

Nahum 3:1-4

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The prophet Nahum pronounces judgment on Nineveh because of the ferocity of her wars and her wicked influence on other nations.

The LORD used the Assyrian empire and its capital city, Nineveh, to carry out His judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel, which it conquered and exiled in 722 BC, “the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria” (2 Kings 17:6).

But Assyria’s intent was evil. And now the LORD was about to judge Nineveh for her wicked deeds. So He used Nahum to pronounce an oracle of judgment against the city. God used Jonah to pronounce destruction upon Nineveh roughly a hundred years earlier, and Nineveh had repented. Now Nahum’s pronouncement of destruction upon Nineveh marks its end. Nineveh fell in 612 BC to the Babylonians in alliance with the Medes. Nahum opens Chapter 3 by pronouncing:

*Woe to the bloody city, completely full of lies and pillage;
Her prey never departs.*

As Nahum described the downfall of Nineveh, he began with the interjection *Woe* to describe the despair and agony of the city. The term translated as *Woe* is “hōy” in Hebrew (Amos 6:1). Sometimes, it is translated as “Alas!” (Amos 5:18). The term was used in ancient Israel as a mourning shout at funerals. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah told King Zedekiah of Judah that people would cry at his funeral, “Alas, lord!” (Jeremiah 34:5; 1 Kings 13:30). Here Nahum used the term to announce the destruction of Nineveh. In doing so, he called Nineveh *the bloody city*, literally, “the city of blood.”

The term for blood in the phrase *Woe to the bloody city* is “dām” in the Hebrew language. It is plural in Hebrew, which suggests abundant bloodshed that consistently flows (Hosea 4:2). This description of a *bloody city* fits the city of Nineveh well because she was notorious for her cruelty and ferocity toward the other nations. Nineveh enjoyed cutting off the hands, feet, ears, and noses of her victims, exposing them to the derision of jeering spectators or forcing them to carry in procession the heads of their former comrades. In short, she excelled in violence and bloodshed.

The city of Nineveh not only excelled in bloodshed and violence. She was *completely full of lies and pillage*. She deceived the other nations by making false promises to them.

The words of Rabshakeh, the messenger sent to Judah by King Sennacherib of Assyria, confirms Nineveh’s treachery. Rabshakeh told Judah this whopping lie:

“Have I now come up without the LORD’s approval against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, ‘Go up against this land and destroy it.’”
(Isaiah 36:10)

The truth was that God intervened and saved Judah, just the opposite of Rabshakeh’s lie that God told Assyria to destroy Judah (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36).

Nineveh had used cruelty and lies to amass material prosperity. She would capture exiles and hold them as prisoner, thus, *her prey never departs*. The term *prey* refers back to Nahum’s depiction of Nahum as a lion, and her victims as *prey*. Just like a lion, Nineveh gathered spoils from her continuous marauding, humans and goods, and consumed them all.

In verses 2 and 3, Nahum described the final chaos and panic of the city of Nineveh. On the day of God’s judgment upon the city, people would hear *the noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of the wheel, galloping horses, and bounding chariots*. The picture seems to be *the noise of the whip* of drivers whipping their horses pulling the invading *chariots*, who are attacking the city. Or perhaps the *horses* and *chariots* have broken through the wall and are now plundering the city.

The *galloping horses* may indicate cavalry charges, mowing down the Assyrian infantry. Both the *galloping horses* and the *bounding chariots* indicate that the invader has prevailed. If the citizens of the city can hear the *noise of the rattling of the wheel* of the *chariots*, the sound of the hooves of the *galloping horses*, and the *noise of the whip* of the chariot drivers, that likely means their attackers are upon them.

Besides the sounds of warfare, the people of the city would experience *horsemen charging, swords flashing, spears gleaming, Many slain, a mass of corpses, and countless dead bodies*.

The term *charging* speaks of a command. The people of the city would hear the *horsemen* of their attacking enemy urging their horses to advance toward Nineveh. As the adversaries advanced toward the city, Nineveh’s inhabitants would see their spears gleaming in the sun. They would observe the flashing swords of the approaching infantry. Perhaps they also hear and observe these things as the attackers breach the wall and enter the city.

The sights and sounds all belong to a picture of a successful military advance and invasion of Nineveh. They describe the horrors of the enemy’s war machine, which resulted in *many slain*. There will be *a mass of corpses and countless dead bodies* in Nineveh. That the *dead bodies* are *countless* and a *mass* would indicate a massive slaughter of Ninevites. This is a picture of annihilation. The ethic Nineveh visited upon others will now be visited upon her.

The attack on Nineveh would be so massive that the enemy soldiers would *stumble over the dead bodies* as they walked around the city. There won’t even be clear paths to walk through. It seems the streets will be completely covered with *corpses*.

All this would happen to Nineveh *because of the many harlotries of the harlot*. The word translated as *harlotry* (“zēnûnîm” in Hebrew) describes the activity of a prostitute. The term

harlot refers to a woman who engages in sexual relationships in exchange for money (Hosea 1:2). The book of Proverbs warns against *harlots* as wicked and deceitful women (Proverbs 6:26; 7:10; 23:27; 29:3).

In our passage, the prophet personified Nineveh as a *harlot*, likely because she seduced the nations into her alliance and then exploited and abused them. The Hebrew language uses repetition to indicate emphasis or volume. The *harlotries of the harlot* is rendered in other translations as “multitude,” “countless,” or “many” harlotries. Nineveh is being judged because of the sheer volume of deceptions and exploitation of others.

The judgement of Nineveh presages the judgement of the kingdoms of the earth. We see this in Revelation 19, where a great multitude proclaims:

“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER.”

(Revelation 19:2)

It appears that the abusive, exploiting Assyrian Empire will be an image of the coalition of kingdoms constructed by the ruler and antichrist called the “beast” in Revelation. We see this in Micah 5:5, which predicts that the Messiah/Jesus will repel the “Assyrian [who] invades our land.” Just as Nineveh burned in judgement, so it will be for the beast and his false prophet, who will be thrown directly into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20).

That Nineveh enticed the nations is clear in the next line where Nahum called her, *The charming one*. The term *charming* may speak of Nineveh’s skill to attract other nations and exploit them. An example is the lie Rabshakeh told Judah, asserting that God told Assyria to destroy Judah, so it was useless for them to trust in the LORD (Isaiah 36:10).

Nineveh was so cunning that she earned the descriptive title *mistress of sorceries*. The term *sorceries* refers to the use of spells and divination. It is the practice of those who claim to have the power to perform signs using magical incantations to control circumstances (2 Kings 9:22). The word translated *mistress* is rendered “medium” in 1 Samuel 28:7, which speaks of a witch who made contact with dead spirits. Nineveh apparently served the role of connecting other nations with occult powers.

In Deuteronomy, Moses listed *sorcery* among the detestable practices of the neighboring nations and warned Israel against it (Deuteronomy 18:10–12). In Galatians, Paul lists it as one of the sinful practices that characterize the sinful deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:19–21). *Sorceries* can be viewed as spiritual power to exploit others. God’s desire is for His people to walk in His Spirit, which is spiritual power to serve others in truth and love. Assyria served as a graphic example of one who used spiritual and physical power to exploit others.

Nineveh employed magic because of her selfish lust for power, social malevolence, and futile attempt to bypass God’s wisdom. She *sells nations by her harlotries and families by her*

sorceries. The phrase *sells nations* is literally rendered “is selling nations,” indicating that this is a perpetual activity. This could indicate that Nineveh considers *families* and entire *nations* as mere property to exploit. We might say that Nineveh was a massive human trafficking enterprise. The indication is that Nineveh used seduction and sorcery to capture entire *nations* and its *families*, much like a human trafficker captures their victims. The goal of a trafficker is to sell their prey, to exploit and extract from its victims.

Therefore, the LORD would judge Nineveh, causing her to lose her power and disappear from the scene. The LORD’s action against Nineveh would demonstrate that He alone has complete control over the world He created. God, not Nineveh, is all-powerful. God is about to completely disgrace the proud and arrogant world power.

Biblical Text

¹Woe to the bloody city, completely full of lies *and* pillage;
Her prey never departs.

²The noise of the whip,
The noise of the rattling of the wheel,
Gallop*ing* horses
And bounding chariots!

³Horsemen charging,
Swords flashing, spears gleaming,
Many slain, a mass of corpses,
And countless dead bodies—
They stumble over the dead bodies!

⁴*All* because of the many harlotries of the harlot,
The charming one, the mistress of sorceries,
Who sells nations by her harlotries
And families by her sorceries.