

H.L. Rossier

Comments on the book of the Prophet Nahum

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Rue du Château d'Or n°16/6

1180 Uccle (Brussels)

Belgium



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FOREWORD

Nahum differs from Jonah and Micah (2 Kings 14:25; Jer. 26:18) in that he is not mentioned anywhere other than in the book of his own prophecy. All we know of him is that he was a native of Elkosh. Jerome's testimony, which relies on a similarity of name to place this locality in Galilee, stands entirely alone and has not been verified by others. A tradition had Jonah dying in Assyria and also placed Elkosh, Nahum's birthplace, there, but like any similar tradition, it scarcely merits a mention. If Elkosh were situated in Galilee, the Pharisees' remark to Nicodemus that 'no prophet arises out of Galilee' (John 7:52) would be doubly erroneous, for Jonah was from Gath-hepher, a town in Zebulun which was part of Galilee. Moreover, Isaiah had foretold that from there the Christ, the great Prophet, would come—a title which the unbelieving Jews even refused to grant him (Isa. 9:1, 2).

As for the date of Nahum's prophecy, his book provides us with the period, if not the exact year. When he prophesied, the destruction of No-Amon (Thebes, capital of Upper Egypt) was

a fait accompli (3:8). This event had, in antiquity, a considerable impact, for it completed the decline, already begun, of Egypt's most important city and foreshadowed, in the near future, the definitive fall of that kingdom. According to history, the sack of Thebes took place in 663 BC, during the reign of Manasseh, King of Judah (698–643).

It is therefore clear that Nahum, referring to it as a past event, could not have prophesied before that time, as has long been claimed. More recent Assyrian discoveries have confirmed the biblical date. Ashurbanipal, the penultimate king of Assyria, conqueror of Egypt and destroyer of Thebes, mentions, in connection with this expedition, the submission of 'Manasseh, king of Judah' and other tributary kings. We know, moreover, that Manasseh, after an abominable start to his reign, was taken prisoner and brought to Babylon, which was, at that time, a vassal state of Assyria, and that he was subsequently restored to his throne in Jerusalem after humbling himself before God (2 Chron. 33:1–20). Although we do not know the exact date of this restoration, we can say that Manasseh's recognition of Assyrian sovereignty took place less than 20 years before his

death, for Ashurbanipal, who ascended the throne of Assyria in 667, sacked Thebes in 663, and Manasseh died in 643.

Thus, around the year 660, Nahum refers to the fall of Thebes as a past and well-known event. The city of Nineveh was destroyed, according to some historians, in 625, according to others in 608 or 606, during the reign of Jehoiakim (610–599), that is to say, about fifty years after Nahum's prophecy.

The uncertainty surrounding the date of the fall of Nineveh, the most significant event in the entire ancient history of the East, shows us how little trust should be placed in historical studies of antiquity, however conscientious they may be, when they cannot rely on the word of God. On the other hand, we have learnt from experience not to place great value on the assertions of critics who claim to judge the age of a prophecy by its style or by passages which, in their view, a prophet may have copied from another. Whether we are dealing with the books of Moses, the prophets or the Gospels, any claim that their authors copied from other authors has no solid basis; thus we see all critics constantly contradicting one another on this subject and

never reaching agreement. In fact, their work unwittingly betrays its origin, which, on closer inspection, is the denial of the verbal inspiration and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures. As for the Christian, he knows that it is God who has spoken in the Bible; so, whether in the Old or New Testament, he has no difficulty in observing, from one book to another, in accordance with the purpose the Holy Spirit has set out to achieve, repetitions that are sometimes very extensive, sometimes, as in the Psalms, the repetition of the same passage by the same writer (*), or two entirely different styles in the same author. Faith derives immense benefit from the nuances contained in the repeated passages, for they clearly highlight God's plan in the various parts that make up the Bible. That a prophet, Daniel, should study the prophecy of Jeremiah fills the believer with confidence in Revelation and at the same time helps him understand the difference between inspiration and the teaching of the Spirit. Does he not know that the prophets studied their own writings? Indeed, the Bible is a divine whole, which even the inspired men called to complete it—and, indeed, He who was the Word made flesh—could not do without. But that a

prophecy or some other passage might be a human recollection of earlier writings, the product of a more or less faithful memory—this the simple believer absolutely denies. What these critics fail to realise is that the Word of God is an organic whole, composed by the Holy Spirit, and not a collection of writings with no connection between them (**). If it pleases God to repeat Himself, why should He not do so? Faith, too, understands the reason for this. It knows that the holy men of God spoke ‘by the Holy Spirit’ and not by copying one another.

(*) See, for example, Psalms 14 and 53.

(**) On this subject, we can do no better than to quote here a few lines from a servant of God who has many times successfully combated modern unbelief: ‘The objections raised against the Bible by sceptical German theologians and their imitators betray a wretched narrowness of mind that is utterly ignorant of God’s ways, confined as it is to a narrow circle of ideas. These men comment on a book of which they have, in truth, no knowledge, and whose purpose and intention they have not even studied. Never has this vast field, this immense system of thought—in which all parts are interconnected, interdependent and flow from one another—unfolded before their eyes: a sys-

tem that begins at the point where the past touches eternity and leads us, through the development and resolution of all moral questions, to the goal where the future is lost in eternity according to God. In it we find, historically pursued and developed, whilst showing them in their moral and individual realisation, all the forms of the relationship between God and man. Each part fits into the other like the pieces of a map in a jigsaw puzzle. When the pieces are assembled, it is a perfect whole in which nothing is lacking. This entire system, which forms a whole, an absolute unity, was nevertheless written (for the best evidence proves that it was written) at long intervals, over a period of about 1,500 years; it was developed through all the conditions of ignorance, darkness or light in which man finds himself, and under the influence of principles intentionally set in contrast to one another, such as the Law and the Gospel. Amidst all these diverse conditions, this system never loses its perfect and absolute unity, nor the relationship of its various parts to one another. To sceptics, these things are non-existent; they are not even aware of their existence; they have about as much knowledge of the Bible as a child who, in the ‘jigsaw puzzle’ map, would choose to put together two pieces

situated at opposite ends of the globe, simply because they are red and look attractive.”

Zephaniah, who prophesied during the reign of Josiah, like Nahum, announces the fall of Nineveh and foretells the destruction of Assyria that followed, an imminent event, for it took place, according to the most probable historical assumptions, at the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign (Zeph. 2:10–15).

Finally, Ezekiel, prophesying during the captivity, around 589 BC, reminds Pharaoh of the complete fall of Assyria, which had taken place several years earlier and was soon to be followed by that of Egypt (Ezek. 31).

* * *

Let us note, in concluding this Foreword, a distinctive feature of the prophet Nahum. Whilst in Micah we have seen various interlocutors succeed one another, sometimes so rapidly that the transition from one to the other demands sustained attention, in Nahum we hear but a single voice, that of the Lord, speaking through his prophet, now to one person, now to an-

other, and doing so so unexpectedly, indeed so abruptly, that only the context can inform us of the character in question: such as, for example, the Assyrian (1:14; 2:11), the last king of Assyria (Ashur-edililane according to history) (3:18); Manasseh (1:12); Judah (1:15); Nineveh (2:13; 3:5, 6:8, 11). At other times the prophet speaks, without naming them, of the Lord (2:3); of Nineveh (1:8; 2:7; 3:1); of the king and the kingdom of Assyria (1:15; 2:13; 1:13). In this way, attention is continually kept alert to the imminence of judgement.

CHAPTER 1

God's wrath against the Assyrians. The deliverance of Judah. The reign of peace begins.

This chapter forms a complete whole and extends to the final restoration of Israel. This restoration is one of the great themes of prophecy, as we learn from Peter's speech in chapter 3 of Acts. The apostle announces, in fact, that God had foretold through the mouth of all the prophets that his Christ must suf-

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fer, and that he had spoken, through the mouth of his holy prophets of old, of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:18–21). But let us bear in mind, from the outset, that the book of Nahum is ‘the oracle concerning Nineveh’ (v. 1). This subject is seemingly limited, but in reality represents the judgement of the nations, which became God’s instruments to chastise his people, yet which, in the fulfilment of their duties, derived no benefit for themselves. Instead of judging themselves whilst exercising judgement, they persisted in their forgetfulness of God and their hatred against him, in their criminal idolatry, in wickedness, violence, the abuse of force, and in their impure excesses. Could God fail to take this into account? After many warnings, he finally decides to give free rein to his wrath.

Let us remember that the fall of Nineveh was the collapse of the entire political, religious and commercial system, of the whole civilisation of that time, which was buried beneath the city’s ruins, to such an extent that two hundred years later an army of ten thousand men could camp on the ruins of the great city, without even suspecting that, beneath that dust, a vast

people lay buried, along with their arts, their refined culture and their intellectual life, which surpassed all those of the East and even rivalled that of Egypt.

What happened in the past will happen again in the prophetic times, still to come, yet so close to us today. A symbolic city—no longer the Assyrian Nineveh, nor the Chaldean Babylon which suffered the same fate, but the great Babylon, the apostate Christendom which will rule over the kings of the earth—will come to mind before God and receive ‘the cup... of the fury of his wrath’ (Rev. 16:19). It too will be brought down in a single hour (Rev. 18:10, 16, 19) and will collapse along with all its blasphemous religious power, its civil, military and commercial organisation, so that it will ‘be found no more’ (Rev. 18:21). This destruction will occur at the same time as that of the revived Roman Empire, the final imperial form of Chaldean Babylon. We see, therefore, that the prophecy of Nahum is far from having the limited scope one might be tempted to ascribe to it at first glance.

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The judgement of Nineveh gives rise, in verses 2 to 5, to a description of God's attributes. This is not a matter of the essence of the divine Being, who is love and light, nor of what He possesses in Himself, for He is the supremely 'blessed' God, and these attributes remain eternally true and never change; rather, it concerns the manner in which He reveals Himself in His government. If He had once revealed the principles of this government to the people He had chosen, would He not also make them known to the nations, He, the Creator and sovereign Ruler of mankind? All are accountable to Him. Undoubtedly, their accountability differs according to the degree of their knowledge and the privileges they enjoy, but it nonetheless remains in its entirety. Therefore, concerning Nineveh as concerning Israel, 'the Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps his anger against his enemies' (v. 2).

God had declared this in the same terms to his people when he gave them the law at Sinai, and this from the very first words contained in the Ten Commandments: 'I, the Lord your God,

am a jealous God' (Exodus 20:5). He cannot tolerate idolatry, which has the audacity to set up its false gods alongside him; he is indignant at it; will he not take vengeance on all who practise it? For the nations are inexcusable, they who have exchanged 'the glory of the incorruptible God' revealed through his creation, 'for the likeness... of a corruptible man and of birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things' (Rom. 1:20, 22). Undoubtedly Israel, to whom God had revealed Himself as the Lord, was a thousand times more guilty of doing the same things as the nations and of indulging in their idolatry (see Exodus 20:4), but these nations were in turn to experience the blows of God's vengeance and wrath, after He had used them (in Nahum, the Assyrians) to pour out His anger upon His guilty people.

Such are the ways of God in governing all mankind. They do not change and apply to all. Idolatry invites His vengeance, and none of the nations will be able to plead ignorance when they stand before God's judgement.

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But this passage reveals another aspect of His governance. He is not merely the jealous God who holds His wrath against His enemies: 'The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and He will by no means clear the guilty' (v. 3). Here again we find a revelation of the character of His governance over the nations. This revelation does not have the scope of that given to Israel, when, after the golden calf, Moses interceded for the people and the Lord made himself known as the 'God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands of generations, who pardons iniquity, transgression and sin, yet by no means clears the guilty, but visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and fourth generation' (Exodus 34:6, 7). However, Nahum shows here three characteristics of this government that are very important for the nations.

1. 'He is slow to anger'. What a relief for a conscience convicted of sin! The God who holds back his anger against his enemies is slow to anger. Never does man, however provocative

his attitude, succeed in provoking God into premature action or an outburst of fury. Nineveh could remember this. At the first sign of repentance, the Lord had suspended his judgement. Jonah, for his part, grew angry and said, 'I am right to be so angry that I might die,' whereas the Lord 'repented of the harm he had threatened to do to them, and did not do it'. Yes, he is slow to anger and, secondly, 'mighty in power' to halt decreed judgements with a single word or to give them free rein. But, thirdly, his government will never 'consider the guilty innocent'. This remains true always, for, as we have said, this concerns the character of God in his government and his holiness in his ways, but not the work of grace which justifies the guilty by virtue of the sacrifice. Human justice might make the mistake of declaring a guilty person innocent, but God never does. In his great patience, he had held back the course of his wrath against Nineveh, but what had these kings—Shalmaneser, Tiglath-Pileser, Sennacherib—done since then, if not provoke God to wrath through their unbridled pride, their insatiable hatred against the Lord and against his people, and their blasphemies? Truly, God could in no way regard the guilty as inno-

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cent. The last of them all, Ashurbanipal, had been more wicked, more violent, more abominably cruel than all his predecessors, whom he surpassed in splendour and power, and Nahum prophesied during his reign.

In verses 3 to 6 we find a description of the ways of this God who rules according to his holiness, his justice and his power: 'His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and the cloud is the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and causes all the rivers to run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt away; and before his face the earth is shaken, and the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation, and who can endure the heat of his anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and before him the rocks are shattered' (vv. 3–6).

Here it is no longer a question of his person, but of the attributes through which he manifests himself when he gives free rein to his judgments. This is how he had once revealed himself to Elijah at Horeb. He was not in the great and powerful wind

that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire (1 Kings 19:11), but these terrible judgments were to precede his appearance in grace to Elijah. So it is here. When it comes to clearing a path to bring his beloved ones face to face before him, no obstacle prevails. Not even the sea and all its rivers can set a barrier against him. The cloud cannot hide from him the goal towards which he strives; he treads it underfoot, and it cannot deprive him of the sight of the end of his journey. The world contains things rich and prosperous, lovely or exalted; all these wither and vanish before the unfolding of his ways. The most firmly established powers, the subordinate authorities, tremble and melt away. This brings to mind the entire book of Amos and chapter 1:4 of the book of Micah. The most ancient kingdoms—and none, save that of Egypt, could boast of a longer duration than Assyria—cannot stand before the heat of his wrath. About fifty years after this prophecy, the predicted collapse took place.

In v. 7 we discover a completely different perspective: ‘The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of distress, and He knows

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those who take refuge in Him.’ What a contrast to the previous descriptions! For here we are speaking of what He is to His own, even in the midst of judgments, of what He is to all believers and particularly to the Remnant of Israel, the focus of the entire Old Testament prophecy. He is good; He has never changed His character towards His own, whatever calamity they may face. When they are weighed down by the burden of judgments, He comforts them by declaring to them what He is, what He has always been. When, having emerged from distress, they finally enjoy deliverance, they will be able to sing the beautiful, age-old hymn: ‘Praise the Lord! For He is good; for His goodness endures for ever!’ Throughout the Psalms we hear this word, repeated a hundred times to the ears of the Remnant, to sustain them in the midst of their anguish: ‘The Lord is good!’ It is the same for us: in the sorrows of the present hour, the love of the Father and the Son is what sustains the heart and prevents it from giving in to doubt and discouragement.

“A stronghold in the day of distress.” The enemy triumphs; the faithful are passing through the great and terrible day of the final tribulation called the distress, the ‘tsarah’ of Jacob. There is no place of refuge in a world where Satan’s fury relentlessly pursues the poor Remnant, but the Lord is in the palace of his holiness (Ps. 11:4; Micah 1:2; Hab. 2:20); He Himself is the ‘stronghold’: ‘In the day of evil,’ it is said, ‘He will hide me in His pavilion; He will conceal me in the shelter of His tent; He will set me high upon a rock’ (Ps. 27:5).

‘He knows those who trust in him.’ Is that not enough for us? It was enough for Christ when men reviled him and said of him: ‘He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he delights in him’ (Matt. 27:43); but a day will come when the ungodly men who mocked the saints will be destroyed.

In v. 8 we see what will happen to Nineveh and to all the enemies of the Lord: “But by a flood that overflows, he will utterly destroy his place, and darkness will pursue his enemies.” This verse contains two very characteristic Hebrew terms: the term ‘overflow’ (Shataph, Sheteph) and the word ‘utterly des-

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troy' (Kalah, Killayon), translated in other passages as 'consume', 'consumption', 'decreed consumption'.

The words 'overflow' and 'overflowing flood' invariably apply to the historical or prophetic Assyrian, or to the 'King of the North' (north of Palestine) who, as we have so often seen in the study of the prophets, is the leader—probably a military one—of the Assyrian Confederacy. But a time will come, as we see here (1:8) and in other passages, when the one who overflows, the Assyrian, will in turn be overwhelmed, and when 'his place', Nineveh, will be destroyed (*). The overflowing flood will be turned against him by the Lord. The phrase: to destroy utterly, decreed destruction, is 'a technical expression used to denote the final judgements preceding the reign of the Messiah' (**). The decreed destruction takes place upon Jerusalem, by the desolator (the prophetic Assyrian), but in the end it will affect not only him and his land (Isaiah 10:22, 23; Nah. 1:8), but also all the nations gathered against Jerusalem, and finally 'the earth', the land of Israel and the apostate people dwelling therein, over whom the Antichrist will reign. Only the faithful

Remnant will pass through this upheaval without being utterly destroyed, without the decreed consummation befalling them (***)).

(*) See, for example, regarding this word and its application: Isaiah 8:8; 10:22; 28:17; Daniel 9:26; 11:10, 22, 26, 40; Nahum 1:8.

(**) See J. N. Darby's version. Note on Isaiah 10:23; Jeremiah 4:27; Nahum 1:8.

(***) See, regarding the Assyrians: Isaiah 10:22, 23; Nahum 1:8; regarding the nations: Jeremiah 30:11; 46:28; Nahum 1:8 (his enemies); regarding the apostate people and their land: Daniel 9:27; Isaiah 28:22; Zeph. 1:18; and finally, regarding the Remnant, spared from utter destruction: Jer. 4:27; 5:10, 18; Ezek. 11:13.

We cite all these passages in the footnotes to highlight the following truth, which one might lose sight of when reading the book of Nahum: whilst this book deals with the imminent historical destruction of Nineveh, the Spirit of God goes far beyond this fact; indeed, He acts no differently in any prophecy. In speaking of an impending judgement, He sheds light on the

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events of the end. The fall of Nineveh becomes the harbinger of the future collapse of the power of the prophetic Assyrian, along with that of all the enemies of the Lord who themselves took part in this catastrophe: 'Darkness shall pursue his enemies'. It will not only be the land of Nineveh that will be destroyed before the coming of the Lord as the Messiah, but His enemies, along with those of Nineveh, will be buried in darkness. Historically, this came to pass for Babylon and the Medes; prophetically, it will come to pass for the Roman Beast and the ten kings, enemies of the Assyrian. It is because they have not enquired into these matters that modern rationalists so lightly deny the future significance of prophetic events which have had their historical fulfilment in the past.

'What are you plotting against the Lord?' (v. 9). To whom, then, are these words addressed? To the present-day enemies of Nineveh? But God had raised them up against the capital of Assyria. No; the prophet looks into the future; he foretells that the enemies of Assyria, as well as Assyria itself—which is the primary focus here—are plotting against Christ. This is seen

very clearly in Psalm 2:1–3: ‘Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Anointed: ‘Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their cords from us!’” The passage in Acts 4:25, 26, which quotes this Psalm, provides us with one of the consistent proofs that such a passage of prophecy is given to us as containing several different fulfilments: one imminent, the other for the end times. See also Acts 13:41 compared with Hab. 1:5.

‘He will utterly destroy; distress shall not arise a second time’ (v. 9). This passage could be understood to mean that the distress of Nineveh will not have the opportunity to recur, since it is definitive; but the word ‘distress’, so characteristic of the ‘great tribulation’ of the last days, directs our thoughts far beyond this coming event and leads us to the end times that will precede the reign of Christ. The distress will not only befall those who, under Satan’s instigation, have brought it upon themselves, but it will be final, and no second such distress will arise. So it was with Nineveh; so it will be with Assyria and the

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nations of the end. But this word will also hold true for the faithful Remnant. The tribulation will not arise twice for the disciples in the last days; they will simply pass through it as through Daniel's furnace, without being consumed, or as through the waters of judgment, without being submerged (Isa. 43:2), or as through the decreed destruction, without being utterly destroyed (Jer. 5:18).

'Though they are like tangled thorns, and though they are drunk with their wine, they shall be devoured like dry stubble, utterly' (v. 10). These expressions are applied to the unbelieving Jewish people in Micah 7:4 and to the Assyrians in Isaiah 10:17. It is specifically Nineveh and the Assyrians that are referred to in our passage, but the nations and the apostate people will be struck by the same final judgement. It will not be repeated, because, like fire in stubble, it will have consumed them all at once and devoured them entirely.

'From you has come forth the one who devises evil against the Lord, a counsellor of Belial' (v. 11). This Assur, who had once come out of the land of Shinar to build Nineveh (Gen. 10:10,

11), had now come out of Nineveh, the seat of Assyrian power, to devise, in a spirit of satanic pride, evil against the Lord. All the kings of Assyria, from Pul to Ashurbanipal, possessed this character, and their haughty hatred against God and His people had already reached its ultimate limits in the person of Sennacherib. It is exclusively the Assyrian power that is referred to in this passage. In v. 9 the prophet had said: 'What are you plotting against the Lord?', including in this phrase all the powers gathered together in the end against Christ. One of these enemies, the one who comes out of Nineveh, the main subject of Nahum's prophecy, is highlighted here, driven by the same sentiments as the others. He is a 'counsellor of Belial'; deceit is his defining trait, a deceit already evident today in so many nations destined to play the role of the Assyrian in the future. This man of the end is the same deceitful king described in chapter 8 of Daniel (vv. 23–25).

What a contrast between him and the true King! He who is to reign in Israel and bear the sceptre of universal dominion has come forth, not from the vast city of Nineveh, but from Bethle-

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hem Ephrathah, the least among the thousands of Judah—he whose origins are from the days of eternity, and upon whom the Spirit of the Lord shall rest (Micah 5:2; Isaiah 11:2). He who comes from Nineveh has run in the past and will run in the future towards destruction; he who came from Bethlehem will see his throne established for ever (Ps. 45:6). He who came out of Nineveh will be ‘humiliated’; he who came out of Bethlehem will be highly exalted, will have a name above every name, and will see every knee bow before him (Phil. 2:9).

‘Thus says the Lord: “Though they are intact and so numerous, they shall be cut off and shall be no more”’ (v. 12). The people of Nineveh are still whole, intact and numerous, in these days of Nahum when already the fate of Assyria is being prepared in the shadows. Babylon, Assyria’s stronghold, still in turmoil, has not yet revolted definitively; the Medes have not yet gone to war to besiege Nineveh. A few more years will pass before the destruction of this capital of the world. But the prophecy goes further: it is not just Nineveh, nor its last king, disappearing in the fire of his palace; it is the entire military power of

this nation that will cease to be. The prophecy tells us that with the historic defeat of Assyria, the final word on its history has not yet been spoken. This formidable power will re-emerge at the end of time. It will be, as we have seen, the scourge that floods the land, but this 'bold people' will be suddenly annihilated (Isaiah 28:19; 30:31–33). Only then will this word be fully fulfilled: 'They shall be cut off and shall be no more'

'And though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you, and I will tear your bonds asunder' (vv. 12, 13).

Having taken issue with Nineveh, the nations and the unfaithful Jewish people, the Lord now turns, just as suddenly and unexpectedly, to the afflicted Remnant. If we look back to the reign of the king of Judah, under whom Nahum prophesied, we discover, as we saw in our study of Micah (1:1), striking parallels with the content of this prophecy. The reign of Manasseh is divided into two parts. In the first, he does worse than all his predecessors. He restores idolatry in all its horror to Jerusalem, even to the point of sacrificing his sons to Molech; he practises

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sorcery and magic; he fills Jerusalem with innocent blood; and, as the height of desecration, he places an idol in the temple of God. Do we not recognise, in this picture, all the traits of the Antichrist? Thus the inhabitants of Jerusalem are led to do evil more than the nations themselves (2 Chron. 33:1–10; 2 Kings 21).

This state of affairs ends in a merciless judgement upon the apostate people and their profane king, who, bound in chains, is taken to Babylon by the king of Assyria. Under the pressure of distress, Manasseh's character changes completely. He becomes, in our eyes, the type of the repentant Remnant who has come out from among the reprobate people and separated himself from them. Distress opens his eyes to his condition and, judging it beyond remedy, he turns to God and His grace: 'When he was in distress, he implored the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He was moved by him, and listened to his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem to his kingdom; and Manasseh recognised that the Lord is God' (2 Chron.

33:12, 13). Here, we might say, we have a striking picture of the Remnant, brought back to God through distress and finding the final Restoration through the work of grace in his conscience. The prophets had spoken to Manasseh when he had forsaken the Lord to give himself over to apostasy (2 Kings 21:10–15); now another prophet, Nahum, speaks to him of deliverance and God's favour, when he has returned to the Lord. So it will be with the Remnant, whom all the prophets mention and whose restoration they foretell. Distress will not come upon them a second time. The Lord speaks to them, through the person of their king, to comfort them: 'If I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more!' 'Comfort, comfort my people,' says God, through the mouth of Isaiah. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her time of distress is over, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins' (Isaiah 40:1, 2).

“And now I will break her yoke from off thee, and I will burst thy bonds” (v. 13). This is what happened for a time to Manasseh, but only to a limited extent, for during his lifetime the

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yoke of the Assyrians continued to weigh upon him as a vassal of that king. It was not the same for Judah, for it passed immediately from the yoke of Nineveh to that of Babylon, which was far heavier.

But, let us note, the prophecy here merely foreshadows, in the coming events, those far more decisive events of the future.

‘And the Lord has decreed concerning you: “No seed of your name shall be sown any more. From the house of your god I will cut off the carved image and the cast image; I will prepare your grave, for you are vile”’ (v. 14).

Here the Lord turns to the Assyrian just as unexpectedly as He had just turned to His people. This passage stands in stark contrast to the deliverance announced to Judah. The Assyrian shall be destroyed, his offspring annihilated, his idols overthrown, his grave prepared. All this undoubtedly took place at the fall of Nineveh, but the prophet Isaiah tells us that in the last days, at the time of Israel's Restoration, Topheth (cf. 2 Kings 23:10), long prepared for the Assyrian, will be set ablaze to consume

him once and for all, and that this very pyre is also prepared for 'the King' (a term used in prophetic speech to designate the Antichrist; see Isaiah 57:9; Dan. 11:36), as well as for the unbelieving people (Jer. 7:31–34). The destruction of the two enemy powers of the end times will take place at the same time. The Antichrist, the man of sin, the false Messiah, has not yet appeared, although his spirit is at work everywhere today, and this figure will not be revealed until the Church, the Bride of Christ, has been taken from the scene. The same will be true of the revived Roman Empire with its ten kings, of whom the Antichrist will be an ally; the same will also be true of the Assyrian who, reappearing in his final form as the king of the North and Gog, will face the judgement prepared for him in Topheth. We know, from Ezekiel 39, that for seven years, all that remains of him, after his army has fallen upon the mountains of Israel, will be consumed by fire.

'For you are vile', the final word of the Lord's wrath against this supremely proud man who had thought to measure himself against the mighty God and set up his idols, Assur and Ishtar, in

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opposition to the Lord. You are vile! All the pretensions of the most favoured among men, their names, which they deem imperishable, their ambitious power, their indomitable pride, their self-exaltation—all shall be trampled like the mud of the streets under the feet of the true King, to whom but a single gesture will suffice to take universal dominion into his hand and annihilate his enemies like the vile serpent whose head man crushes beneath his heel!

‘Behold, upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, of him who proclaims peace! Judah, celebrate your feasts, fulfil your vows; for the wicked one (or Belial) shall no longer pass through you, he is utterly cut off’ (v. 15).

Through a singular misunderstanding of the prophetic word, this passage has been attributed to the fall of Nineveh, when it was foretold in Jerusalem. Where is the proof of this? Nineveh was destroyed at the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign (610–599 BC) and probably two years after it began. Do we find, in the history of this king, any allusion to this event? Jehoiakim was installed by Pharaoh Necho in place of Jehoahaz, subjected to a

severe yoke and forced to pay a heavy tribute. He then fell for three years under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and having rebelled, was plundered by bands of Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites. He could therefore only have rejoiced to see Nineveh survive and the Assyrian empire prevail (Jer. 2:18). After eleven years of reign, Nebuchadnezzar captured him, bound him with bronze chains, and took him to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:6). Thus nothing could have been politically more fatal to this king, as well as to Jerusalem and Judah, than the ruin of Nineveh. On the other hand, nothing is clearer than this passage, applied to prophetic events. The guilty but repentant Remnant will no longer be afflicted in a future day. Judah will be delivered from the yoke of the Assyrian when this enemy of God's people is destroyed on the mountains of Israel. It is of this prophetic event, and not of the historical fall of Nineveh, that Isaiah chapter 52 speaks to us, the terms of which correspond so exactly to our verse 15. There too, the Assyrian who has oppressed Israel without cause is mentioned. But at that moment in the future, the Lord reveals Himself and says to His people: 'Here I am!' (vv. 4, 6). Immediately the

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good news of the kingdom is proclaimed; the war is over, the reign of peace begins: ‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings news of happiness, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion: “Your God reigns!”’ (v. 7). This is the moment when God restores Zion and comforts his people. Similarly, in Micah 5:5, peace is established through the coming of Christ and the defeat of the Assyrian.

In Nahum, the fall of Nineveh is like a foreshadowing of what will happen at the end of days. The good news is not, any more than in Isaiah, the fall of this capital, but the coming of the Messiah or Saviour of Israel, the conqueror of his enemies. Under his reign of peace, Judah will be able to celebrate its great festivals, and above all the Feast of Tabernacles, which will follow the judgement of the adversaries, the ‘harvest’ and the ‘grape-gathering’ (Zech. 14:16–19; Ezek. 45:21–25). From now on, nothing will disturb these joyful celebrations. The wicked one, Belial, that creature of Satan, will no longer sweep

across the land of Israel like 'a raging flood', as he did in the past and will do in the future.

It may be that the prophet is alluding, as is typical, to the reign of Josiah, during which Judah was once again able to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (2 Chron. 35), but that reign had come to an end before the fall of Nineveh. All that we have just said therefore leads our thoughts, without hesitation, to the time of the end.

Who will be the bearers of the good news referred to here? Scripture teaches us that this testimony will be given by Jewish disciples. These are the ones who, in the days when the Lord was on earth, were sent on mission to the towns of Israel, but whose testimony will continue in the last days. It is they who will preach the gospel of the kingdom to the nations during the period of the great tribulation. It is they, finally, who will be, on the mountains of Israel, the messengers—seen and heard by all—of this great event: the inauguration of the Messiah's glorious reign!

CHAPTER 2

It is decreed

‘The destroyer has come up against you: guard the fortress, watch the road, strengthen your resolve, and greatly increase your strength’ (v. 1).

Having addressed Judah to encourage and comfort him, the Lord suddenly turns to the Wicked One, to the Assyrian king of Nineveh, and calls out to him. These unexpected interjections are, as we saw in the Foreword, one of the outward, characteristic features of our prophet. Here we enter fully into the historical scene.

The words ‘He who breaks has come up against you’ contrast strangely with Micah’s words: ‘He who breaks through has gone up before them’ (Micah 2:13). There, the Shepherd broke through to shatter the obstacles and deliver his sheep; here, the Avenger comes to shatter forever the hostile power whose yoke weighed so heavily upon Judah, and to cut it off entirely. Thus

the judgement of the nations is as certain as the deliverance of God's people.

The instruments the Lord uses to destroy Nineveh are called 'his mighty men' (v. 3; Isa. 13:3). These are not the same mighty men whom the Lord brings down with him in Joel 3:11, when he sits to judge all the nations, and who have as their antitypes the mighty men of David (2 Sam. 23:8–39). Here Babylon, allied with the Medes, is the instrument God uses to destroy Nineveh, just as He will later use the Medes and Persians to destroy Babylon. All these powers that believe they are acting independently and for their own sake are unwitting and blind instruments in the hand of the Lord to accomplish his purposes. This principle is important to bear in mind today. God raises up a nation today; he will bring it low tomorrow. Today it serves as his rod; tomorrow he will raise up a new rod that will break, and then crush, the first. The pride of Assyria is humbled by the pride of Babylon, by the mighty men of the Lord; the pride of Babylon will in turn be crushed. In Nahum's time, Babylon, the stronghold of the kings of Assyria, had already rebelled on several occasions against the yoke of

Nineveh and had repeatedly suffered bloody reprisals. Now the hour had come when the Lord, though slow to anger, would give free rein to His wrath. Having stripped the unfaithful Israel of its dominion, God had decided to entrust it to Babylon, which He intended to make the ‘head of gold’ among the Gentile empires. It was therefore necessary that the Assyrians’ claims to this supremacy be destroyed, not to mention the iniquity of Nineveh, which had reached its peak. Despite his ambitions, Assyria had never achieved a universal empire. This term does not mean that the whole world is subject to such an empire, nor does it even refer to the extent of its territory; rather, it means that a universal dominion encounters no nation that is not subject to it, and that the kings of these nations are its vassals. So it was with Babylon and the other empires that succeeded it. So it will be with the last, the Roman Empire, resurrected at the end of time in the form of the Beast and the ten kings, that confederacy which will provoke the admiration of the whole world.

How ironic is this call to the king of Nineveh: ‘Guard the fortress, watch the road, strengthen your resolve, and greatly in-

crease your power!’ Have you taken every precaution? Watch over everything yourself, build up your reserves; let nothing be lacking; let your foresight fail nowhere! Will my strong men be able to do anything against such a skilful organisation? But you are forgetting one thing: ‘The Lord has restored the glory of Jacob as the glory of Israel.’ This passage has been translated in various ways, but I have no doubt that we must adopt this version as corresponding to the spiritual interpretation and transcending the historical meaning even in a picture as essentially historical as this one. At the moment when ‘the destroyer has come up’, the glory of Jacob (of the whole people represented by Judah) and the glory of Israel (a name frequently given to the ten tribes) were restored. Nothing of the sort had taken place, save partially and very incompletely under Josiah; the Lord had for a time lifted Judah out of its deep lowliness, though the character of the people was in no way changed (Hab. 1:1), but already ruin had resumed its course under the successors of that godly king. It will not be the same in the end; the glory of God’s ancient people will be restored, and then the Assyrian, Gog, will be destroyed forever. Thus the Remnant

will be restored, for, as it is said, ‘those who plunder’ had plundered them and had ruined their branches. At the time of the destruction of Nineveh, this state of affairs had not changed, and even today Israel is as lowly as it was then. It is like a trunk without branches, and all the nations plunder it. All will change when the glory of the Messiah whom it had despised appears and is recognised by it, and when, speaking of Christ, it can say: ‘My glory’ (Ps. 3:3; Jer. 2:11). We see here that Israel, having fallen through its sin under the blows of the Assyrians, will be restored by the fall of its enemy, the fall of Nineveh being but the forerunner of the terrible judgments of the end, for restoration is inseparable from judgment.

In verses 3 and 4 we have a magnificent description of these mighty men of the Lord, that is to say, the army of the Medes and Chaldeans: ‘The shields of his mighty men are dyed red; the valiant men are clothed in scarlet; the chariots gleam with steel on the day he prepares for battle, and the cypress spears are brandished. The chariots rush furiously through the streets, they rush into the squares; their appearance is like torches, they run like lightning.’ This refers to the streets and squares of

Nineveh and not to the cities of Assyria, as some commentators maintain. Nineveh is always the primary focus in Nahum.

‘He thinks of his valiant men: they stumble as they march, they hasten towards the wall, and the shelter is prepared. The floodgates are opened, and the palace collapses’ (vv. 5, 6). The Assyrian (always the same abrupt manner of introducing the characters) thinks to set his ‘mighty men’ against the ‘strong men’ of the Lord. In vain! God’s will must be done. These mighty men hurry, perhaps emerging from some orgy; they stumble in their drunkenness (cf. 1:10) to reach the shelters entrusted with the defence, when part of the city has already been overrun. ‘The gates of the rivers are opened.’ The rivers that defended the city and formed an impregnable barrier now serve as a gateway for the attackers (*). Later, differing from this in only one respect, the fate of Babylon will be decided by the diversion of the Euphrates, whose dry bed will serve as a gateway for the enemy to seize the great city. The magnificent palace, adorned and marvellously enlarged by Sennacherib, collapses and is now nothing but a ruin.

(*) This interpretation seems to me far simpler than that of other commentators.

Such is the sentence pronounced. ‘It is decided’ and there is no turning back. Nineveh, like a queen stripped of her garments, will be exposed to abuse and taken captive with her maidservants. The feminine part of the city becomes the weeping prey of the victor. The whole scene is presented as having already taken place, so irrevocable is the decree.

‘From the day she came into being, Nineveh has been like a pool (or rather a pond, a reservoir “Berekah”) of water’ (v. 8) (*). Surrounded by rivers and canals, she was from the day of her existence an impregnable city, as well as a prosperous one, providing abundantly through her rivers to feed the peoples. It had increased the number of its merchants more than the stars of the heavens (3:15). In Jerusalem, the ponds and reservoirs were maintained with great difficulty; those of Nineveh, supplied by nature, made it impregnable... “But they are fleeing...” What use are their defences when they are seized by panic? It is a rout... ‘Stop! Stop!’ Nothing can be done; not one turns to face the enemy. Then comes the plundering; the in-

vaders seize the immense wealth that has been accumulated. Nineveh is plundered, emptied, devastated. An unspeakable anguish seizes all its inhabitants.

(*) See 1 Kings 22:38; 2 Kings 18:17; 20:20; Neh. 2:14; 3:15, 16; Song of Songs 7:4; Isaiah 7:3; 22:9, 11; 36:2; 2 Sam. 2:13; 4:12; Eccl. 2:6.

What a vivid picture of this disaster! It is as though we are witnessing this terrible scene, this collapse! History tells us that Nineveh was besieged for three years, then taken. That is possible, but what God shows us here is the sudden and final judgement brought about by the instruments prepared by God for this destruction.

The well-known pride of the Assyrians is crushed at a stroke. When God utters the terrible words: 'It is decided', who could resist, even for a moment? The fate that the Assyrians inflicted upon the nations, their sudden attacks, the terror they spread around them, when 'all faces turn pale' at their approach (Joel 2:6), all this is now inflicted upon them: 'The heart melts, and the knees are weak, and a piercing pain is in every loins, and

all faces grow pale’ (v. 10). Here we see him, struck by the very fate he had inflicted upon the great Thebes of Egypt (chap. 3).

(vv. 11–13.) — ‘Where is the lions’ lair, and the place where the lion cubs fed, where the lion, the lioness, and the lion’s cub roamed, with no one to frighten them? The lion tore enough for his cubs, and strangled for his lionesses, and filled his dens with prey, and his lairs with torn beasts. Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts; I will turn your chariots into smoke, and the sword shall devour your cubs, and I will cut off your prey from the earth; and the voice of your messengers shall be heard no more.’”

The image of the lion was familiar to the Assyrian monarchs, as their monuments bear witness. From the time of Nimrod onwards, lion hunting was the pride and pastime of the kings of Assyria. The strength, ferocity and cruelty of this animal—which devours, which fears nothing, which strangles and tears apart to satisfy itself, its lioness and her cubs—its thirst for power and the spoils with which it fills its lairs: all this charac-

terised the Assyrian. It was enough for the Lord of Hosts to rise up to oppose him whom no man had ever been able to resist; immediately all the accoutrements of war with which he had set out to conquer the world were reduced to smoke. The sword of God destroyed his offspring, through whom he might have hoped to regain power (*). His kingdom destroyed, those whom he had made his prey and who constantly rebelled against him submit to the new empire raised up by God, and the era of carnage is ended, though peace is not thereby ever restored to the earth. It will be restored only when it is said: 'Peace on earth', at the appearance of the Lord in his reign. 'The voice of your messengers will no longer be heard.' Ah! how clearly that threatening voice had once been heard, which the king's messengers came to convey to Hezekiah and Jerusalem, and which dared to rise up even to the very throne of God! (Isaiah 36:37). In a future time, only the joyful voices of the messengers of good news announcing peace will be heard! (1:15).

(*) The last scion of the kings of Assyria, Assur-edil-ilane, perished in the sack of Nineveh.

Secular histories have preserved for us scarcely a remark or two concerning the grandeur of Nineveh; the ancient Assyrian monuments discovered since the middle of the last century tell us far more and introduce us to the unprecedented luxury and astonishing prosperity of this immense city. But no document tells us of its fall or describes its disaster. The Bible alone provides us with clear and divine insight into the origins of Nineveh and its destruction, which was more sudden than that of Babylon, even though Nineveh surpassed the latter in splendour and importance. What fills us with admiration for the Scriptures is that all the biblical accounts concerning the ruin of Nineveh are prophetic. Nahum occupies the foremost place among them.

CHAPTER 3

Retribution

‘Woe to the city of blood, full of deceit and violence! Plunder never leaves it’ (v. 1).

There is only one ‘woe’ in Nahum, that of the ruin of Nineveh. The verdict was pronounced in chapter 2; here we see its final fulfilment. Nahum is the only prophet whose book ends with a definitive judgement. If he speaks of the restoration of Israel, it is, so to speak, only in passing, in the first chapter, and to situate it within the whole of the prophecy. Nineveh must fall; all the power of a haughty and proud world that recognises only its own importance, of a world whose pride constitutes the enemy of God’s people—all this power must be destroyed. In chapter 2, the assault and capture of the city were portrayed as a consequence of the harm done by the Assyrians to the vineyard of Israel; here, in chapter 3, it is the very nature of Nineveh that brings these reprisals upon it. Just as, in Jerusalem, the iniquity of the people and the blood of all the prophets had been found, so in Nineveh, the city of blood, God finds nothing but deceit, violence and plunder. This city is like the quintessence of the character of the Assyrian people and their kings.

Verses 2 and 3 differ in tone from verses 3 to 7 of chapter 2, which described the attack on Nineveh, followed in verses 9

and 10 by plunder and terror. Here we witness the sacking and the appalling massacre that fills the city ‘with heaps of dead bodies and endless corpses’.

One aspect of Nineveh’s iniquity stands apart from all the others, for it is no longer a sin against mankind, but a sin against God: ‘Because of the multitude of the harlotries of the alluring, bewitching harlot, who sells the nations through her harlotries and the families through her bewitchings, behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will lift up the skirts of your robe over your face, and I will show your nakedness to the nations and your shame to the kingdoms. And I will cast filth upon you, and I will bring you low, and I will make you a spectacle’ (vv. 4–6).

She had succeeded in captivating the nations through the worship of her false gods and through her magic. How many of them had been led to bow down before the gods of Nineveh, witnessing the downfall of their own gods, taken captive by the kings of Assyria (Isa. 36:19, 20), and thus exposing themselves to the same judgement from the Lord as she. Now, in the eyes

of these very nations, she was utterly debased, a harlot whose nakedness was exposed to the disgust and contempt of all. Thus does God judge and punish the foolish pride of man who extols his false gods in the very face of the Lord of hosts. ‘You are vile,’ says the Lord to the king of Assyria (1:14); ‘I will bring you low,’ he says to Nineveh. She shall be covered with filth, a picture of the worth that all the attractions and enchantments of the world may have in God’s eyes. May we, too, regard these things, as the apostle Paul did, in the light of the sanctuary! (Phil. 3:8).

‘And it shall come to pass that all who see you shall flee from you, and say: “Nineveh is laid waste! Who will mourn for her? From where shall I seek comforters for you?”’ (v. 7).

Such is the selfishness of the world. Those who are not directly affected readily come to terms with the misfortune of others. A few words of regret, perhaps, and the catastrophe is already forgotten. Comforters are not to be found among men. God alone can comfort, but how could He comfort her who, to the very end, despised Him and mocked Him? When repentance

took place and Jerusalem received double for all her sins, then God presented Himself to her as Comforter. ‘Comfort,’ He says, ‘comfort my people’. From the moment conversion takes place, consolations are never lacking again; they are the supreme balm in the trial: the apostle comforted his brethren and was himself comforted by God. Such is the result of Christ’s work for us. He graciously took upon Himself our curse, the calamity pronounced upon the world; he sought comfort here on earth and found none (Ps. 69:20); but now He is comforted at the right hand of God and will see the fruits of his soul’s labour brought into the places where God Himself will comfort them eternally, wiping away every tear from their eyes.

The idolatry of the Assyrian is one of the key points of the prophecy concerning him. In Isaiah 10:8–11, we see him regarding his idols as superior to all others and even to the Lord Himself. Isaiah 14 shows us his final defeat (and that of Babylon) because of his boundless pride, which seeks to take the place of God himself. Verses 19 and 20 of this same chapter recall the sack of Nineveh, but go much further and consider, as indeed the whole chapter does, the final defeat of the proph-

etic Assyrian. In Isaiah 47, Babylon's fate is the same as that of Nineveh: the same nakedness laid bare, the same shame exposed (v. 3). In Jeremiah 13:26, 27, the Lord pronounces a curse upon Jerusalem just as Nahum did upon Nineveh: 'I too,' says the Lord, 'will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen.' She had followed the idolatry of the nations; it is with her that the judgments begin; then comes the turn of Nineveh; finally that of Babylon. All this took place historically, and will be repeated prophetically at the end of time. Jerusalem, the swept-clean house, where the seven idolatrous spirits will gather in the end, under the reign of the Antichrist, will be judged, but then restored because of the repentant and believing Remnant; whilst the great Babylon of the end, apostate and idolatrous Christendom, will be utterly destroyed, and the Assyrian will be consumed upon the mountains of Israel.

'Are you better than No-Amon, who dwelt by the canals, with waters all around her—she who had the sea as her rampart, the sea as her wall? Ethiopia was her strength, and Egypt, and

there was no end to them; Puth and the Libyans were among those who helped her' (vv. 8, 9).

This passage, as we have seen above, gives us the date of Nahum's prophecy, but it offers several other details. No-Amon, Thebes, capital of Upper Egypt, was besieged, captured and sacked by Ashurbanipal in the year 633 BC. It was therefore at the earliest around 660 that Nahum could have made mention of this event. The date of Ashurbanipal's death is unknown, but it can hardly have occurred before the year 630, perhaps quite some time after that date; and since Nahum prophesied under Manasseh (698–643), his mention of the fall of Thebes could only have taken place during Ashurbanipal's lifetime (*).

(*) Moreover, as with every other matter, the only certainty lies in the historical dates given by Scripture, from the very beginning of Genesis. When it comes to dates provided by man, one is often adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Thus, the pivotal event of the ancient world, the ruin of Nineveh, presents contradictory dates separated by some twenty years. The same applies to the prophecy of Nahum, which the apparent silence of the Scrip-

tures has led some to place under Hezekiah and others under Manasseh, that is to say, a span of nearly 60 to 80 years.

God therefore announces to Nineveh or its king the same fate that He had just inflicted upon No-Amon. The situation of Thebes was identical to that of Nineveh. It too was situated on ‘the rivers’—a term which, in the context of Egypt, always refers to the channels of the Nile—just as Nineveh was surrounded by the channels of the Tigris; it too had ‘the sea’ as a bulwark, that is to say, the vast course, the main course of the Nile (cf. Isa. 19:5), just as the Tigris was the bulwark of Nineveh. Thebes was protected against invasions by Ethiopia to the south, and by Lower Egypt and Memphis to the north. It relied on both. Puth and the Libyans, its allies, further guaranteed its safety. What had become of it? Its fate, which Ashurbanipal commemorates in a memorable inscription, was the exact image of what was to befall Nineveh (*). It too, like Thebes, would be led away and go into captivity (3:10; 2:7). The little children of No-Amon had been crushed at every street corner. Would it be any different for Nineveh, with its multitude of slain and its heaps of dead? We know that such

was the atrocious custom of these peoples who claimed to possess the high culture and civilisation of that time. (Ps. 137:9; Isa. 13:16; Hos. 13:16). Could not the refined civilisation of our own day offer examples of this in both the East and the West?

(*) ‘I took,’ he said, ‘the city of Thebes, and my hands subjected it to the rule of Assur and Ishtar (my gods). I seized its silver, its gold, its precious objects, the treasures of the royal palace, the garments... the fine horses, the male slaves, the women... and I returned to Nineveh with a considerable booty.’”

‘You too will be intoxicated; you too will be hidden away; you will seek a stronghold from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with their first figs; if they are shaken, they fall into the mouth of the one who eats them. Behold, your people within you are like women’ (vv. 11–13). That Assyrian who had said: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, for I am wise; and I have removed the boundaries of the peoples, and plundered their treasures, and like a mighty man I have brought down those who sat upon thrones. And my hand has found, like a nest, the riches of the nations; and, as

one gathers up abandoned eggs, so I have gathered up the whole earth, and there was not one that fluttered a wing, or opened its beak, or cried out' (Isa. 10:13, 14)—this Assyrian in turn falls. Some eighty years after Nineveh, the same fate befell Babylon. There is certain retribution in this world. Boast, O peoples, of your power; lift up your heads high; invoke the support of your God against your enemies, who, for their part, invoke the same support against you. In truth, this God whom you invoke in your blindness is no better in your thoughts than Assur and Ishtar. The true God does not lead you to victory, though he may use you to fulfil his purposes and may even call you 'his mighty men'. But the true God watches over all your deeds and repays them. What you did in Thebes long ago shall be done to your Nineveh. The atrocities you have committed shall find their recompense. Cry out no more the name of your God; rather, hear his irrevocable judgement, his cry of 'Woe', his final word: 'It is decided'!

'The gates of your land stand wide open to your enemies; fire devours your bars' (v. 13). We see here that the fall of Nineveh entails the invasion of the entire empire of which it is the

centre. Its disappearance is the very downfall of Assyria, which confirms the allusions to the end of Assyria noted throughout this text. No more than Babylon, Nineveh will be rebuilt, but these powers themselves, as we have said many times, will be reborn in new forms, with this difference, however, that whilst the mystical Babylon disappears forever, the prophetic Assyria will be destroyed only in its military power and will endure as a nation under the glorious reign of Christ, as it is written: ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance’ (Isa. 19:25).

Note further, in contrast to the prophetic future, that here Assyria falls first after Egypt, and after it Babylon, the golden head of the four Gentile monarchies. At the end of time, the fourth of these kingdoms, represented by the Beast—the resurrected Roman Empire, the final successor to Babylon—will fall first. It is only after its fall that Assyria will be destroyed. Thus the prophetic order will be the reverse of the historical order.

‘There, fire will devour you, the sword will destroy you; it will devour you like the locust. Multiply like the locust, multiply

like the grasshopper. You have increased the number of your merchants more than the stars of the heavens; the locust spreads out, then flies away. Your elite men are like locusts, and your captains are like a swarm of locusts camping in the hedges in the cool of the day; the sun rises, they fly away, and no one knows where they are' (vv. 15–17). — Nineveh will be destroyed by fire and by the sword. The same was true, after it, of Babylon (Jer. 50:37; 51:30). The yelek, the locust, an image so frequently used to represent the Assyrian army in Joel and other prophets, will be the means of destroying this power that destroyed all others: another army of locusts, that of Babylon, will in turn devour it. It may well multiply, as in days gone by, the power and number of its armies. The yelek has two characteristics: first it devours, then it flies away. The time has come when the elite men of Assyria, accustomed to devouring everything, will scatter, then fly away; when the captains of its troops, like a swarm of 'gobs' camping in the hedgerows in the cool of the day, will fly away without a trace. This whole scene of the end takes us back once more to prophetic times.

‘Your shepherds are asleep, O King of Assyria! Your valiant men lie there, your people are scattered upon the mountains, and no one gathers them’ (v. 18). Does this not recall the future defeat of the Assyrian, foretold by Daniel? ‘He will come to an end, and there will be no one to help him’ (Dan. 11:45). ‘You will fall,’ says Ezekiel, ‘on the mountains of Israel, you and all your bands, and the peoples who are with you’ (Ezek. 39:4).

‘There is no relief for your wound; your injury is very grievous; all who hear of you clap their hands over you; for upon whom has not your wickedness continually passed?’ (v. 19). This passage brings to mind Jeremiah chapter 10 (vv. 17–22). There the prophet, who so often plays the role of the Remnant of Israel, cries out: ‘Woe is me because of my ruin! My wound is painful’. When from the land of the north (Chaldea) comes a great upheaval to lay waste the cities of Judah. Here a final judgement is pronounced upon the invader, whilst the painful wound of Israel will be healed.

Throughout this chapter, we thus see established this simple truth, so easily forgotten by men throughout the ages, that there

is retribution, and that those who have afflicted God's people—however guilty they may have been, whatever discipline God may have deemed fit to exercise upon them—that those very ones, the enemies of God and His people, will suffer the punishment. 'It is only right before God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant you who are afflicted rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven' (2 Thess. 1:6, 7).

