

## CHAPTER IX

# NAHUM

### *The Fall of Nineveh.*

THE whole prophecy of Nahum revolves around the one thought of the coming downfall of Nineveh "the bloody city." It consists of a triumphal ode describing the power of Jehovah (ch. 1), followed by two pictures of the capture of Nineveh (ch. 2 and ch. 3).

The date of the prophecy can be fixed within fairly narrow limits. It must be after the sack of Thebes (No-amon; 3: 8) by the Assyrians in 663 B.C., and it must be before the actual fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. The general religious situation in Judah hardly justifies our assuming a date earlier than Zephaniah (c. 627 B.C.), as does Kirkpatrick.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand 1: 13, 15 suggest that Assyria was still dominant in the West. Her power crumbled immediately after the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 B.C. We feel that the general tendency of moderns to place Nahum even nearer the fall of the city is based less on the internal evidence than on a widespread dislike to admitting more clear prophecy of the future than is absolutely necessary. The failure to mention the identity of the attackers in itself supports a date round 625 B.C.

Already in 626 B.C. Nineveh had been attacked by the Medes, but it was saved by the intervention of the Scythians. Some years later Babylon, which had become independent in 626 B.C. under the Chaldean Nabopolassar, joined hands with the Medes; they parcelled out Assyria's empire between them and attacked Nineveh, which fell in 612 B.C. Four years later the last vestiges of Assyria vanished unlamented, never to be revived.

The very vividness of Nahum's language and the splendour of his descriptions tend to hide from us his almost barbarous exultation over the doomed oppressor with never a word or suspicion of sympathy. It has its affinities with passages like Isa. 14: 4-21; Ps. 137: 7ff; Rev. 19: 1ff. They reveal to us the awful lengths that man's cruelty and wrongdoing can reach; finally they dry up all compassion for the sinner in the deep satisfaction that God's justice has been finally vindicated. Nahum is so dominated by the sin of Nineveh that he makes no

<sup>1</sup> Kirkpatrick, p. 245ff.

reference to the sin of his own people—the only other prophet of which this is true is Obadiah, and his is a special case (see ch. XII).

### *The Author.*

All we know of Nahum is that he came from Elkosh (1: 1), an unidentified place, about which there are three traditions:

(1) It is claimed that Elkosh is the modern Elkush, a village in Iraq about 27 miles north of Mosul, which is near the ruins of Nineveh. Nahum's tomb is shown there, but the tradition identifying it cannot be shown to be older than the sixteenth century. Were this tradition correct, Nahum will have been a descendant of one of the captives deported after the fall of Samaria in 723 B.C. (II Kings 17: 6).

(2) Jerome (fourth century A.D.) was shown the hamlet of Helkesi in Galilee by Jewish guides, who claimed that it was Nahum's birthplace. We cannot now identify the site of this hamlet with certainty. A barely possible support for Nahum's Galilean origin is found in the name Capernaum=Kepharnahum, *i.e.* Village of Nahum. If this tradition is correct, Nahum was the descendant of Israelites left in the North after the deportations by the Assyrians (cf. II Chron. 30: 1, 5f, 10f, 18; 34: 6f).

(3) In a work known as the Lives of the Prophets, attributed, perhaps wrongly, to Epiphanius (fourth century A.D.), a native of Palestine, Elkosh is placed in the tribal portion of Simeon, perhaps near Lachish.

Sentiment might make us favour either of the former views, but we have to acknowledge that there is no real evidence in their favour. Nahum's concern is clearly with Judah, not Israel. The vast majority of scholars assume he was a Judean.<sup>1</sup>

### *A Triumphal Ode (Ch. 1).*

Scholars have found an acrostic poem here, but the first eleven letters of the alphabet can be discovered only by textual manipulation, and the second eleven only by major alterations.<sup>2</sup> There are two diametrically opposite errors connected with the Hebrew text that we must avoid. On the one hand we must not assume that it has been handed down to us in a flawless condition. Equally we must not assume that it is full of major errors. All recent textual study, including the evidence of the older copy of Isaiah among the Dead Sea

<sup>1</sup> One of the few modern writers to support the first view is Kirkpatrick, p. 249 *seq.* Driver, LOT, p. 335, gives cautious support to the second view.

<sup>2</sup> There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. For details see HDB, article Nahum.

scrolls, has supported a middle position, and there has been a strong reaction from the lavish textual reconstruction of an earlier generation.<sup>1</sup>

Though there are considerable textual difficulties in the first chapter, to suppose that an acrostic poem should have been so mutilated seems impossible, unless we say of the writer with Pfeiffer, "It is clear that he did not copy the alphabetic psalm from a manuscript but wrote it down as best he could from memory. He had not only forgotten the second part of this poem, but being unconscious of the alphabetic arrangement of the lines, he paraphrased certain lines . . ." <sup>2</sup> Faced with this, common sense is likely to decide that the few indications of an acrostic are purely accidental, so Harrison, p. 927.

The ode begins with a description of the attributes of Jehovah (vers. 2, 3a) and of His power in nature (vers. 3b-6), both of which justify the confidence that He will at last carry out the punishment of Assyria first pronounced by Jonah (Jonah 3: 4) and affirmed clearly by Isaiah (Isa. 10: 12, 16-19, etc.). Then comes the promise (vers. 7-15) that Jehovah will make an end of the enemies of His people. There are textual corruptions in vers. 10 and 12; the verbs in ver. 11 should be in the past, for the verse probably refers to Sennacherib; in ver. 12 the R.V. mg. should be followed. To get the sense we should omit 1: 13, 15; 2: 2, for while we do not doubt that they are by Nahum, in their present setting, addressed as they are to Judah, they interrupt the address to Assyria. This is particularly true of 2: 2. N.E.B. shows the transpositions needed to use these verses in approximately their present position.

### *The Siege and Fall of Nineveh (Chs. 2, 3).*

The chapter division is correct, for we have two poems on the same subject. Nahum is not giving a vision of the actual capture of Nineveh, nor does he give a detailed description of the siege. He gives a vivid series of pictures of ancient siege warfare as such sieges always were. Nineveh was doomed and it was in this way that she would go down into silence.

<sup>1</sup> See especially B. J. Roberts: *The Old Testament Text and Versions*.

<sup>2</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 595.