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## NAHUM IN THE PULPIT

Greg Cook\*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Westminster Larger Catechism asks, “How is the word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?” (WLC Q.159). The answer charges ministers to make “known the whole counsel of God.” The elders of the church bear the responsibility to teach the entire Bible to their congregants. With 1,189 chapters in Scripture, this task proves daunting, yet possible. Modern audiobooks demonstrate that the Bible may be read out loud in about seventy hours. A church member whose “delight is in the law of the LORD” (Ps. 1:2) should be able to gain a familiarity with all sixty-six books through careful study.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, few of us can truthfully claim Paul’s words: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” (Acts 20:20).

Except for the book of Jonah, many churches rarely venture into the Minor Prophets—for numerous reasons. These books contain passages that are often difficult to make sense of, let alone develop application points from for contemporary audiences. The poetic sections of the Minor Prophets complicate this due to the terse, figurative language. The Oracle against the Nations texts require preaching God’s judgment while contextualizing passages about ancient, unfamiliar peoples for modern audiences. The Minor Prophets demand patience, study, and discipline to “rightly [handle] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

The book of Nahum combines difficult language, dense poetry, and judgment against a deceased empire. For these reasons, it ranks as one of the least preached books in the church. Nahum’s neglect began early in church history. In the first Christian writings “the book is cited infrequently: by Tertullian (twice), Clement of Alexandria (once),

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Eusebius (eight times), Epiphanius (ca. 315–403; five times), Cyril (twice), Hippolytus Romanus (ca. 170–ca. 236; twice), Melito of Sardis (once), and John Chrysostom (twice).<sup>2</sup> Church liturgies also demonstrate inattention to Nahum. For example, no church lectionaries include a reading from Nahum and the hymn “God Moves in Mysterious Ways” is the only hymn that cites its text.<sup>3</sup> Anecdotal evidence also suggests that Nahum rarely appears in Sunday sermons. One biblical scholar who objects to the book states, “No wonder, then, that these biblical passages are seldom used for preaching and teaching.”<sup>4</sup> It is understandable that those who view Nahum as immoral would not use it in worship services. Unfortunately, “those of us who have no doubts about the place of Nahum in Holy Scripture would probably have to admit that we have rarely, if ever, preached from the book of Nahum.”<sup>5</sup> Few biblical books, if any, have received less attention.

This article does not seek to minimize the difficulties of the book; rather, it addresses three ways that biblical scholarship has exacerbated the disregard of Nahum. Namely, this article proposes that biblical scholarship has misinterpreted the book regarding its main theme, the recipients of violence, and its relationship with Jonah. These errors perpetuate the idea that Nahum is irrelevant to the church, and have therefore hindered the preaching of this text.

### A GENERIC THEME?

Nahum presents numerous difficulties, and a minister seeking to teach the book would naturally turn to commentaries for help. Unfortunately, these commentaries—conservative and liberal—teach three doctrines that discourage using Nahum in church. These three doctrines do not

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<sup>2</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Nahum: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 24F (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1986), 5. Interestingly, Aron Pinker notes that Jewish lectionaries also lack any reading from Nahum. “Nahum’s Theological Perspectives,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (July 2004): 148. Similarly, James D. Nogalski says that “Nahum is not a prominent figure in rabbinic tradition.” *The Book of the Twelve: Micah—Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA.: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 601.

<sup>4</sup> Judith E. Sanderson, “Nahum,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Bridger, *The Message of Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 87.

stand up under careful scrutiny, however, as we shall see. We shall also look at why they contribute to Nahum's neglect, and how the text of Nahum refutes them.

Commentaries usually assert that Nahum has only one theme—God will judge wicked nations. For instance, Walter Maier opens his 385-page commentary by saying, "A single theme pervades Nahum's prophecies: Nineveh the haughty capital of the Assyrian Empire will be destroyed."<sup>6</sup> Another conservative commentary is more explicit: "The book of Nahum runs the risk of being monotonous because of the singularity of the author's purpose and theme. He is intent on saying only one thing: Nineveh shall fall. But the variety of methods which he employs in saying this one thing are quite remarkable and lend great force to his message."<sup>7</sup> Numerous scholarly works make similar claims.<sup>8</sup> These statements leave a preacher with only one application from the entire prophecy—an application that is general, well-known, and present in almost every biblical book. Therefore, a minister who considers preaching through Nahum may conclude that his labor will only result in redundant sermons.

Nahum does teach that God will judge wicked nations, but this general idea misses the specific point of this prophecy. God's vengeance against Assyria comes because the empire seduced God's people away from him. Indications of this appear as soon as the text begins. After the introductory verse, Nahum declares, "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" (1:2). Of particular note is that the first two Hebrew words in this verse are אֱלֹהִים זָלוּ ( "God is jealous").<sup>9</sup> This clause appears six other times in the Old Testament (Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Josh. 24:19). In each of

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 13. Citations are to the Baker edition.

<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 26.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary*, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 21; Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2*, *Forms of the Old Testament Literature 22* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4; Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Conquest Metaphors," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 633 (January 2002): 22; David J. Clark and Howard A. Hatton, *A Translator's Handbook on The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, *Helps for Translators* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1.

<sup>9</sup> My translation.

these passages, God either initiates or renews a covenant with Israel. In each of these passages, God warns his people against worshipping other gods. In each of these passages, God promises wrath should his people commit spiritual adultery. Nahum's original audience—knowing their language and history more intricately than modern Christians do—would likely have recognized the allusion. The conspicuous placement of this allusion at the beginning of the book puts the words that follow in the context of Israel's and Judah's covenant infidelity.

After the beginning statement of God's covenant jealousy, Nahum 1:2 continues by making the most emphatic statement of God's vengeance in the Bible. The verse does this by means of a rare threefold exclamation. In Hebrew, the doubling of a word indicates emphasis. When Hebrew triples a word, phrase, or clause, it connotes extreme emphasis (for example, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" [Isa. 6:3]). In the case of Nahum 1:2, the Hebrew words נקם יהוה ("the LORD avenges") occur three times—in rapid succession—in order to identify vengeance as a central theme of the book.<sup>10</sup>

In between the second and third occurrences of נקם יהוה in Nahum 1:2, the prophet inserted another phrase that identifies the covenantal nature of the book. Nahum names God using the Hebrew title ובעל המה. Besides occurring as the name for the god "Baal," the word בעל may mean "owner," "lord," or "husband." The word המה means "of wrath." The phrase identifies God's sovereign right to execute judgment, but it implies the right of an offended husband. In Nahum, the LORD avenges because he is "a husband of wrath."<sup>11</sup>

Those familiar with the prophets know that such language usually accompanies God's judgment against Israel or Judah. For example, the theme of Israel's spiritual adultery spans the book of Hosea. In Nahum, however, it quickly becomes apparent that God's covenant anger comes against Assyria, not Judah. As one commentator noted, "Uniquely here, Yahweh punishes the promiscuity of one with whom he is not in covenant/marriage relationship."<sup>12</sup> How does God's jealous, covenant love relate to the Assyrian Empire? Why would Nahum begin a book about Nineveh by using the language of a spiritual marriage covenant? While books such as Hosea and Ezekiel chastise Israel and Judah for spiritual adultery, Nahum turns God's covenant vengeance against those who spiritually seduced his beloved.

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<sup>10</sup> My translation.

<sup>11</sup> My translation.

<sup>12</sup> Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum*, 2nd. ed., Readings—A New Biblical Commentary (London: Sheffield Academic, 2009), 63.

God's jealousy arises out of his love. The Bible says that God punishes his people when they stray from him. He also punishes those who vie for the affections of his people, for "love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave" (Song 8:6). Such "jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge" (Prov. 6:34). Once God has addressed the adulterous heart of his people, he will "pursue . . . into darkness" (Nah. 1:8) those who seduced and prostituted his people. Nahum 1:12b–13 confirms that God has found Judah guilty of infidelity, yet the judgments of Nahum concern those who compelled this unfaithfulness: "Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart." God's judgment against Nineveh accomplishes the liberation of his beloved.

The Assyrian Empire had existed for over a millennium before Nahum's time. Through most of this history, Assyria did not trouble Israel. Then God raised up Assyria to chastise Israel. Moses had told God's people that if they broke the covenant, God would "scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known" (Deut. 28:64). Israel did break God's covenant and the curses of Deuteronomy 28 did come upon them. The fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28:64, however, required an instrument capable of scattering Israel. For this purpose, God raised up the Assyrian Empire.<sup>13</sup> In 722 BC,

the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods. (2 Kings 17:5–7)

Prior to 722, God had prepared Assyria to accomplish this task.

Texts like Isaiah 7:17 and 10:5 confirm that God commissioned Assyria to "afflict" (Nah. 1:12) Judah. Assyria, however, exceeded its commission by enslaving God's people to Assyrian gods. The statement in Nahum 1:13 that "I will break his yoke from off of you" alludes to this bondage. The yoke "metaphor is distinctly Assyrian; it occurs rarely in

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<sup>13</sup> This insight comes from chapter 6 of Bill Cooper's Kindle book, *The Authenticity of the Book of Jonah*, 2012.

the literature of other ancient Near Eastern nations.”<sup>14</sup> Assyrian kings routinely described conquered nations as under their yoke. Significantly, Assyrian inscriptions often describe conquered peoples as under the yoke of Asshur, the high war-god of Assyria. For instance,

Abdimilkutte, king of Sidon . . . threw off the yoke of the god Ashur, trusting the heaving sea (to protect him).<sup>15</sup>

[T]he rebellious inhabitants of Carchemish who (had sided) with him, I led away as prisoners and . . . imposed upon their (neck) the yoke of Ashur, my lord.<sup>16</sup>

I placed kings, governors, officials, (and) harbormasters over their lands, and I imposed the yoke of the god [Aššur], my lord, upon them.<sup>17</sup>

Judah had traded being God’s beloved people for the right to become Asshur’s draft animal.

Judah entered into its covenant with the Assyrian pantheon by its own volition. Second Kings tells the story:

Then Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem, and they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him. At that time Rezin the king of Syria recovered Elath for Syria and drove the men of Judah from Elath, and the Edomites came to Elath, where they dwell to this day. So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasures of the king’s house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him. The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin. When King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. And King Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details. (2 Kings 16:5–10)

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<sup>14</sup> Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 27.

<sup>15</sup> “Esarhaddon (680–669),” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 291.

<sup>16</sup> “Sargon II (721–705),” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 285.

<sup>17</sup> *Royal Inscriptions from the Neo-Assyrian Period* 4 060; brackets in the original.

Despite Isaiah's warnings against this alliance (Isa. 7:1–9), Judah subjugated itself to Assyria.

Assyria forced its vassals to sign treaties that included obeisance to the Assyrian king and gods. For example, the best known Assyrian vassal treaty begins, "[This is] the treaty which Esarhaddon, king of Assyria has established with you before the great gods of heaven and earth."<sup>18</sup> Though Judah initiated this covenant, Assyria exploited it. Nahum exposes this as spiritual prostitution. This explains the explicit sexual language in 3:4: "And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms" (Nah 3:4). Whereas the book of Hosea condemns God's covenant people for prostitution with false gods, Nahum condemns Assyria for prostituting God's covenant people to false gods.<sup>19</sup>

This evidence shows that Nahum condemned Assyria for specific crimes against God's honor, not general sins against humanity. The failure to address the covenantal nature of Nahum has caused the book to seem redundant rather than recognizing the unique contribution Nahum makes in the canon. Nahum tells the story of God's deliverance of his people from their bondage to demonic gods (Deut. 32:17). God comes down to break the physical and spiritual bondage his people willingly entered into but soon regretted. Nahum speaks of God's hatred of sin, his love for his people, the lengths he will go to deliver them, and his vengeance against those who besmirch his honor.

### VIOLENCE IN NAHUM

The second mistaken dogma of Nahum scholarship pertains to the violence in Nahum. Many scholarly works explicitly condemn the violent language in Nahum. Richard Nysse says that the book has long been "regarded as the worst example of self-serving, violent pronouncements."<sup>20</sup> David Garber writes, "one must wrestle with the image of God presented in the text. A jealous, powerful, and violent

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<sup>18</sup> "Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon," in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 535.

<sup>19</sup> For a more thorough explanation, see Gregory D. Cook, "Human Trafficking in Nahum," *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 37, no. 2 (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Richard W. Nysse, "Keeping Company with Nahum: Reading the Oracles against the Nations as Scripture," *Word and World* 15 (1995): 414.

deity is not one to whom many Christians wish to cling.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most insightful comment on this phenomenon comes from Julia O’Brien: “Nahum, according to these interpreters, is a violent, nationalistic book, one morally repugnant to modern persons. Its moral inferiority, however, does not mask its literary artistry. Nahum is a bad book written well.”<sup>22</sup>

Before addressing how those who condemn Nahum’s violence have misinterpreted the book, it is necessary to clarify that God deserves “praise” for “His glorious justice” (WCF 3.7). He has every right to punish sin in whatever way he deems just. All sin “deserveth his wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come” (WLC Q.152). I do not dispute this doctrine. The Bible contains many passages that are “morally repugnant to modern persons,” because modern persons “call evil good and good evil” and “put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20). Neither do I seek to re-read Nahum in order to do away with “a stumbling block” (1 Cor. 1:23) for modern culture. Instead I argue that scholars have read doctrines into Nahum that the text does not support. The goal is to let Nahum speak for itself.

Scholarly literature on Nahum has misunderstood the judgments of God in three ways. First, it usually does not differentiate between the violence that Nahum attributes to God and the violence that Nahum attributes to Assyria. Nahum contains graphic language, but three of the most violent passages describe atrocities committed by Assyria that God condemns. Nahum 2:12 says, “The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses; he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh.” Here a righteous judge condemns wanton violence.

The most violent passage in Nahum occurs in 3:1–3: “Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!” Again, the passage begins with God’s condemnation, as demonstrated by the declaration of “Woe.” Nahum 3:4 explains that the corpses described in this text result from Assyrian violence rather than God’s vengeance; they initiated from “the countless whorings of the

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<sup>21</sup> David G. Garber Jr., “Facing Traumatizing Texts: Reading Nahum’s Nationalistic Rage,” *Review and Expositor* 105, no. 2 (March 2008): 292.

<sup>22</sup> O’Brien, *Nahum*, 105.

prostitute.”<sup>23</sup> The Assyrian armies marched out to war, killing hundreds of thousands of people, in order to satisfy this harlot’s lust for conquest.

Another horrific description comes in 3:10, which recalls the babies of Thebes: “her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street.” The verse occurs in a passage (3:8–10) that compares Nineveh to Thebes. The prophet warned Nineveh that if even Thebes could be destroyed, Nineveh had no reason to expect peace and security. Nahum’s original audience knew that Assyria had committed the atrocities mentioned in 3:8–10 during the campaign of 663 BC.<sup>24</sup> Nahum does not exalt in these barbarities; it condemns Assyria for its war crimes.

Second, commentaries fail to recognize the limited focus of Nahum’s judgment. Nahum 1:2, 8 announce God’s intention to avenge himself on his enemies. Nahum 1:9–14 introduces these enemies using ambiguous pronouns. Since the English language does not differentiate between gender and number in the second person pronoun, an English reader has difficulty following the rapid shifts in this passage. To understand this, the following text of Nahum 1:9–14 includes the gender and number of pronouns when not evident in English.

What do you [masculine plural] plot against the LORD?  
 He will make a complete end;  
 trouble will not rise up a second time.  
 For they [masculine] are like entangled thorns,  
 like drunkards as they [masculine] drink;  
 they [masculine] are consumed like stubble fully dried.  
 From you [feminine singular] came one [masculine singular]  
 who plotted evil against the LORD,  
 a worthless counselor.

Thus says the LORD,  
 “Though they [masculine] are at full strength and many,  
 they [masculine] will be cut down and pass away.  
 Though I have afflicted you [feminine singular],

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<sup>23</sup> “That is, the dead bodies of verse 3 are the result of Assyria’s evil trickery of her foreign neighbors. . . . [T]here is a repetition in the Hebrew of ‘*kabod*,’ in 2:9, where it refers to Nineveh’s ‘heaps’ of treasure, and in 3:3, where it depicts the ‘heaps’ of corpses that she has caused” (Achtmeier, *Nahum*, 22–23).

<sup>24</sup> Conservative scholars usually date Nahum in the period between the fall of Thebes in 663 BC and the rapid decline of the Assyrian Empire that began in 627. This author prefers a date of 639 on the basis of textual clues in Nahum 1:12. Assyria’s destruction of Thebes would have been a recent and momentous event for Nahum’s first hearers.

I will afflict you [feminine singular] no more.  
 And now I will break his yoke from off you [feminine singular]  
 and will burst your [feminine singular] bonds apart.”

The LORD has given commandment about you [masculine singular]:  
 “No more shall your [masculine singular] name be perpetuated;  
 from the house of your [masculine singular] gods I will cut off  
 the carved image and the metal image.  
 I will make your (masculine singular) grave, for you [masculine singular] are  
 vile.”

A careful reading reveals that these enemies are (1) a group of males, (2) a single female, (3) a worthless counselor, and (4) a single male.

The punishment decreed for the group of males (1:9–10, 12) uses metaphors of incapacitation and withering. In Nahum 2:13, this group is compared to young lions that a “sword shall devour.” The single female receives much of the judgment in the book. In 2:7, she is “stripped” and “carried off.” Most of Nahum 3 describes God’s pursuit of her in order to destroy her power. The worthless counselor only appears in 1:11, 15; the latter verse declares him “utterly cut off.” The single male figure appears at various points of the book. The first mention of him in 1:13–14 pronounces him incapacitated. The book ends (3:18–19) with another description of his incapacitation and a prophecy of his certain doom (similar to 1:14). Throughout Nahum, this male figure does not act. He merely watches as his kingdom disintegrates. By paying attention to these passages, it becomes clear that God pursues these enemies, incapacitates them, and prophesies a future judgment.

In contrast to the judgment spoken against these ambiguous adversaries, the Assyrian people receive mercy at God’s hands. This aspect of Nahum has been either unnoticed or ignored by scholars. Most commentators assume that Nahum prophesied the annihilation of the Assyrian people. For instance, Kenneth Barker and Waylon Bailey write, “God himself decreed the destruction of Assyria. He would make their grave. The whole people would be killed and buried together because they were ‘vile.’”<sup>25</sup> Nahum contradicts this view.

Five verses in Nahum make explicit mention of Nineveh’s citizens. Nahum 2:7 describes “slave girls.” Nahum 3:13 mentions “people” (the ESV translates this word as “troops”). Then, Nahum 3:16–18 lists “merchants,” “princes,” “scribes,” “shepherds,” “nobles,” and “people.” Contrary to Barker and Bailey, Nahum gives no indication that these

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, New American Commentary 20 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 189.

people have been killed. The “slave girls” moan (2:7) and the “troops” may be afraid, but the other six people groups leave, sleep, or wander.

This point becomes clearer by comparing Nahum’s treatment of Assyrians to other biblical texts and standard Assyrian practice. In several passages in the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites to completely destroy a people. For instance, God commanded Saul to “go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Sam. 15:3). Nahum lacks such language.

Likewise, the Assyrian citizenry in Nahum receives better treatment than the people Assyria conquered. Assyrian annals differentiate degrees of victory by how many enemy soldiers died. When Ashurbanipal invaded Hirimme, he claimed “The inhabitants . . . I cut down with the sword. Not a soul escaped.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast, a more limited Assyrian victory results in less loss of life: “The overthrow of Tirhakah king of Ethiopia he had accomplished, and scattered his forces.”<sup>27</sup> The scattering of the forces serves as a euphemism for not being able to exterminate them.

In contrast to these biblical and Assyrian examples, the judgments in Nahum focus only on the ruling powers of Assyria. The judgment against common Assyrians is conspicuously absent. While Nahum does not portray common Assyrians as under God’s wrath, it does portray the citizens as unable or unwilling to obey their leaders. God’s intervention does not crush the Assyrians; it incapacitates the Assyrian rulers and separates the citizens from their overlords. While this is plain in the text, it has not been remarked upon in scholarly literature.

### JONAH VS. NAHUM

The third way that Nahum commentaries hamper the proclamation of the gospel from Nahum is by pitting the books of Jonah and Nahum against each other. These two books share a number of conspicuous similarities. They are both Minor Prophets. They stand together in the canon, separated only by Micah. Jonah contains forty-eight verses and Nahum has forty-seven. Both prophets prophesied against the same

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 134, accessed May 26, 2015, [http://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/ancient\\_records\\_assyria1.pdf](http://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/ancient_records_assyria1.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> George Smith, *History of Ashurbanipal, Translated from the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1871), 34, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/historyofassurba00smituoft#page/34/mode/2up>.

pagan city. Both books use the root for the other prophet's name. The root נחם occurs in Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2, where the ESV translates it "relent," "relented," and "relenting." The root נחנך appears in Nahum 2:8 (2:7 ESV) and the ESV translates the word "doves."<sup>28</sup> Jonah and Nahum both quote a portion of God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7.<sup>29</sup> Also, Jonah and Nahum are the only two biblical books that end with a question.<sup>30</sup> These similarities suggest interplay between the two books.

While scholars recognize these similarities, they interpret the books as giving contrasting pictures of God's character. Not all of the Nahum literature mentions the tension between the books, but this author has never found an argument against it. However, the belief that Jonah and Nahum display different aspects of God's character oversimplifies both books and does not survive a careful reading.

Peter Craigie's commentary on the Minor Prophets provides a typical example of this viewpoint: "There is little charity in Nahum's words, little love for the citizens of Nineveh or concern for their fate. In this sense, it contrasts sharply with the Book of Jonah, in which a quite different attitude towards Nineveh is expressed (and which may be read alongside Nahum as a counter-balance)."<sup>31</sup> It was demonstrated above that the "citizens of Nineveh" do not receive the brutal treatment in the book of Nahum that many scholars claim. This author proposes that Nahum shows concern for the fate of common Assyrians and that the theology of Nahum does not differ with the book of Jonah in this manner.

We begin our discussion of this by examining Jonah in its canonical and historical setting. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jeroboam II "restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai." Jeroboam II ruled from 786-746 BC. This gives an approximate date for Jonah's ministry that corresponds to

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<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew text differs with English versions in the verse numbers in Nahum 2. Nahum 1:15 in English Bibles is 2:1 in the Hebrew text. Nahum 2 maintains this one verse difference. Both texts agree on the verse numbering of Nahum 3.

<sup>29</sup> Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3.

<sup>30</sup> Francis T. Glasson, "The Final Question in Nahum and Jonah," *Expository Times* 81 (1969-1970): 54-55.

<sup>31</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 2:61. See also, Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols., Berith Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000-2001), 428; Robertson, *Nahum*, 56-57; Jason T. LeCureux, *The Thematic Unity of the Book of the Twelve*, Hebrew Bible Monographs (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 159.

a pivotal time in Assyrian history. During this time period, Assyria was failing.<sup>32</sup> Economic hardships, natural disasters, and rebellious vassals threatened to destroy the Empire. Then Tiglath-pileser III usurped the throne from Ashur-nirari V in 745, and began an eighteen-year reign of conquest and reorganization. In this brief time, the Assyrian Empire went from the verge of disintegration to the largest empire the world had ever known. Shortly after Tiglath-pileser's death, Assyria would obliterate the Northern Kingdom of Israel and fulfill the prophecy of Deuteronomy 28:64—God would scatter his people because of their rebellion. It appears from Scripture and history that Jonah's missionary journey revived the Assyrian Empire.

Just as the book of Jonah does not only pertain to God's mercy, Nahum does not only speak of judgment. Nahum's judgment against the rulers of Assyria brings deliverance to Assyrians as two previous prophecies had foretold. Isaiah had spoken of Assyria's redemption: "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance'" (Isa. 19:23–25). Nahum did not contradict Isaiah 19; he set the events of Isaiah 19 in motion. Similarly, Micah prophesied Assyria's liberation. In the prophecy about Christ coming from Bethlehem, Micah stated that God would raise up shepherds who would "shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword" (Mic. 5:6). This corresponds to Nahum 2:13: "Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth." The Good Shepherd kills the lions that devour the flock (1 Sam. 16:34–35). The judgment in Nahum is limited to the powers behind

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<sup>32</sup> A. K. Grayson notes, "A very clear trend towards decline was observed during the reign of Adad-nirari III and this decline reached its lowest point in the subsequent period, the reigns of Shalmaneser IV (782–773), Ashur-dan III (772–755), and Ashur-nirari V (754–745). The enemies and problems which beset Assyria were present earlier; only now these factors became more pronounced and serious. The sources for this era are few and sketchy but there is enough to grasp the general picture and to convince us that the very lack of sources is evidence of the troubles of the time." "Assyria: Ahur-Dan II to Ashur-Nirari V (934–745 B.C.)," in *The Prehistory of the Balkans; and the Middle East and the Aegean World, Tenth to Eighth Centuries B.C.*, ed. John Boardman et al., vol. 3, pt. 1, of *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. John Boardman, et al., 2nd. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 276.

Assyria. As Nahum ends, the citizens of Assyria are not destroyed; they are set free. In Nahum 3:16–18, the Assyrians no longer respond to these evil rulers. “You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust spreads its wings and flies away. Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold—when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they are. Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them.” God has shepherded the people of Assyria by destroying those who devoured them.

Seen from this perspective, the final question in Nahum agrees with the final question in Jonah. Both display God’s concern for Nineveh’s people. In Jonah, God asked, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jon. 4:11). Likewise, Nahum 3:19 expresses concern for all who have suffered under the brutal oppression of Assyrian rulers: “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 3:16–18 shows that all levels of Assyrian society have come out from under the evil regime; they no longer respond to their king’s desire. Assyrians too rejoice in what God has done.

## CONCLUSION

The book of Nahum deserves its place in the canon; “the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bear[s] witness by and with the word in our hearts” that it is Scripture (WCF 1.5). The historical church has upheld this view, yet the historical church has also allowed the book to remain in obscurity. Much of the reason for this lies in Nahum’s intricate language and distant context. Some passages of the Bible provide more challenges to the interpreter than others (2 Peter 3:16). God intended this. Still, every effort should be made to wrestle with difficult texts and reveal their riches. Unfortunately, in the case of Nahum, biblical scholarship has embraced interpretations of the book that have hindered this exploration.

Commentaries on Nahum usually limit Nahum to one main theme: God’s judgment against wicked nations. This interpretation fails to recognize the covenant language that begins Nahum. It therefore overgeneralizes the prophet’s message. Instead of merely providing another example of God’s vengeance against foreign nations, Nahum

declares God's vengeance against those who would seduce his beloved. God is an offended husband who will be avenged against his rivals.

While Nahum commentaries overgeneralize the vengeance in Nahum, they also fail to recognize the limited judgment in the book. Nahum targets specific enemies of God, yet the common Assyrians mentioned in the book escape this vengeance. Nahum prophesied open gates (2:6; 3:13) and broken bars (3:13). The common Assyrians respond by leaving (2:8; 3:16–18). Nahum teaches a targeted judgment and a wholesale liberation.

Because Nahum commentators teach a generic judgment against the whole population of Assyria, they have difficulty reconciling the message of Nahum with that of Jonah. This leads them to proclaim that the two prophets—alike in so many ways—actually function as literary foils within the Minor Prophets. Nahum and Jonah do not disagree about God's redemptive plan for Assyria; they agree with each other and they agree with Isaiah and Micah. Each of these four books proclaims judgment against Assyria for its atrocities. Each prophet also extends God's grace to Assyria's citizens. They prophesy that Assyrians will be among the "great multitude . . . from every nation . . . standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9), for "In that day they will come to you, from Assyria" (Mic. 7:12). In all four books, the condition of grace for Assyrians corresponds to the condition for any people: they must humble themselves before God, repent of their sin, and cling to him in faith.

The book of Nahum has much to say to the modern Church, but its treasures do not come easily. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught that "all the Prophets" (Luke 24:25, 27) proclaimed the gospel of Christ. A preacher willing to wrestle with Nahum will discover riches in its verses. "The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh" (Nah 1:1) merits a place in the canon, a place in the pulpit, and a place in the hearts of God's people. Do not let scholars convince you otherwise.