

Zephaniah 2:13-15

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Zephaniah pronounces judgment against Assyria for her pride and arrogance. God will make Nineveh a ruin, and the land of Assyria will be emptied of population and become a place for pasturing animals.

After the LORD's short prophecy concerning the Cushites (v. 12), Zephaniah moved to the north and pronounced judgment against the most powerful empire of the day: Assyria. He began by announcing the destruction of the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Then, he contrasted the city's former condition with her new condition after her downfall.

The prophet told his audience that the LORD would *stretch out His hand against the north and destroy Assyria* (vs 13). The term *hand* symbolizes power and strength (Exodus 15:12). To "stretch out one's hand" signifies that someone is ready to act, usually in a hostile manner.

In the book of Isaiah, the LORD stretched out His *hand* against His covenant people to strike them, causing the mountains to quake (Isaiah 5:25). In our passage, He would fight against *Assyria to destroy it and make Nineveh a desolation, parched like the wilderness* (vs 13).

The *city* called *Nineveh* was the capital of Assyria. It was on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. According to ancient Near Eastern standards, *Nineveh* was a fabulous and sizeable city (Jonah 1:2; 3:2). Today *Nineveh* is Tell Kuyunjik, located on the Tigris River some six hundred miles upriver from the Persian Gulf in northern Iraq. Even though *Nineveh* was watered by a river, it would become *parched like the wilderness*, which indicates something will take place that causes Nineveh to be *parched* and barren.

The book of Nahum also pronounces judgment upon Nineveh. On the day of the LORD's judgment, *Assyria* would experience defeat. As powerful as it was, it would not stand before God, the great and invincible warrior. The once fabulous city of *Nineveh* would become desolate. On that day, the Tigris River would no longer supply *Nineveh* with water, so *Nineveh* would be as dry as the *wilderness* (Nahum 1:8; 2:6).

History tells us that the Assyrians were powerful and ferocious. They had dominated the international political scene since the reign of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (745–727 BC)— also called "Pul" in the Bible. They even captured Israel in 722 BC when King Hoshea stopped paying tribute to the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (2 Kings 17:6). However, around 630 BC, the prophet Nahum announced an eventual collapse of *Nineveh*.

The great city of *Nineveh* fell by a coalition of Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. It was burned with fire, making it parched and desolate. The final step in the fall of Assyrian power came at the Battle of Carchemish in 605.

The prophet continued his announcement of divine punishment against *Nineveh* and described her condition after her fall. He depicted her as a ruined area with no inhabitants. The great city of *Nineveh* which once had a large population would be useful only for herding animals, *Flocks will lie down in her midst, all beasts which range in herds* (vs 14). That means that Assyria would lose its urban population, and in its place every sort of animal creature would occupy the once-proud Assyria. This is a similar prediction to that of Philistia (vv 6-7).

Having stated that animals of all kinds would reside in *Nineveh* after her fall, the prophet focused on the smaller creatures. He stated that *both the pelican and the hedgehog will lodge in the tops of her pillars* (vs 14).

The Hebrew words translated *pelican* and *hedgehog* appear from the context to represent species of birds. These birds will *lodge in the tops of her pillars* (vs 14). This would be an indication of buildings that are abandoned, and left to the birds to use for nesting. Further, the *birds will sing in the window* (vs 14) again because the buildings are vacant ruins. In the once-proud *Nineveh*, *desolation will be on the threshold* (vs 14).

Translators variously render *pelican* and *hedgehog* as “owl,” “bittern,” “desert owl,” “screech owl,” “eagle owl,” “heron,” and “cormorant.” This indicates uncertainty of species. But the main point is that the city is in ruins.

The voice of the *birds* would echo through the windows of *Nineveh*’s buildings, which would be deserted because *He [the LORD] has laid bare the cedar work* (vs 14). The *cedar work* probably refers to the structural beams of the buildings.

When Solomon built the Jerusalem temple, he “covered the house with beams and planks of cedar” (1 Kings 6:9). He also used cedar wood to build his palace (1 Kings 7:3, 7). That the *cedar work* is visible (*laid bare*) would indicate that fire and destruction has burned away all but the structural skeleton of the buildings.

The final verse of the chapter summarizes the downfall of *Nineveh*, a city once filled with pride and arrogance: *This is the exultant city which dwells securely* (vs 15). *Nineveh* thought she was invincible. Warfare was her primary activity. She showed no mercy on her captives. The prophet Nahum called her “a bloody city” because she shed innocent blood consistently. *Nineveh* was so proud that she would say *in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me”* (vs 15).

The statement, “*I am, and there is no one besides me*” is a claim to absolute power that does not belong to any human being. Only the LORD has absolute power to do as He pleases (Deuteronomy 4:35; Isaiah 45:5). *Nineveh* thought she had absolute power. A seventh-century inscription from King Esarhaddon of Assyria states, “I am powerful, I am omnipotent, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honored, I am magnified!”

Assyria thought she would always dominate the world, but that was not to be. Only God is eternal. *Nineveh*’s pride and arrogance would lead to her fall (Habakkuk 2:4). As the book of Proverbs states, “Pride goes before destruction” (Proverbs 16:18).

The Eternal God would destroy Nineveh on the day of His judgment: *How she has become a desolation, a resting place for beasts* (vs 15). The formerly magnificent city would become a deserted ruin, a place suitable only for animals, *Everyone who passes by her will hiss and wave his hand in contempt* (vs 15).

To *hiss* and *wave one's hand in contempt* are gestures of horror and disgust (1 Kings 9:8). That means that ordinary people passing by *Nineveh* would react in scorn when seeing her ruined condition. This could be because Nineveh was so cruel and brutal that everyone was glad to see it go. It could also be because the fall and devastation was so complete.

Biblical Text

**¹³ And He will stretch out His hand against the north
And destroy Assyria,
And He will make Nineveh a desolation,
Parched like the wilderness.**

**¹⁴ Flocks will lie down in her midst,
All beasts which range in herds;
Both the pelican and the hedgehog
Will lodge in the tops of her pillars;
Birds will sing in the window,
Desolation *will be* on the threshold;
For He has laid bare the cedar work.**

**¹⁵ This is the exultant city
Which dwells securely,
Who says in her heart,
“I am, and there is no one besides me.”
How she has become a desolation,
A resting place for beasts!
Everyone who passes by her will hiss
And wave his hand *in contempt*.**