

For many centuries it was impossible to see any valid reason why Nahum used these words. Then men began to excavate the ancient ruins of the great empires of Assyria and Babylonia, and learned to read the language of those lands. At many places they found inscribed clay tablets. Some of these were historical documents, official letters, or minutes of court trials. Others contained religious or philosophical discussions. The great bulk were business contracts. The contracts found in various parts of Mesopotamia have many similarities, but those from Nineveh and the neighboring Assyrian cities often contain a special phrase that was peculiar to that area. This phrase in the Assyrian language sounded like the Hebrew words "perfect and likewise," but its meaning was very different, and corresponded to the modern phrase "severally and jointly responsible." It indicated that each of several persons making up one party to a business contract was responsible, not only for his own share, but also for any portion of the contract that one or more of his co-signers might fail to carry out. Thus it was the strongest possible way that a citizen of Nineveh could express the idea of many men standing together and loyally supporting one another.

As the years went by, the language of the Assyrians was forgotten and the memory of Assyrian conditions disappeared. Biblical scribes no longer understood what the phrase meant, but they copied its letters exactly as they stood, so that only very slight changes occurred in the process of transmission. To the early translators of the Bible, who naturally tried to take the words as Hebrew words, the phrase did not make sense, but to the people of Nahum's day the meaning and appropriateness of this Assyrian phrase would have been obvious.

Thus some knowledge of the historical background and the facts of Assyrian archaeology make it clear that God is declaring that He will prevail, no matter how harmoniously wicked people may stand together against Him. With wickedness so rampant in the world today, how wonderful it is to know that we can trust God to carry out His will. How wonderful it is also to know that we can trust His Word and know that every bit of it is true, even when we may lack the knowledge required to interpret it correctly.