

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NAHUM

(Richard D. Patterson)

The *terminus a quo* [earliest possible date] for the origin and setting of Nahum's prophecy can be deduced from the mention (3:18) of the fall of Thebes (663 B.C.), whereas the *terminus ad quem* [latest possible date] is the date of the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.), an event that is predicted throughout the book. During these five decades the ancient Near East was to witness a great transition. The Assyrian king who ruled through most of this long period was Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.). Although he fought some nine military campaigns that advanced the sphere of Assyrian control or influence, from Persia on the east to Arabia and Egypt on the south and southwest, he was largely the heir of the accomplishments of the great Sargonid kings who preceded him. Accordingly, Ashurbanipal could increasingly turn his attention to such internal matters as great building projects, religious pursuits, and the cultivation of the Assyrian beaux arts and belles lettres. Indeed, his reign was the zenith of an Assyrian imperialism, cultural flowering, and socio-political system that spanned the length and breadth of the Fertile Crescent and has been termed the *Pax Assyriaca*.

The land of Judah, which had resisted successfully a formal takeover by King Sennacherib of Assyria during the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chron. 32:1-23; Isa. 36-37), had also been able to maintain its independence during the reign of Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.). Manasseh (698/97-640 B.C.) then ruled over Judah and was evil to the point of total apostasy. His early spiritual degradation is carefully detailed in the Scriptures (2 Kings 21:1-11, 16; 2 Chron. 33:1-9, 19). Because of his wickedness, the nation of Judah was doomed to divine judgment (2 Kings 21:12-15). Manasseh's capitulation to Ashurbanipal during his first Egyptian campaign (AR 2:876) only plunged him into deeper sin until at last (c. 648 B.C.) his duplicity caused him to be summoned to an audience before the Assyrian king. Ashurbanipal had just subdued his seditious brother Shamash-shum-ukin and was then occupying his brother's base of support in Babylon. After being called there, Manasseh repented and was subsequently released and returned to Judah. But although the Chronicler reports Manasseh's spiritual transformation at that time, few lasting gains were made in Judah despite the reforms that Manasseh attempted. True reform would tarry until the reign of his grandson Josiah (640-609 B.C.).

With the accession of Josiah, Judah's fortunes experienced political, economic, and spiritual reversal. Because the young king was a godly man, his rule was marked by repeated periods of reform and iconoclastic purge. His order for the repair of the Temple in 621 B.C. occasioned the "chance" finding of a copy of the Book of the Law (2 Kings 22:8-13), an event that brought further royally initiated spiritual reforms and religious celebration to Judah (23:1-25; 2 Chron. 34:32-35:19).

By the mid-640s Ashurbanipal's campaigning was over, and he began increasingly to enjoy the fruits of the long years of Assyrian expansion. Ashurbanipal mentions spending much time in the care and aggrandizement of



Nineveh. By the last decade of his reign, signs of Assyrian weakness began to surface. Ancient sources suggest that Ashurbanipal himself grew indolent and degenerate. At any rate, with his death in 626 B.C. Assyrian fortunes took a sharp decline. Very shortly the Chaldean Nabopolassar succeeded in gaining independence for Babylon and, having found common cause with the Medes and others, began to reduce Assyrian territory. When in 614 B.C. the ancient political and religious center of Ashur fell to the Medes, the fate of Nineveh itself hung in the balance. In 612 B.C. the great Assyrian imperial capital fell to the combined pressure of the Medes, Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians), and a people known as the Ummanmanda (Scythians?), presaging the end of the great Neo-Assyrian era (745-605 B.C.). Subsequent defeats at the hands of the Chaldean Nebuchadnezzar II (also Nebuchadrezzar) at Harran (609 B.C.) and Carchemish (605 B.C.) delivered the *coup mortel* to Assyria. She would not arise again (cf. Nah. 1:9).

The end of the seventh century and the onset of the sixth was thus a critical period for the ancient Near East. With the collapse of Assyria, the greater part of the Fertile Crescent was ruled jointly by Medes and Chaldeans. The chief exception was Egypt, whose Saite (twenty-sixth) Dynasty managed to maintain Egypt's last flourishing period of political and cultural prominence until 525 B.C. As for Judah, when the godly Josiah lost his life in opposing the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II, vainly attempting to come to the aid of the beleaguered Assyrian forces in Harran, the country fell into the hands of Josiah's worthless heirs Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, all of whom lacked his personal wisdom, strength of character, and spiritual fiber. By 586 B.C. Jerusalem itself lay in ashes before the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar, who, having besieged the city three times, took huge booty and a long train of captives with him to Babylon. The end of the monarchic era (c. 1003-586 B.C.) had come to the city of Zion.

The book of Nahum is intimately bound up with this period of dramatic change.