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NAHUM'S LOVING DEITY: ANALYSIS OF NAHUM 2:1 AND HOW THE SCENES OF DESTRUCTION IN NAHUM CONTRIBUTE TO ITS CALL TO REPENTANCE

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Perhaps no book in the Bible is maligned as much as Nahum. It has been described as a violent expression of bellicose nationalism with no place in a religious or theological canon.¹ The book describes the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, with which Judah had a long and contentious history. The imagery of death and devastation in the imperial city is some of the most vivid of the Hebrew Bible. Are the critics correct? Is Nahum nothing more than a nationalistic and ethnocentric celebration of the violent destruction of one of Judah's oldest enemies? In this paper I will show that the purpose of the book of Nahum is more than reveling in the prophesied destruction of one of Judah's enemies. I will show that Nah 2:1² is a prophetic call to repentance to apostate Judah and the scenes of destruction are included to show the consequences if the call is not heeded. I will further show that the author uses Nineveh as an example not because of nationalistic anger but to encourage Judah to repent and to show that Nineveh has an opportunity to escape destruction as well.

Historical Context

The purpose of the book of Nahum and why the destruction of Nineveh plays such a prominent part becomes more clear in light of the historical context of the book's composition. The text itself is scant on evidence of the historical context. The book does not refer to other texts or to any other individuals. The author identifies himself in the prologue in the first verse, but no other information about him is given by the text or other sources except

1. Duane L. Christensen, "Nahum," *HBC*, 737–38.

2. In most modern English versions of the Bible, this verse is Nah 1:15. I refer to it here and throughout this article as it appears in the Hebrew Bible, as Nah 2:1.

his place of residence, Elkosh, whose ancient location is not known. The lack of detail found in the text itself or in external sources makes determining the geographical or precise cultural setting of Nahum very difficult.

The text does give some clues to the temporal setting of the book's creation. The author makes specific reference to the Kingdom of Judah, suggesting that Nahum was a prophet of the southern kingdom. Nah 3:8 refers to the destruction of Thebes in Egypt conducted by the Assyrians, meaning the text must have been created after 663 B.C.E.³ The Assyrian capital was destroyed in 612 B.C.E. by Babylonian, Scythian, and Median forces. Taking both events into account,⁴ the window for the creation of the text spans fifty-one years, from 663 to 612 B.C.E.⁵ Some scholars have attempted to further narrow the range, citing two factors: (1) Nahum's relatively scarce mention of the sins of Judah implies the text may have come forth during the reforms of Josiah⁶ and (2) the hope for Nineveh's destruction may have been spurred by the rising threat against the Assyrians posed by Cyaxares of Medes or Nabopolassar of Babylonia. Such assertions are merely possibilities,⁷ but even the larger range gives us an idea of the relationship between Assyria and Judah at the time of the book's creation.

The relationship was not a friendly one. The Neo-Assyrian Empire ruled over much of the ancient Near East from 950 to 612 B.C.E. Their dominance extended into Israel during the eighth century. Tiglath-pileser III overran Gaza in 734 and exacted tribute from Israel and Judah.⁸ A few years later Shalmanaser V conquered the Northern Kingdom. The Assyrian kings deported tens of thousands of upper-class Israelites and moved foreigners into Israel according to typical Assyrian deportation practice.⁹ Sennacherib did the same during his campaign in Judah that is most famous for his unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem in 701, devastating the kingdom of Judah and its people.¹⁰ Sennacherib was also responsible for moving the capital of Assyria to Nineveh, which became a large and rich city.¹¹ The book of Nahum was produced during an era when Judahites lived in the shadow of the Assyrian empire and

3. Paul L. Redditt, "The Book of Nahum," *MDB*, 601–2.

4. See Christensen, "Nahum," 52–56. Christensen gives a detailed discussion of the various views on the dating of Nahum, the vast majority of which agree that the prophecy was indeed before 612, with a few dissenters.

5. Ralph Smith, "Nahum," *WBC* 32, 61–90.

6. Kent Harold Richards, "Nahum," in Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 1249.

7. Christensen, "Nahum," 737–38.

8. Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "The Book of Nahum," *NIB*, 438–41.

9. Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East* (2 vols.; London: Routledge, 1995), 2:469.

10. Garcia-Treto, "The Book of Nahum," 438.

11. *Ibid.*

undoubtedly viewed all Assyrians, including the residents of Nineveh, as enemies. It is this antagonistic relationship that has fueled the idea that the description of Nineveh's destruction was no more than a manifestation of the Judahites' desire for vengeance, but the literary context of the book of Nahum illuminates a different possibility.

Literary Context

The book of Nahum is part of the grouping of Minor Prophets in the MT of the Tanak, the seventh of the twelve.¹² These prophets generally wrote in later years during the divided monarchy or after the fall of Israel. While the texts are separate entities, looking at the group of the Prophets as a whole reveals common themes and additional perspective, particularly when people, locations, or cities appear in more than one text. Richards asserts that a book such as Nahum must be read "among his contemporaries, such as Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah, to hear the interplay between God's judgment and salvation and the strong word of assurance in Nahum that the Lord will prevail against evil."¹³

Assyria and its capital Nineveh play a major part in the book of Jonah, the fifth of the Twelve Prophets. An exhaustive report on the authorship and dating of Jonah is not possible here, but use of the resources available gives some context for the book and its relationship to Nahum. A prophet named Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kgs 14:25, in which he prophesies in the court of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel.¹⁴ The book of Jonah appears to fit into the time period of 2 Kings and contains pro-Israel, anti-Assyrian tendencies, which would fit with the nature of the prophet in Jeroboam's court.¹⁵ King Jeroboam's reign is dated from 793 to 753 B.C.E., so if we accept a literal dating in which the Jonah mentioned in Kings was the narrator and writer, the book of Jonah was written well before and would probably have been known to the author of Nahum. However, the book itself is not datable within a large boundary (ca. 750–250 B.C.E.), and any theories are merely possible and not probable.¹⁶

Whatever the historical relationship and chronological order of the two texts, their canonization in such close proximity within the Twelve Prophets suggests a relation in canonical tradition. In Jonah, we find that Yahweh is not reveling in the potential destruction of Nineveh, but rather is actively seeking to convert the people of the Assyrian city by dispatching a prophet there.

12. See Harold W. Attridge, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, xxxi.

13. Richards, "Nahum," 1250.

14. Ralph Smith, "Hosea–Jonah," WBC 31, 431.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 432.

Yahweh goes to great lengths to persuade the reluctant Jonah to accept his mission, even utilizing a storm and a great fish to foil Jonah's attempts to escape. When Jonah is exceedingly displeased that his missionary success prevented the destruction of Nineveh, Yahweh rebukes him, asking why Nineveh and its inhabitants should not be spared (Jonah 4:11).

What happens in Jonah does not prove anything about Nahum. It is possible that two closely related texts would cast opposing depictions of Yahweh's attitude towards Nineveh and its inhabitants. In Jonah, Yahweh desires to prevent the destruction of Nineveh by working to cause them to repent. This proves that it was *possible* for prophetic literature to portray Nineveh in a positive light. This opens up the possibility that the prophesied destruction of Nineveh in Nahum serves a different purpose than simply rejoicing in the destruction of Judah's enemies.

The Purpose of Nahum

Nahum's purpose in creating his text has proven elusive, but it is possible to return to Nahum's historical context to shed further light on the question. Judah was unstable in the mid- to late seventh century, having endured a steady pattern of decline since the fall of the united monarchy several hundred years earlier. Three kings ruled during the fifty-one-year window mentioned above. Manasseh ruled from 696 to 642. During his reign Judah was constantly involved in wars either as a participant or as an unwilling spectator of Assyrian and Egyptian armies traveling through the Levant.¹⁷ The worship of gods other than Yahweh was prevalent, with Manasseh himself credited for the institution of necromancy, human sacrifice, altars to foreign deities, and an astral cult in the temple itself.¹⁸ The reign of Aman was short, spanning only two years, from 642 to 640. Josiah ruled from 640 to 609. During the reign of Josiah, significant reforms in the temple and the country as a whole were carried out.¹⁹ The exact date of the creation of the book of Nahum and specifically whether it came during the reign of Manasseh or Josiah would indicate very

17. Siegfried H. Horn and P. Kyle McCarter Jr., "The Divided Monarchy: The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel" in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (ed. Hershel Shanks; Boston: Prentice Hall, 2010), 194–95.

18. *Ibid.*, 192–96.

19. *Ibid.*, 196–98. Some (see Margaret Barker, "What did Josiah reform?" in *He unfurrowed his brow and laughed: Essays in honour of Professor Nicolas Wyatt* [AOAT 299; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007], 11–33) contend that these reforms were a departure from the religious practices of the early patriarchs, which were replaced by a new religious code, that which was supported by the Deuteronomist. No matter what the exact nature of the reforms, it is clear during this time period that powerful segments of Judahite society sought to abolish the use of idols and worship of any deity that was not Yahweh.

different cultural and political settings which the available evidence does not reveal. However, no matter which king was in power during his writing, it is clear from the record in Kings and Chronicles that the issue of idolatry was a significant one and that prophets actively condemned idolatrous practices. Nahum's writings opposed the idolatry occurring in Israel (Nahum's condemnation of idolatry will be shown in the textual analysis section of this paper). If Nahum had written during the reign of Manasseh, he would have viewed the polytheistic and idolatrous practices taking place in the country negatively and sought to convince the people of Judah to oppose the royal cult and worship Yahweh alone. If Nahum had written during the period of reform under Josiah, his intent would have been the same, seeking to reinforce the reforms of the time by supporting the monotheistic worship of Yahweh according to the principles of Deuteronomistic law.

Difficulty in determining the genre and structure of Nahum has contributed significantly to the challenge in discerning its purpose. Christensen states simply, "The question of the literary genre of Nahum remains unresolved."²⁰ He also states "there is no scholarly consensus in regard to the literary structure."²¹ I will show that Nah 2:1 contains a distinct invitation to repent. Acknowledging this invitation as the critical point of the text will show that the rest of the text, including the scenes of destruction, is structured to support the invitation and persuade the audience to accept it.

Textual Analysis of Nah 2:1 and Surrounding Material

הנה על ההרים רגלי מבשר משמיע שלום חגי יהודה חגיך
 שלמי נדריך כי לא יוסיף עוד לעבור—בך בליעל כלה נכרת

*Look! On the mountains! The feet of one who bears news, who causes peace to be heard. Judah, go on a pilgrimage to your feast. Complete your vow, for it will not pass over you again. The man of ruin has been cut off.*²²

In the first chapter of Nahum, the author reminds the audience of the power and nature of Yahweh. Nah 1:2–13 contains declarations of Yahweh's eschatological and destructive power. He includes descriptions of Yahweh's retribution against his enemies both typical and specific. Nah 1:14 is addressed to an enemy that Yahweh is capable of destroying. The author states that Yahweh will "command that your name not be sown" and "make your grave, for you

20. Christensen, "Nahum," 40–41. Christensen lists a number of diverse possibilities advanced by scholars, including a prophetic refutation speech, a festal liturgy, a propagandistic tract, a song of triumph, and a letter.

21. *Ibid.*, 41–52.

22. All translations from Hebrew are the author's.

are nothing.” The next statement is given on Yahweh’s behalf and provides the reason for the destruction: “I will cut off idol and image from the house of your gods.” The word פסל, used here as idol, and the word מסכה, used here as graven image, are clear references to the idolatry to which the author is opposed.²³ It is possible that the enemy referred to in Nah 1:14 is Nineveh, but if Nah 2:1 is viewed as a prophetic call to repentance to apostate Judah, then the enemy referred to could be Judah as well.

The call to repentance in this verse is made up of three imperative verbs. The first is הנה (Look!). The author directs the audience’s attention to the mountains, where a messenger is coming משמיע שלום (who causes peace to be heard). This indication of peace is the signal that the enemy can avoid the violence and destruction of Yahweh and instead hear מבושר (good news) and have peace instead of destruction. The next two imperatives deal with how to avoid destruction and gain peace and are the strongest evidence that Judah is at least in part the target of this and the previous verse. They are told to חגיגו (go on a pilgrimage to your feast). They are then told to שלמי נדריך (complete your vow). These two invitations contain clear covenant imagery in references to sacral feasts and the promises between Yahweh and Judah. The imperative שלמי (complete) indicates that such a covenant relationship has existed before and can again. This is the invitation to repent with the stipulation that this is the last opportunity, made clear with the addition of לעבור בך (it will not pass over you again). The clause at the end of the verse is ambiguous; it could be referring to the king of Assyria, another enemy of Judah, or something else altogether.²⁴ It suggests both that the enemies of the repentant party will be repressed, immediately promising blessings to the beleaguered Judahites who repent, and that any who do not repent will remain בליעל (worthless, wicked) and will be cut off or destroyed.

23. פסל is the very word used to ban idolatry in the 23 commandments in Exodus 20. It is also used in 2 Kgs 21:7 and 2 Chr 33:7 to describe the sins of Manasseh. Likewise מסכה is the word in Exodus 32 that describes the golden calf built by the Israelites while Moses was on Sinai. It is also used in Lev 19:4 to reiterate the ban, in Num 33:52 to describe the idols of the Canaanites that the Israelites are commanded to destroy, in 1 Kgs 14:9, 2 Kgs 17:16, 2 Chr 28:2, Hos 13:2, and Hab 2:18 to describe apostate idol worship among the Israelites, and in 2 Chr 34: 3, 4 for the idols that were destroyed by Josiah.

24. George Wigram, *The New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 230. The concordance gives in Deut 13:13 *naughty*, in 15:9 *wicked*. Sixteen appearances from Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are not translated and are left as *Belial*, and in Pro 6:12 *naughty*, 16:27 *ungodly*, 19:28 *ungodly*. Whatever the word’s exact denotation, it appears twenty-seven times in the Hebrew Bible, emphasizing ungodliness, unrighteousness, and those not observant of the law, and the connotation is clearly negative.

Nah 2:2–3:19 comprises the final section of the book, a graphic description of coming destruction. In Nah 2:2–3 the consequences of the failure to repent are made clear by the introduction of an approaching enemy host. The next stanza, *שב יהוה את-גאון יעקב כגאון ישראל* (as Yahweh returned the exaltation of Jacob, so as the exaltation of Israel) would be out of context if Nineveh is the only intended audience of the passage. It is inserted here to show the Judahites that it is not too late to repent. Yahweh is willing to save them even when their enemies are at the door. This is followed by an interesting construction consisting of a verb and a subject of the same root. Possible meanings of the root *בקק* include “to lay waste,” “devastate,” or “empty.” A similar repetition of the verbal root appears in Isa 24:3, *תבוך הבוך הארץ* (the land shall be utterly emptied). The interesting alliterative effect caused by the repetition of sounds fits in the poetic form of the passage. Sweeney has argued that the verb root can also mean to depopulate, recalling the Assyrian practice of deporting native populations,²⁵ which had occurred in Israel some years earlier. The most likely translation would communicate a desolation or emptiness or devastation to a particular land, reinforced by the nominative accusative, “they will destroy the land (to) destruction.” The unclear subject here is significant: this clause has dual meaning. Both the advancing armies and the forces of God lay ready to utterly destroy their enemies. If Judah repents, the hosts of God will destroy their enemies, preserving their lives. If they do not, it is their enemies who will destroy to emptiness. The imagery of depopulation would have been significant to Judahites, as the memory of the deportation of Israel would have been fresh in their minds.

All three chapters contain vivid descriptions of the death and destruction that await the apostate city that does not repent. As noted above, this imagery is partially referring to the destruction of Nineveh, but also can be viewed as incentive for the Judahites to repentance in order to avoid the described destruction. Viewed in this light, the destruction is included for a purpose other than simple nationalistic anger.

Intended Audience

Nahum never explicitly states who his intended audience is. In the superscription Nineveh is identified as the subject of the prophecy. Nah 2:9 and 3:7 contain direct references to the city by name, and Nah 3:18 speaks directly to

25. Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets (Vol. 2): Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry)*, ed. David W. Cotter; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 437.

מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר (the king of Assyria). These references confirm that the destruction prophesied in the text takes place in Nineveh.

However, the references to sacred feasts and the exaltation of Israel noted above indicate that the text was intended for the people of Judah. The mention of pilgrimage and feasts in the call to repentance are particularly illuminating. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkoth were important holiday feasts for all of Israel and played a role in the proper observance of Israelite religion, especially when compared with the idolatry and worship of other gods mentioned in the passage. Additionally, Judahites and Israelites would have been expected to go to Jerusalem and present themselves at the temple for these feasts, a fact alluded to by the instruction to go on a pilgrimage.²⁶ The reference to the exaltation of Israel makes it clear that Nahum was also speaking to Jacob's descendants, the inhabitants of Judah.

The evidence shows that Nahum was using a double meaning in this prophecy. The author was describing the situation of Nineveh, an apostate and idolatrous city. He described the approaching destruction and showed that the only way to avoid it was by repenting and worshipping Yahweh correctly. Nahum used Nineveh as an example, but in reality his call to repentance was directed at Judah. Using the destruction of one city or people as a warning to another is not unique; Micah uses the same approach in his "announcement of punishment against Samaria and Israel, which stands as a paradigm for the judgment that will also come upon Jerusalem and Judah."²⁷ In this text Nahum uses the Assyrian city as an example of the fate that could befall Judah and calls Judah to repentance as the only way to avoid such a fate.

A Last Chance for Nineveh

Perhaps most interesting here is the possibility that Nahum is calling repentance not only to Judah but to Nineveh as well. That the text was intended for Judah has been established, but the varied usages of second person forms throughout Nahum opens up the possibility of who the intended audience is. In some sections of the text, the author is clearly speaking directly to Assyria or Assyria's king and uses masculine singular forms.²⁸ But three masculine singular forms are also used in Nah 1:14, which we have seen is directed to Judah. Feminine forms appear throughout the text and are used to refer to Nineveh in the sections describing the coming destruction.²⁹ But feminine forms are also

26. *Ibid.*, 434.

27. *Ibid.*, 347.

28. See Nah 3:18–19.

29. See Nah 2:2 (three feminine singular pronouns), 2:14 (four feminine singular pronouns), 3:5, (five feminine singular pronouns), 3:6 (three feminine singular pronouns), and

used to refer to Judah.³⁰ Nahum intentionally alternates his usage of second person forms so as not to prevent the vital sections of the text from excluding either Judah or Nineveh. Instead, both peoples are rebuked for their sins and called to repentance. Nahum intentionally does not clarify his audience in order to give Nineveh, too, a chance to repent and avoid destruction, as it did in the days of the prophet Jonah.

The choice of Nineveh as the city of prophecy was not accidental but rather served two purposes. First, Nahum stressed that no one, not even the powerful Assyrians, were immune to the justice of Yahweh. Second, Nahum was able to extend the call to repentance to both the Judahites and the Ninevites.

Conclusion

The powerful imagery of violence, death, and destruction in Nahum serves a clear purpose. The author sought to invite the people of Judah to cease their worship of idols and other practices that he indicated were inappropriate. He included the material in question to motivate the audience to accept the call by showing the consequences of inaction. Nineveh is the subject of the prophecy, but the evidence makes it clear that Nahum did not single out the Assyrian capital because of nationalistic anger but rather to strengthen the power of his call. It is also possible that Nineveh was a part of the intended audience, including the opportunity to repent and escape destruction.

3:7 (three feminine singular pronouns).

30. See Nah 2:1 (five masculine forms).