

THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Lesson 2, Chapter 1

We're going to open the 1st chapter of Nahum today. Last time we met was the Introduction to Nahum in which we spent quite a long time on technical matters about this complex book. We talked about the structure of the book, which is hidden from view unless read in the Hebrew language. Even then, for modern folks including the most scholarly, the way it is written and the way it is constructed is quite unique and cryptic. It is written primarily in Hebrew poetry, but also it employs several strange-to-us literary features such as acrostics, telestiches, base-60 math, and more.

I won't review our introduction about these technical, but important, features of the book, but it would be a mistake to skip over it and to go right to our exegetical study of chapter 1. However, I will mention a couple of things about the author and the backdrop of the times he lived that we did cover briefly in the introduction.

The first verse of chapter 1 is:

CJB Nahum 1:1 *This is a prophecy about Ninveh, the book of the vision of Nachum the Elkoshi:*

This is the one and only time we'll hear Nahum's name in the entire book. Like most books of the Old Testament, this first verse is a superscription. A superscription is a brief introduction that usually reveals the author and summarizes (from the 30,000 ft. view) what his book is about. No matter what you might hear or read from commentaries or from Bible teachers, the reality is we get no other information about the author than what is contained in the superscription. Here we read that he is an Elkoshi (an Elkoshite). We don't know whether this is speaking of his family heritage or the place he is from. We don't know what he did or who he was prior to receiving and passing along this prophecy given to him by God.

The way his book is structured says that either he is supremely knowledgeable and talented in writing, or he has given the oracle as he received it from God to a scribe

to structure and write down. Again, there is no way to know. Most biblical prophets were ordinary men who were farmers, shepherds, craftsmen, or the like. They had no formal training in literature and were but mildly literate. So, those other Prophets no doubt used the services of a professional scribe to one degree or another to have their prophecies documented.

The meaning of his name (Nahum) is only generally understood as something like "full of consolation" or "full of comfort". He lived in a time, around the mid-600's B.C., when the Assyrian empire had peaked in its power, scope, and influence and likely had begun its descent. The name "Assyria" is a play on the word "Asshur". Asshur is the name of the chief god of Assyria, a polytheistic culture of several gods and goddesses, each with their own temple and priesthood. We read in many places in the Bible about the trouble Assyria caused for Israel; the worst being when late in the 8th century B.C. they overran the northern kingdom of Ephraim/Israel, and exiled and scattered those 10 tribes of Israel that had lived there, to

places all over the Asian Continent, even into northern Africa.

To help us get a handle on where Nahum fits in a timeframe of the various Prophets, he must be very close to the time of Isaiah and Micah, and both of these Prophets may still have been alive when Nahum was around. This means Nahum was living when King Hezekiah of Judah was reigning. There are a number of close resemblances between sections of Nahum and Isaiah; most likely Nahum borrowing directly from Isaiah's works. That is not uncommon among the Prophets.

Nahum has a single topic: the end of the capital city of Assyria, which was Nineveh. However, when talking about a foreign nation invading and conquering another nation's capital, that represents the conquering of the nation as a whole. So, this is about the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. This downfall is described as being something Yehoveh did as an act of divine wrath upon them for their terrible treatment of Israel. In a word, it was an act of vengeance, and "vengeance" in the sense of justice.

Let's read the 1st chapter of Nahum.

READ NAHUM CHAPTER 1 all

When the first verse refers to the "book" that Nahum received from God, the Hebrew word is *sepher*. This term refers to a written document, written down on any sort of material, in most any format. In Nahum's day, the way we think of books with bound pages didn't exist. Rather, it was characters either scratched onto clay tablets, scribed onto stone stelae, inked on to various types of animal skins, or as in Egypt, inked onto papyrus, which was then rolled up as a scroll. What we think of as a book is called a codex. And, that form of documentation was in its early stages around the time of Paul, but not in the Hebrew world. So, in the end, at Nahum's stage of history, *sepher* was a general term that just meant it was now written down in some manner. In fact, while those books that came earlier than Nahum were almost always at first handed down orally, this very likely meant that Nahum was immediately written down. That is, the era of

everything being handed down orally prior to eventually becoming written, was inching towards a close.

Nahum says that the means he acquired this prophecy was a vision (at least that is how it is usually translated into English). The Hebrew word is **hazon**. **Hazon** is nearly exclusively used in relation to prophecy, and it does NOT necessarily mean that the prophet "saw" something with his eyes. Rather, it is divine truth that came to that prophet by means of some inspired revelation in his mind. Further, in times when **hazon** more meant something that produced a visual image, those images were nearly always of something in Heaven. So, that means the eyes were not involved.

The further we go back in time to the earliest books, we find that **hazon**... visions... came at night in a condition of sleep. Later on, **hazon** just came to mean a divinely given prophecy... however it might have occurred. That is nearly certainly how it was by Nahum's day.

Before we move on to verse 2, I'll alert you to something we'll soon see that I spoke about in the Introduction to Nahum. The final word to this superscription begins a telestich that will ultimately spell out God's name. A telestich takes the final letter of a series of words to form a name or a phrase. We'll see this particular telestich develop by taking the final letters of the final words of Nahum chapter 1, verses 1, 2a, 2b, and 3a. Here's the thing to understand; we can only see this in Hebrew. Second, we can only see this within the Hebrew poetic structure of the original. That is, while in English and other language translations we number things by verses, and we tend to write out the scriptures in full sentences involving full margin to margin lines of print in our Bibles, that is far from how it was written down in Hebrew. Some Bibles attempt to write it out in a poetic style with shortened lines (like the CJB does), but it doesn't always hit the mark. So, they typically use the wrong criteria to determine what a line of poetry amounts to...where it begins, and where it ends and goes onto the next line. This, again, is because while in Western literature, poems almost always are based on rhyming, that is not how

Hebrew poetry was usually created. The Hebrews used a few different methods ... to determine the beginning and ending of a line of poetry. Only quite recently... the 21st century... has a better understanding of this emerged.

For the sake of being able to explain this poetic literary structure, scholars will speak sometimes of verses by using both a number and a letter; like as in verse 1a and verse 1b. 1a simply means the first words of verse 1, and 1b then means the later or perhaps final words of verse 1. At least it is used this way as it pertains to how it is written down in English and in the way we traditionally number and order verses. That can be a bit difficult to comprehend, but it operates very much like Hebrew months as they relate to our modern Gregorian calendar months. In other words, the 2 calendar systems don't line up; rather they overlap. For instance, we cannot say that the Hebrew month of Tishri corresponds to September, because in reality Tishri overlaps parts of the months of September and October. Let's move on now to verse 2. We're going to look at two different versions to give us a better view of the content.

CJB Nahum 1:2 *Yehoveh is a jealous and vengeful God. Yehoveh avenges; he knows how to be angry. Yehoveh takes vengeance on his foes and stores up wrath for his enemies.*

YLT Nahum 1:2 *A God zealous and avenging is Jehovah, An avenger is Jehovah, and possessing fury. An avenger is Jehovah on His adversaries, And He is watching for His enemies.*

Please notice that as in some earlier books, I've commented on, when quoting the CJB I will often substitute the word "Yehoveh" where the CJB has written in all caps ADONAI. This is because Yehoveh is what is actually there in the Holy Scriptures. The word ADONAI is used by Jews because of a tradition dating back the 4th century B.C. that forbids the formal name of God to be written or spoken. I will continue to do that from time to time in our study of Nahum.

Many Bible scholars have recently noticed that because of the structure of Nahum's book, verses 1 – 10 are very much a psalm about God's vengeance on Nineveh. The CJB, as do other major Bible versions, reorders the words of verse 2 for the sake of English. The Youngs Literal Translation version comes closer to keeping them in the same order as we find in the Hebrew. Notice how in the YLT, the first words are "a God". Better would be if the participle "a" was left out. This is because the Hebrew begins with the word **EI**. **EI** is a very ancient word that most literally indicates the chief god of many gods. I find it odd to find that word used here, and so a lot of scholars say that this was a redaction by some editor when this book was copied. El (or Il in Canaanite) mostly referred to Baal. It does NOT actually properly or literally mean God even though nearly all Bible versions will use the word God. So, by the time we reach the later Prophets, the use of the word El as referring to Yehoveh had greatly diminished, often never appearing at all. So, why do we find it used here in Nahum who is one of the latest Prophets? Simply, it has to do with the amount of Hebrew letters and the accents used to form a line of poetry. One

element of Hebrew poetry uses the amount of letters in a word, and at other times the amount and place of accented syllables in a series of words, to determine what constitutes a line of poetry because the Hebrew letters were assigned number values. So, when a set of poetic words were added up according to the number value assigned to each letter, it had much to do with when a line of poetry began and ended. Therefore, it was necessary (in Nahum's mind and his way to create a poetic structure) to use the ancient term El to refer to God rather than something else, otherwise it would have interfered with the structure. Bottom line: while a studied Bible student might find it strange to find the term El used here and wonder why, this is not mysterious nor about precision of meaning; it is about precision of word count used to form a complete line of poetry. So, this is where my explanation for the need of "eye discipline" in our Introduction to Nahum begins to appear. We must not try to ponder very much on, or let our eye too much notice, regarding Nahum's strange choice of words for God by using El; rather, it just has to do with making it work

within his poetic literary structure than using a more common and precise word for the God of Israel.

In verse 2 God is said to be jealous. Thankfully, the YLT says zealous. The Hebrew is **qanno**. Indeed, it can mean "jealous". The problem is what the term jealous means to Westerners, especially over the last couple of hundred years. We are not to think of it in human psychological terms of something that is pretty negative, if not petty. In our modern way of speaking the word zealous comes much closer to the sense of **qanno**. It is a word of intensity and not envy. It is not about the "green eyed monster". Biblically this word is always in reference to God and never to people. In the next stanza that says (as usually translated) "Yehoveh avenges and is full of wrath", that is off the mark. I think that is because there is a word here that bothers both Jews and Christians. That word is "ba'al". What this verse actually says is "Yehoveh avenges and is the ba'al of wrath" (no wonder this has caused much consternation). In Hebrew this reads **ba'al hemah**. And ba'al of wrath or lord of wrath is correct since ba'al

came to be used both as a proper name for the chief Canaanite god, and as a noun that means lord or master.

Helpfully, we find this same Hebrew phrase used in Proverbs so, we can get a better idea of what it means.

^{YLT} **Proverbs 29:22** *An angry man stirreth up contention, And a furious man is multiplying transgression.*

Once again, reticent scholars have rendered **ba'al hemah** as "a furious man" to avoid dealing with the sensitive word **ba'al**. However, it turns out that we need not take this literally. Rather, **ba'al hemah** is an idiom... a figure of speech. As such, all it means in this verse in Proverbs and in Nahum is that Yehoveh is capable of becoming quite angry. So, notice what we talked about a short time ago that earlier in this same verse, it opens with the word **EI**. Thus, in typical Hebrew poetry, we find parallelism created by the author between the first half of the verse with **EI**, and the second half with **ba'al**. After all, El and Baal had always been coupled together in ancient days.

Then add in the matter of poetic word count and we understand why these words and this way of explaining was chosen. For the sake of helping to get this lodged in our minds, I'll be a bit repetitive. Nahum is complicated, and the super technical side not only of Hebrew poetry but also of the structure of this book in a way to give us hidden meanings is what is at play here. Much of this would have been noticed by the more literate people in Nahum's general era; but to us in the modern West, we've had no knowledge of this reality and so it can seem so difficult to grasp. And, it certainly is, so don't be discouraged!

In this verse, the Hebrew root word **naqam** is used 3 times. It means to avenge or to take vengeance. The first time it is used describes something God can and will do: avenge. The second time it is used, it more describes His character as avenger. The third time explains who can expect His vengeance; it is His enemies. In the final stanza of this verse (as it appears in English) we read "He is watching for His enemies" or "He stores up wrath for His enemies" or something similar. However, it leaves out

a Hebrew word in this passage: **noter**. **Noter** introduces the idea of something that is long term. It lasts for a long time. So, God's wrath upon His enemies lasts a long time. However, this idea is here because of what verse 3 opens with: that God is slow to anger. The intent is to say that God is greatly patient, but when justice eventually demands that He takes action, it is not only terrible it can also be long lasting.

^{CJB} **Nahum 1:3** ***Yehoveh is slow to anger, but great in power; and he does not leave the guilty unpunished. Yehoveh's path is in the whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.***

Here is some comfort for us all. Generally speaking, in the Bible we find that God's anger is mentioned in connection with His enemies 3 times more often than with His people. So, while the ending of verse 2 connects with the beginning of verse 3, in the sense that God can get terribly angry, but He is very slow to reach such a stage of deploying His wrathfulness, the beginning of verse 3 is also in parallel with the next statement in verse 3 which

is: "but great in power". "Great in power" is in Hebrew ***gadol koah***. Every use of this term in the ***Tanakh*** refers to God's grace. Even so, note the balancing act. Yes, Yehoveh can become burning with anger and take awful vengeance even on His own people. On the other hand, it takes a lot to get Him to that point. A person or a nation doesn't ping-pong back and forth by doing good one day, and then sliding into a sin the next, and so God pounces on you for it. It could eventually get that way, but by His grace, He exhibits a marvelous patience that none of us mere earthlings will ever be able to match... or deserve to receive.

And yet, just because He doesn't pour out angry wrath on a person or a nation doesn't mean that punishment isn't coming. So, where is that balance point between His wrath and His grace? In comparison to how long He will show His grace by not destroying us by His anger, how long will He hold it against us and keep on punishing us once He decides to do so? That answer was given around 7 centuries before Nahum's time.

CJB Exodus 34:6-7 ⁶ Yehoveh passed before him and proclaimed: "YUD-HEH-VAV-HEH!!! Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh is God, merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in grace and truth; ⁷ showing grace to the thousandth generation, forgiving offenses, crimes and sins; yet not exonerating the guilty, but causing the negative effects of the parents' offenses to be experienced by their children and grandchildren, and even by the third and fourth generations."

What did we just hear? God will display His mercy, grace, and forgiveness to His people for 1000 generations. While He won't exonerate the guilty, His anger will be but for 3 or 4 generations. While we should not take such numbers as absolute and literal, the point is that the weight of God's grace versus His vengeance falls way out of proportion to the side of mercy and compassion. Just as it means that in Exodus, so does it mean that in Nahum. Even so, the extent of the wrath that God shows to His people as compared to His perennial enemies, is also way out of proportion in favor of His people. So, Nineveh

(Assyria) is going to be destroyed permanently as punishment. But as for Israel? It follows that Cycle of Sin pattern we've looked at a few dozen times in Torah Class. That is, God will not permanently destroy His people. After His wrath on His own people comes a promise of restoration. Not so for His wicked enemies. Israel NEVER became God's wicked enemy and so they are advancing steadily... kind of 2 steps forward and one back... towards a perfection of restoration and an end of the Cycle of Sin.

Before we get to the final half of verse 3, let's find that hidden telestich of the poetic lines of 1, 2a, 2b, and 3a. Remember: do not confuse the beginning and end of a Hebrew line of poetry with verses and verse numbers in the Bible. Those chapter and verse numbers only happened for the first time around 1000 A.D. And remember that this hidden telestich can only be seen in Hebrew. So, here it goes:

The last word of the first line is **ha-elqoshi** (in English, the Elkoshite). The final letter is a Yud.

The last word of the second line is **hemah** (in English, wrath). The final letter is a Heh.

The last word of the third line is **lesarav** (in English, his adversaries). The final letter is Vav.

The last word of the fourth line is **yenaqqeh** (in English, acquit). The final letter is a Heh. We wind up with Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh... Yehoveh... God's formal name. So, there is our first hidden meaning in Nahum that is only revealed by the way the words are poetically structured. I won't do this in every case, but I wanted you to see that once you understand how this works, suddenly these words start to pop out. And, when English translations modify the original text, it disappears.

The final half of verse 3 speaks of God's path as being like the whirlwind and the storm. The picture here is of God as the divine warrior. He is marching onward, unstoppable (even invisibly) to battle with the evil forces, here represented both literally and symbolically as Assyria. This is speaking of Holy War against the Assyrian Empire.

When Yehoveh ordains a war, only then is it a true Holy War. And when it is a Holy War, the outcome is decided before the first battle is fought.

Now is a good time to remember the Prophet Jonah, whom God sent to this same Nineveh around a century earlier than Nahum, with the hope of them averting God's wrath. Recall that Jonah didn't want to go; he hated Assyria and it made no sense to him that Yehoveh would actually want to try to rescue these barbarians by giving them a chance to repent. Jonah tried to run away from this task and so develops the story of the storm at sea, Jonah being tossed overboard, and then swallowed up by some huge fish. Soon, rather comically I think, he is spit up and discharged onto the shore so that he can go to Nineveh. The result of his going to Nineveh with the warning of disaster if they didn't repent from their ways was effective and so God backed off. Well, Nahum is the rest of that story. Nineveh did repent because of Jonah, but in a few years went right back to their old ways. You will notice as we proceed through Nahum that no offer of repentance was offered again to Nineveh. Their end was certain... there would be no reprieve. Nahum's prophecy is but an announcement of Nineveh's destruction. But even more, their end was to be permanent with no hope of ever being restored.

In Hebrew the whirlwind and the storm form a poetic word pair. In Hebrew it is **supah** and **se'arah**. **Supah** more literally means destructive wind. **Se'arah** more literally means gale. "And clouds are the dust of His feet" is rather accurately translated. Here's the thing: a number of times in the Bible we hear of dust being stirred up by humans walking on the dirt. Why? Because humans' place on earth is that we stand on the ground, but above us is the sky with its clouds and celestial objects, and the sky is the abode of God. So, for God, His imagined standing place is upon the clouds. We walk on dirt and stir it up; He walks on clouds and stirs them up. It's no more complicated than that.

^{CJB} **Nahum 1:4** ***He rebukes the sea and leaves it dry, he dries up all the rivers. Bashan and the Karmel languish; the flower of the L'vanon withers.***

I think the YLT helps us a bit in getting the point of this verse.

YLT Nahum 1:4 *He is pushing against a sea, and drieth it up, Yea, all the floods He hath made dry, Languishing are Bashan and Carmel, Yea, the flower of Lebanon is languishing.*

This verse opens with the Hebrew **go-er**, which is a form of the root word **ga'ar**. Nearly all Bible versions translate it to "rebukes". Notice that the YLT chooses "pushing against", because this is a stronger term than rebuke.

Professor Kennedy argues that the better English word is "blasts", because it is more severe and very strong.

"Rebuke" and even "pushing against" he thinks is too weak. This statement is meant to evoke a memory of the Red Sea parting. It took a very strong divine force to do this. Considering the word pair to end the previous verse that speaks of strong winds, then blasts is meant to continue the idea of a violent and strong action of God.

Even so, this is not meant to only refer to the Red Sea parting, but to every sea and river on earth, which all-powerful Yehoveh can smite in His wrath, and cause them to dry up. Therefore, in the 2nd half of this verse, it speaks

of Bashan and Carmel being affected. Bashan and Carmel were particularly fertile areas of Israel, and this due to the abundant availability of water. But, by means of God-ordained drought, Bashan and Carmel lost their fertility. Lebanon with its world- renowned forests, here called the flower of Lebanon as an expression of beauty, also suffered by drought. Climate change to either cause devastation or abundance is in the province of God; it is not in the control of humans nor in serendipity. He is omnipotent; humans and technology are not. This message in Nahum makes this so very clear that when the devastating side of climate change happens, it is God that is behind it. Similarly, when the abundant side of climate change happens, it is this same God that is behind it. Modern people, even Believers, would call this primitive superstition. The Bible calls it fact. There is no Mother Nature to determine feast or famine; there is only Father God.

^{CJB} Nahum 1:5 *The mountains quake before him, and the hills dissolve; the earth collapses in his presence, the world and everyone living in it.*

Verse 5 is but a continuation of thought carried over from verse 4, but essentially it widens the scope of what is affected when the divine warrior (Yehoveh) brings His presence from Heaven to Earth. While plant life can be devastated by God through control of the climate (which verse 4 speaks about), so can the mountains be shaken and even melted down and dissolved by Yehoveh's limitless power (which is what verse 5 speaks about). As we have seen before in other and earlier Torah Class book studies, the mountains shaking and the earth trembling are the common responses of our planet to God's presence on earth... that is, a theophany. All of nature and all of the human population must recognize Yehoveh's manifestations and power over the realm of nature. Nothing and no one is exempted.

I have observed what the melting away of mountains can look like. In Southern California, during a particularly wet rainy season, I have seen hills quite literally dissolve and just flow away taking many homes with them. There is much video footage of Mt. St. Helens in Washington State,

a one-time dormant volcano, suddenly coming to life and with its eruption a goodly portion of that huge mountain simply coming off and millions of tons of dirt and rock roll downward to the valley beneath. This is what we are to mentally picture as we read these dramatic and poetic words of Nahum 1:5.

From purely a literary standpoint, the pairing of the words mountain and hill are common in the Bible. **Har** (meaning mountain) and **gibah** (meaning hill) come from the world of mythical qualities of mountains and hills. Mountains were thought to be the cosmic pillars of the earth, while hills were the raised places where temples and altars were placed since it was believed that this brought humans closer to the gods who lived in the heights. More often than not, this word pair is mostly synonymous. That is, we're not to focus on any inherent differences between hills and mountains, because the difference is not the point. Even to this day those differences are quite subjective (when does a hill become a mountain?). Rather the issue is the "high places" they are, and the strength and stability that mountains and hills represent. And the

fact that the ancients believed that these were the oldest existing parts of the Creation process.

Just for the sake of putting these Hebrew thoughts in perspective, long before Abraham the Mesopotamian world thought in the same terms and we find it in written in some of the most ancient literature ever discovered. In a very old Mesopotamian hymn to the god Adad, found in cuneiform tablets, we read:

In the Lord's (Baal's) anger the heavens will shake, in Adad's anger the earth will tremble, the great mountains will crumble.

The resemblance between this and Nahum's words cannot be ignored. They both express the same kind of thought. So, long before the Hebrews existed, and even later when the Bible was written, this cosmic understanding of the ancient Mesopotamians about gods and what their capabilities were, and what their appearance on earth caused, was held as common knowledge.

CJB Nahum 1:6 *Who can withstand his fury? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, the rocks broken to pieces before him*

What follows in verse 6 is a wisdom saying. That is, if what verses 4 and 5 say are true, then it is impossible that any human being could succeed in shielding himself from, or defeating in some way, the wrath of God.

Because Nahum essentially tells the rest of the story of what commenced with Jonah regarding Nineveh, then it is not surprising we would find the same thought as is found in Joel, who lived at the same time as Jonah.

CJB Joel 2:11 *Yehoveh shouts orders to his forces- his army is immense, mighty, and it does what he says. For great is the Day of Yehoveh, fearsome, terrifying! Who can endure it?*

A God that can by His presence alone destroy geographic features, cause the earth to crumble and the climate to shift... all at His command... cannot be withstood and is not to be trifled with. The conclusion that any reasonable

person ought to come to who has heard or read what Nahum has just said, is that any man who thinks He can stand up against God's indignation and wrath is foolish beyond measure. Yes, Nineveh *is* doomed and there is nothing they might do to stop it.

So, what does the wise man do in the face of such awesome, unimaginable power of God? Submit. Pursue peace with God at all costs. The amazing part of that requirement is that someone else paid for the biggest part of what pursuit of peace with Him requires. That person was Yeshua of Nazareth. Our part is to repent of our ways, and to trust in Yeshua, and then to begin to obey God faithfully and wholeheartedly. There is no way to achieve that peace through personal merit, nor by living a perfect enough life (in our own estimation). But the bulk of humanity still attempts to do just that. While Yeshua would not arrive for another 600 years after Nahum, the plan is laid out and the consequences for rejecting it are highlighted by what is about to happen to Nineveh.

We'll resume our study of Nahum next time.