

SPENDING TIME WITH THE PROPHETS

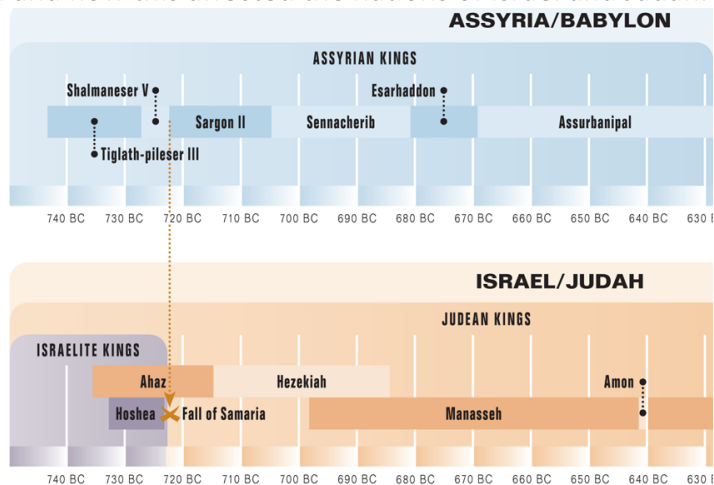
the book of Nahum

History of Assyria and Israel

The opening phrase of Nahum's prophecy sets the stage for the book's message: "The oracle of Nineveh." This message from Jehovah would focus on Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. So, to better understand God's message to this foreign power let's first explore the history of Assyrian expansion and how this affected the nations of Israel and Judah.

1. Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC)

- While the Assyrian Kingdom existed long before Shalmaneser, he was the first to have direct contact with Israel.
- In 853 he fought a coalition of kings in Syria, including "Ahab, the Israelite."
- Then there is the famous inscription of Jehu bringing tribute on Shalmaneser's black obelisk: "The tribute of Jehu, the son of Omri. I received from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king."



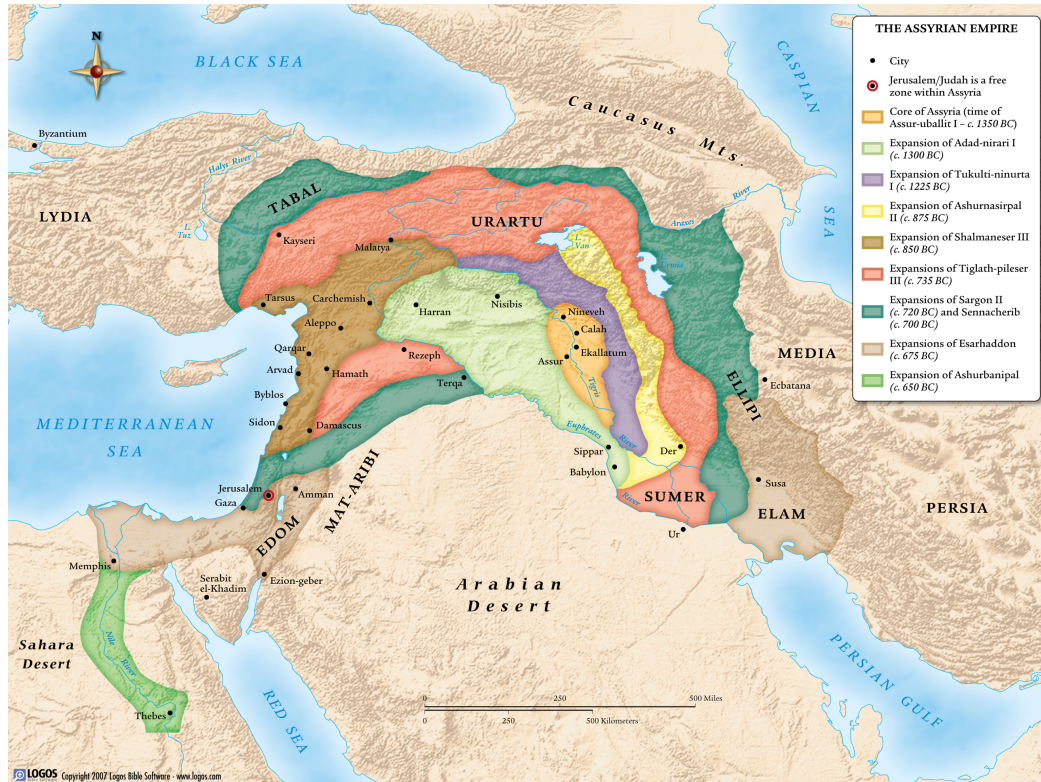
2. Adadnirari III (810-783 BC)

- During the years between Shalmaneser III and Adadnirari III, Assyria did not concern itself much with Syria and Israel, focusing more on its northern border. During this time Syria was the dominant power and greatly afflicted Israel leaving king Jehoahaz with only a token army. However, God sent a "deliverer" which history identifies as Adadnirari (see 2Kings 13.1-7).
- In 804 BC this Assyrian king invaded Syria and made it tributary to him. This freed Israel from Syrian oppression and opened the way for the expansions which took place under Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah (2Kings 14.25).

3. Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC)

- Following the death of Adadnirari III, Assyria entered a period of decline. However, when Tiglath-pileser III ascended to the throne Assyrian power grew once again. (note: Tiglath-pileser is also known as Pul. See 2Kings 15.19; 16.7).

- b. He invaded Israel during the reign of Menahem and exacted heavy tribute (see 2Kings 15.19-20) and took much of Israel's territory during the reign of Pekah (2Kings 15.29).
 - c. When Pekah became king of Israel, he joined forces with the Syrians in rebelling against Assyria. This coalition used its military might to pressure Ahaz of Judah to join the rebellion, but Ahaz petitioned Tiglath-pileser III to intervene. He did so by invading Damascus (2Kings 16.5-9).
 - d. Hoshea deposed Pekah as king of Israel in 732 BC. He immediately submitted to the Assyrian king, which spared Israel for a short time, but at a heavy price. "The country of the house of Omri ...all its people (and their possessions), I carried away into Assyria. Pekah their king they had overthrown; Hoshea as king over them I placed. Then talents of gold...talents of silver I received as tribute from them."
4. Shalmaneser V (727-722 BC) and Sargon II (722-705 BC)
- a. When Tiglath-pileser III died, Hoshea of Israel rebelled against his Assyrian masters, mistakenly believing that Egypt would help. Shalmaneser invaded and laid siege to Samaria (2Kings 17.3-5)



- b. Shalmaneser died before Samaria fell, but Sargon completed the siege in 722 BC. "At the beginning of my reign, in my first year,... I besieged and captured Samaria. I carried captive from the midst of it 27,290 people. Fifty chariots I took there to be an addition to my royal force...I returned and caused more people than formerly to dwell there; I settled in the midst of it people from lands which my hands had captured. I appointed my officers over them as governors; I imposed tribute on them after the Assyrian manner." (See 2Kings 17.6ff).
5. Sennacherib (705-681 BC)

- a. Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 BC after Hezekiah rebelled (2Kings 18.7). He laid siege to and destroyed many cities including Lachish. Reliefs picturing the fall of Lachish show Assyrian soldiers flaying and impaling some of the captives, giving just a hint of how brutal the Assyrians were in their conquests.
 - b. The Bible records how Sennacherib's forces reached the walls of Jerusalem, but the Lord demonstrated His awesome might in delivering His city (see 2Kings 18.13-19.36).
 - c. It is significant that Sennacherib boasted of conquering many kings, but even though he mentioned Hezekiah he did not claim to have defeated him. "As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities.... Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage...."
6. Esarhaddon (681-669 BC) and Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC)
- a. Hezekiah's faith in the Lord kept the Assyrian menace at bay, but unsurprisingly the Assyrians again became dominant over the Lord's people during the wicked reign of Manasseh.
 - b. Esarhaddon boasted of forcing a coalition of kings, including Manasseh of Judah, to pay him heavy tribute.
 - c. Ashurbanipal forced Manasseh to provide supplies and troops for the Assyrian invasion of Egypt. "During my march (to Egypt) 22 kings from the seashore, the islands and the mainland.... Manasseh (*Mi-in-si-e*), king of Judah (*la-ú-di*) ... servants who belong to me, brought heavy gifts ... to me and kissed my feet. I made these kings accompany my army over the land—as well as (over) the sea-route with their armed forces and their ships."
 - i. This invasion is significant to the context of Nahum. Thebes fell to the Assyrians in 664 BC, an event mentioned in Nahum 3.8 (No-amon).
 - ii. This invasion also furnished another example of Assyrian brutality as Ashurbanipal boasted, "I captured many soldiers alive. The rest I burnt.... I built a pile of live (men and) heads before their gate.... I burnt their adolescent boys and girls"
 - d. Several kings rebelled against Assyria in ~648 BC. It is believed that Manasseh was one of the kings who rebelled and his captivity in Babylon was a result of this rebellion (see 2Chronicles 33.11-20).
7. With the death of Ashurbanipal in 627, the empire fell into decline until ultimately Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612, bringing an end to the Assyrian kingdom.

The Context of Nahum:

1. While no kings of Judah are mentioned in Nahum, a likely date would be toward the end of Manasseh's reign. The date would have been after the fall of Thebes in 664 BC (Nahum 3.8), but before the fall of Nineveh in 612. Assyria was at the height of its power during the reign of Manasseh, but if this once wicked king had begun his religious reforms (see 2Chron. 33.13-16) it would help explain why Nahum does not focus on the sins of God's people. So, we date the letter at ~650 BC.
2. The name "Nahum" means "comfort" and is significant to the theme of the letter. God's people could take comfort that their Assyrian oppressors would be destroyed. But for the Assyrians there would be no comfort (Nahum 3.7).

The Message of Nahum:

1. Hymn Describing Yahweh (1.2-11)
 - a. The hymn glorifies and praises the Lord for His attributes, focusing on His power and judgment.
 - b. His power which controls the forces of nature (vss. 3-6) would be felt by His enemies, namely Nineveh (vss.1,11).
2. Oracle of Two Verdicts (1.12-2.2)
 - a. Even though the Lord had used the Assyrians to afflict His people (1.12; cf. Isaiah 10.5-11), they would afflict His people no longer.
 - b. Judah could look forward to peace and blessings, but the Assyrians and their gods would be completely cut off (1.14).
3. Increased Confrontation (2.3-13)
 - a. This passage describes an attack (vss. 3-4) and even though there is a hurried defense (vs. 5), it would be ineffective (vss. 6-8). The city would be left open and defenseless (vss. 9-10).
 - b. Nineveh's former ferocity is now a source of mockery (vss. 11-12).
 - c. Even though it would be the Babylonians who would defeat the Assyrians, the Lord makes it clear that He is the reason they will fall. "I am against you..." (vs. 13).
4. "Woe, Bloody City" (3.1-7)
 - a. "Bloody city" was an apt description for Nineveh as we've already noted just a few of the Assyrian atrocities (vss. 1-4).
 - b. But since the Lord was against them (vs. 5) she would be devastated and brought to shame.
5. A Satire Against Might (3.8-13)
 - a. Nahum was probably penned at the height of Assyrian power, shortly after the defeat of Thebes (No-amon, see 3.8).
 - b. No one at that time would have thought Assyria could fall, but they would because the Lord had declared it!
6. Useless Preparations (3.14-19)
 - a. Assyria might have boasted in her numerous merchants and guards, but they would be of no avail. She would be devastated like locusts consume vegetation.
 - b. Ultimately, nothing could prevent Assyria's fall. Her wound was incurable.

Major Themes:

1. The Lord is faithful. Nahum uses the name "Yahweh" (Lord) 13 times in the letter. This was His covenant name and emphasized that He would remain faithful to His people and destroy His enemies (see 1.7-8).
2. He is Lord of ALL the earth. The Lord had used the Assyrians to punish His people, but now He would punish the Assyrians (1.12-13). He would do this because He is Lord over all people!
3. Thus, His people have hope. When Nahum wrote his prophecy, Assyria was completely dominant. But God's people could believe in a better future because their Lord had promised it (see 1.15-2.2).