

Hatred of Assyria

Commentary for August 1, 2013 — The Nations Were Glad

“The Book of Nahum” is this month’s article by Dr. Ernest Martin. In his unique manner, he covers the important prophetic issues of this small book while giving insights from the text that few others recognize. Please read the [“August 2013 Newsletter”](#) first.

I want to discuss in this commentary why the empire of Assyria¹ was so hated in the world at that time. Nahum gives us some information that implies horror greater than words convey:

“Woe to the bloody city [Nineveh]! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departs not [escape]; The noise of a whip [on chariot horses and on people], and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots. The horseman lifts up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcasses; and there is none end of their corpses; they [the chariots] stumble upon their corpses:

• **Nahum 3:1–3**

Why was this happening? It was because of their treatment of other people and because of their religious evil. Why was Assyria punished so severely? They knew better. Jonah some 100 years before, told them the truth about God and His judgments, which caused them to repent. The Assyrian Gentiles went back to their old ways.

“Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the well-favoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that sells nations through her whoredoms, and [sells] families through her witchcrafts. Behold, I am against you, says YHWH of hosts.”

• **Nahum 3:4–5**

This litany of repulsive terms describes what was going to happen (and what did happen) to the inhabitants of Nineveh when the city was captured. The sacking of Nineveh was retribution for the same kind of gross evils Nineveh committed against others in the past. YHWH Himself will be against them. In the past, He used Assyria as His agent to punish the northern Israelite kingdom of Samaria. Now God will use other servants, Babylon and Persia, to punish Nineveh and overthrow Assyrian hegemony.

The words of Nahum actually understate the reality of what the leaders of the Assyrian empire did in their conquests. The lower classes were guilty also, as they carried out the atrocities. One website focuses on the inhumanity pictorially displayed on Assyrian stone inscriptions: [“Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death”](#) compiled by Erika Belibtreu.

¹ An “empire” is a kingdom which has overlordship over other kingdoms, peoples, or nations outside of their own kingdom. An empire usually has a territory greater than a kingdom. Each subject kingdom had its own ruling structure of king, governors, or local nobles. As long as timely tribute of money, products, travel, trade, or military support is given to the ruler of the empire, then there is peace. If a subordinate ruler stops paying tribute, then his kingdom is in rebellion and subject to penalties set forth in the treaty “covenant” between the emperor and the vassal kingdom. This usually means war.

Assyrian inscriptions pictorially show that the words of Nahum were not hyperbole. Nahum's words not only describe what would happen to Nineveh, they also describe how Assyria treated other nations and peoples. God would do to them as they did to others.

The Assyrians were hated. They were powerful, victorious, and vicious beyond their contemporaries in a cruel age. They terrorized their neighbors through their brutality. Assyria also had a form of military conscription which caused most of their male population (unless they were traveling merchants) to be trained in war. Their victories aided their huge merchant class to gain markets throughout their empire and beyond. They also had an excellent spy network all over the Middle East.² Great relief arose with word of Nineveh's downfall:

"And I will cast abominable filth upon you, and make you vile, and will set you as a gazingstock. And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon you shall flee from you, and say, 'Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her?' whence [from where] shall I seek comforters for you?"

• **Nahum 3:6-7**

No one will cry out and mourn that Nineveh is being so diminished. Even though they expanded their empire later, it seems that Assyrian power began a slow decline after God destroyed the large Assyrian army at Jerusalem when Hezekiah was king of Judah.

"What do you imagine [plot] against YHWH? he will make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time. ... There is one come out of you, that imagines [plot] evil against YHWH, a wicked counselor.

• **Nahum 1:9,11**

Remember, the city of Nineveh was preached to by Jonah.³ There is a connection between Jonah and Nahum. Both books are undated as to when their prophecies were given. Both concern Nineveh. Jonah tells about the city's repentance and physical salvation; Nahum gives a prophecy of Nineveh's capture and destruction. Both also deal with the Assyrian empire. In Jonah, preservation of the capital meant the empire would survive; in Nahum, the prophesied loss of the capital dooms the empire. Assyria's experience predicted that punishment will come to Judah also, unless she repents (compare this with Isaiah 20:3-6):

"Yet was she [Nineveh in this case] carried away, she went into captivity: her young children also were dashed in pieces at the top of all the streets: and they cast lots for her honorable men, and all her great men were bound in chains."

• **Nahum 3:10**

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² Peter Dubovsky, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18-19* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006). From Assyrian official royal correspondence Dubovsky describes the depth and reach of the Assyrian military, political, and economic intelligence network throughout its empire and neighboring lands. He refers to modern intelligence to analyze Assyrian capabilities. He does so to focus on the Assyrian psychological warfare techniques used by the Assyrians in 2 Kings chapters 18-19 and elsewhere. Unfortunately, Dubovsky concludes that the biblical evidence is untrue, but his work is still interesting.

³ See "[The Book of Jonah](#)" where Dr. Martin examines Jonah's historical account.