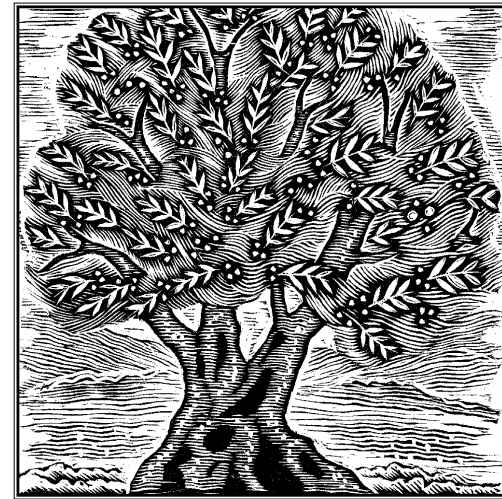


NAHUM
to
MALACHI

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BIBLE COMMENTARY**



**GRACE
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Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship
15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
ISBN 1 84101 028 6

First edition 1998
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Caledonian Book Manufacturing International, Glasgow

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While it is important to deepen understanding of a given passage, this series always aims to engage both heart and mind in the study of the Bible. The scriptures point to our Lord himself and our task is to use them to build our relationship with him. When we read, let us do so prayerfully, slowly, reverently, expecting him to speak to our hearts.

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PBC NAHUM—MALACHI: INTRODUCTION

*For
Mary, Ken,
Ruth,
fellow workers for the Kingdom*

‘I can’t wait to read the end of the book’—how often have you said that? Sometimes we are tempted to take a quick look at the end when we are only halfway through! It goes without saying that the end of a book is important, often gripping, fascinating. For a novel, it’s the climax of the story. If we look at it too soon, we lose the excitement and suspense. And if it is a detailed discussion on a technical matter, the end is often the place where the threads are drawn together and the results are set out clearly.

The Old Testament is a different matter—not so much a book, more a library, it is often said. And sadly, these last six short books, Nahum to Malachi, are often the volumes that are left to gather dust on the bookshelves. It seems to have been Augustine, back in the fourth century, who first described them as ‘minor prophets’. He was not disparaging their importance, merely referring to their brevity compared with the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For, with the exception of Zechariah which has fourteen chapters, they are very short books indeed, ranging from Haggai with only two chapters to Malachi with four, and in the Hebrew Bible even Malachi has only three chapters. By the third century BC these six books formed a single scroll together with the six prophets from Hosea to Micah, and were known as The Book of the Twelve Prophets.

Our six prophets fall into two groups. Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah were active towards the end of the seventh century BC, when the Assyrian empire was in decline. It finally fell before the advance of the Babylonians in 612BC. In 587, Jerusalem itself was conquered by the Babylonians and the period known as the Exile began. By the time of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Babylonian empire too had fallen, defeated by the Persians. In 538, Cyrus, the Persian ruler, issued an edict allowing the Jews (and other nations) to return to their own lands. But the glorious, joyful hopes expressed in Isaiah 40—55 failed to materialize. Apathy set in; there were tensions within society; the Jerusalem temple remained in ruins. Into this situation came two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, both concerned with the rebuilding of the temple. The Bible neatly summarizes the results of their ministry: ‘The elders of the Jews built and prospered,

through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo' (Ezra 6:14). Between 520 and 515, the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. The date of Malachi is uncertain but is probably around 450BC.

The situation as far as the books are concerned, in contrast to the prophets themselves, is more complex. Even at a cursory reading it is clear that chapters 9—14 of Zechariah differ significantly from chapters 1—8, both in style and in content, and come from a much later period, probably the late fourth or early third century BC. There are too few indicators within the text to enable us to pinpoint their date with any greater certainty. The early chapters of Zechariah, with their strange, even bizarre, visions, have some of the characteristics of what has come to be known as apocalyptic literature. In chapters 9—14 these characteristics are more fully developed.

Apocalyptic literature

The importance of prophets gradually waned. Before the exile, Isaiah and Jeremiah had been involved with kings and affairs of state. Even after the exile, when the country was no longer an independent nation, Haggai and Zechariah had considerable influence in motivating the community to put worship at its heart. But gradually prophetic ministry declined, partly due to the fact that many prophecies remained unfulfilled. As we shall see in our study of Zechariah, the role of prophet fell into disrepute. Then came the rise of apocalyptic literature, which takes its name from a Greek word (*apokalyptein*) meaning 'to reveal'. The main examples in the Bible are Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament, but there are other examples, among them Zechariah 9—14. Whereas the prophets expected God to intervene within history, to right wrongs and bring justice, the apocalyptic writers thought in terms of a new age to come when God would establish his kingdom and, by direct intervention, would bring salvation. This type of literature flourished particularly in the period between the Old and New Testaments, from the second century BC to the first century AD.

One Bible, two Testaments

The order of the books in the Christian Bible binds the Old and New Testaments into a single whole. Whereas the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanach*, to give it its Jewish name) ends with Chronicles and includes

the prophets in the middle section, the Old Testament (as Christians call it) ends with Malachi, with a prophecy that looks forward to the future, pointing us to God's coming in Jesus and to his messenger, John the Baptist, a second Elijah (Matthew 11:13–14).

The Old Testament is not easy to read. Written in an ancient language, it comes from a society very different from ours. Yet we must avoid the temptation to read it only as if it were ancient history or ancient literature, fascinating but not relevant to our modern world. As holy scripture it is God's word to us and we must allow it to speak with its own voice, often an uncomfortable and challenging voice despite all the centuries that have passed. For the Christian it is, of course, incomplete, awaiting its fulfilment in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. In our study we shall look at the continuity of both the Old and New Testaments, showing that they are indeed one Bible, but we shall see also the contrasts between them which make the New Testament radically new.

Bible versions

The translation on which these studies are based is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), from which quotations are taken unless otherwise indicated. One sign of the vitality and relevance of the Bible today is the number of modern English translations produced in recent years. This is enriching but it also raises problems for the writing of notes and commentaries! The Good News Bible is especially helpful to readers unfamiliar with the Bible. Some versions, particularly the NRSV, its earlier form the Revised Standard (RSV), and the New International (NIV), follow the structure of the Hebrew and Greek closely, giving as far as is possible in translation the 'feel' of the original. The New English Bible (NEB) and the Revised English Bible (REB) aim for more idiomatic English.

Grace Emmerson

JUDGMENT & MERCY

The beginning of Nahum is hardly an attractive invitation to read further. What kind of a book is this to be found in the Bible? It seems to confirm the view that the God of the Old Testament is a God of vengeance, far removed from the loving Father whom we know from the New Testament. That, of course, is far too simplistic a contrast and untrue to both Old and New Testaments. Ironically, Nahum's name means 'comfort' and we soon discover that his ominous words of judgment are shot through continually with glorious hope. To read the book as if its sole theme were bloodthirsty revenge is a gross distortion of the prophet's message and enables us to sidestep the continuing challenge of these ancient words. In fact, Nahum's purpose can be described as bringing comfort to Judah, a small country oppressed by the powerful nation of Assyria, whose capital city was Nineveh. The word 'jealous', when used of God, signifies not a petty emotion but the closeness of his relationship to his people and the vulnerability of his love.

Nahum among the prophets

It is important, when reading Nahum, to remember that this little 'book' does not stand alone but is part of the 'Book of the Twelve Prophets' which begins with Hosea and ends with Malachi. They are often referred to as the 'minor prophets', that is, the shorter prophets in comparison with the long books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In the 'Book of the Twelve', judgment and mercy are counterbalanced; there is judgment for all, including Israel, and mercy for all, including Nineveh.

The historical setting

Assyria was one of the great international powers of the eighth and seventh centuries bc. It was the Assyrians who overthrew the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722bc and overran its territory. Judah, too, suffered the brutality of Assyria's military might. By Nahum's time, however, Assyria itself was threatened by other rising powers and in 612bc Nineveh was captured by the Medes. Nahum's words are probably to be dated shortly before that time. Rather than gloating

over a conquered enemy, they are a cry for help by people still desperate for relief from tyrannical oppression and from savage acts of war against the helpless. It isn't necessary to read back into history to get the feel of this. Our newspapers and TV screens confront us daily with similar atrocities. Viewed in this light, Nahum can be understood rather than condemned. His words are an affirmation of faith in God's sovereignty and his power to save, in the face of human brutality.

The message

Human suffering matters to God. Those who destroy lives and shatter happiness are in the end accountable to him. Deliverance for the oppressed means judgment on the oppressor. But Nahum knows that this is not the whole story. In spite of rampant evil, God is patient—'slow to anger,' says Nahum.

God is not an unjust judge. The guilty will not go unpunished, their crimes disregarded. And isn't justice precisely what we long for in our unjust world? This is what the book of Nahum is about.

A thought for today

'The Lord will by no means clear the guilty.' Did Paul perhaps have these words of Nahum in mind when he wrestled with the problem of how God, just and holy as he is, can forgive us who have sinned? When he wrote to the Christians in Rome he had the answer: 'by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free' (Romans 3:24, GNB).

PRAYER

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.

GOD of DARKNESS & STORM

Nahum is a book of powerful poetry, of ‘vision’ as the title informs us, a kaleidoscope of rapidly changing pictures, not a literal account of events. The first verses are known as an acrostic, in which each line begins with a consecutive letter of the alphabet, in this case only half the alphabet.

Nahum’s God is a majestic God, wholly other than humankind:

*His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*

Here is both the mystery and the power of God, the Almighty. Yet God is not thereby remote from us, for these are words to bring comfort in times of overwhelming, inexplicable sorrow, when all is darkness and even God seems to be hidden. But be assured, he is with us in the storm, he has not left us alone. Nahum’s faith can be our faith too, and for us those ‘feet’ are the feet of the crucified one. It was from out of a whirlwind that God spoke to Job in the midst of his suffering and anguished questioning, and Job was able to say, ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you’ (Job 42:5). From second-hand report to first-hand encounter with the living God!

If verse 4 seems destructive, it also reminds us of God’s great saving action when he rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, drying up the sea so that they could cross on dry land. This story is to be found in Exodus 14:21–22.

Rejoice, the Lord is king

Nahum’s poetry is reminiscent of some of the psalms, and if we set it alongside Psalm 97 we shall see that ‘cloud and darkness’ spell not gloom but mystery. Psalm 97 is, after all, a resounding celebration of God as king, a psalm overflowing with joy for all to share: ‘let the earth rejoice’ (v. 1). But true worship requires also an element of mystery:

*Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Psalm 97:2).*

Like Nahum, the psalmist too attributes the great cataclysms of nature to God’s awesome power: the earth trembles, mountains melt like wax before his presence. Here is a reminder for us that the God who is so close as to be called ‘our Father’, whose love provided the Saviour, is not to be treated lightly, as if he were a god made in human image: he is king, Lord of all, an awesome presence. Making himself vulnerable in Christ on the cross, he is not encompassed by the limits of our world. On both counts, his love and his majesty, he is a God worthy of all worship.

PRAYER

Lord, when we cannot feel your presence, grant us the faith to believe that you are ever beside us and that your purpose is always grounded in your love. Lift up our hearts in the midst of the whirlwinds and storms of our lives and lead us into worship and praise.