

Nahum (“Consoling”) versus Nineveh: Is God a Rapist Avenger?

With a literary power that makes him one of the great poets of Israel, Nahum celebrates the fall of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire, and her destruction by a coalition of Babylonians and Medes (612 B.C.), an event represented in the oracles as either imminent or quite recent (see the commentaries and study Bibles for diverse opinions on details). Duane Christensen sums up Nahum’s message this way, emphasizing the contrast (theological diversity) between Nahum and → Jonah:

Nahum is primarily a book about God’s justice, not about human vengeance, hatred, and military conquest; it is best read as a complement to the book of Jonah. The book of Jonah may be read as a midrashic reflection on Exod 34:6 and God’s steadfast love (*hesed*), whereas the book of Nahum reflects Exod 34:7 and God’s wrath. In short, Nahum focuses on the “dark side” of God, while Jonah portrays God’s mercy and compassion toward the same wicked city. Both aspects are essential for an understanding of the divine nature.¹

Similarly, David Pleins comments: “There is no mistaking the justice message of Nahum.”² Actually, however, no word in Nahum refers explicitly to justice. Moreover, in the Hebrew Bible the wrath of God is almost never related to the vocabulary of justice, since justice refers primarily to positive, liberating justice in the face of oppression, not to the penal justice Nineveh deserved for its “endless cruelty” (3:19).³

1. The Poor. Although Nahum does not explicitly refer to the poor, nor to justice, the prophet does speak of oppression and violence and shows how these sins against the weak awaken Yahweh’s anger (Ex. 22:21-24; HCSB 1391)⁴. Nineveh “becomes a paradigmatic example of the fate of worldly powerful oppressors” (Ehud Ben Zvi, JSB 1219). Therefore, since God cannot remain indifferent and passive – in the face of oppression and violence – against the cruelest empire in ancient history (having taken captive the northern kingdom of Israel. 722 B. C.), Nahum begins by celebrating this divine wrath:

“A jealous and avenging God is the Lord,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and rages against his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger but great in power,
And the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.
Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
And by him the rocks are broken into pieces” (Nahum 1:2-3^a, 6).

Under the guise of the lion, Nahum describes the robbery, cruelty and violence of the empire against its neighbors, which provokes Yahweh’s anger:

“What became of the *lion*’s den,
the cave of the *young lions*,
where the *lion* goes,
and the *lion*’s *cubs* with no one to disturb them?
The *lion* has torn enough for his whelps
and strangled prey for his *lioness*;
he has filled his caves with prey
and his dens with torn flesh.
See, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts”
(Nahum 2:11-13², see Nineveh’s “endless cruelty”, 3:13)

It is common to criticize Nahum for an excessive nationalism “que no vislumbra aún el Evangelio, ni siguiera el universalismo de la segunda parte de Isaías” (BJ 1091). Still, Nahum insists that God, letting Judah suffer under the oppressive power of Assyria, had also judged Judah for its injustices and oppressions:

“Though I have oppressed/humiliated (*yanah*) you”
I will oppress/humiliate (*yanah*) you no more.
And now I will break off his yoke from you
And snap the bonds that bind you (Nahum 1:12-13).

In Nahum’s theology, Yahweh is the Lord of history, who directs/permits all that occurs, including the oppression of his own people and their subsequent liberation

Many in comfortable situations find it difficult to see how divine judgment can constitute such an essential part of the Gospel in the New Testament (Rom 2:16; Mark 13). However, as Nahum clearly shows, for the weak and oppressed the assurance that God is not indifferent to their suffering, but will judge their oppressors, is cause for celebration:

“Look! On the mountains the feet of one
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!
Celebrate your festivals, O Judah,
Fulfill your vows,
For never again will the wicked invade you;
They are utterly cut off” (Nahum 1:15).

Isaiah, the prophet of the Exile, employed the same image of the Messenger of Peace to celebrate the fall of Babylon, the imperial successor of Assyria (Isaiah 52:7-10).

2. Women. Theologians who attempt to sensitive us regarding our common use of caricatures that result in cruelty to animals can not feel very comfortable when Nahum describes Nineveh’s cruelty under the image of a lion (see 2:12-14^a above)⁵. Likewise, the conscientious modern reader must feel discomfort when Nahum, with an impressive and effective rhetoric for its readers, insults Nineveh with sexist language:

“Look at your troops; they are women in your midst” (3:13),

implying that women are inferior and cowardly (contrast → Romans 16:3-5, where Paul praises Prisca and Aquila for having “risked their necks/lives” to save his life; and in the Hebrew Bible → Esther). (Sexual minorities suffer from the same caricatures, such as the custom in Buenos Aires of insulting the opposing soccer team and its members by calling them “maricones” (fags); see Babylon as the great “whore” in → Revelation 17).

In addition, women explicitly appear to be long-suffering “slaves”, the sacred prostitutes, priestesses of the goddess Ishtar (characterized by her militaristic and erotic activities):

“It is decreed that the city (the Beautiful [Ishtar]) is exiled,
its slave women led away,
moaning like doves
and beating their breasts” (2:7).

Nahum celebrates the fall of the empire along with its gods, without making any show of sympathy for these poor slave women.

But the discomfort the modern reader may feel on encountering these caricatures of the lions (always cruel), women (ever cowardly) and pagan prostitutes, will be slight compared with the indignation expressed in the writings of feminist theologians as they contemplate Nahum’s portrayal of God taking revenge against a Nineveh under the image of a male sexually violating a prostitute (see the detailed treatment in → Ezekiel 16; 23):

4 “Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute,
gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery,
who enslaves nations through her debaucheries,
and peoples through her sorcery,
5 I am against you, says the Lord of hosts
and will lift up your skirts over your face;
and I will let nations look at your nakedness
and kingdoms on your shame.
6 I will throw filth at you
and treat you with contempt,
and make you a spectacle.
7 Then all who see you will shrink from you and say,
‘Nineveh is devastated, who will bemoan her?’
Where shall I seek *comforters* for you?”
(Nahum 3:4-7; [see “Nahum”, *consoling*]).

With his Yahweh “against” Nineveh, Nahum expresses the “bad news” for the oppressive empire with a preposition, like Paul sums up all his Gospel for the oppressed with another preposition: “God is *for* us” (→ Romans 8:31). However, Judith Sanderson⁶ and Gerlinde Baumann⁷ offer us profound reflections on the problematic of Nahum 3:4-7 (and similar texts → Hosea 2; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 16:23) for the modern reader. They point out that prostitution was not prohibited in patriarchal societies such as Israel (cf. Paul, who condemns not the prostitute, but the wealthy Christian husbands who exploited them → 1 Cor. 6). Therefore, the act of forcing a prostitute to have sexual relations was not

considered a violation, since sexual violation was only concerned with another's sexual property – it was the “theft of sexual property “of another man, and the prostitute belonged to no one⁸. Sanderson concludes that, starting from Nahum, we must forge a new definition of rape and sexual violation: in a non-patriarchal society (recognizing women's equality) we must understand sexual violation as a crime against women, not their owners/lords. Sanderson ends with a strong admonition:

The image Nahum used to vent that anger is dangerous to women's health, lives, and well being and must be recognized as such. In a society where violence against women is epidemic, it is extremely dangerous to image God as involved in it in any way. The danger is of two kinds.

- What would it mean to worship a God who is portrayed as raping women when angry?
- And if humans see themselves in some way as the image of God, what would it mean to reflect that aspect of God's activity on the human level?

To involve God in an image of sexual violence is, in a profound way, somehow to justify it and thereby to sanction it for human males who are for any reason angry with a woman.⁹

Baumann¹⁰ points out that oppression and violence against women does not occur in an isolated manner, but rather in contexts where other weak groups suffer in the same way. And given that violence and counter-violence create a never-ending cycle, we must seek an end to it¹¹ (see Jacques Ellul 1980). Such an end could *begin* with Nahum, because the prophet proclaims God's justice, but does not exhort the readers to take up arms against Nineveh. Ephesians commands us to “be imitators of God” in his sacrificial love (Eph. 5:1-2), and to not take revenge. In Romans, Paul exhorts us to not take revenge against our oppressors, but to learn to love the enemy and recognize that vengeance belongs to God alone, not to us (Rom. 12:14-21, citing Proverbs 25:21-22; see also Mt. 5:44; Luke. 6:27).

3. Sexual Minorities. Of Nahum's three references to women, two refer to sexual minorities: the sacred prostitutes at the altar of Ishtar (2:7) and the image of Nineveh as a prostitute raped by Yahweh (3:4-6). The third reference is also metaphorical: the ridiculing of the cowardly troops of Nineveh: “Look at your troops: they are women in your midst” (3:13; see the infamous photos portraying efforts to feminize and break the moral of prisoners in the Iraq war in 2004!). Like so many of the pioneering Liberation theologians in Latin America, Nahum appears to only be concerned with Judah as a victim of imperial violence, but devoid of any sensitivity toward the oppression of women, animals and sexual minorities¹². Especially James (3:1-12; 4:11-12) makes us recognize the great danger of “killing with the tongue.” With the tongue, whether men or women, we may become false witnesses in a judicial process or may destroy the reputation, dignity and self-worth of persons, thus provoking them to violence or motivating them to suicide. Therefore, any end to the cycle of violence, even though it might conceivably begin with Nahum, must also transcend the prophet and his powerful rhetoric, so effective with his contemporaries, yet so dangerous for subsequent generations of believers—particularly when in positions of power to inflict violence on other nations (as Nahum's battered audience of colonized Judeans was not).

Nahum and Sexual Violence (→ Ezekiel 16; 23)

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End Notes

1. Christensen, D. L. 1999:201
2. David Pleins 2001:391
3. Hanks 1972:498; 2000:9-11)
4. Hanks 1982:37; 1983:17
5. Andrew Linzey, *Los Animales en la Teología*, Barcelona: Herder, 1994/96
6. Judith Sanderson 1992/98:233-236
7. Gerlinde Baumann 1998/99:349-353
8. Baumann 1998/99:350; Susan Brooks Thistlewaite 1993:62-63
9. Judith Sanderson 1992/98:236
10. Gerlinde Baumann 1998/99:352
11. Gerlinde Baumann 1998/99:353
12. Elsa Tamez 1986/87; Marcella Althaus-Reid 2001

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Translator’s note: Need BJ ref in Eng., pp 1-2.