

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah
LIGHTS IN THE VALLEY





Yaakov Beasley

נחום, חבקוק,
וּזְפַנְיָהוּ

NAHUM, HABAKKUK,
AND ZEPHANIAH

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In Loving Memory of
Mr. Albert Allen, a"h
אברהם בן סלחא





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Introduction

Studying Prophets

There were many [prophets], as it is taught in a *baraita*: Numerous prophets arose for the Jewish people – double the amount [of Israelites] as left Egypt [1.2 million].... Prophecies that were relevant for future generations were recorded [in the Bible]; otherwise they were not recorded. (Megilla 14a)

The Torah is the supreme prophetic vision, yet it is completely foreign to us. Not only are we baffled by most of its commandments and prohibitions, we don't even recognize the world it portrays. It is filled with descriptions of miracles and the appearance of God in the world.... Prophecy is a complement to miracle and worship – all involve an awareness of a direct relationship with the Creator. We lack this awareness. The consistency of worship in the ancient world and the existence of prophecy in the past indicate to us that the nature of awareness has a history.¹

1. Jeremy Kagan, *The Jewish Self: Recovering Spirituality in the Modern World* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1998), 25–26.

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

In this study of the books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, the seventh, eighth, and ninth books of the Twelve Minor Prophets, or *Trei Asar* in Hebrew, we attempt to decipher the timeless meaning of these sacred words. These words are more than inspired poetry – they are part of a divine message that is still meaningful and relevant for us today.² Nonetheless, whenever I teach these works I encounter students asking at least one of these questions: How does one read the books of the Prophets? Given the countless interpretations that have arisen over the years, can one claim to have arrived at a “correct” reading? Aren’t all the prophets essentially saying the same thing? Once our greatest sages have offered an interpretation, isn’t it enough to then study their writings instead rather than study the text of the Tanakh? Why turn to secular sources, whether academic biblical scholarship, history, or archaeology – what do they know anyway? Most importantly, why do these books matter? The answers to these questions form the underlying premises and principles that guide this commentary, and as such, I wish to address them at the beginning.

Our first and fundamental premise is that although “only those prophecies that were relevant for future generations were recorded” (Megilla 14b), the timelessness of their messages does not remove those messages from having been originally said in a specific time and place. To fully appreciate the prophet’s lesson, the reader first has to have a basic understanding of the historical setting and situation that are the

-
2. Discussing the distinction between the prophetic texts (*Nevi'im*) and the written texts (*Ketuvim*) in Maimonides’s thought, Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg writes:

Rambam’s choice (in his commentary on the mishna in Sanhedrin 10:1) of the term “prophecy” rather than “inspiration” is significant: Prophecy is defined as the reality of man receiving a direct and clear message from God.... Those contemporary thinkers who believe that the Torah was not given through direct communication with the Almighty, that the words of Torah are not His exact words but merely divinely inspired words of men, do humanity a great disservice. Since a person is easily inspired by a message he wants to hear, a law built upon inspiration obviously will not command the respect and authority necessary to bind man; it will become malleable in his hands. Such a Torah would cease to be the source of life from Above, and would instead become a mere product and target for human manipulation. (Yaakov Weinberg, *Fundamentals and Faith* [Jerusalem: Targum Press, 1991], 69–70)

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background to his message. No prophet spoke in a vacuum; he spoke to live people who faced real concerns and challenges. The reader must identify those challenges and distill what message the prophet wished to convey to his immediate listeners. Only then should the reader attempt to draw parallels to his own situation. Not every empire is Babylon and not every metropolis is Nineveh. The idolatry that Isaiah faced was vastly different from that faced by Zephaniah. Isaiah spoke to a prosperous Judah, whose prosperity and wealth led them to worship “their own handiwork” (see Is. 2:11, 17). Zephaniah’s Judah was immensely different, having lived under Assyrian oppression for so long that they doubted that God even heard their cries anymore. Lack of familiarity with the historical context often leads readers to conflate two separate messages, while understanding of the historical setting of each prophet enables us to distill what is truly unique about each message. To help facilitate this understanding, this study includes brief overviews that introduce each prophet and his background before delving into the textual analysis, as well as a separate historical overview of the time period in which Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah spoke, covering both general and Jewish history as necessary.

Second, we attempt to read the words of the prophets as a dynamic dialogue. Each sentence spoken by a prophet was intended either to evoke a reaction from his listeners, address potential concerns, or refute a mistaken belief that prevented the prophet’s message from penetrating the hearts of his listeners. Though the texts generally record only the prophet’s words,³ prophecy, like all communication, has two components⁴ – the explicit communication, and the response of the people that the prophet is addressing. I have tried to be sensitive to this in my commentary. The prologue and epilogue attempt to reflect the situation the prophet was facing, and how his words may have been received. Additionally, the prophet does not always identify the target audience or the message that his prophecy wishes to convey at its beginning. Understanding the

3. On occasion, however, the prophet does record his debate with the people, giving them a voice even while disagreeing with their message (cf. Ezek. 18:1–5, Mal. 1–3).
4. For a summary of the role of communication theory in understanding prophetic interactions, see Gary Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1994), 6–13.

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prophet's words as discourse means that if the words spoken were at first equivocal, and the implied listener would attribute multiple meanings to the prophet's words, then these meanings must be identified at that point in the text, even if the prophet later clarifies his intentions.

As these three books are smaller works, ranging between forty-seven and fifty-six verses, I have chosen to relate to them as unified wholes, with each prophet delivering one central message.⁵ To deliver this message, however, the prophet sometimes divides his discourse into sections. We must plot and track the connection between them, and demonstrate how the sections combine to prove his thesis. Because of the fluid nature of the written word and interpretation, the criteria by which sections are delineated may differ from book to book, and sometimes even within a book. Each study begins with a suggested explanation of the book's overall structure as a guide to following the development of its lessons and ideas. While the reader may discern a new section due to a change in subject matter, it is often actually a literary marker that separates one section from another. Habakkuk introduces his third chapter with the statement that what follows is a psalm. With other prophets, the flow from one part to another may be so smooth that the end of one section and the beginning of another is almost indiscernible. In Nahum, the study tracks his alternating usage of masculine and feminine language when addressing the people, a distinction not noticeable in a standard English translation. With Zephaniah, the written text is split based on the addressee and the subject matter.

The first resources when approaching these texts are the traditional sources and commentaries that have guided us throughout the generations and continue to guide us today. This work does not provide a comprehensive guide to everything that the traditional biblical commentaries – including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abarbanel, and Malbim – say on these verses, but it does attempt to summarize the main issues and approaches that these commentaries discuss. Additionally, this book draws upon knowledge from outside sources when

5. This is the case with the book of Zephaniah as well, even though his prophecy is understood as spanning several decades and different kings.

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they are necessary to enrich our understanding of the text, without compromising the belief in the Bible's status as divine message. Arriving in the Land of Israel in 1263, Nahmanides was handed an authentic coin used in the Temple hundreds of years previously as a *maḥatzit hashekel*. Close investigation led him to realize that his previously written commentary regarding his understanding of the coin had been mistaken, and he immediately wrote to his students to correct his error.⁶ We hope that our efforts to “hear the truth from whoever says it”⁷ lead only to a greater understanding of these words.

Another important tool for understanding the texts is sensitivity to the fact that these prophets drew heavily on their predecessors in formulating their message. Not only did this enable the prophet to find a shared common language with his listeners, but he was able to utilize the messages of his predecessors in creative ways to maximize the rhetoric effect of his message. Recognizing quotations and allusions in these books is imperative, and this project attempts to do so.

Finally, these works are poetry. Ignoring that fact can lead to misreading them entirely.⁸ Just as the historical background is important to fully understand a text, so too is an awareness of the form and genre of that text. The prophecies here are unlike the narratives in the historical books (Joshua through Kings), which generally contain straightforward and non-cryptic messages of punishment and salvation. These prophecies are characterized by more extensive use of poetic imagery and metaphors, unconventional syntax, parallelism, and wordplay. These literary

6. Nahmanides, *Commentary to the Torah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1988), 507.

7. From Maimonides's introduction to *Pirkei Avot* (*Shemoneh Perakim*), as cited by Rabbi Hayyim Angel in his excellent discussion of the issues modern yeshiva students face when studying Tanakh seriously. See additional sources in his essay “From Black Fire to White Fire,” in *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing, 2009), 16nn11–12.

8. Robert Alter writes, “For a reader to attend to these elements as literary art is not merely an exercise in appreciation but a discipline in understanding: the literary vehicle is so much the necessary medium through which the Hebrew writers realized their meanings that we will grasp the meanings at best imperfectly if we ignore their articulations as literature” (*The Literary Guide to the Bible* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987], 21).

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tools and devices not only frame and help convey the message, at times they become the message. As Leland Ryken concludes his work on the Bible's literary features:

We should read the Bible expecting to encounter religious and moral truth. More often than not, that truth will come to us in a literary form – in stories, poems, proverbs, and visions, for example. To understand the Bible, therefore, we need to understand how these literary genres work. Our enjoyment of the Bible will be enhanced if we have developed the capacity to perceive its artistry and beauty. In short, the Bible is not an occasionally literary book – it is mainly a work of literature.⁹

To help appreciate how the literary artistry of the prophets assists and conveys their message, we will highlight the relevant poetic devices as they appear throughout the commentary.

* * *

It is with both tremendous trepidation and gratitude to Hashem that I present this volume on the biblical books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. I emphasize trepidation, because one should not flippantly claim an understanding of the biblical word, especially when dealing with works that have not been studied widely. These three books suffer from relative obscurity: they are small in size, not part of the traditional *haftara* cycle, and the Tanakh's prophetic works tend to be less familiar generally. Yet, they all contain important and pertinent messages for our time. Very little material of quality exists for the discriminating reader who wishes to study the Latter Prophets in English and the challenges in reading them are numerous. The terse and cryptic style of biblical prose makes reading it difficult, even with the myriad of translations available today, and this issue is even more striking regarding the prophetic works in particular. They are written in semi-poetic form, often relying upon the

9. Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Michigan: Baker Academic), 355.

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reader to recognize the many allusions within their words and unpack the full import of their meaning. There is much we don't know about the exact time, place, or circumstances in which the prophet spoke, we aren't familiar with the nature or appeal of the idolatrous practices that the prophets decry, and we view the words of reproof against abusing widows and orphans as belonging to a different time.

Yet, these words are meant for us. Rabbinic thought teaches (Megilla 14a) that only prophecies that contain an eternal message were preserved for the generations. We live in amazing times. The image in Zechariah's vision of redemption, of boys and girls playing in Jerusalem's streets (8:5), has come to pass before our eyes, and his message of the importance of pursuing social justice, to "execute true judgment and perform loving-kindness and mercy" (7:9), is as relevant as ever. Thus it behooves us to revisit these words to discover their message for us. Therefore, my trepidation is accompanied by a tremendous feeling of gratitude to the *Ribono shel Olam* for affording me this opportunity to share with the world, in a very small way, His ideas as transmitted by the prophets and hopefully in doing so, helping make it a better place.

* * *

This work is not the work of a single person. Though I bear sole responsibility for the material presented within, this book would not have come to fruition without the support and encouragement of many people along the way, and I wish to acknowledge as many of them as possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank the publisher of Koren Publishers and Maggid Books, Matthew Miller, and his wonderful and professional team, whose dedication to producing intelligent and thought-provoking Torah literature in English is unparalleled. I am especially grateful to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, editor in chief, who has not only pushed me forward professionally at many key junctures in my life, encouraging me to place words on paper for several outlets, including *Tradition* magazine and Yeshivat Har Etzion's Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (VBM), but has also been there as a friend and colleague as well. Special thanks also to Ita Olesker, Sara Henna Dahan, Yonatan Shai Freedman, and Debbie Ismailoff.

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Though this book was written in Israel, it really began in a small town in Canada many years ago, where children on outdoor ice rinks dream of Gretzky and Sittler, not ancient prophets. Despite living in a small town with an anti-Semitic past, which at one time had grouped dogs and Jews together on a sign forbidding both parties to bathe on the beach, I grew up with tremendous pride in my heritage. My parents and grandparents on both sides provided me with unconditional love, a thirst for knowledge, and a healthy dose of curiosity, paving the way for my interest in Tanakh. All of my teachers – from Rabbi Larry Englander in Mississauga, my first teacher, to all the teachers at the Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, including Rabbis Pachino, Saknowitz, Levine, Kapustin, Bloomberg, Gurvitz, and Feldman – showed tremendous patience for an energetic, small-town student. I would like to make a special mention of the former head of Toronto's Board of Jewish Education, Rabbi Yitzchak Witty *zt"l*, his wife Rebbetzin Shulamit Witty, and his family. His home was a paradigm of scholarship and generosity, and I am privileged to still count his family among my close friends today.

I began to study Tanakh extensively for the first time at Yeshiva University under Rabbis Allen Schwartz and Mitchell Orlian. When I moved to Israel and eventually to the community of Alon Shvut, I was exposed to the new style of learning Tanakh, with its emphasis on its literary aspects and with the understanding that behind it lay real historical events that needed to be placed into their proper context. Special mention goes to those who became my guides: Rabbis Menachem Leibtag, Yaakov Medan, and Yoel Bin-Nun. At Bar-Ilan University, where I am continuing Tanakh studies on the doctoral level, I wish to thank Professors Elie Assis, James Kugel, Esther Eshel, and Michael Avioz.

Many of the ideas in this book in particular, and the underlying approach to Tanakh on which they are based, have been battle-tested in the classroom over time by excellent students whose insights and questions have often forced me to sharpen and revise my thoughts. These exchanges spanned several years that I spent teaching at Yeshivot Shaarei Mevaseret Zion, Darchei Noam, and Machon Gold, in communities in Minnesota and Toronto, at Yeshivat AMIT Nachshon under Rav Noam Krigman and Avi Dadon, and especially at Yeshivat Lev HaTorah, where

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several years ago Rabbis Boaz Mori and Michael Cytrin hired me as Tanakh coordinator with the mandate to teach as much Tanakh as possible. To them, and all my students, many of whom I remain in touch with until today, I remain grateful.

Several talented scholars generously donated of their time to read, edit, and critique this manuscript. Because of the efforts and insights of Rabbi Yitz Etshalom, Dr. Yael Ziegler, Rabbanit Shani Taragin, and especially Rabbanit Mali Brofsky, this book is a much better product. Thank you.

Most importantly, I wish to thank from the bottom of my heart all my family members, whose unstinting support provided me with the strength to persevere and complete this work. To my in-laws Alberto and Matilde Nowosiolski, I wish you many years of enjoyment from your grandchildren. To my mother and her husband, Adela and Zwi Zur, I can only hope for many more years of health and happiness in each other's company. To my children, Mordechai, Shabtai, Michaya, Yair, and Yoshiyahu, and my amazing daughters-in-law, Noa and Tamar, I wish that Hashem will fulfill all the requests of your hearts – so ask for the sky! To the Katchalski and Fuld families, I wish nothing but shared happiness, and may the memory of Tamar's father, Ari Fuld *Hy"d*, be a source of blessing to all.

Finally, to my wife, Devorah – without your love and faith, this book would never have come into being. I only hope that I continue to be worthy of being together with you and deserving of your love for many decades to come.



Prologue

In the year 658 BCE, ten miles south of Jerusalem, a teenage shepherd named Amos carefully leads his sheep through a steep and winding path in a valley near Tekoa. He thinks about the famous prophet whose name he bore, a legend who walked those very hills a century before. His parents called him Amos after the prophet Amos; they told him that bearing the name of a man of God would bring him fortune. Amos knew their real reason, though. Using the name of a prophet who stood down tyrants and injustice was their quiet protest against Manasseh, the wicked king who ruled the Kingdom of Judah (the Southern Kingdom). They could never say so, or at least never out loud. Spies lurked everywhere; people advanced their position in the regime by slandering their neighbors. But Amos could discern his parents' contempt for Manasseh, and Amos knew why they held this contempt.

Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, was a proud, independent kingdom a mere hundred years earlier. To its north lay the Kingdom of Israel (the Northern Kingdom), even more prosperous and powerful, with Samaria as its capital. While the people of Judah were strong in their monotheistic belief and faithful in their worship of the God of Israel, the northerners were wayward in their beliefs. God commanded Amos the prophet to leave Tekoa to deliver a blunt prophecy to Israel:

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Change your corrupt ways, or disappear and never rise again (Amos 5:2). Israel ignored Amos; the dangerous Assyrian Empire, though always a threat, was far away, and besides, they reasoned, didn't Israel's prosperity signify God's approval? But then came the earthquake of 760 BCE.

The earthquake devastated the northern kingdom.¹ Israel's economic prosperity disappeared and the ruling dynasty of Jehu soon collapsed. Ambitious princes who tried to rule in its wake were soon assassinated by even more aggressive officers. Politically, the country was divided over whether to continue to pay the yearly tribute to Assyria instituted by Jehu or to rebel and join the Aramean coalition that promised to push the Assyrians back to the Euphrates. Israel became fragmented and impoverished. By the time the Assyrian armies invaded, the Northern Kingdom was barely a whisper of its former glory. Sargon II overran Samaria in 722 BCE, exiling the remaining population far from Israel.

In the south, with vast hordes of Assyrians perched on his border, King Ahaz of Judah capitulated and became a vassal to Assyria. He even placed an altar for offerings to Assyria's idols in Solomon's Temple. Though his son Hezekiah, who remained faithful to God, valiantly tried to remove the Assyrian yoke, his insurgency led to Judah's near destruction. God performed a miracle and decimated Sennacherib's armies outside of Jerusalem, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. As the remnant of the Assyrian army retreated to its homeland in 701 BCE, Judah was by then

1. The earthquake was so powerful that hundreds of years later, the prophet Zechariah could taunt his listeners with the words: "You shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah" (Zech. 14:5), secure in the knowledge that they would be daunted by his threat. Josephus records a tradition that an earthquake shook the land when Uzziah entered the Holy of Holies (*Antiquities of the Jews* IX:10:4). Archaeological excavations at Hazor, Samaria, and other places reveal leaning and crooked walls, displaced rows of stones, and broken debris lying around, evidence of a violent earthquake (between 7.8 and 8.2 on the Richter scale) that occurred around 760 BCE. Y. Yadin et al., *Hazor II: An Account of the Second Season of Excavations* (Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1956), 24, 26, 36–37; Philip J. King, *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 21; S. A. Austin, G. W. Franz, and E. G. Frost, "Amos' Earthquake: An Extraordinary Middle East Seismic Event of 750 B.C.," *International Geology Review* 42 (2002): 657–71.

largely a smoldering ruin, with forty-six of its largest cities destroyed. On his walks, shepherding his herds, Amos could see these ruins, a series of black scars that dotted the landscape for miles.

Following Hezekiah's death in 696 BCE, his young son Manasseh decided that it was in Judah's interest to reassume the status of being Assyria's loyal vassal. He surrendered the independence for which his father had fought and reintroduced Assyrian rites into the Temple. In the process, he brutally suppressed dissent, and Jerusalem's golden-colored stone streets ran red with the blood of prophets. According to rabbinic tradition, Manasseh did not spare even his father-in-law, the great prophet Isaiah; his soldiers slaughtered him with axes.² He ruled as king of Judah for decades with an iron fist, supported by the rehabilitated and now invincible Assyrian Empire. It was during this period that Egyptian refugees and slaves began to appear in the markets for the first time, as even Egypt's once impregnable capital, No-Amon (Thebes), fell to the Assyrians in 663 BCE.

Most of Judah's inhabitants acclimated themselves to life under Assyrian rule. The God of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, who spoke of social justice and mercy, appeared to have abandoned His people, possibly defeated by the Assyrian deities worshipped by their empire's overlords. Amos the shepherd could merely wonder: Would prophets who spoke in God's name ever be heard again?

2. There are two accounts in the Talmud that claim that Manasseh killed Isaiah. Yevamot 49b states:

Manasseh said to Isaiah, "Moses, your master, said, 'For man shall not see Me and live' (Ex. 33:20), but you said, 'I saw the Lord seated upon [His] throne' (Is. 6:1)." ... [He continued to point out other contradictions and] Isaiah thought: I know that he will not accept my explanations; why should I increase his guilt? He then uttered a divine name, a cedar tree opened, and Isaiah disappeared within it. However, Manasseh ordered the cedar to be sawed open, and when the saw reached his mouth Isaiah died. So he was punished for having said, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Is. 6:5).

A somewhat different version of this legend appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (Y. Sanhedrin 10), where Isaiah hides himself in a cedar tree but is discovered by the fringes of his garment. This second legend about the martyrdom of Isaiah became the kernel of the Christian Apocryphal work *The Ascension of Isaiah*.



Historical Background

To begin our study of and to fully appreciate the messages of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, we shall quickly summarize the reigns of the kings of Assyria, also called the Assyrian Empire, and of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, the superpowers of the time, as well as the kings of Judah who ruled in each period, also taking into account major historical events.

Table 1 – Time Line of Kings of Judah, Kings of Assyria, and Prophets¹

Year	King of Judah	King of Assyria	Prophet	Historical Events
770 BCE	Uzziah* (794–742 BCE)		Amos	

1. For simplicity's sake, we have followed the accepted conventional historical dating system, and do not address the discrepancies with the midrashic chronology suggested by *Seder Olam*.

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Year	King of Judah	King of Assyria	Prophet	Historical Events
760 BCE				760 BCE – A major earthquake devastates Israel
750 BCE	Jotham (752–736 BCE)	Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE)	Isaiah	
	Ahaz (742–726 BCE)		Micah	
740 BCE				721 BCE – Downfall of Samaria and exile of ten tribes
730 BCE	Hezekiah (726–697 BCE)	Shalman-esser V (726–722 BCE)	Hosea	
720 BCE		Sargon II (722–705 BCE)		
710 BCE				701 BCE – Assyrian invasion of Judah, siege of Jerusalem and defeat of Sennacherib
700 BCE		Sennacherib (705–681 BCE)		
690 BCE	Manasseh (696–641 BCE)			

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Year	King of Judah	King of Assyria	Prophet	Historical Events
680 BCE		Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE)		681 BCE – Assassination of Sennacherib
670 BCE		Ashurbani- pal (668–626 BCE)		
660 BCE				663 BCE – The Egyptian capital No-Amon (Thebes) falls to Assyria
				652 BCE – Assyrian civil war
650 BCE			Nahum	650–648 BCE – Manasseh arrested after rebellion
640 BCE	Josiah** (639–608 BCE)			
630 BCE			Zefaniah	
		Civil War, Downfall of Assyria	Habakkuk	626 BCE – Nabopolassar takes power in Babylon, attains independence, and begins to wage war on Assyria

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Year	King of Judah	King of Assyria	Prophet	Historical Events
620 BCE			Jeremiah	612 BCE – Fall of Nineveh
610 BCE				609 BCE – Death of Josiah; Nebuchadnezzar takes throne in Babylon
600 BCE	Jehoiakim*** (608–597 BCE)			605 BCE – Battle of Carchemish, final defeat of Assyria
				598 BCE – Nebuchadnezzar invades Judah, first exile to Babylon.

* It is widely believed that Uzziah's final years and Jotham's early years overlap, as Uzziah retired after contracting leprosy (II Chr. 26:21).

** Josiah was briefly preceded by his father, Amon, who ruled from 641 to 639 BCE.

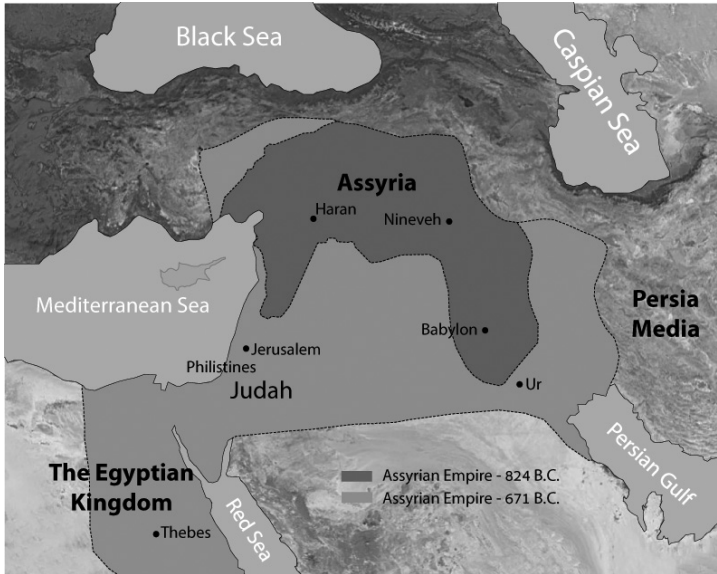
*** Jehoiakim was briefly preceded by his brother, Jehoahaz, who ruled for three months before being exiled to Egypt in 609 BCE, and was followed by his son Jehoiachin, who also ruled briefly for three months in 598 BCE before being exiled to Babylonia.

THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Though the roots of the Assyrian Empire began in the third millennium BCE, the entity that would dominate the ancient Near East, including Israel and Judah, began in 966 BCE with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser II and lasted until its final defeat in 605 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians. The Assyrian Empire was the most technologically advanced empire of its era, among the first to mass-produce iron weaponry, while

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most other nations still relied on bronze.² At the height of their power and influence, they dominated the ancient Near East, conquering and enslaving entire nations,³ as seen on the map below:



Map of Assyrian Influence

The first surviving record of an Assyrian ruler that had direct contact with Israel is that of Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE). In his royal annals (the Kurkh Monolith, a stele found near the Tigris River in Turkey), Shalmaneser III records the events of his campaign to Qarqar in 853 BCE. There, he fought a coalition of kings that included King Ahab of Israel

2. Simon Anglim et al., *Fighting Techniques of the Ancient World 3000 BCE–500 CE* (London: Amber Books, 2013), 12.
3. Paul Kriwaczek writes that “Assyria must surely have among the worst press notices of any state in history. Babylon may be a byname for corruption, decadence and sin but the Assyrians and their famous rulers, with terrifying names like Shalmaneser, Tiglath-Pileser, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, rate in the popular imagination just below Adolf Hitler and Genghis Khan for cruelty, violence, and sheer murderous savagery.” Paul Kriwaczek, *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 208.

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and Hadad-Ezer of Damascus (possibly Ben Hadad of I Kings 20). He would return twelve years later, this time receiving tribute from King Jehu of Israel. He recorded that the Israelite king prostrated himself on the Black Obelisk, on display today at the British Museum.

Five weaker kings followed Shalmanesser III on the Assyrian throne, and the people of Israel and Judah were able to live in relative tranquility for over a century. This period of calm ended in 745 BCE with the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE). The new Assyrian monarch reverted to pursuing aggressive expansionist policies in the west, expanding Assyria until the empire reached Israel's borders. The Assyrians then applied unrelenting pressure on the Northern Kingdom, waging war on Israel's border towns and slowly depleting the countryside.⁴ The next Assyrian king, Shalmanesser V (726–722 BCE), besieged Samaria, the capital of Judah, for three years, beginning in 722 BCE.⁵ When he died suddenly, his general Sargon II (722–705 BCE) took the reins, defeating and exiling Israel, and bringing thousands of foreigners to repopulate the now empty lands.⁶ At home, Sargon II moved the capital of the empire to Dur Sharrukin, but after his untimely death in battle, his successor Sennacherib moved it to Nineveh. In 701 BCE, Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) campaigned against Hezekiah and nearly destroyed Judah, until his armies were decimated almost overnight outside of Jerusalem's walls.⁷ Despite the defeat, Sennacherib continued to rule the Assyrian Empire with an iron fist. He waged war against Elam and Babylonia for years, and this war culminated in the destruction of Babylonian temples and shrines in 689 BCE. He was ultimately murdered by his eldest children in 681 BCE (II Kings 19:37).

Though Sargon II established Nineveh as the new Assyrian capital, it was Sennacherib who was responsible for transforming the ancient metropolis into a truly great city. The name Nineveh is generally assumed to have meant "Place of Fish" (the cuneiform symbol for Nineveh was a

4. II Kings 15:29, II Kings 16, I Chr. 5:26, II Chr. 28:20.

5. II Kings 17:3, 18:9.

6. II Kings 17, Is. 20:1. Some estimate that in total, the Assyrians were responsible for moving as many as 4.5 million people between 745 BCE and 612 BCE. Cline and Graham, *Ancient Empires: From Mesopotamia to the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50.

7. II Kings 18–19, II Chr. 32, Is. 36–37.

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fish within a house, from the Aramaic *nuna*, “fish”). Others understand Nineveh to mean either “the city of Nin” (the Babylonian version of Hercules), or “the city of Inanna” (Inanna was the name of an ancient Sumerian goddess, associated with both love and beauty as well as war and power). Genesis 10:8 credits Nimrod with founding Nineveh, attesting to its antiquity. Sennacherib devoted almost twenty-five years of his reign to enlarging Nineveh,⁸ adding palaces, aqueducts, temples, ramparts, and palace gardens.⁹ The streets were lined with stone carvings that boasted of Sennacherib’s military conquests, and according to uncovered ruins, the boulevards were almost twenty feet wide. Population estimates from that time range from 100,000 to 150,000 residents, making Nineveh among the largest cities in the Middle East. By the end of Sennacherib’s reign, the words Assyria and Nineveh had become interchangeable.¹⁰

His successor Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE; mentioned in II Kings 19:37, Ezra 4:2, and Is. 37:38) maintained the empire’s strength and managed to keep the restless Babylonians, also known as Chaldeans, at bay.¹¹

8. According to Nelson’s *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 760: “In Sennacherib’s day the wall around Nineveh was 40 to 50 feet high. It extended for 4 kilometers along the Tigris River and for 13 kilometers around the inner city. The city wall had fifteen main gates, five of which have been excavated. Each of the gates was guarded by stone bull statues. Both inside and outside the walls, Sennacherib created parks, a botanical garden, and a zoo. He built a water-system containing the oldest aqueduct in history at Jerwan, across the Gomel River [65 kilometers away].”
9. According to British Assyriologist Stephanie Dalley, these were the famous Hanging Gardens, one of the ancient Seven Wonders of the World. Though later writers placed them at Babylon, extensive research has failed to find any trace of them, and Sennacherib’s account of the palace gardens he built matches accounts of the Hanging Gardens in several significant details. Christopher Scarre and Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient Civilizations* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 231.
10. Nahum uses the term “Nineveh” to refer to both the capital city and to the entire empire. This is not uncommon in the Bible, when prominent cities represent their countries (the city of Samaria become synonymous with the northern Kingdom of Israel; today we talk of news from Jerusalem or Washington meaning Israel or the United States). This is an example of metonymy, when a writer uses the name of one thing for that of another associated with or suggested by it.
11. Historically, the Chaldeans lived in southern Babylonia, in an area about four hundred miles long and one hundred miles wide alongside the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (today’s southern Iraq). In the Bible, the term Chaldeans generally refers to

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He successfully handed over the flourishing empire to his son, Ashurbanipal (668–626 BCE). Ashurbanipal reigned successfully for many decades, continuing to extend Assyrian control until it reached Persia in the east, Arabia in the south, and Egypt in the southwest. The capture of its arch-rival, Egypt's capital No-Amon (Thebes), in 663 BCE represented the zenith of Assyrian imperialism. Though Ashurbanipal had to fight an insurrection led by his brother (whom he had appointed governor of Babylonia) between 652 and 648 BCE, Ashurbanipal's reign was generally unchallenged. Due to the complete control that they exercised over the ancient Near East, this era has been termed the *Pax Assyriaca*, the "Assyrian peace."

As rulers, the Assyrian kings acquired a well-deserved reputation for brutality. Cruelty has been a constant in warfare since the beginning of time, but few bragged about it as much as the Assyrian monarchs. They would meticulously document and record their exploits on tablets, obelisks, reliefs, and carvings. Dismemberment, impaling, flaying, and beheading of the captured, whether soldier or civilian, were common. Among Ashurbanipal's boasts we find the following:

I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile.... I felled three

Babylonians in general, but can refer to the tribes from that specific area. Gen. 11:28 speaks of Abraham's father Terah, who was from "Ur of the Chaldeans," the specific tribe or people known as the Chaldeans. Similarly, God called Abraham a Chaldean in Gen. 11:31 and Gen. 15:7.

The kings of Babylon came from Chaldean stock: Ukinzer, a Chaldean, became king of Babylon in 731 BCE for a brief period; Merodach-Baladan, also a Chaldean, became king over Babylon a few years later (King Hezekiah is mentioned as meeting his envoys in II Kings 20). With the rise of Nabopolassar, another Chaldean, to the throne of Babylon and the severing of ties with Assyria, the words Chaldean and Babylonian became synonymous with each other (see Is. 13:19, 47:1, 5, 48:14, 20).

After the Persian conquest of Babylon in 538 BCE, the Bible uses the term Chaldeans to refer to wise men rather than a separate people. They influenced Nebuchadnezzar's decision to throw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:8) and appear throughout the book of Daniel as wise men and astrologers (Dan. 1:4, 2:10, 4:7, 5:7, 11).

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thousand of their fighting men with the sword... I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city... I slew two hundred and sixty fighting men; I cut off their heads and made pyramids thereof. I slew one of every two. I built a wall before the great gates of the city; I flayed the chief men of the rebels, and I covered the wall with their skins. Some of them were enclosed alive in the bricks of the wall, some of them were crucified on stakes along the wall; I caused a great multitude of them to be flayed in my presence, and I covered the wall with their skins. I gathered together the heads in the form of crowns, and their pierced bodies in the form of garlands.¹²

It is no wonder that one historian concluded that “it is tempting to see the Assyrian Empire... as a historical forebear of Nazi Germany: an aggressive, murderously vindictive regime supported by a magnificent and successful war machine.”¹³

The mid-640s BCE was a period of transition for the Assyrians. After the bloody civil war with his brother, Ashurbanipal turned away from further military adventures, concentrating instead on building projects, religious pursuits, and cultivating the arts. By the final decade of Ashurbanipal's reign, signs of weakness began to surface. The empire's coffers were empty and there was not enough manpower to garrison the border posts facing the Scythians in the north and the Medes to the east. Some sources suggest that even Ashurbanipal himself degenerated into slothfulness and laziness, preferring poetry to the

12. Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), 124, 126.

13. Anglim, *Fighting Techniques*, 12. Assyriologist H. W. F. Saggs takes an alternative view, arguing that the Assyrian Empire was actually a stabilizing force for progress in the ancient Near East, enabling transportation and hence innovation. He argues that their reputation for cruelty is vastly exaggerated. His main work on the empire is *The Might That Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984).

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burdens of rule.¹⁴ And with his death in 627 BCE, Assyrian fortunes underwent a rapid decline.

Following Ashurbanipal's death, his many children each claimed the right to succeed their father. Their ill-timed squabble led to a civil war, enabling Babylon to regain its independence under the aggressive leadership of an officer named Nabopolassar. Allying himself with the neighboring Medes and other countries in the region chafing for independence, Nabopolassar began to slowly but systematically reduce Assyrian control over the area between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Much of the information that we have about this period comes from accounts in the Babylonian Chronicles (tablet ABC 2),¹⁵ which describe a long, twelve-year struggle between the two historical rivals and enemies. In 614 BCE, Nabopolassar conquered the ancient political and religious center of Ashur; by 612 BCE, he laid siege to the great imperial capital of Nineveh. The Assyrian king Sinsharishkun was killed during the siege, and in August, the last remaining defenses finally broke down and Nineveh was razed.¹⁶ A new king, Ashurballit II, managed to fight his way out of Nineveh, reorganizing his forces at Harran. However, though there would be several more battles between the Babylonians and the Assyrians, the battle for Nineveh was the turning point in the war. Harran fell in 608 BCE, and Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar delivered the final blow at the battle of Carchemish, defeating the remnants of the Assyrian army and their Egyptian allies in 605 BCE. Assyria would never rise again.

The devastation of Nineveh was so total and complete that within two generations no one even knew where the city once lay. For the next two millennia its ruins were covered by sand; many rejected the biblical

14. H. W. F. Saggs writes: "It was a defect of Ashurbanipal as a king that he had nothing in him of the great strategist, statesman, or soldier. He was as barren in political insight as he was rich in vindictiveness. It was his misfortune that he was called to be king when by inclination he was a scholastic." *The Might That Was Assyria*, 116.
15. The Babylonian Chronicles are a series of inscribed clay tablets, held at the British Museum, which are the primary historical record of and source for many major events in Babylonian and Mesopotamian history.
16. According to some historical sources, the Medes were responsible for the actual destruction of Nineveh. "Indeed, the Babylonians were very careful in their records to distance themselves from the general looting of the city and especially the temples of this great city." Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 459.

descriptions of Nineveh as belonging to the realm of myth, not history.¹⁷ This was the case until the nineteenth century, when archaeologists and scholars, trying to corroborate the biblical narratives with historical evidence, began to scour present-day Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In 1847, Sir Austen Layard discovered the ruins of Nineveh at the Kuyunjik Mound, opposite the present-day Iraqi city of Mosul. He unearthed a city that was 4 miles by 2 miles in area,¹⁸ and in 1849 uncovered Sennacherib's "palace without a rival." He also found Ashurbanipal's library, containing 22,000 inscribed clay tablets. These discoveries not only reveal the extent of the wealth and glory of ancient Assyria, but also help to confirm and complete the historical record of the Bible.

THE NEO-BABYLONIAN EMPIRE: BEGINNINGS

Babylonia has a long, ancient history; archaeological digs at the site of ancient Ur reveal remnants of civilization dating back to the fourth millennium BCE. The most famous city in ancient Mesopotamia was Babylon, whose ruins today lie in modern-day Iraq, ninety-four kilometers southwest of Baghdad. The city's name is derived from *bav-il* or *bav-ilim*, which means "gate of god" or "gate of the gods" in Akkadian.¹⁹ Babylon

17. Will Durant writes about the extent of Nineveh's destruction:

Nineveh was laid waste as ruthlessly and completely as her kings had once ravaged Susa and Babylon; the city was put to the torch, the population was slaughtered or enslaved, and the palace so recently built by Ashurbanipal was sacked and destroyed. At one blow Assyria disappeared from history.... In a little while all but the mightiest of the Great Kings were forgotten, and all their royal palaces were in ruins under the drifting sands. Two hundred years after its capture, Xenophon's Ten Thousand marched over the mounds that had been Nineveh, and never suspected that these were the site of the ancient metropolis that had ruled half the world. Not a stone remained visible of all the temples with which Assyria's pious warriors had sought to beautify their greatest capital. (*The Story of Civilizations: Our Oriental Heritage* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983], 283–84)

18. Additional excavations revealed that suburbs extended for miles outside the wall. This could explain why Jonah required three days to traverse the city while delivering his warning (see Jonah 3:3).
19. The story of the Tower of Babel, told in Genesis, chapter 11, states that the city was named for the confusion that ensued after God caused the people to begin speaking in different languages (in Hebrew, the root *bavel* means "confusion").