

The Hunter Becomes The Hunted

Nahum 2:11-13 April 10, 2024

In 1898, two maneless, male lions terrorized the Tsavo region of Kenya. They dragged off and devoured human victims almost daily, and were particularly focused on a British construction camp. Thousands of Indian and African workers were there, building a bridge over the Tsavo river. The estimated number of victims ranges from dozens to over a hundred. The truth is, casualties among the African workers weren't documented.¹

What do you do when lions are brazenly hunting people? You gear up and hunt *them*. John Patterson, who was in charge of the bridge-building, spent months pursuing the beasts. He was ultimately successful, though the second lion had to be shot nine times and died "gnawing on a fallen tree branch, still trying to reach him." After all that terror and destruction, the Tsavo Man-Eaters became rugs in Patterson's home. Years later the skins were sold to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where they were stuffed, mounted, and are now on display for the world to see.

Israel had a lion problem: Assyria. They were the apex predators of the ancient world, victimizing everyone in their territory. They devoured peoples and cities and nations. They lived, breathed, and celebrated violence. They dared God to stop them, roaring their blasphemies wherever they went.

Isaiah described the unstoppable Assyrian army this way:

Isaiah 5:29 - ²⁹Their roaring is like a lion's; they roar like young lions; they growl and seize their prey and carry it off, and no one can rescue it.

What you may not know is how into lions the Assyrians were. They used lion imagery more than any culture in the ancient, semitic world.² They used it in their art and in their architecture and in their literature and their propaganda. Lions were featured on the royal seal for hundreds of years, pressed into countless clay tablets.³ Tiglath-Pileser I wrote, "*I left the chariots and took my place at the head of my warriors. I was bold as a lion, and advanced triumphantly.*" King Sennacherib said, "*I raged like a lion, I stormed like a tempest, with my merciless warriors I set my face against Merodach-baladan.*" His son, King Esarhaddon, also wrote about roaring and raging like a lion.⁴

The Assyrian goddess, Ishtar, was often depicted as a lioness or as riding a lion.⁵ And kings like Sargon and Sennacherib, would put what are called *Lamassu* sculptures at the entrance of their citadels and throne rooms. These statues were protective deities with human heads and bodies of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsavo_Man-Eaters

² Gordon Johnston *Nabum's Rhetorical Allusions To The Neo-Assyrian Lion Motif*

³ Eckart Frahm *Assyria: The Rise And Fall Of The World's First Empire*

⁴ Johnston

⁵ *The New American Commentary Volume 20: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, And Zephaniah*

bulls or lions with wings.⁶ The lamassu figures were often followed by statues of a hero, grasping a wriggling lion. These are great, tall wall-sculptures that are currently on display at the Louvre.

Lions were a part of Assyrian culture for a long time, but it was Ashurbanipal who could really be called the original Lion King. We believe *this* was the king who reigned while Nahum wrote. He frequently used lions in his propaganda, and literally used lions to show that he was the strongest king in the world. He once said, “Among men–kings, and among the beasts–lions; all are powerless before my bow.”⁷ He decorated his palace walls with images of lion hunts, which he frequently took part in. In fact, he was the *only* king of Assyria to put himself as a lion-slayer in reliefs on the palace walls. He had a big ego, but it also had a practical, PR purpose.

You see, lions were not only a symbol in Nineveh, they were also a real a problem. There was a population explosion in the area during Ashurbanipal’s reign.⁸ They threatened both people and livestock. As king, Ashurbanipal was responsible to do something about it. So, he had an arena constructed in Nineveh so he could publicly “hunt” lions in front of his people. He wanted his citizens to know that *he* was the boss of lions. He told his people he could kill lions with his bare hands.⁹ And he once reported that he killed 18 lions just 40 minutes after daybreak.¹⁰ He said he was able to do this because he had been divinely empowered.¹¹ In fact he called himself the king of the universe.

So, hearing all this, now listen to what Nahum wrote at the end of chapter 2:

Nahum 2:11-13 - ¹¹Where is the lions’ lair, or the feeding ground of the young lions, where the lion and lioness prowled, and the lion’s cub, with nothing to frighten them away? ¹²The lion mauled whatever its cubs needed and strangled prey for its lionesses. It filled up its dens with the kill, and its lairs with mauled prey. ¹³Beware, I am against you. This is the declaration of the Lord of Armies. I will make your chariots go up in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the sound of your messengers will never be heard again.

Nahum closes this chapter with a *taunt* song.¹² Assyria had roared and ravaged and ruined the land for centuries, but now it’s over because the Lord God of Israel was going hunting. Look at verse 11 again.

Nahum 2:11 - ¹¹Where is the lions’ lair, or the feeding ground of the young lions, where the lion and lioness prowled, and the lion’s cub, with nothing to frighten them away?

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamassu>

⁷ Johnston

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Frahm

¹¹ Johnston

¹² Ralph Smith *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 32: Micah–Malachi*

This wasn't just about one city - the *whole* Assyrian empire was going to be wiped out. *All* the lions. *All* the lionesses. *All* the cubs. *All* their feeding grounds would be reclaimed. They were going the way of the buffalo.

Now remember: At the time of writing, Assyria was as strong as ever.¹³ And they were swollen with pride. Back when Ashurbanipal's grandfather, Sennacherib, sent an army to besiege Jerusalem, his field commander had mocked the God of Israel. He said, "Your God can't help you or save you. *NO* god can overpower Sennacherib. *Where is the god* who can rescue you from Assyria's power?" Then they found out. There *is* a God Who acts and responds and protects His people.

Assyria was going to find out again, only *this* time it would be their final lesson. In the previous verses, Nahum depicted the siege of Nineveh. Now, the dust has settled and there's nothing left. Nahum mocks the Assyrians, saying, "Where'd everybody go?"

Nahum 2:12 - ¹²The lion mauled whatever its cubs needed and strangled prey for its lionesses. It filled up its dens with the kill, and its lairs with mauled prey.

When Jeremiah described what Assyria did to Israel, he said, "Israel is a stray lamb, chased by lions. The first who devoured him was the king of Assyria."¹⁴

The Assyrian kings were very excited to talk about how violently they devoured their enemies. Here are a few lines from their annals. Ashurbanipal: "...*cities I conquered, destroyed, laid waste and burned with fire...carrying booty away from them which was beyond counting.*" Sargon: "*I smashed their fortified walls and reduced them to the ground. The people together with their possessions I took as booty.*" Tiglath-Pileser: "*I felled with the sword 800 of their combat troops, I burned 3000 captives from them. I did not leave one of them alive as hostage. I made a pile of their corpses. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls. I flayed...their city ruler and draped his skin over the wall of the city...*"¹⁵ *I crushed the corpses of their warriors...I made their blood to flow over all the ravines and high places of mountains. I cut off their heads and piled them up at the walls of their cities like heaps of grain.*"¹⁶ The lion's roar of Assyria was terrifying.

Their empire stretched over 1,000 miles, from the Nile river to the Caucasus mountains.¹⁷ And through that whole territory they spread fear and violence and bloodshed. One source writes, "Assyrian cruelty stands almost unparalleled in the record of human history."¹⁸

Just three weeks ago, in Northern California, a man and his brother were attacked by a mountain lion. One man was killed, the other survived with traumatic injuries to his face.¹⁹ What do you do when lions start killing people? You hunt and kill them. And we do that even knowing that the lions

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¹⁴ Jeremiah 50:17

¹⁵ J. Daryl Charles *Plundering the Lion's Den: A Portrait of Divine Fury (Nahum 2:3-11)*

¹⁶ R. F. Harper *Assyrian and Babylonian Literature*

¹⁷ <https://www.ushistory.org/civ/4d.asp>

¹⁸ W.A. Maier *The Book Of Nahum*

¹⁹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2024/03/24/mountain-lion-fatal-attack-california/73085116007/>

are simply following their animal nature. Lions aren't *evil*. They're not *criminals*. But they are dangerous, and so we protect people from them. We step in and put a stop to their violence.

The Assyrians were not animals - they were human beings. They should've known better, especially since they had had a *real encounter* with the Living God during the time of Jonah. And in that encounter the Lord had told them, "You *have* to stop doing what you're doing. You've got to turn from this evil and this violence otherwise I'm going to destroy you." And, for a time, Nineveh did. They repented and turned toward God. But then, years went by, new rulers came to power, and the people went back on the prowl. They chose to run with the lions of Assyria, rather than the Lion of Judah.

Nahum 2:13 - ¹³ Beware, I am against you. This is the declaration of the Lord of Armies. I will make your chariots go up in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the sound of your messengers will never be heard again.

I am against you. Most of us have heard the *comforting* words of Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" But this is the *opposite* of that. And if God is *against* you, it doesn't matter who is on your side. It doesn't matter your wealth or power or position or fortification or intelligence. All of it will burn in God's wrath. Like the chariots of Assyria, it all goes up in smoke.

Their strength, their people, their empire, their culture, it was all going into the dirt. And while we shrink from the severity of their judgment, the truth is that they were reaping what they sowed. You love violence? Well then, you can die doing what you love.

The messengers of Assyria figure prominently in the Old Testament. They're highlighted here - but we also see one of these messengers in Isaiah, 2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles. He's called the *Rabshakeh*. He was the royal spokesman of Assyria and he's very much like the Mouth of Sauron if you're familiar with *The Lord Of The Rings*. These messengers came to intimidate, to blaspheme, to demand submission, to exact tributes.²⁰ They were messengers of death.

Finally, the Lord said, "That's enough. I'm going to stand up on behalf of all your prey. I'm putting a stop to this once and for all." And, along the way, He would remind the world that *He* is the Almighty God. *He* is the One in charge of the flow of human history. *He* is the King of the universe. Not some Assyrian. Nineveh was seen as the hub of the world at the time.²¹ But God was showing His people and anyone else paying attention what was *really* true. The Lord is in charge.

We're don't know if Nahum's message actually made it to Nineveh, though I suspect that at some point in the forty years between writing and wrath it made its way to Nineveh's great library. But we know God was *always* willing to save individuals who fled to Him when judgment was coming. Rehab in Jericho. The mixed multitude in the exodus. The Gibeonites in Joshua. God is always ready to accept Ruth the Moabitess, Uriah the Hittite, Naaman the Syrian general. Nebuchadnezzar

²⁰ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

²¹ John Goldingay, Pamela Scalise *Minor Prophets II*

the Babylonian. He's not willing that any should perish but that all would come to repentance. But when they don't, perish they will.

The city of Nineveh was doomed. The Assyrian empire was going to be wiped off the map. But *individual* Assyrians could still be saved. What should they do? They should desert. They should desert their temples, their culture, their sin, and ally themselves with God Almighty.

This is always the choice. We're *all* guilty of sin and rebellion and blasphemy against the One True God, and the only hope we have is to fall at His feet and receive His mercy and become one of *His* people. That's the only way to be saved from His devouring sword. To become citizens of His Kingdom.

Meanwhile, what was Israel supposed to be doing - the people who already belonged to God? Nahum told them, back in chapter 1, verse 15 what they should be doing:

Nahum 1:15 - ¹⁵Look to the mountains—the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace. Celebrate your festivals, Judah; fulfill your vows.

Judah was supposed to remain faithful and remain separate. Don't become the new Assyrians. Be who God made you to be. Orient your lives around your walk with the Lord.

I was stunned (and a little disturbed) to discover that, outside the San Francisco library, stands a 15 foot tall statue of...*Ashurbanipal*. In one hand he holds a clay tablet, reminiscent of his great library where he sought to compile all the world's knowledge. In the other hand, the statue clutches a wriggling lion cub to his chest. It's said that the sculpture cost \$100,000. It has stood there for nearly 40 years²² - an emblem of man's wisdom, man's hubris, man's blasphemy, and failure.

Who is our lion King and what does He stand for? We don't want to be anything like the Assyrians. God calls us to *not* love violence, to *not* be greedy, to *not* oppress the weak, to *not* think more highly of ourselves than we ought. He invites us to lives of mercy and thankfulness and generosity and grace. And as His *messengers*, we're to be the exact opposite of the messengers of Assyria. They were messengers of death, we're messengers of life. They came with intimidation, we go in gentleness. They extracted tribute, we freely give. They demanded submission, we go with *invitation* to join the family of God, to submit one to another and *together* kneel before our loving Savior, Who protects and provides and walks with us through life. He is the *real* Lion King, coming once again to put down the oppressor and deliver His people.

²² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Ashurbanipal_\(San_Francisco\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Ashurbanipal_(San_Francisco))