

THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

THE MINOR PROPHETS:

THE PROPHECY OF NAHUM

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In our time we hear a lot about God being a God of love. So much is this love of God emphasized that if you suggest that God is not only love, but also justice and wrath, you have people responding by saying: “*That’s not my God- -my God is loving.*”

I imagine that it would have been hard for Nahum as a preacher career-wise to have gotten a modern television broadcast to declare his message. In his message, we have a loving and merciful God revealed, but he primarily focuses on God’s wrath and judgment against sin. This was not a very popular revelation of God then, and it is certainly not now (even some Bible scholars frown at Nahum’s inspired message that seems to their sinful thinking to be imbalanced, and presents God in a vengeful light).

Yet it is how God reveals himself; God is love, but he also so much more, and Nahum helps us to understand more of God’s revealed character in his book. How does the Westminster Shorter Catechism help us to summarize God’s character in a balanced way?

What is the Shorter Catechism’s definition of the character of God? (1)

WSC 4 What is God? A. God is a Spirit, (1) infinite, (2) eternal, (3) and unchangeable, (4) in his being, (5) wisdom, (6) power, (7) holiness, (8) justice, goodness, and truth. (9) (1) John 4:24 (2) Job 11:7-9 (3) Ps. 90:2 (4) James 1:17 (5) Exod. 3:14 (6) Ps. 147:5 (7) Rev. 4:8 (8) Rev. 15:4 (9) Exod. 34:6,7

What is a key verse for interpreting Nahum’s prophecy? (2) Chapter 1, verse 3a:

ESV Nahum 1:3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

What is the summary of Nahum’s message? (3) (A) ***First Reading*** (How the first readers would have understood Nahum’s prophecy): Nineveh will fall (on the surface his prophecy doesn’t seem to lend itself to much practical application for our times- -but it is an imminently theologically practical book of inspired Scripture!). (B) ***Second Reading*** (Considering Nahum’s prophecy from the larger perspective of redemptive-history and more particularly in light of the coming of Christ): ***God is the Divine Warrior who judges evil.***

Not much is known about Nahum’s life. Nahum was a common name in the ancient Near East (even appearing in Dr. Luke’s genealogy, 3:25). The name Nahum means “consolation” or “comforter” (from *n-h-m* the Hebrew verb *comfort*; the pronunciation of his name may be “nah-hoom” rather than the traditional “Nae-hum”).

Nahum is like a similar name *Nehemiah* that means specifically “YHWH comforts”. Ironically, the prophet whose name is “comfort” was to bring great prophetic discomfort

to Nineveh and the nations who opposed God and rebelled against him. Nahum is from Elkosh (1:1), but this specific birthplace is unknown.

Nahum's call is not described in the book or in the Old Covenant, but his writings are described as prophetic oracles and visions:

ESV Nahum 1:1 An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

Nahum lived during the height of the powerful Assyrian Empire; Assyrian power extended from Egypt in the West to Elam in the East (possessing practically all of the known nations of the world at the time). Nineveh was the capital of Assyria at the time of his prophetic ministry.

Although Assyria was powerful, she was under the judgment of God, and her end was near. Nahum must have been a very brave soul because he prophetically preached, railing against Assyria at the height of her power (when he began his preaching there was no evidence that Assyria would be weakened and destroyed).

Despite all appearances of power and strength, this mighty nation will fall:

ESV Nahum 1:12 Thus says the LORD, "Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more.

What is the date of Nahum's prophetic oracles? (4) An approximate date of Nahum's ministry can be established because we know the date of the fall of Thebes the capital of Egypt to Assyria's Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C and Nahum prophesied after this redemptive-historical event (3:8-10). We also know that the date of the fall of Nineveh was in 612 B.C and Nahum prophesied the fall of Nineveh (2:13). *Nahum's prophetic-oracles were given during this time period of 663 – 612 B.C.*

What other prophets ministered in the same generation as Nahum? (5) Nahum prophesied within thirty years of the ministries of the prophets Habakkuk and Zephaniah (which we will look at in weeks to come). Nahum and these prophets also witnessed the despicable and sinful practices of King Manasseh of Judah (ca. 687-642 B.C. in the southern kingdom, although he reformed toward the end of his life); here is what most of their prophetic time period was like (see also 2 Kings 22:14-20):

ESV 2 Kings 21:10-15: And the LORD said by his servants the prophets, ¹¹ "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster¹ that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. ¹³ And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. ¹⁴ And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, ¹⁵ because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day."

The ministries of these three prophets essentially were focusing the believing (true) Israel to trust in God even in the midst of present exile because of sins and covenantal unfaithfulness against God (cf. 1:15). These three prophets sought to answer the people's question: **"Are we still the covenant people loved by God, or have we become *Lo-Ammi- Not My People?*"**

Nahum witnessed Assyria at the height of her power, and he prophesied and saw how quickly (about 150 years) she fell to ruins as an great, proud and prosperous empire of this present temporal world! The proud Assyria who had destroyed Thebes would become like her under God's sovereign judgment (3:8-10). Assyria who had exiled the northern kingdom of Israel and made Judah a satellite kingdom under her power, would be humbly defeated by the Babylonian Empire (with the help of the Medes).

The believing remnant of God's people could know that this did not mean that God's people had been forsaken. Remember, that after Israel's exile from the land, after being defeated by her enemies, the believing people wondered when God's kingdom would fully come and when all of the promises to Father Abraham concerning possession of the land would be realized (Gen. 15).

The future hope of the possession of the land was understood by the believing people of God (the remnant) to be the consummation of God's covenant promises and a restoration of the whole world, a new creation.

Nahum told the people to trust in God's sovereign purposes and take refuge in his goodness:

ESV Nahum 1:7 The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.

Nahum tells the people experiencing exile from the land that God knows those who are his own- -that is, those who believe (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19). As the New Testament authors teach:

ESV 2 Timothy 2:19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

ESV 2 Peter 2:9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials,¹ and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment...

Assyria may have been the means by which God disciplined His people (as part of God's sovereign decree), but this did not mean that the Assyrian Kingdom would be eternal and that the Assyrian Empire herself would *NOT* be humbled by God's wrath. God may use Israel's enemies as instruments of discipline, but that did not mean that they were safe from His wrath- -because God is a consuming fire (cf. Heb. 12:28-29) and unbelieving idolaters are never safe from God's displeasure.

Only God's Kingdom is eternal and unshakeable (Heb. 12:25-29). In contrast to Jonah's ministry to Nineveh to preach repentance, Nahum is sent to declare God's wrath for failure to repent!

How should we outline the Book of Nahum? (6)

1:1-2:2- God is both jealous and zealously faithful and will redeem His people.

2:3-13- Nineveh is overcome and her prideful pretensions mocked.

3:1-19- Judgment of God and completed destruction awaits Nineveh.

How is God revealed in Nahum's prophetic-oracles? (7) Nahum's Message is extremely Theocentric in this focus (God-centered). The prophecy of Nahum opens in chapter 1 with a detailed summary of God's character and nature, particularly God's Theophanic wrath against his adversaries and his love for those who put their trust in Him (1:1-8).

God is Just; God will bring every work into judgment whether it be good or evil. No man or woman should be presumptuous before God thinking them more righteous than they ought. All must plead to God for mercy and grace.

- God is a jealous God (1:2a); what does it mean that God is "jealous"?

God's anger is revealed as jealous and zeal. In God's jealousy for His people, he is angry with those who oppose them; in God's zeal he is covenantally committed to defend, love and protect those he calls his own.

Because God is jealous for his rule and reign over his creation, he will not tolerate rebellion and opposition to his sovereignty. This is why Nahum describes God in this way as jealous and zealous in 1:2-3, which is an echo of God's words in the Book of Exodus when God reveals Himself to Moses:

^{ESV} Exodus 34:6-7: 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, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands,¹ 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."

In the revelation of God's Law, God describes himself as a jealous God who will not tolerate idolatry (Exodus 20:5; His Name is revealed as Jealous קנא *Qanna*, Exo. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; Josh. 24:19).

God is impartial in his judgment upon sinners: "[God is He]...who will by no means clear the guilty" (1:3; Exodus 34:7) is language that Moses and Nahum use to describe those who are unfaithful to God and oppose him.

God is Judge; God's judgment brings retribution for sins against God. Retribution means simply "pay back". God gives punishing eternal wrath to those who richly have deserved and stored up for themselves wrath for the Day of Wrath. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 2, a hard-hearted and unrepentant person is storing up wrath for himself (a recompense or "pay back" from God):

ESV Romans 2:5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

- Nahum says that God as the Great Judge is revealed as an avenging and wrathful God (1:2b). How does the Lord "take vengeance upon his enemies"? (1:2c) Through His wrath upon sin.

It is important to note that in 1:2, God is called an "avenging" or "vengeful" God three times (from Hebrew verb *nakam*: נָקַם); this is very important when considering how God reveals himself. The repetition three times of a character attribute is to focus attention and stress importance like an underlined sentence in writing (for example: "Holy, holy, holy", Isaiah 6):

ESV Nahum 1:2 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.

In other words, God is holy, holy, holy and because he is too holy to look upon sin, he is also avenging, avenging, avenging according to Nahum 1:2.

- God is slow to anger and great in power (1:3a)
- God will not clear the guilty before him (1:3b); this implies and teaches us that God must take the initiative in solving the problem of guilt. If one is guilty before God to seek to remove his guiltiness is only to exacerbate and amplify and aggravate it before God's holy throne!
- God is good and a stronghold for those who trust in Him (1:7)
- God is also the one who will pursue his enemies to destruction (1:8).

God is revealed here in Nahum's prophecy as gracious and merciful but also wrathful- - not only a loving God, but a just and vengeful God and both these attributes we must hold together in our speaking of God as He has revealed himself.

God's wrath is revealed in his jealousy for His character and truth and His zealous vengeance against his enemies; God's goodness is revealed in his zealous love, redemption to the covenant community who live by faith trusting in Him. In fact, God's judgment upon His people using Assyrian as his rod is particularly a *restorative judgment*

for those who believe and trust in his grace and mercy (“Judgment begins at the household of God” kind of judgment):

ESV Nahum 1:15 ¹ *Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off.*

It is good to know that the gospel, or the good news of “published peace” can still be declared to the world in light of God’s just wrath!

How is God specifically revealed as the Divine Warrior in Nahum? (8a) Where else do we find the Divine Warrior motif in Holy Scripture? (8b)

Old Testament professor Tremper Longman III describes Nahum’s first eight verses as a poem or victory hymn celebrating the Theophany of the Divine Warrior. He writes: “The appearance of the Divine Warrior is accompanied by massive cosmic upheaval. Creation order turns to cosmic disorder” (*The Minor Prophets*, ed. McComiskey, pg. 775).

We should understand that Nahum as part of a prophetic line of mouthpieces for God and mediators over Israel is alluding to the *Song of Moses* revealed in the Exodus event when God saved his people and destroyed His enemies and theirs. For Moses and later Nahum, God is the Divine Warrior who fights on behalf of his people:

ESV Exodus 15:2 *The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.* ³ *The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name.* ⁴ *"Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.* ⁵ *The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.* ⁶ *Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.* ⁷ *In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.* ⁸ *At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.* ⁹ *The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'* ¹⁰ *You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.* ¹¹ *"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"* ¹² *You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them.* ¹³ *"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.* ¹⁴ *The peoples have heard; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.* ¹⁵ *Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.* ¹⁶ *Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.* ¹⁷ *You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.* ¹⁸ *The LORD will reign forever and ever."*

God revealed himself as the Divine Warrior on behalf of His people, but at times in redemptive-history he showed himself as Divine Warrior in the righteous judgment against his people (as in the time of Samuel’s youth, 1 Sam. 4 or more recently in the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel).

However, the Church, the true believing people of God, were not to fear the opposition from the most powerful and hateful kingdoms of this world because at the end of the day, God is power and will be a warrior on behalf of His people!

We must understand that Nahum's prophetic-oracles addressed to Nineveh is God's word against all of the kingdoms of this world that oppose the LORD and His Anointed One. As the Psalmist cries out to God:

ESV Psalm 2:1-6: Why do the nations rage¹ and the peoples plot in vain?² The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,³ "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,⁶ "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

As Nineveh and the Kingdom of Assyria came to an end because of God's judgment, so will all of God's enemies, all of the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of God and His Son (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24ff). Assyria represents the non-elect, sinful, rebellious, autonomous, and evil kingdoms of this world.

How is Christ revealed in Nahum's prophecy? (9)

God is not sleeping, but has sovereignly allowed the evil we see in the world around us (while not being the author of it). However, there will be a day when all evil will be destroyed and stamped out and the fall of Nineveh is an eschatological-typological picture of that long-awaited event! God is a God of love for those who believe, but for those who reject his grace, he is a vengeful, wrathful Divine Warrior before Whom no man will be able to stand!

When John the Baptist was called to prepare the way for Messiah (Isaiah 40) as the last prophet of the Old Covenant epoch, he described the imminent arrival of Messiah as a time characterized by the "wrath to come":

ESV Matthew 3:7-11: But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

When Jesus came and showed grace and love by healing the sick and preaching the gospel rather than bringing in the full measure of God's vengeance and wrath against sinful mankind immediately, John the Baptist was confused and even for a season doubted who Jesus was (Matt. 11:1-19). The Messianic time that John thought would be characterized by God's clear revelation of himself as Divine Warrior to the world came in an unexpected and even surprising manner.

When Jesus Christ came he heightened the eschatological battle and showed and revealed himself to be the Divine Warrior but He did not fight against God's enemies and the Church! Rather, he focused his wrath by engaging in a greater spiritual battle in spiritual warfare with a greater more formidable foe- -the very devil himself (Heb. 2:14-18). Jesus healed in his attacks, he forgave, he exorcised demons, he resisted temptation, he overcame death and hell and the devil on behalf of his people as the Divine Warrior!

Jesus as the Divine Warrior waged war against not merely the flesh and blood enemies of Israel but more intensely he waged war against Satan himself. The warfare against Satan ended in the cross and the tomb, and he was victorious through resurrection and ascension!

For all who believe Jesus Christ is the Consummate Divine Warrior who has defeated the stronghold and bondage of Satan, he has removed our lifelong fear and bondage to death, and made us free to live as the children of God through faith in Him!

Those who resist and war against Christ, will war against His Church as well. But God will come in wrath and judgment against them. We as the Church "in Christ" still struggle against Satan and evil, and we are to resist the devil and fight in Jesus' Name through spiritual warfare that is described in Ephesians 6:12-20.

Remember the Abrahamic covenantal blessing upon all those who believe God's promises like Father Abraham?

ESV Genesis 12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

We may not see and experience God's holy judgment and wrath displayed against His and our enemies in our lifetime- -but this judgment will come. God will curse those who dishonor those who believe as Abraham believed, and are united to Jesus Christ!

Jesus also comes in wrath for those who reject him- -for those who oppose him in unbelief, he will come as the great and wrathful Divine Warrior to judge the world!

Revelation 19:11-21: Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in¹ blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave,¹ both small and great." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was

captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence¹ had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.²¹ And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

In light of this as Christians, we are to live patient lives in Christ, knowing that now is the time to make the gospel of hope known in Jesus Christ. As Christ's people we are to pray for and show mercy and kindness to our enemies. We are to know that vengeance belongs to God who is our Divine Warrior –and so we are to fight the good fight by showing love, grace, and mercy and warning those who refuse to repent that “Vengeance is the LORD’S and He will repay!

As Christ loved, so should we and we must remember that we are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good:

Romans 12:17-21: Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it¹ to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Praise be to God for His Word! Praise be to God for His Christ!

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