

THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Lesson 1, Introduction

The most important questions anyone should ask as we open a Bible book to read it are: what does it say and what does it mean? Simple questions. And, yet, the Bible writers were ancient Easterners, speaking to ancient Easterners; not ancient Easterners speaking to modern Westerners. Naturally, this was reflected in their choice of words, the order of their words, and even how they constructed lines and sentences in order to pass along their inspired writings, the bulk of it written in Hebrew and Aramaic. So, those 2 simple questions we should ask are worthy goals; but achieving them accurately can be far more complex when it comes to God's Word... especially when it comes to the Book of Nahum. This doesn't mean an ordinary Bible reader can't get something out of Nahum with a casual reading; but it does mean that it will be more minimal than one might expect.

Transferring information from a distant past to an immediate present is what it all boils down to. It is said that we live in the Information Age. What makes it thus? Transferring information from one human to another has always occurred, going back to the Garden of Eden. Different ways were devised to do that as humanity progressed. From pictographs in caves, to spoken language, to alpha bets and writing and then to audio transmissions and videos over distances, these are all simply ways to share information. In reality, over time the changes in how this was accomplished amounted primarily to the way, form, and speed of information that was recorded, transmitted, and obtained. The same historical information that was available that we had 1000 years ago or 100 years ago or yesterday hasn't changed; only the ways and methods of how we get it. Today, if we don't know how to use the digital world of the Internet, or Word Processing apps, or Spread Sheets, or Smartphones... and soon, AI... then we will have a very hard time extracting the information that those forms contain. It is similar when studying the Bible, and especially so the Prophets. The information is surely there; but do we really know how to access it accurately and understand its meaning fully? Those who wrote these documents certainly knew what they meant to communicate; and the people living in the era and society of the person who wrote were generally able to understand what was said and grasp what was meant. But how about us...

living from 2000 years to 3500 years from the original creation of those documents?

The eminent Bible scholar Duane L. Christiansen says this:

“Current research in the cosmology and mythology of the ancient Middle East, from ancient Vedic texts (that is, ancient Hinduism) to detailed mathematical puzzles in Plato’s Dialogues (as well as in both testaments of the Bible and extending into the common era in various circles), demonstrates how prevalent apparent “cryptic” information was in ancient texts and why...”

Professor Christiansen speaks of “apparent” cryptic information that was common in ancient literature, as is in both testaments of the Bible. Cryptic means something that is mysterious, obscured or camouflaged. So, how do we decipher the cryptic from thousands of years ago? Merely a plain reading of the text cannot uncover whatever part of it is camouflaged. Nothing could be more cryptic at times for we modern Westerners to deal with than prophetic writings. So, I’m going to take an unusual direction in this introduction to begin our study of the prophetic Book of Nahum that I have not done before... because I think understanding Nahum requires it. Even so, please be aware that those oracles of the other Minor Prophets that were produced in roughly the same general time frame as Nahum lived and wrote (from slightly earlier than the 8th, to slightly later than the 7th centuries B.C.) were also affected to one degree or another by what you are about to learn today. While we won’t dissect all of Nahum according to what I’ll show you (it would be far too tedious), Bible students such as yourselves need to at least be informed of these elements and constructs of the Holy Scriptures that have generally not been factored into the interpretations of Western or Eastern Bible scholars. Let’s face it: if you are studying this rather small and only infrequently read Book of Nahum, then you are part of a limited category of Bible students that are this serious-minded about knowing God’s Word. That is the reason that I have chosen to put the following challenging information where I have.

A few years ago, I was preparing to teach on the Book of Matthew, when I was alerted to a new publication of someone I know and respect; it was on the subject of Jewish Parables, published by Carta and titled Parables of the

Sages. Since the Jewish Yeshua spoke in parables regularly, this interested me due to their important place in our faith. What I learned changed the way that we are supposed to read Parables in order to take from them what was intended. I would classify that new and proper method as involving eye discipline. That is, we have to know what to train our eye on in a Jewish parable and what not to; the words and thoughts that are important to reveal the point, versus the words that are little more than eye-candy... because that's how Jewish parables work. And, not surprisingly, the Church has forever taught us to focus on the wrong things in a parable because they only know to look at them from an entirely Western literary point of view. I won't go any further than to say to go to the Torah Class lessons on Matthew where you'll find what I had to say about parables.

There is a similar eye disciple issue in reading the Prophets... especially those of that certain era I mentioned earlier. That is, we have to train ourselves on where to focus our attention, what to notice as the critical parts of the message, but also what **not** to get distracted over in an attempt to get unnecessarily precise about certain words that are used. But, even more, it is so we can be on the look-out for things that our eye would normally not notice at all. This is challenging because we can only observe these things in the original Hebrew language. Once they are translated to any other language, all hope of seeing them is lost.

Thanks to archaeology, anthropology and the recent increase in the deciphering of ancient languages and cuneiform writing, it has become easier in the 21st century to establish pretty clearly such things as what the ancients wore, what they ate, how they transported goods and themselves around, their accounting systems, how they built their houses...things like that... in each of the many eras that spanned the 15 centuries during which the various Bible books were created. What I'm seeking to uncover, however, is much deeper than that. I want us to know the *why* of what those ancients did, thought, and said that helps to uncover what they meant by it. What they **intended** their fellows to know ought to be everything for us. Otherwise, we have little basis to extract all but the surface of what the Bible's words offers, and even then, those words can be, and regularly have been, terribly misconstrued, sometimes to serve an agenda-driven purpose.

So: as for the Minor Prophets...beyond their social environments and cultural customs, why did they construct their prophecies the way they did? Why was poetry used so much? Why is Hebrew poetry so different from Western poetry? Why did they choose to use the particular symbols they did for their (sometimes) prolific use of symbolism? Where did the various styles they used come from and why did they choose them? Were they random, or was there intention and hidden meaning within those chosen styles?

When we look closer, newer revelations reveal that when the Prophets constructed their prophecies, they also embedded in them clues based upon *their* current understanding and beliefs of the way that the cosmos and, therefore, the spiritual and physical world operated in harmony with, or at times against, humanity. Some of those clues were unintentional and merely reflected the typical way words and thoughts were handed down and/or written down then. At other times, those clues were intentionally and intricately woven in for their readers to find as part of the experience of hearing or reading those Hebrew prophecies.

To discover the *why* of the several questions I asked, we have to climb into our “Way Back” machine and try to put on the minds, and enter into the cultures, of the ancients to see the world and the cosmos as they saw it. Long before the dawning of the scientific age, which is said to have begun in the mid-1500’s... an age that rules our day in every imaginable way... boundaries between teaching disciplines were not that sharply drawn and specialized as they are now. Rather, there used to be much overlap and integration. Using modern day categories of what teaching disciplines mean and are, would include such fields of study as mathematics, theology, physics, history, and medicine. Each of these is called a discipline because each has its own reasoning to approach its own realm. Each pursues its own purpose, and develops its own methods, by which to investigate and understand a particular aspect of life or an operation of the Universe or an understanding of God and His heavenly realm. Each is today considered a specialization meant to distill as much knowledge as possible about just one thing. In modern Western thinking, the result is that math, for instance, is a separate discipline that is therefore not equipped to explain the discipline of Theology. Nor is Theology

equipped to explain history. History, as a discipline, is not capable of explaining medicine, etc. (although sometimes one discipline attempts to go outside its boundaries and causes conflict). On the other hand, the cultures of the ancient world, including Israel, saw the disciplines of things like astronomy, music, history, mathematics and theology as inseparably connected... as interconnected reflections of each other... and not as disciplines that could or should be separated for examination or learning.

The Babylonians, for instance, and the Sumerians before them (we're talking in the 2000 B.C. era) were especially interested in such matters as *how*, exactly, these disciplines were naturally interwoven and affected one another. Babylon was quite advanced and became renowned as an expert teaching center in the Middle East to advance this philosophy or methodology of discovering the underpinnings of the mysteriously synchronized harmony of the Universe that was definable and predictable long before any of it could rightly be called "science". Here is an example of what I mean.

The Babylonians believed that the Universe was fundamentally orderly and predictable, and so, they saw the power of numbers in their method of study. Numbers, alone, evoked great mystery in the ancients; numbers were thought to have meaning even to the point of certain numbers being signs and omens. From centuries of empirical evidence that they gathered and recorded by careful observation of the sky, they developed the idea of numbers to create a base-60 mathematics system with the goal of tracking the movements of those celestial bodies that they saw in order to obtain meaning from it all. Don't let that term base-60 throw you. It simply means that in the math system they devised, they count 1 through 60 before they begin a new column to make even larger numbers. In our modern world, we primarily use a base-10 system... what we call the decimal system... for arithmetic. So, we use the numbers 1 through 10 before a new column is begun to express even greater numbers. Thus, our number 20 is thought of as 2 base units of 10 (or as I recall my 1st or 2nd grade teacher saying, it was two tens). The number 25 in our math system is 2 base units of 10, plus the 5th place of the next base-10 unit. It might sound a bit odd to think of it that way, but that is how the decimal system works.

So, in that 4000-year-old base-60 system, we count, multiply and divide in units of 60, while in our more modern-day base-10 system we count, multiply and divide in units of 10. As an example, the ancient Babylonians expressed what we would call in our decimal system the number 80 as 1;20. That is, the 1 expresses one entire base unit of 60. Then with a symbol to create a separator, the next number that is 20 represents the 20th place in the next base-60 unit. So, in base-60 arithmetic, 80 of something is expressed as 60 plus 20. Why do we in Western civilizations use base-10 instead of base-60? Is that any better of a system than another? Not really. More than likely it came about because we humans have 10 fingers and 10 toes! Another base mathematics system that is common today is base-2, what we call binary. Only two digits are used: zeroes and ones to express numbers of any amount. As simplistic as that is, it is what all computers operate on ...even the most advanced AI based computers. Different math systems used for different purposes.

Don't think this ancient use of a base-60 system has gone away. When we speak of compass directions and degrees or we define a circle, we say it consists of 360 degrees (that is, 60 times 6). We define a minute as consisting of 60 seconds, and an hour consisting of 60 minutes. This came from using the ancient base-60 mathematical system.

The Greeks, unlike the Babylonians, tended to use geometry instead of arithmetic in order to study and to model the motions of the sun, moon, and planets. However, eventually the Greek intellectual Pythagoras moved towards employing elements of the more ancient Babylonian system and further refining it. Perhaps the most advanced expression of this mode of understanding of the Universe and the motion of celestial objects until the scientific age came about, originated from the Greek Pythagorean notion of combining geometry with mathematics, and then that with music... yes, music. In what he called **musica universalis**, the harmony of the spheres, Pythagoras created his new theories in the early 6th century B.C., only a couple of decades after Babylon had invaded Judah and exiled the Jews. Here's where the Hebrews come in. No doubt, many of the Jews that were exiled to Babylon... those of greater intellect and education... were given the opportunity to learn this kind of advanced system knowledge, and so, brought this

information back with them in their return to their homeland 70 years and more later, and thus incorporated it into their cultural thinking. Even before the exile, the world was a much more connected place than usually given credit for. People from the nations of the Middle East learned from people other nations. Not surprisingly, what the Babylonians and Greeks knew quickly found its way into Hebrew literature well before the Babylonian exile. Many (probably most) of these Hebrew prophecies were at first handed down orally, and only later were written down on scrolls. More often than not, it was not the prophet himself who physically did the writing; it was a hired Scribe that was skilled in literature and writing.

Other literary techniques were also used that were quite unique and seem utterly foreign to most of us. They used acrostic fairly frequently. Acrostic means to take the first letter of the first word of a new line of writing, and then do the same in the following lines, and then put those letters together to form a new word or even a short phrase which forms a hidden message. The use of telestiches also was employed. A telestich is just like an acrostic, except that it takes the **last** letter of certain words in a phrase or sentence to form a hidden message. What can make finding these hidden messages doubly difficult is that, since they are given within the form of Hebrew poetry, it uses the unique rhythms and meter of Hebrew poetry to determine how ever many words, or how many letters, or however many syllable accents, and other measurements to determine the pattern for when to take a letter to make it part of an acrostic or telestich. Very complicated, isn't it? But this is how it is and was.

You might not realize it, but the Western system of literature in use today inherently reflects Western culture. When we talk, when we write, even though we are not conscious of it, we think and order our words in the terms of our social order and in what we think about the world, the Universe, religion, etc. Page numbers, chapter numbers, everything about our Western literature system uses base-10 mathematical structure. Unfortunately, our Bible interpreters and translators are reading the Prophets as though those prophecies were written in a base-10 and modern structural mindset.

One of the more apparent, but misunderstood, Bible stories that reflects what I'm talking about appears in the New Testament. Approaching the 1st century A.D., when the famous Magi from the Babylonian east came to visit the newborn Yeshua, they made their decision to come, and knew where to go, based not upon anyone's holy scriptures or theology, but rather upon their own mathematical models using base-60 calculations, which were derived from astronomy (studying the movements of celestial objects in the sky) that they believed actually communicated information about the future and the present to the relatively few humans who knew how to use the system. The Magi were NOT political kings or even diplomats who came to the Holy Land (as our typical Christmas stories wrongly picture them); they were among the great scholars and mathematicians of their day. And who could argue against the historical fact that their calculations certainly revealed to them something quite real and history changing was in the making. It was enough to convince them to undertake that long arduous trip all the way from the far east to the outskirts of Jerusalem, and finally to that backwater place called Bethlehem.

According to the Greek Pythagoras's conception... which the Magi and those before had long ago incorporated into their thinking... there was a deep, although mysterious, link and interaction between music, math, and celestial motion. That is, the academically developed linkage of those study disciplines explained the reason and rationale for the movement of objects in the sky and why it was the way it was, and (most importantly) what information about the present and the future it was telling them. Did those movements actually produce a cause and effect on earth? Pythagoras believed that his studies proved that the sun, the moon and the planets danced around the Earth to the tune of a literal, but inaudible, musical symphony. Those heavenly bodies that could be seen in the sky with the naked eye he divided into two categories. First, there were the fixed stars, which were, he believed, literally attached to a cosmic dome that was above the Earth (for him, that dome was considered as half of a sphere), and second, there were the wanderers... the sun, the moon and the visible planets... which changed their positions with respect to what he thought were the immovable, fixed-in-place stars. Each of these wanderers (as he called them) was assigned its own sphere, so the cosmos was built kind of like a spherical onion with its many layers. Each layer of it was inhabited by its own celestial bodies that contributed their own notes

added to the many other notes that together comprise the universal symphony, which was, in the end, purest divine harmony. The cycle and pulse for life on Earth was connected to, and guided by, these cosmic vibrations that could be mathematically deduced, and each of these various elements worked in unison with all the others. It was music that embodied these vibrations, and thus it made music itself as capable of calculation as it was mysterious in its power.

Yes, much of this was not really accurate as it turns out. And, true, much of it was wrapped up in the pagan god mythologies of that day. On the other hand, there is no denying the intricate observable order of the objects in the skies and on the earth, and some of the later prophets like Micah, Nahum and Habakuk believed very much what Pythagoras and even more ancient scholars believed: that God had created this kind of order for the Universe that somehow translated into, or was the result of, actual musical notes based upon mathematical constants, geometry, and number ratios. This led to Pythagoras also noticing some important things about the natural structure of audible music that remains to this day. Let's look briefly at that.

I don't think I have to tell you that music affects people. It can inspire, it can depress, it can soothe, it can cause unrest. Probably there are few more remembered Bible stories about music and musicians than David. We're told that he was an extraordinary harp player, and a writer of songs, and it seems that the only thing that could calm and steady the moody King Saul was David's music. Our modern films use music as an irreplaceable element to make its intended impact. Our churches and synagogues use music to bring reverence, awe, praise and joy into the meetings. Yet, what is music? From a physics standpoint, it is only vibrations from the disrupted movement of air that enters into our ears, is transformed into minute electrical impulses that then are sent to our brains, which goes on to interpret what those electrical impulses mean. There is an entire field of study called musicology that studies this matter. And, in the ancient times, believing in the effects of music, music was woven into their belief systems of how the Universe worked, even into their theology. And, as we're about to see, music very much operates based upon arithmetic principles. So, it was also woven into their literature and into many of the scriptural writings.

Music was part of what Pythagoras called the quadrivium. It was an understanding of the Universe based on a combination of 4 things: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. He discovered that musical intervals corresponded precisely to whole-number ratios (no fractions), such as 2:1 to produce octaves, 3:2 to produce perfect fifths, and 4:3 to produce fourths. The educated people who came later whether Greek or Hebrew, learned of this and incorporated it into how they understood the inner-workings of the Universe, even in what they felt must affect the proper way to structure prose, poem, and song since in their minds it all must work together, harmoniously, to be legitimate.

So, the biblical Prophets gave us their prophecies that were received from God, using these various understandings as part of the rationale for how their prophecies were to be written out and structured. I want to emphasize: it was not that the Prophets based their prophetic content and divinely-given information on what little they actually knew about this musical/mathematic resonance of the cosmos, but rather their writings were intentionally structured in a way that reflected that order as the vehicle used to present the oracles that God had given to them. It was simply the way it happened within their culture. So, whereas in Western literature we have a very developed literary structure and order of subject, predicate, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, etc., the mid-1st millennium B.C. scribes wrote their literature based on their perceived mathematic/musical/geometric order of the Universe that was thought to be insightful and correct. Since poetry, too, reflects a definite mathematical, rhythmic, musical order and structure (and being that song was usually poetry set to music with music itself being mystical), then this is why we find several of the Prophets from the 800's B.C. to the 400's B.C. making extensive use of Hebrew poetry in their prophecies. Stop and think: are we to assume that God actually spoke to those Prophets using poetry? And sometimes even poetry mixed with narrative and simile and metaphor? But, for those human prophets and scribes, to employ poetry, narrative, simile and metaphor was the natural thing to do to present that God-given information to others. We do exactly the same thing in our time, we just don't recognize it because we are so consumed by a maze of long-held assumptions that we take to be true... or as the right way... that we don't challenge it or ask why.

We just live our lives and communicate our thoughts according to these assumptions, and ways that we have been taught, that we see them as absolute and unshakable, even as universal.

A reasonable question to ask about now, is what the motive was for those ancient writers and scribes to choose to use some of their strange-to-us literary methods, as opposed to other ways. The first thing to understand is that these odd methods appear in the Bible in more places than just the Prophets. We find them used in several Psalms, a few Proverbs, and the Book of Lamentations (probably also elsewhere in other Bible books, but because this approach to interpretation is so new there hasn't been time or resources devoted to finding it). The depth of the complexity of their literary constructions probably at times had to do with demonstrating to their readers their prowess and knowledge as a means to give it authority if not reverence. So, this brings us to the issue that we Believers today, and for the last several centuries, have dealt with. While the ancient peoples understood what I just told you to one level or another, and had their own list of assumptions about how things actually are and why it is that way, and why their literature including certain biblical writings were constructed as they were, it has only been quite recently that a precious few bold Bible scholars are re-discovering it, taking it seriously, and now attempting to add that knowledge to the existing pool of Bible knowledge, in order to help us better understand what we read in some of the Prophets from their ancient perspective.

To sum it up, there was meaning even in the structure and form of the way a prophecy or a poem or a wisdom saying was written down. Further, it is highly likely that only a few of the mid-1st millennium B.C. prophets actually wrote by their own hand what we are reading in our Bibles. Rather they used intellectual scribes, which was usual and normal. The Prophets, the direct receivers of God's oracles, were certainly literate to a modest level, but most were not highly trained in the academic discipline of writing and literature skills. We know this because we are usually informed in the prophet's own books... most often in the superscription to begin their book... that these were just ordinary men, suddenly plucked out of whatever craft or skill or trade they were making their living by, so as to serve God by delivering His oracle. Most of them would have necessarily needed the highly honed skills of professional

scribes. So, God to Prophet to Scribe to the reader was the usual and customary path, although not in every single instance. This is important because contained within that ancient literary prophetic structure were embedded ways to help understand what the Prophetic Oracle meant to impart to God's people. This is why so many of this roughly 300-year era of Prophets have, and continue to, at times baffle Western scholars because the way these prophecies are worded, their thoughts structured, and even the grammar involved, doesn't seem like it is properly ordered according to modern Western scholarly theories and standards. And this means that often these scholars throw up their hands and simply declare that "obviously" this Prophet's words have become corrupted along the way or were worded incorrectly from the beginning. So, unless we substitute that particular scholar's opinion on what those words should have been, then (according to these same Bible scholars) there is no sense to be made of it.

Nahum is without doubt the prime example... exhibit number 1... perhaps the most challenging example of all I have been telling you about. I know it's a lot to take in, and you'll remember only bits and pieces. That's fine. My goal was to make you aware that this matter exists, it is real, and the serious effects it can have on what we read and how we interpret the meaning. It will definitely have some effect on how I teach it to you. Let's move on.

The truth is no one knows who Nahum was. Even where he is said to be from is a mystery. He identifies himself as an Elkoshite. That could be referring to a clan, or it could be indicating a place; we just don't know. We also don't know anything about his background. He could have been a simple farmer or tradesman, or he could've been an intellectual. In fact, he might even have been a scribe, considering the intricacy of his writings. Anything I or anyone else could come up with as plausible would still be pure speculation.

The time of this prophecy and the backdrop for it is most important. The bulk of Asia and the Middle East, and parts of North Africa, were dominated in this era of the late 7th century B.C. by the Assyrian Empire. Assyria had been a most powerful nation since at least 1100 B.C. (that is, well before the time of Kings Saul and David, when Israel was still being ruled tribe-by-tribe by Judges). We encounter the actual words Asshur or Assyria only a couple of

times in Nahum, but we encounter the name of Assyria's capital, Nineveh (which represents Assyria) 3 times, once in each of the 3 chapters of the book. Asshur and Assyria are, and Nineveh very nearly, synonymous terms. The difference is that Asshur is the formal name of the god of the nation of Assyria.

Nahum prophesied in the mid-600's B.C. Very likely he was not yet born when Assyria attacked and conquered Samaria, the capital of Israel's Northern Kingdom, and in the succeeding few years Assyria emptied the 10 tribes of Israel from their land. What Nahum was dealing with and prophesying about, then, was the punishment God was going to inflict upon Assyria for having been so cruel to Israel. And as tends to happen, the main attack of one nation upon another would first be on its greatest city or its capital city, which for Assyria was Nineveh.

We could spend a great deal of time focusing on Assyria's amazing and most interesting history, if for no other reason than it played an important role in the history of Israel in the Promised Land from around 1100 B.C. until Assyria's fall at the turn of the 7th to the 6th century B.C. I'll sum it up by saying that Egypt was always a target for them, and that meant traversing Israel to get there. In 663 B.C., Assyria conquered most of Egypt, going as far south as Thebes. In Nahum, Thebes was called No-Amon, and in later times it was also called Luxor (which, if you were to visit Egypt today is what that place is still called). Assyria was noted for its savagery, brutality and cruelty.

There has always been controversy over exactly when this prophecy of Nahum about Nineveh was finally fulfilled. Most scholars have settled on the date of 612 B.C. when Nineveh was conquered by an invasion of Babylon along with their ally the Medes. Some argue for a date about 15 years earlier when Assyria's king Ashurbanipal was killed in 627 B.C., but in my estimation that was only the date when Assyria started down a greatly weakened road. Here's the thing: in ancient times, especially, invasions and the eventual conquering of a people tended to occur over a period of several years; it wasn't a single event. So, to try to assign a specific date is misleading. In that era fighting could only happen in good weather. So, there was a season for war, and then followed by a season when everyone could put up their weapons for a time

and go home because the weather conditions didn't allow for it. It is still that way in this world, although to a lesser degree.

We will learn in Nahum that people who defy God's long-ago given basic morality through violence, atrocities against humanity, long term oppression, and greed for more and more territory to lord over, will eventually be His targets for anger and wrath. Assyria was one of the worst offenders of all time. Nahum's prophecy was, interestingly enough, as much directed towards the people of Nineveh and Assyria as it was to Judeans, to tell them what God was going to do. Going back to the beginning of this introduction to Nahum, and hopefully now having a better handle on the ways of Assyrian thought that was essentially the same as Babylonian thought, that had heavily influenced Hebrew thought, about math, music, theology, etc. as being both mysterious and predictable, and about how the Universe and humanity worked in harmony, it probably helps to explain why Nahum structured his prophecy as he did. That is, the Assyrians would have recognized not only the meaning of the words but also the embedded meaning inside of its literary structure.

I think what I've given you today is sufficient background before in the next lesson when we open the Book of Nahum and begin to unpack its words. More background and context will immediately begin to pour out, as will examples of what I have taught to you, and so we'll discuss them as we come upon them.