

The Message of Nahum for Today

Justin Richardson

I recently had a conversation with a church friend about a class paper on Nahum I was working on. As the conversation progressed, the friend interrupted, “Wait, I know I should know this. Is Nahum a book of the Bible?” Such a sentiment might characterise more of us than we would care to admit. If asked to turn to Nahum, we might first consult the table of contents.

As Christians, hearers and doers of God’s word, our task when reading Nahum is to hear what the book says in its Old Testament context and to consider how it connects with the New Testament as a mutual witness to Christ and God’s redemptive plan. We ask as we read, “How does Nahum witness to Christ?” Along with that, we might ask, “What does a fresh reading of Nahum reveal in our current situation?”

Nahum is a message of hope for God’s people in every age. In fact, Nahum means “comfort.” Who else but the Lord can offer comfort in every circumstance? Nahum’s prophecy proclaims judgment on Israel’s oppressors. His focus is on Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (1:1). The prophecy is set in the seventh century BC, sometime after the destruction of Thebes in 664 BC and before the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC (3:8). In the eyes of Israel and the surrounding nations, Assyria might be considered an omnipotent human foe (3:19). The Lord had raised up Assyria for a time as a rod of judgment against Israel, yet Assyria overstepped its bounds (Isa. 10:5-19; 2 Kings 18-19). Nahum’s message gives hope to God’s people that their enemy will ultimately fall.

Nahum’s prophecy opens with a hymn depicting God as a divine warrior who judges and saves His people (1:2-2:2). In Scripture, divine-warrior imagery portrays the Lord engaged in warfare, using cosmic and creation terminology. Nahum first depicts the Lord’s character as a God who is jealous, avenging, and wrathful.

He takes vengeance on His adversaries and reserves wrath for His enemies. The Lord is also patient, powerful, and just (1:3). This is good news for God's people. The cosmic terminology at the end of verse 3 demonstrates the Lord's sovereignty over His creation. All creation belongs to Him and obeys His voice (1:4-5). Creation is no match for the Lord. Neither is Assyria, the once-omnipotent human foe. Who can stand before the Lord's indignation?

Assyria is further depicted as plotting against the Lord. Although Assyria is at full battle strength, the Lord will make a complete end of them. The Lord will break the Assyrian yoke from the neck of His people and cut off Assyria and her idols. The destruction of Nineveh is comforting news for Judah (1:15; 2:13; 3:19). The contrast between kingdoms is clear in Nahum. The Lord will make a complete end of Nineveh, but He knows those who take refuge in Him (1:7-8). The Lord will restore His people (2:2).

Nahum 2:3-13 offers us a prophetic vision of Nineveh's demise. The scene is rendered with vivid battle imagery, featuring chariots, spears, warriors, and plunder. Assyria is pictured in desolation, taunted by the Lord with images of her former success. Assyria once delighted in portraying herself as a lion, safe in its den, devouring its prey. In similar imagery, the fearful words of 2:13 are proclaimed against Assyria: "Behold, I am against thee, saith the LORD of hosts." The lion is no longer safe.

Nahum 3 is a woe-oracle accompanied by taunts against Nineveh. Woe oracles typically announce judgment on nations and sometimes even on Israel. Nineveh, the bloody city, is depicted again in battle tumult, with galloping horses and chariots, spears and swords, and hosts of the slain (3:1-3).

Nineveh is further mocked as a whore. She is portrayed as a prostitute, alluring the nations with her charms and whorings. In stark imagery, the Lord's opposition will see her embarrassed before the nations, despised with no one to comfort her (3:4-7). Once powerful Nineveh is compared with Thebes. Although Thebes enjoyed the support of the surrounding nations, she too came to ruin and exile. From the smallest to the greatest city, Nineveh will be among those who meet the same doom. She is compared to a shaken fig tree. Her troops are derided as feminine, and all her powers are diminished (3:10-14). Like an army of locusts, they are here today and gone tomorrow (3:15-

17). In the end, Nineveh's downfall is applauded (3:18-19).

Jesus in the Field of Divine Warfare

Nahum has focused our attention on the depiction of God as a divine warrior. As such, He fights for His people, subduing all His foes. Nahum's message brought hope and comfort to his original audience. We see this same divine-warrior language used frequently of Jesus in the New Testament. The New Testament adopts and redirects this language, presenting Jesus's life, death, and resurrection as His field of divine warfare. Jesus carries on His warfare under the banner of the cross, where He fights our greatest enemies, sin and death.

The gospels are replete with images of Jesus as the divine warrior.

- John the Baptist's proclamation, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight", evokes Jesus's victory march with His train of captives (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4).
- The baptism of fire attendant upon His coming is also an image of divine warfare (Matt. 3:11-12).
- Jesus controls the elements; He commands the wind and waves (Matt. 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25).
- He treads upon the mountains and walks upon the sea (Matt. 14:22-33; 17:1-9; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21).
- Jesus is the divine warrior who rides upon the clouds (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27).
- The book of Acts illustrates the spread of the divine warrior's kingdom throughout the nations through the preaching of His gospel by His servants sent on His authority (Acts 1:6-11; 28:28-31).
- Jesus holds preeminence and makes peace by His own blood (Col. 1:15-20).

The Christian in the Field of Struggle and Warfare

Paul portrays the Christian life as a struggle and warfare in which we are to put on the full armour of God (Eph. 6:10-20; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11). Revelation rounds out this portrayal with its depiction of Jesus as the Lamb of God who conquers, judges, and wages war (Rev. 17:14; 19:11). Triumphant, He leads His people in a new song (Rev. 5:9; 14:3).

The Christian life is lived in the way of Christ's victory, but this does

not mean we do not face temporal griefs and trials. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our current social and economic climate may be a source of anxiety. Rest assured that these momentary afflictions are not beyond the reach of Jesus's mighty hand.

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