The West as Nineveh: How Does Nahum's Message of Judgement Apply to Today?

Julie Woods, who is doing her PhD in Durham, is fascinated with the so-called 'hard' passages of the Bible, particularly the oracles of judgement, and how we handle them as Christian Scripture today. Nahum 'won her sympathy vote ... because the church seems to ignore him'.

Introduction

All Scripture is inspired by God – but maybe with the exception of Nahum, we think.¹ Along with Obadiah and Haggai, it has no place in the three-year lectionary and is rarely preached. The book of Nahum is brutal and bloody, callous and cruel and ‘we often wish Nahum were not in the canon’² for God is the one who incites and executes terrible judgement upon Assyria. These punishments are ‘not softened by constantly remembering how mean the Assyrians were’,³ yet softening is the approach taken by many who do write or preach on Nahum.

Along with espousing the wickedness of Assyria, many commentators are at pains to point out that the oracle is ‘full of comfort’⁴ for Judah, that Nahum must be read alongside the more forgiving book of Jonah, balanced with the rest of the Book of the Twelve,⁵ and taken in context with the rest of Scripture. ‘If Nahum’s words seem harsh, then it is because he must use appropriate literary convention to express the seriousness of

¹ Achtemeier, E. Preaching from the Old Testament (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 127.
the situation’. Only when the caveats are in place and Nahum has been satisfactorily muzzled is he allowed to mutter in muffled tones his bold, crude prophecy.

The book’s most redeeming feature is that it is regarded by many as the ‘top most rung of sublime literature’ and with the discovery in the late nineteenth century of the incomplete and broken acrostic hymn found in the first chapter, much ink has been spilt on Nahum’s literary qualities. It has sometimes been treated as ‘a bad book written well’. As this paper will reveal, a number of commentators of Nahum do give it the fair hearing any book within the canon of Scriptures deserves.

The first part of this article will examine the theological context of the relationship between Israel and the nations within the broader framework of the Hebrew Bible. The hypothesis is that the Hebrew Bible is as missiologically focused as the NT. Although this is not an exegetical work on the book of Nahum, this first section will primarily discuss the relevant exegetical issues.

The second section of the essay will discuss God’s judgement of Nineveh (the capital city of Assyria) and seek to answer why Assyria was judged. This will be achieved by critically assessing the sins of Assyria (from both Scriptural and non-canonical sources) which culminated in God’s outpouring of his wrath and searching for underlying universal moral principles.

Having analysed the framework of Israel and the nations in relation to God’s overall plan for both, the third section will concentrate on the hermeneutical application of Nahum to the contemporary Western world. ‘Nahum’s message has become the prototype of the destruction of all evil – from that of Nineveh to Nazi Germany to the final end of all evil like that of Babylon in Revelation 18.’ To apply the message in Nahum to inhumane oppressors such as Hitler and Stalin may give more validity to the LORD’s violent judgements, but is it sound hermeneutics to ‘substitute

“Assyria” with the oppressor of your choice? This section will begin with a summary of the hermeneutical principles that I am using and conclude with a survey of the various missiological responses to Nahum.

Finally, I will draw together the results and give my concluding comments.

The terms ‘Hebrew Bible’ and ‘Old Testament’ (OT) will be used interchangeably. Since I do not refer to the northern kingdom of Israel, the term ‘Israel’ is used to refer to the whole of Israel, both northern and southern kingdoms. The term ‘Judah’, naturally, designates the southern kingdom.

**Nahum in its Hermeneutical and Missiological Context**

**Book of Nahum**

There is remarkably little dispute over the authorship, date and state of the text of Nahum (which, according to Jewish tradition, follows Jonah in the canon\(^\text{12}\)). The authorship remains unchallenged, in part, because not much is known about the man Nahum, or about Elkosh, the district from where he came. Almost all commentators agree that Nahum was written somewhere between 663 BCE when Thebes fell, (since the fall of Thebes is referred to in Nahum 3:10), and 612 BCE when Nineveh fell. Some maintain that it was written soon after the fall of Nineveh. Even so, this only extends the date from 612 to 608 BCE.\(^\text{13}\) Since Nahum does not mention the sins of Judah, some have speculated that it was written at the beginning of Josiah’s reforms in 621 BCE.\(^\text{14}\)

Relatively recent discoveries of scrolls of Nahum have shown no significant textual variations. These works include the Pesher of Nahum (4QpNah) found in Qumran, the Hebrew Scroll of the Minor Prophets from Wadi Murabba‘at (Mur 88) and the Greek fragments of the Minor Prophets from Nahal Hever (8 Hev XIIgr).\(^\text{15}\)

Although ‘an oracle concerning Nineveh’ (Nah. 1:1), the book has

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
always been part of the Jewish Scriptures. This raises the question, was Nahum intended for Judah or Nineveh? Nahum (meaning ‘comfort’) was never part of the oral tradition but, unusually, was delivered as a book (Nah. 1:1). Commentators have concluded, therefore, that the knowledge that God would avenge Judah and bring an end to her suffering under Assyria was probably intended to comfort Judah.\(^{16}\)

Most commentators subscribe to a single authorship of the oracle and ascribe to the author a distinct literary style. This style includes use of metaphors (e.g. 2:11ff., 3:4ff.; 3:11, 12, 13; 2:15ff.), an ambiguous use of ‘you’ (after 1:1 Nineveh is not mentioned by name again in the Hebrew until 2:9) and mixed use of gender. In the 1900s attempts were made to show that Nahum was composed for various festivals but these were largely rejected. The theory receiving most interest was that of J. Watts (1975) who said that it was part of a ‘Day of the LORD’ liturgical expression.\(^{17}\)

The book begins benignly and although the oracle opens with the words, ‘The LORD is a jealous and avenging God … and is filled with wrath’ (Nah. 1:2), it is impersonal and general until 1:8. Myers O’Brien refers to this section as a hymn to the Divine Warrior.\(^{18}\) The rest of chapter one continues on the theme of judgement, juxtaposed with salvation for Judah. Chapter two is a striking and detailed vision of Nineveh’s destruction, which is followed by taunts, insults and woe oracles that continue into chapter three. The prophecy ends with the assertion that everyone who hears of Nineveh’s fall will clap their hands, ‘for who has not felt your endless cruelty?’ (Nah. 3:19). Jonah is the only other book of the Bible to end with a rhetorical question.\(^{19}\)

*The Book of the Twelve and the Day of the LORD*

House and others are keen to take the Book of the Twelve as a single unit, noting that it has been seen as such for a long time.\(^{20}\) (Indeed this was the original view and the first references to the minor prophets is of a single

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book of twelve.  

Although it is ‘nonsense to speak of twelve books displaying unity in any comprehensive sense’, they assert that to read one of the Twelve out of context is to misunderstand it.

The idea of reading several books as a cohesive whole began with the Pentateuch, followed by the Psalter and then the Book of the Twelve.

Ball considers Nahum to be the missing oracle in Isaiah that speaks of the final demise of Assyria, and Christensen’s work shows the ‘densely intertextual character’ of Nahum with Isaiah. O’Brien shows textual links to Jeremiah whilst others deem Nahum and Habakkuk to be two halves of the same oracle. The more usual stance, however, is that Nahum belongs firmly to the Book of the Twelve.

The common theme running through the Book of the Twelve is that of the Day of YHWH and its eschatological implication. The Day of YHWH is only referred to implicitly in Nahum so that, even in works dedicated to expounding the Book of the Twelve, Nahum is once again relegated to receiving comparatively little mention. ‘Its role and position in the Twelve ... has been overlooked.’

For this reason, although it is important to remember that Nahum is part of a larger work, I prefer to deal with Nahum separately. I will return later, to the theme of the Day of YHWH. Similarly, the idea of God as a Divine Warrior runs throughout Scripture, particularly in the prophets.

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22 House, P.R. The Unity of the Twelve (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 24.
30 House, P.R. The Unity of the Twelve (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 143.
(including The Book of the Twelve) and I will return to this idea in due course.

The Missiological Basis of the Hebrew Bible

Having briefly overviewed Nahum, it is imperative to set it in the framework of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Bosch may agree with Rzepkowski’s assertion that, 'The decisive difference between the Old and the New Testament is mission'\textsuperscript{31} (although he maintains that the OT is fundamental to understanding the new\textsuperscript{32}), but various OT scholars have refuted this. In the *missio Dei* understanding of mission, mission (an attribute of God) is a 'movement from God to the world',\textsuperscript{33} rather than an activity conducted by humans. If one accepts the concept of *missio Dei* then one can agree with Wright and others that the whole framework of the OT is that of mission, particularly that of the covenant.

In the covenant God made with Abram, he promised that Abram would be a great nation, that God would personally bless him, that his name would be great and that he would be a blessing for all the people on earth (Gen. 12:3).\textsuperscript{34} In Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4 and 28:14 the promise that all nations would be blessed through Abram’s seed was repeated.

From the start there was universality in God’s purpose, for his vision included the whole earth. There was also particularity for he chose one man through whom a nation would spring and this nation, Israel, was to be his means to carry out his purpose.\textsuperscript{35}

Israel was to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6 and 49:6) and although God did not send Israel out into the nations\textsuperscript{36} her role was threefold. She was to be a unique testimony to God’s revelation and redemption as his special people; she was to be ethically different and separate as a holy nation. She was also to be a kingdom of kings and priests.\textsuperscript{37} The other nations were under a curse and Israel was to be a blessing to them.\textsuperscript{38} in

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 390.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
what some have defined as ‘centripetal’ mission;\(^{39}\) by attracting the nations to her. When God blessed Israel, the nations would look and fear him (Ps. 67:7), that is, put their trust in him.\(^{40}\) Thus the election of Israel was not the rejection of the nations, but the means of their salvation.\(^{41}\)

**The Eschatological Vision**

The idea of Israel being a light to the nations is one that runs right through the Bible, NT included, and it is a theme with an eschatological perspective.\(^{42}\) The Servant of the LORD in Isaiah 40–55 was to bring both light and salvation to the nations and glory and restoration to Israel. He was to be a combination of justice, gentleness and liberation (Is. 42:1–9), but shrouded in rejection and apparent failure (Is. 49:4; 50:6–8).\(^{43}\) In time the Servant of the LORD (and fulfilment of the seed of Abraham\(^{44}\)) was made manifest in Christ, who was the light to the nations (Matt. 4:15–16 quoting Is. 9:1–2)\(^{45}\) until the day when they would walk by the light of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:24–26).\(^{46}\) Brueggemann notes that the ultimate promise to the nations is the end of hostility and complete shared shalom in him;\(^{47}\) an eschatological hope found in Psalms 47, 87 and 96 and in other prophetic passages.\(^{48}\)

Since Christ was the fulfilment of the seed of Abraham and, himself, became a light to the nations, most commentators conclude that the relationship between Israel and the nations does not exist in the way that

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40 Ibid., 33
41 Ibid., 22
43 Ibid., 709.
46 Ibid., 220.
it did in the OT (some believe that the church has replaced Israel). The nations, therefore, are no longer used to chastise Israel. It is outside the remit of this essay to explore this further, suffice to say, I have accepted this assertion.

The Interdependency of Israel, the Nations and Judgement

From what has been discussed so far one could be mistaken in concluding that the nations have a passive role in God’s plan. Some have argued for a passive role and, whilst the nations were not bound to YHWH in a covenational way, ‘against their will, in spite of themselves, they [were] used by God to accomplish God’s purposes’. Frequently, they were used as tools to chastise a recalcitrant Israel as Judges and the prophets declare. When Israel’s light grew dim, those who were supposed to be beneficiaries of that light were used by God to discipline Israel to make that light shine more brightly. Assyria was one such tool that was used (Is. 10:5, 15; Nah. 1:12) and although Hedlund regards them as ‘his unknowing (unbelieving) instruments’, the nations were not helpless pawns in God’s game of chess. As Brueggemann notes, God punished them when ‘in arrogant boasting and haughty pride’ they went beyond the remit set by God and tried to destroy Israel. It was never God’s plan that Israel be annihilated and he held the nations accountable for not acknowledging that his anger has limits. Isaiah 36–37 seems to imply that Assyria acted on her own accord and in opposition to God in oppressing Judah.

During her time of discipline, the fact that Israel had been defiled in the eyes of the nations was supposed to shame her into returning to her God (Ezek. 22:15–16). The nations, therefore, had a dual purpose: they were the rod of God’s wrath and the shaming element. It pained YHWH to discipline his people because the lack of prosperity in Israel and her

51 Hedlund, R.E. God and the Nations (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 64.
53 Hedlund, R.E. God and the Nations (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 66.
54 Ibid., 65.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 507–508.
dispersion pointed to an inept and inadequate God. Although God was 'prepared to see his name profaned in the sight of the nations in order to purify Israel for himself', in Ezekiel 36:20ff it was concern for his holy name that led him to gather Judah back from exile into her own land. This act demonstrated to both Judah and the nations that YHWH is the covenant God of Israel, a fact that should have caused all to turn and fear him.

Brueggemann purports that God’s dealings with the nations were not always in relation to Israel but as a way of exercising his sovereignty and kingship in the world. He suggests that the oracles against the nations, of which Nahum is one, normally concerned themselves with this type of direct disciplining of the nations. These oracles are addressed to the superpowers and whilst God is not opposed to superpowers, he punishes those who ‘disregard the mandate of heaven’ by being brutal and oppressive.

On the one hand, from Isaiah 10, it appears that Assyria has been used to chasten Israel but on the other hand, according to Brueggemann, it seems in Nahum as if Assyria is being chastised purely on the grounds of political brutality and oppression. Perhaps the two are not mutually exclusive and at this point it is worth considering the sins of Assyria.

Judgement of Assyria’s Sin

Assyria’s Sin

Nahum lists some of Nineveh’s sins: plotting against God (1:9, 11); idolatry (1:14); vile behaviour (1:14); shedding blood, lying and plundering (3:1); enslaving nations (3:4); presumption (3:8); and cruelty (3:19). Imperial greed, which displayed itself in theft and other sins, can also be added to

58 Williams, D.A. Then They will Know That I am the Lord: The Missiological Significance of Ezekiel's Concern for the Nations as Evident in the Use of the Recognition Formula (Unpublished ANCC MA: 1998), 55-56.
60 Ibid., 502–509.
61 Ibid., 513.
62 Ibid., 509.
63 House, P.R. The Unity of the Twelve (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 214.
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the list.\(^64\) Assyria lured weaker nations (3:4) to their ruin; to be carried as prey into the lion’s den (2:12).\(^65\) Calvin suggests Nineveh’s greatest sin was that she oppressed God’s people and that by doing so she outraged God himself.\(^66\)

Nahum, itself is not as explicit as the boasts of Assyria herself, as extant Assyrian reliefs and written records demonstrate. These reliefs show bodies impaled on sticks, tongues being cut out, people being led by lip rings, heads being carried and piled up, dismembered bodies with scattered limbs and severed heads serving as ornamental decoration on walls and structures and totem poles made of human heads.\(^67\) As gruesome as it may seem to Western readers of the 21st century, it was the custom for kings and political powers to wildly exaggerate their claims of success in order to increase their fame\(^68\) and, according to von Soden, ‘to induce their enemies to yield the more readily.’\(^69\)

It is very easy to demonise the enemy, especially when the enemy has provided the written and pictorial record to do so and particularly when doing so makes the bitter pill of God’s bloody vengeance in Nahum slightly easier to swallow. In attempting to demonstrate that God’s punishment fits the crime, there has, perhaps, been a tendency to rely too heavily on these exaggerated records. ‘Shall those whose eyes you have gouged out shed tears at your death? Shall those whose ears and nose you have cut off lament now? Shall the tongues you have chopped off recite your praises?’\(^70\) Compare this with Nahum 3:19.

The Reason for Nineveh’s Judgement

With the debate over the literal interpretation of the Assyrian boasts, it seems sensible (for this paper at least) to restrict the discussion of her sins

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68 Magee (‘Historical Dating’ of ‘Ask_Why’ website) and Burns (quoted in ‘The Assyrian Empire’ website).
69 Magee (‘To Tiglath-pileseser I’ section of ‘Ask_Why’ website).
to those itemised in Nahum. It is, however, possible to say with confidence that Assyria oppressed her enemies and the Assyrian records confirm the severity of this oppression. Therefore, it is possible that Nahum’s message of judgement was directed at Nineveh, irrespective of her treatment of Judah, because, in Brueggemann’s terms, ‘emotive aversion to brutality is located in the heart of [Yhwh].’

However, Judah’s salvation is too closely linked to Assyria’s downfall for the message of judgement to be completely independent of their relationship. There are four judgement oracles in Nahum (1:12–15; 2:1–13; 3:1–7, 8–13), each one bringing salvation to Judah and sometimes judgement and salvation are very closely dovetailed, e.g.

- Judgement (1:9–11)
- Salvation (1:12–13)
- Judgement (1:14)
- Salvation (1:15)
- Judgement (2:1)
- Salvation (2:2)

The jealous covenantal God is pledged to Israel and must execute the terms of the covenant in righteousness. Jealousy and anger are closely linked in the Hebrew Bible as expressions of God’s holiness and, indeed, an assertion of God’s jealousy is how the book of Nahum starts. Eichrodt agrees with Hänel’s premise that the Eiferheiligkeit (literally ‘jealousy–holiness’) is ‘the basic element in the whole OT idea of God.’ Pawson defines jealousy as wanting something that is rightfully yours, as opposed to envy, which is wanting something that is not yours.

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Maier decides that Nineveh is ‘doubly doomed’ because YHWH twice declares, ‘I am against you’ (Nah. 2:13 and 3:5–7). I would propose that Nineveh is doubly doomed because she has been judged according to her atrocities aside of her relationship with Judah (the genre of ‘oracle against the nations’ adding textual support to this conclusion) but also because she has insulted Judah’s jealous covenantal God by not limiting her abuse of power. Whether singularly or doubly doomed, it is worth remembering that prophetic oracles of judgement were avoidable if the people repented (cf. Jonah); in Nahum Nineveh did not.

It is also worth remembering, as Brueggemann does, that great kingdoms rise and fall with no other explanation than divine governance.

*Underlying Principle of Social Justice*

The ethic of doing good deeds and performing acts of social justice stems from the Hebrew Bible itself. Jeremiah 22:16 reads ‘He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?’ declares the LORD.’ The foreigner, the orphan and the widow were well provided for under Israelite covenant law and to do judgement (shaphat) was not only to decide between right and wrong but also to choose to do right; ‘in Hebrew, “to judge” and “to help” are parallel ideas’. When God judges one party, it is often for the deliverance of another.

Osborne warns against turning the prophets into social reformers, for whilst they condemned social injustices, it was only as a part of their overall message of God. Although Osborne may be correct in his assertion that the prophets were not social workers, many authors would assert that justice, including social justice is ‘fundamental to the holiness of God’. Indeed, it is the foundational basis of liberation theology, but many authors, not necessarily calling themselves liberation theologians quote many different verses and passages in support of the argument that social justice is a key element in the Bible (e.g. Is. 1:13–17, 1 John

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80 Ibid., 519.
83 Haughen, G.A. Good News About Injustice (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 70.
84 Wright, Chris J. Living as the People of God (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 37.
3:17–18, 85 Deut. 23:7, 86 Prov. 21:13, 87 Ps. 35:10 88). If one accepts as normative the plethora of verses decrying social injustice, then Nineveh was not judged on an ad hoc basis but according to an underlying universal principle that God is concerned with social justice.

Having considered why Assyria is being punished, it is now prudent to discover how she is punished.

The Divine Warrior and the Day of the Lord

As was stated earlier, the Book of the Twelve appears concerned specifically with the Day of the Lord and the Divine Warrior. Although the Day of YHWH is only implicit in Nahum, the language is similar to those passages that speak of it explicitly. 89 R. H. Charles defined the Day of YHWH as ‘essentially the day on which [YHWH] manifests Himself in victory over his foes’. 90

The Divine Warrior was also linked closely with the eschatological Day of YHWH and the OT prophets looked forward to this day with eager expectation when a mighty deliverer would deliver Israel from her enemies (Zech. 14). 91

This Divine Warrior would not fight with spears and swords but by the might of his word 92 (cf. Nah. 1:14). He was often portrayed as riding on clouds (see Nah. 1:3b) – possibly to surpass Baal who was believed to be a cloud rider 93 – whose coming would tear nature apart (see Nah. 1:4–6). 94 In the majority of cases, the Divine Warrior (who did not need human agents) fought against Israel’s enemies, 95 for he was first and foremost the

89 See Appendix B.
94 Ibid., 790.
Sovereign Lord who avenged his covenant people.96

Longman asserts that although the Divine Warrior image is not the key theme in the Bible, it is, nevertheless, a theme that runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.97 In the NT, Jesus Christ, the Divine Warrior, becomes the eschatological Judge of the world who presides over the final judgement (Jude 14).98

Given the clear themes of the Day of the Lord and the Divine Warrior in Nahum, some have questioned whether the judgement referred to in Nahum (especially considering its severity) takes place on earth or (metaphorically or literally) refers to the final judgement.99 Nahum may well refer to the final judgement, given the context of the Day of YHWH, but most probably primarily it refers to the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. Either interpretation acknowledges that God is sovereign over history and the nations are his tools.

Assyria may have acted out of selfish ambition and greed in oppressing the surrounding vassal states but God used her to afflict Judah. In Nahum, the rule of this great superpower reached an end, for God used the Medes to overthrow her.100

Having considered the exegetical issues of Nineveh and her judgement from God, it is now time to turn to the hermeneutical application.

**How Does Nahum Apply to Today?**

**Hermeneutical Principles**

In the seventh century, Julian of Toledo interpreted the destruction of Nineveh allegorically, mystically and morally.101 It would be wise, therefore,

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101 Ball, E. “‘When the Towers Fall’: Interpreting Nahum as Christian Scripture’, *JSOTS* 300, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 212.
if at this stage the hermeneutical boundaries that I am using were set out.

Kaiser warns against four ways of interpreting the Bible,\textsuperscript{102} but all these can be summarised into one: do not apply the passage within a modern context without having first established a firm foundation in the form of strong exegesis.

Osborne’s guide to interpretation is as follows:

- Determine the surface message
- Determine the deep structure principle behind message
- Note the original situation
- Discover the parallel situation in the modern context
- Decide whether to contextualise at the general or specific level.\textsuperscript{103}

The first two sections have covered the first three steps and it is now time to embark upon the fourth and fifth. As difficult as it might be to know how free one is to draw parallels between the text and the contemporary context ‘the fact that we must do so is inescapable’.\textsuperscript{104}

It has been demonstrated that the ‘missional basis of the Bible’\textsuperscript{105} originates in the OT and that, as part of this focus, one of the underlying principles is that of maintaining justice. Having considered Nineveh’s sins and ascertained that she was judged, in part, because she acted in opposition to this underlying principle, it is now time to turn to consider the West as Nineveh. The missiological implications and possible appropriate responses that result from this contemplation will then be discussed.

\textit{The West as Bloodthirsty Nineveh}

To boast of bloodthirsty exploits (real or imagined) is not the culture of the Western world, which in contrast, prefers to perceive herself in benevolent terms. Atrocities such as torture hit the headlines precisely because they do offend the Westerner. The scandal of the Iraqi war photographs\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 336.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 318.
\textsuperscript{106} BBC News and Washington Post websites
demonstrates the ambiguity of the West. On one hand, the photographs show tortures exacted by the hand of the Western military forces on a powerless people, but on the other hand, the public outrage that followed the publication of the photographs (by the Western media) shows that such brutal behaviour is an anathema to Western culture. Perhaps the disparity reflects the attitudes and behaviour of the ‘common man’ in opposition to ‘the rulers’ or the ‘military power’.

The Bible does not give us a socio-political breakdown of Nineveh, but it is generally considered that the whole of Nahum’s message is addressed to the king of Assyria (3:18). O’Brien notes that it is only in the preceding verse that real people in Assyria are named; guards, merchants and scribes, and with the mention of the king, ‘he’ (1:2; 1:13; 1:14; 2:12–14) is finally identified.107 O’Brien goes further in asserting that, at this point (3:18), Nineveh becomes the victim and no longer the guilty party for she is unprotected by her king.108 Whilst this requires a paradigm shift that may or may not be justified, O’Brien draws attention to an obvious element; not all the individuals in Assyria would have been oppressors and some would have been oppressed. Yet Nineveh was judged.

The fact that Nahum does not talk to an individual till the end of the book, but to a nation, may well indicate that God is concerned with nations, not individuals. Atrocities committed in the name of a nation appear to bring judgement on the whole nation. This may be concerning for those in any nation, but perhaps more so for those in nations who have been, or are deemed to be, superpowers or colonial powers; nations of which the West is comprised.

The West as Oppressive Nineveh

Abuse of power and injustice does not always take the form of brutal murders and tortures.

‘The wealthiest fifth of nations dispose of 84.7 per cent of the world’s combined GNP; its citizens account for 84.2 per cent of world trade and possess 85.5 per cent of savings in domestic accounts.’109 In the 1960s there was general optimism that poverty could be eliminated with the correct agricultural programmes, but since 1960 the gap between the richest and the poorest fifth of nations has more than doubled.110 The

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108 Ibid.
109 ‘From Third World to One World’ on ‘World Socialism’ website.
110 Ibid.
United Nations’ Development Programme (UNDP) reports (1996) that over the past three decades, only fifteen countries enjoyed high growth whilst 89 countries are worse off than they were ten or more years ago. In 70 developing countries, the present income levels are less than they were in the 1960s and 70s.\(^{111}\)

’If we were to examine honestly what has led to this state of affairs, we would have to conclude that it can be summed up in two words – power and greed\(^{112}\) (see Eccl. 4:1).

Developing countries drowned in debt to the richer nations whilst those richer countries exploit them further. One well-known example of this is the coffee farmers around the world who are forced into a cycle of poverty and debt because they are paid less than the costs of production.\(^{113}\) Many of the less developed countries are small and are thus at a great disadvantage when dealing with the Western superpowers.\(^{114}\)

Bof and Elizondo detail the means by which a country becomes rich; through colonial empires or oppressive control of both land and people, through slave labour and harsh working conditions.\(^{115}\) They argue that the West became rich because of her oppressive, unethical practices and that the foundation of her wealth is that of greed and abuse of power. Whether or not one agrees with this analysis, one cannot dismiss the irony easily behind Britain’s boasting of the 1903 Assyrian archaeological finds and Britain seeing it as good for her nationalism to have these finds in her museums.\(^{116}\)

**The West as Nineveh in Opposition to God’s People**

Nineveh persecuted the people of God. Most commentators speak of the people of God in the NT and later as ‘the church’ so the obvious parallel question is to ask whether the West persecutes the people of God, that is, the church. The issue of the treatment of the Jewish people is another question.

Although, historically, committed Christians have been killed by the


\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) ‘Coffee and Fair Trade’ at Fair Trade Federation website


West, in colonial times and more recently, the West has been rather more tolerant of Christians than have many other nations. Instead (and tragically), many of her sins have been committed under the banner of Christianity.

The West as Nineveh: Conclusions

Having considered the West in various ways it is possible to say that the West and Nineveh have similarities. The West may not persecute the Church and she may not be as intentionally cruel as Nineveh but her oppressive cruelty has reached more people than Nineveh’s ever did.

I would propose that instead of considering whether a nation parallels Nineveh, it would be more helpful to look at the underlying reasons of why Nineveh was judged and then consider whether the nation in question is guilty of those same sins. Since injustice is at the root of Nineveh’s evil and underlies Western economic and political practices, I conclude that the West can consider itself under God’s judgement.

This being so, Christian Westerners need to respond to Nahum’s message of judgement and in the following sub-sections I will consider various appropriate responses (particularly missiological ones); responses gleaned largely from commentators on Nahum.

The Call to Repentance

Some commentators write that once the West has been seen to be under God’s judgement then ‘Nahum becomes more than anything else a great call to repentance.’ Repenting on behalf of nations has canonical support, for many of the prophets did just that. It can be argued, therefore, that Western Christians should be crying out to God for repentance on behalf of their nations, even if they personally have not been guilty of oppression. However, very few individuals in the West are completely exempt from the sins of her nation. An action as simple as buying a non-Fair Trade jar of coffee may contribute in a small way to oppression, for indigenous workers on coffee plantations are often kept in abject poverty by the underpayment of coffee manufacturers who are more concerned with keeping coffee prices low for their Western

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consumers. Therefore, personal repentance is needed along with practical efforts to help redress the balance of equality between the West and other nations.

*The Call to Social Action*

A common response of commentators to Nahum is to call Christians to show solidarity with the oppressed. This demands more than an empathetic or sympathetic emotional response. It requires people to speak out actively and to act on behalf of the oppressed.  

‘The oppressor knows that the primary reason we do nothing is because we have lost any hope of making a difference.’ When one is part of the powerful oppressor then it could be argued, one should shout all the louder. The ways in which Christians can make tangible differences is a complex issue. It is not one that can be addressed here but Kreider and others give examples of what one can do beyond buying the occasional jar of Fair Trade coffee.

*The Call to Preach*

When God judges one nation, he often delivers another and this is the two-fold message that some propose should be preached. It is, in fact, the message of Nahum. Both victim and perpetrator are addressed with this approach.

There is a deep-seated sense of justice within most humans and Travis purports that, ‘if God’s just dealings with mankind are not ultimately to be demonstrated, they would think it necessary to give up faith in God’s justice altogether.’

Amidst the pluralism of the Western modern age, passages like Nahum are a reassurance to the oppressed that consequences always follow sin, for this is not an amoral universe, argue Barker and Bailey. The unchangeable God will execute both justice and mercy; his righteousness, faithfulness and steadfast love are never compromised. ‘God will be this

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kind of God wherever God is being God'. 124

O’Brien, on the other hand, takes a different approach. She candidly tackles her response to the violence in Nahum; the shaming of the harlot (3:5) and the infants who are dashed to pieces in the street (3:10). ‘Who will mourn for her?’ (3:7) asks Nahum, and O’Brien instinctively answers, ‘I will.’ 125

Organisations such as Prison Fellowship would probably assert that O’Brien has raised an important missiological issue, for empathy and sympathy for the perpetrator under God’s judgement is as necessary as for the victim. In contrast to Nahum, the book of Jonah demonstrates that God’s care and forgiveness extends to the oppressor, Nineveh.

Nahum presents the oppressed as having deserved judgement in the past and the oppressor as needing deliverance in the future. Undoubtedly, nations are too complex to pigeonhole simply as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Surely Nahum’s mixed message of judgement and deliverance is needed by both oppressors and oppressed. One hopes that the oppressors might repent; delivering both themselves and those who suffer under them.

The Call Not to Silence the Oppressed

Counsellors and those who work with suffering people, such as Howard Zehr, report:

They speak words we do not often hear in polite company, certainly not in church settings, for several reasons. Our society is organised around the pursuit of happiness. Suffering is to be avoided; pain is a bad thing. For Christians, moreover, pain often represents failure: a failure of faith, a failure of God’s presumed control over the world. And the anger in these voices seems a failure to love and forgive, a contradiction of Christ’s commands. So we try not to listen to these voices. 126

However distasteful it may be to (mostly Western) theologians and the church as a whole, there are some who resonate with the violent

124 Fretheim, T.E. and Froelich, K. The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 122.


outpouring of God’s wrath on the oppressors in the book of Nahum. For these people Nahum is the answer to their anguished cry of pain, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ (Rev. 6:10).

As Westerners who have been more used to the position of power than of the oppressed, maybe we should learn to be silent ourselves and allow those who are suffering to express their pain and their anger, however strong the language.

**Acknowledgement that God is Sovereign**

Nevertheless, as Achtemeier and others point out, Nahum is primarily a book about God, not human justice, vengeance and war. ‘God’s hot anger burns against the evildoer’\(^{127}\) in Nahum but it is God who is delivering the message of judgement and God alone is the avenger; Nahum is merely the vehicle through which it is delivered.\(^{128}\)

God is sovereign and one way he displays this is by judging the nations. Judgement a necessary part of the whole order of salvation history. That the total wrath of God (of which Nahum depicts a part) fell on Christ at the cross, demonstrates that, although judgement is necessary, God, himself, provided a substitute. The Suffering Servant took the wrath so that those who repent may escape eschatological judgement. Conservative commentators, especially, concentrate on this aspect of God’s sovereignty.

Above all, God is sovereign ... in the end it will be God’s will that counts ... The essence of wisdom, therefore, is to accept this ultimately incomprehensible truth and to seek God’s guidance in the humility of commitment and obedience.\(^{129}\)

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\(^{128}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{129}\) Wright, Chris J. *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 203.
Conclusion

Nahum may well have broken half a century of prophetic silence\textsuperscript{130} but when he did, he delivered the most graphic account of warfare in the Hebrew Bible. For this reason R.A. Mason asks, ‘will any of us ever have the courage to admit in a popular commentary that the book really is rather a disgrace to the two religious communities of whose canonical Scriptures it forms so unwelcome a part?’\textsuperscript{131} Hopefully, this essay has helped to show that Nahum’s message of judgement can apply to today without ‘using the text to promote patriarchal and other wrong-headed interpretations of God’\textsuperscript{132}.

It has been shown that God used Israel to be a light to the nations and the nations to chastise Israel. Conversely, God judged the nations when they carried his chastisement too far and this judgement proved to Israel (and the nations) that God is Israel’s covenantal God. The ultimate reason for the interdependent relationship between Israel and the nations was that God might be glorified and worshipped by all.

Brueggemann’s work highlights God’s direct dealings with the nations, independently of their relationship with Israel.\textsuperscript{133} Thus Nineveh (representing Assyria) was judged not only because she unleashed unlimited and excessive oppression on Judah but also because of her oppressive and wicked treatment of others she oppressed. This latter sin contravened God’s underlying and universal principle of justice.

Nahum has eschatological overtones, especially when seen as part of the Book of the Twelve, whose major theme is the Day of the LORD. Nineveh is a picture of the ultimate evil that will be destroyed in a final time. The Divine Warrior may be seen as an earthly figure and an eschatological one, but his presence shows that YHWH is indeed God, for nations rise and fall at his command. ‘If this great Gentile nation can fall’, House asks, ‘is any nation safe from the power of God’s wrath?’\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Quoted in Ball (1999), 219–20.
\textsuperscript{132} Fretheim, T.E. and Froelich, K. The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 123.
\textsuperscript{134} House, P.R. The Unity of the Twelve (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 143.
To ask whether 'The West' is Nineveh is asking the wrong question and to substitute 'The West' (or any other nation) in place of Nineveh is hermeneutically unsound. It is better to consider the underlying issues with Nineveh and to see if the nation in question echoes any of those sins. Both past and most recent history of the West indicate that the West employs injustice and therefore is under God's judgement. It is questionable whether there is any nation that is not indicted by Nahum's message. Most nations oppress nations that are weaker than themselves and sometimes even the weaker members of their own nation. Therefore, to some extent, all nations are Nineveh.

Given that 'The West' is guilty of injustice and oppression, the challenge to Western Christians is how to respond. Primarily, nations need to repent and for that to happen, there needs to be those who preach Nahum's message to the nations. The church, as the people of God, needs to repent of her own behaviour and attitudes and also to repent on behalf of its leaders and those in power who perpetuate injustice. The church also needs to speak out on behalf of the oppressed and to become practically involved in striving for justice. As well as this she should allow those who are oppressed to express their suffering, but in the context of knowing that vengeance is God's alone. Mission extends to both the oppressor and the oppressed but, ultimately, God is sovereign. Humbly acknowledging this fact is the first step to take when responding to Nahum's message of judgement.

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Appendix A

Assyrian Reliefs

‘Shalmanesar III and Assyrian Cruelty’ section of following webpage;
http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=www.bible-history.com/assyria_archaeology/sennacherib_murder_nabonidus_marduk.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.bible-history.com/assyria_archaeology/archaeology_of_ancient_assyria_archaeological_discoveries.html&h=522&w=300&sz=78&tbnid=U0KUNwq6b7EJ:&tbnh=128&tbnw=74&start=2&prev=/images%3Fq%3DAssyria%2BArchaeology%2Bpictures%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26ie%3DUTF-8%26sa%3DN

Figure 1: Bronze band from the gates of the palace of Shalmaneser III (852 BC)\textsuperscript{135}

The website for the following picture:

The website for Asshuririzpal Inscription:
http://www.bible-history.com/quotes/asshurizirpa_%20inscription_1.html

‘Their men, young and old, I took as prisoners. Of some I cut off the feet and hands; of others I cut off the noses, ears, and lips; of the young men’s ears I made a heap; of the old men’s heads I built a minaret.’\textsuperscript{136}

(King Asshuririzpal who began his reign in 883\textsuperscript{137})

\textsuperscript{135} ‘Archaeological Discoveries’ at ‘Bible History’ website, 2004
\textsuperscript{136} ‘The Eighth Century BC’ section at ‘Bible History’ website, 2004
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Appendix B

The Similarities Between the Implicit 'Day of the Lord' in Nahum and the Explicit Mentions in the Other Minor Prophets

Nahum 1:10 cf. Joel 2:5, Obadiah 18; Malachi 3:19
Nahum 2:5 cf. Jeremiah 46:9; Joel 2:9; Amos 5:16
Nahum 2:9 cf. Jeremiah 46:5, 21
Nahum 2:10 cf. Isaiah 2:7
Nahum 3:2 cf. Joel 2:5
Nahum 3:10 cf. Isaiah 13:16; Joel 4:2; Obadiah 11\(^{138}\)