them back to their posts. In the aftermath of the destruction, the plunderers are themselves plundered, stripped of all that they had gained from others and left utterly desolate.

In verses 11 and 12, the former glories of Nineveh are compared to a lion's den, a place for the pride and the young lions, a place that no one would dare approach, and a place that was utterly secure. It was the place to which the lion brought, and in which he devoured his prey. But now the place where the lion was once at his most secure has been overcome.

No more can he gather his prey within the den of Nineveh. Nineveh is no more. In the final verse of the chapter, the Lord declares his challenge to Nineveh.

He is going to destroy the Assyrian war machine, which had been based upon the power of the chariot. He is going to devour their young lions. The strength of their nation, the royalty, officials and warriors are going to be devoured by the sword.

Their predatory activities will be put to a halt, and their voices of victory will be silenced. A question to consider. How does the Lord's vengeance upon Nineveh restore the majesty of Jacob? The coming downfall of Nineveh and the Neo-Assyrian Empire has been the subject of the entirety of the Book of Nahum.

Treatment of this continues in Nahum chapter 3, the final chapter of the book. Within the chapter, Nineveh and Assyria are ridiculed for the humiliation of their hubris, and the collapse of their former cruel might. The chapter opens with an oracle of woe, within which the causes of the destruction of the city of Nineveh are presented.

Nineveh was the heart of a cruel, violent and bloodthirsty empire, which ravaged other nations, through treacherous political schemes and its despoiling of and exacting of vast sums in tribute from its foes. Now, however, the Lord's judgement has come upon it. Verses 2 and 3 could be taken as a description either of the army of the Medes and Babylonians that is coming up against Nineveh, as in the preceding chapter, or as a depiction of the brutal power that Nineveh and the Assyrians once represented.

It's more likely that it represents the latter, flashes of sight and sound evocatively characterising the violent and bloody force of Assyria and its war machine, much as in the depiction of the Medo-Babylonian army overwhelming Nineveh in the preceding chapter. In verse 2, we see the chariots of Assyria in their din and rapid motion, a blur of thundering metal and the snorting of war horses. This terse, staccato and kinetic portrayal of the Assyrian army continues in verse 3, where we also see the carnage left in its wake, the heaped corpses that were a matter of pride for the brutal Assyrians.

Assyria is compared to a prostitute, deceitfully drawing in other nations by its wiles, yet proving treacherous and perverse. Nineveh was a place of idolatry and sorcery. The Lord would defile her, humiliating her before the nations that she had once cruelly dominated in her might.

We encounter similar depictions of Jerusalem at key points in the Prophets, for instance in Jeremiah 13, verses 26-27, where the same shocking imagery of lifting up the adulteress's skirts over her face is used. The point of this action is exposure, the manifestation of once hidden sin, the humiliation of the former haughtiness of the wicked, and rendering former oppressors vulnerable. Another similar statement is found in Ezekiel 16, verses 36-38.

And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. The stripping of the prostitute in public humiliation is here used to illustrate the shaming of Nineveh in the eyes of the

surrounding nations, who had formerly been terrorised by her. The uncovering of her nakedness would be a cathartic spectacle for those who had formerly suffered at her hands.

Finally delivered from her terror and her thrall, the contempt of all of the nations for Assyria would be revealed. Nineveh considered itself impregnable and inviolable, but the Lord reminds Nineveh of the great Egyptian city of Thebes, which despite its military strength, its fortifications, its key alliances and its location in the south of Egypt, had fallen to Aso-Banapol in 663 BC. Over the period prior to 663 BC, Assyria had steadily been extending its dominance over regions formerly under Egyptian hegemony.

This had provoked Egyptian Levantine campaigns in response. After an earlier failed invasion, in 671 BC Esau-Haddon made a successful assault upon Egypt itself, taking Memphis and beginning a period of Assyrian dominance in the region. In 663, his successor Aso-Banapol took the city of Thebes, a city that would formerly have been considered absolutely secure.

Nahum describes Thebes in a manner that invites comparisons with Nineveh, not least by describing the place that water had and its infrastructure and defences. Although Assyria had brought down Thebes, Nineveh, the centre of Assyria's own might, would suffer a similar fate. Nineveh is reminded of the violence that it had employed against Thebes.

It would soon be at the receiving end of such brutality. Assyria may not realise it, but it is ripe for destruction. One could imagine someone objecting to Nahum's message here, saying that the sacking of the mighty Thebes was a strange thing to mention here, as it was achieved by the very Assyrian forces that he is declaring will suffer a similar fate.

Surely the case of Thebes suggests that the power of Assyria is overwhelming. Yet the parallel is still drawn, in part because the determining factor is not ultimately human military might, as we'll see in the verses that follow, but the sovereign judgements of the Lord. Before those, no human forces can stand.

Nineveh, in a familiar image of judgement, would be intoxicated, presumably with the wine of divine judgement, and would collapse. Assyria trusts in its power, its troops, its fortifications and its gates. Yet the message of Nahum is that all of these are ultimately powerless to protect her.

Nahum compares the fortresses of the Assyrians to fig trees with first ripe figs. You need only shake them a little and you will have figs falling down upon you, ready to be devoured. Despite their appearance of strength, the strongholds of the Assyrians are ripe for destruction.

In addition to their strongholds, the Assyrians would have trusted in the might of their

army. And yet, in verse 13, we are told that their military might would become like women, a much weakened force, insufficient to defend itself, or anyone else for that matter. The same thing is true of their defences.

Although the great gates of Nineveh might seem to be impregnable, for all the good that they will do in protecting the city from the Lord's judgement, they might as well be left wide open, the bars utterly destroyed by fire. In verses 14 and 15, the prophet gives a taunt against the city. He rallies them to prepare for the coming battle.

They must draw water for the siege, ensuring that they have enough water for when they are surrounded by their enemies. To reinforce their fortifications, they must prepare bricks. And so they get clay for the bricks, they prepare the mortar, and they get the brick mould ready to form the bricks within it.

However, the process is not finished. Before the preparations have been made, they will be devoured by fire, cut off by the sword. They are compared to locusts about to be devoured, and that image is picked up and expanded in the verses that follow.

Assyria has been like a vast swarm of locusts, multiplied over the whole face of the earth. However, while locusts can devour the land and cause considerable destruction, the locusts in such a vast swarm can vanish without a trace. While the Neo-Assyrian Empire may have covered much of the face of the known world, its time would soon pass and it would be nowhere to be found.

The final two verses of the chapter, and of the book, present us with a mocking dirge for Assyria and its rulers. The king and his nobles, the nobles here being described like shepherds, slumber while their people are scattered like an unguarded flock. Perhaps we should see the slumbering of the king and the nobles as a drunken stupor from which they cannot rouse themselves.

They have been intoxicated by the wine of the Lord's judgment. The Lord's judgment upon Nineveh is a final one. There's no recovery from it.

The response of the other nations is to rejoice over Nineveh's downfall. There was virtually no land that had not suffered from the Assyrians' cruelty, but now its violence was coming back upon its own head. A question to consider, what are some of the characteristics of the Lord's judgment and justice that can be illustrated in the downfall of Nineveh?