

# Nahum - Introduction & Background

## Title

Like most other OT books, the Book of Nahum derives its name from the book's central actor (1:1). The Hebrew title of the book is *Nahum* and this title means comfort, consolation, or compassion. Since the book's purpose is to comfort oppressed Judah with prophecies of her oppressor's demise (Assyria), this title is appropriate considering the book's contents. The shortened form of this Hebrew title is Nehemiah, which means "the Lord comforts" or "the comfort of Yahweh." The LXX entitles the book *Naoum* while *Nahum* is the title found in the Latin Vulgate. Like the LXX and the Vulgate, the English title Nahum is adopted from the Hebrew title.

## Authorship

Nahum is the book's writer according to the opening verse (1:1). Nahum is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. The only personal information about Nahum found anywhere in Scripture is in 1:1, which indicates that Nahum was a native of Elkosh or an Elkoshite. Scholars have generated at least four different locations for Elkosh. First, a 16th century tradition locates Elkosh in Al-Qush or Iraq. According to this view Elkosh is located in Assyria, north of Nineveh, on the Tigris. Second, Jerome believed that Elkosh was Elkesi near Ramah in Galilee. This view is built upon the similarity in consonants between Elkosh and Elkesi. However, this view is unlikely since Nahum wrote after the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom in 722 BC.

Third, others speculate that Elkosh is Capernaum, which in Hebrew means *Kephar Nahum* "city of Nahum." According to this view the name Elkosh was changed to Capernaum in Nahum's honor. However, there is no evidence indicating that Capernaum was named after the prophet. Fourth, most believe that Elkosh was Elcesi, a city of southern Judah located between Jerusalem and Gaza. This view is most popular since it explains the concern that Nahum displays for Judah throughout his book (1:12,15; 2:2). However, the location of Elkosh remains unknown and knowledge of its exact location has no bearing upon deriving or applying the book's message. In sum, all that can be held to with certainty is that Nahum was a prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah.

Some scholars contend that while Nahum wrote most of 2:4—3:19 with some parts being later emended, someone other than Nahum wrote 1:1—2:3 in the 3rd century BC. However, Armerding shows how both sections in Nahum 1 and 2—3 are unified by a number of terms appearing in both. Examples include "fire" (1:6; 2:4; 3:13,15), "consume" (1:10; 2:13; 3:12—13,15), "destroy," "cut down," (1:14—15; 2:13; 3:15), and many other common motifs. Part of the theory that someone other than Nahum wrote 1:1—2:3 is that 1:2—10 represents an

acrostic added by a later writer. However, Archer rebuts the idea that this section of Scripture resembles an acrostic. He says, "It should be pointed out, however, that as the text stands, there is virtually nothing acrostic about it. Instead of following along in the order of the letters of the alphabet (as an acrostic poem is supposed to do), the opening letters of v2-10 come in the following order in the Hebrew alphabet: 1,10,3,5,12,9,6,13, and 11. Only by the most radical emendations and reshuffling of verses can the acrostic theory be made out. Furthermore a late origin for acrostic poems has never been proved by any kind of objective evidence."

Johnson notes that even if this section of Scripture were proven to be an acrostic, this argument alone is not sufficient proof that someone other than Nahum wrote this section. Johnson goes on to observe that the title of the book (1:1) is authentic despite the critics' claim that it represents a double title. Its two sections complement one another. The first section reveals the author and the second section reveals his subject. Thus, in this sense, Nahum's title is similar to OT prophetic titles (Is 13:1; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1).

### **Date**

Like other OT prophetic books (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah), the Book of Nahum is not precisely dated. Such ambiguity is perhaps attributable either to the fact that it was written during the wicked reign of Manasseh (686–642 BC) or to its Gentile subject matter. However, the book does give enough information to provide some dating parameters. First, the book must have been written prior to 612 BC since all three of its chapters predict the fall of Nineveh, which transpired in 612 BC. While those denying predictive prophecy date the book after Nineveh's fall, the book's prophecies concerning Nineveh's destruction pose no threat to an early date for those unhindered by anti-supernatural presuppositional bias against predictive prophecy. Second, because Nahum uses the recent fall of Thebes as a comparison for Nineveh's future destruction (3:8-10), the book must have been written after 664 BC since that was the date when Thebes fell. Thus, Nahum was written at the latest before Nineveh's destruction in 612 BC and at the earliest after Thebes's destruction in 664 BC.

Some have contended that the book was written in the latter part of this period since Nahum seems to depict Nineveh's destruction as imminent (2:1; 3:14,19). If this contention is correct, then the Book of Nahum was written during Josiah's reign and his prophetic contemporaries were Zephaniah and Jeremiah. However, Johnson states sound reasons as to why the book was probably written in the earlier part rather than the latter part of this period. Among them are the notions that Nahum's description of Nineveh (1:12; 3:1,4,16) is inconsistent with the city's deterioration under Ashurbanipal's sons, Nahum's description of Judah as being under Assyria's yoke fits better with Manasseh's reign than it does under Josiah's reign, Nahum would have likely mentioned the Median and Neo-Babylonian

empires if he had written during the reign of these kingdoms, and Nahum fails to mention Thebes' restoration (3:8) that took place in 654 BC.

All things considered, it would seem that the Book of Nahum was written sometime during 664–654 BC. Therefore, a date of 660 BC for the composition of the book seems appropriate. Thus, Nahum prophesied in the reign of Manasseh (686–642 BC) and his prophetic contemporaries were Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and the younger Jeremiah. A time of writing during Manasseh's diabolical reign may explain why no king is mentioned in 1:1.

### **Audience and Place of Writing**

The subject matter of the book concerns the City of Nineveh. The prophecies not only mention Nineveh (1:8,11,14; 2:1,8,13; 3:7,14) but also Nineveh's king (3:18). Interestingly, Nineveh is mentioned by name in each of the book's three chapters (1:1; 2:8; 3:7). However, although the book was written *about* Nineveh, it was written *to* the people of Judah (1:12,15; 2:2). Since Judah represents Nahum's target audience, this was also the likely place of the book's composition. This conclusion is strengthened if Elkosh (1:1) can be identified with Elcesi located in southern Judah as most conservative scholars assume.

### **Historical Background**

When Jonah had prophesied to Nineveh around 760 BC, the city had repented (Jonah 3:4–10). However, by Nahum's time Nineveh had returned to her wicked ways and Assyria had become a grave threat to the southern kingdom of Judah. Under Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, the Assyrian empire had swept away the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Under Sennacherib, Assyria had surrounded Jerusalem in 701 BC and would have likely destroyed Judah had it not been for God's miraculous intervention. At the time the Book of Nahum was written, Judah was paying tribute to Assyria. The Assyrians further struck terror into the hearts of God's covenant people through their reputation for brutality and cruelty (3:1).

Assyria had recovered from its defeat in 701 BC and thus was enjoying the height of its power, prosperity, and geographic scope under Ashurbanipal (669–663 BC). The Assyrian empire reached all the way to the borders of Egypt. However, Assyrian power declined under Ashurbanipal's sons Ashuretililani (663–629 BC) and Sinsharishkun (629–612 BC). This decline continued until the Scythians, Medes, and Babylonians under Nabonidus and his son Nebuchadnezzar eventually overthrew Nineveh in 612 BC. The city's demise was comprehensive and fulfilled numerous prophecies found in the Book of Nahum. For example, the Tigris overflowed (1:8; 2:6) creating a breach in Nineveh's wall allowing the Babylonians to enter the city (3:13a), plunder it, and set it on fire (3:13b). Nineveh's destruction was so complete that when Alexander the Great engaged in battle at nearby Arbela in 331 BC he had no idea that Nineveh had once stood there. Xenophon echoed this sentiment 200 years later. He thought that its mounds were the ruins of a Parthian city. So did Lucian who indicated that there was no trace of Nineveh (1:9). The

city's destruction was so complete that it was not discovered until the 1842 excavations of Botta and the 1845 excavations of Layard (3:11). Following Nineveh's fall, the Assyrian empire itself fell in 609 BC to Nabopolassar of Babylon.

As far as the City of Nineveh itself is concerned, it was founded by Nimrod (Gen 10:8-12) and made into the capital of the Assyrian empire by Sennacherib in 700 BC. The city continued to enjoy this status until its fall in 612 BC. The city was located on the East bank of the Tigris thereby allowing the Tigris to form Nineveh's western and southern boundaries. At its greatest width, Nineveh boasted a diameter of nearly 3 miles. The city's large size is evidenced by its estimated population of 150,000, its ruins that "stretch along the Tigris River north to Khorsabad (14 miles) and south to Nimrud (Calah, 20 miles)," "the three days walk required to traverse Nineveh" (Jonah 3:3), the city's expansion outside of its walls, and the fact that some of the city's site still has not yet been excavated.

Nineveh was also surrounded by a 100-foot high wall that was wide enough for three chariots to ride abreast. This wall stretched for 8 miles thereby forming Nineveh's northern and eastern boundaries. Two hundred towers stretching an additional 100 feet upward were also prominently displayed on the city's wall. Nineveh was also surrounded by a 150-foot wide and 60-foot deep moat. Thus, Nineveh was capable of enduring a 20-year siege making Nahum's prophecy of Nineveh's destruction irrational and preposterous.

### **Message**

The destruction of Nineveh and the restoration of Judah reveals God's intention to not only punish sin in accordance with His righteous character but also to comfort Judah who was experiencing Assyrian oppression. If God will enforce the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant by punishing those who oppress His covenanted nation (Gen 12:3), then He also can be trusted to maintain covenant faithfulness by restoring Judah.

### **Purposes**

Nahum likely had several purposes in mind when he composed his book. First, he wanted to predict God's judgment soon to be visited upon Nineveh for her barbarism, mistreatment of the holy people, and refusal to exhibit lasting repentance despite the preaching of Jonah (Luke 12:48). Despite the repentance under Jonah's ministry in 760 BC, the Ninevites had returned to their wicked ways in the ensuing century thereby kindling God's wrath against them. Thus, unlike the Book of Jonah, the Book of Nahum is not a call for Ninevite repentance. Rather the book is a divine decree for the city's destruction.

<b>Jonah</b>	<b>Nahum</b>
Mercy of God	Judgment of God
760 B.C.	660 B.C.
Repentance of Nineveh	Rebellion of Nineveh
Emphasis on the prophet	Emphasis on the prophecy
Disobedient prophet	Obedient prophet
Obedient nation	Disobedient nation
Deliverance from water	Destruction by water
Prophet went to Nineveh	Prophet did not go to Nineveh

Second, Nahum wrote in order to comfort Judah (1:12,15; 2:2) with a message of God's sovereignty over their oppressor. This message of comfort was necessary since Judah was living in fear of Assyrian encroachment. Third, Nahum wrote in order to stimulate Judah toward covenant repentance by explaining that God judges sin. If sinful Gentile nations cannot escape God's wrath, then how can God's covenanted nation escape covenant penalties absent national repentance?

### **Unique Characteristics**

The Book of Nahum boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book represents only one of three OT books that emphasize imminent judgment upon Israel's enemies. The other books are Obadiah, which speaks of judgment upon Edom, and Habakkuk, which speaks of judgment upon Babylon. Second, the book represents one of four OT books whose primary subject matter concerns someone other than the nation of Israel. The other books are Obadiah, which concerns Edom, Habakkuk, which concerns Babylon, and Jonah, which concerns Assyria. Third, along with Jonah the Book of Nahum is one of two OT books whose primary focus is Nineveh. Fourth, despite her wickedness under Manasseh's reign, the book includes no condemnation of Judah.

Fifth, the book contains no calls to repentance. Such an omission may be attributed to the fact that Nahum's prophetic contemporaries (Zeph, Jer, Hab) emphasized national repentance. Sixth, unlike the Book of Jonah, the Book of Nahum provides no opportunity for Nineveh to repent. Seventh, the book contains many prophetic details regarding Nineveh's destruction that were fulfilled literally in history. Eighth, the book contains almost 53 references to nature in its brief 47 verses.

Ninth, this book is never quoted in the NT. Tenth, the book contains no direct messianic prophecies. Eleventh, "Nahum's description of the siege of Nineveh (2:3-7) and the sack of Nineveh (2:8-13) is one of the most vivid portraits of battle in Scripture." Twelfth, the book employs frequent figures of speech including metaphors (1:10; 2:11-13; 3:4-7,12,15-17), similes, vivid word pictures, repetition, short staccato phrases (3:2-3), rhetorical questions (1:6; 3:7-19), irony (3:1,14), and poetic parallelism.

### **Themes**

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Nahum. First, the book teaches that God's attributes of power, holiness, and justice demand that He punish sin (1:2-8). Second, the book teaches that even His attributes of patience and goodness demand that He punish sin because God cannot possess these benevolent attributes without holding Assyria accountable for its evil. Third, the book demonstrates the Abrahamic Covenant's provision that He punishes those who mistreat His covenanted nation (Gen 12:3). Fourth, the book reveals God as the Lord and judge of all the nations of the world.

Fifth, the book shows God's covenant purposes to restore Judah (1:12,15; 2:2). Sixth, the book shows that to whom much is given much is required (Luke 12:48). Because spiritual insight had been bestowed upon Nineveh through Jonah's preaching, God held Nineveh responsible for walking in the light they had received. Seventh, the book shows that even though God uses pagan nations as instruments of His wrath (722 BC), He still holds such nations accountable for their own wicked conduct.

### **Structure**

The structure of the Book of Nahum yields the following three-fold division. First, the book describes divine destruction *decreed* upon Nineveh (1). This section explains *what* God will do to Nineveh and is a revelation of His perfect *character*. Second, the book *describes* the actual judgment destined to come upon Nineveh (2). This section notes *how* God will destroy Nineveh and is a revelation of the coming *catastrophe* to be imposed upon this city. Third, the book explains that Nineveh *deserves* this coming condemnation (3). It explains *why* God will bring judgment upon Nineveh as well as the *reason* for the coming catastrophe.

Others see a twofold division consisting of a psalm of praise centering on the avenging wrath of God (1:2—2:2) and a specific judgment upon Nineveh (2:3—3:19). The first section can be further divided into vengeance upon God's enemies (1:2-11) and the restoration of Judah (1:12—2:2). The second section can also be further subdivided between an oracle of judgment (2:3-13) and a woe oracle (3:1-19).

### **Christ in Nahum**

There are no direct messianic prophecies found in the Book of Nahum. However, some have seen in 1:2-8 the principles of judgment that Christ will manifest at His second advent when He judges in millennial righteousness. Thus, these principles describe Christ's righteousness against sin. Another interesting Christological parallel is that Capernaum in Hebrew means "the village of Nahum" and Capernaum is the city that Christ most identified with during his earthly ministry (Matt 4:13).

### **Genre**

The primary genre of the book is poetic and consists of a judgment oracle against Nineveh. The book's sub-genres include a psalm of praise (1:2—2:2) and a woe oracle (3:1-19).

Others contend that the primary genre of the book is a liturgy commemorating Nineveh's

fall. This liturgy was supposedly sung during the annual Jerusalem enthronement festival of the Lord. However, such categorization ignores the book's title designating the book as a vision (1:1) and destroys the book's predictive quality.

## **Outline**

### I. Nineveh's doom decreed (Nahum 1:1-15)

- (1) Introduction (1:1)
  - (A) Subject: Oracle against Nineveh (1:1a)
  - (B) Author: Nahum (1:1b)
- (2) Doom to come upon Nineveh because of God's attributes (1:2-8)
  - (A) Justice (1:2-3a)
  - (B) Omnipotence (1:3b-6)
  - (C) Benevolence (1:7)
  - (D) Conclusion: God will destroy Nineveh (1:8)
- (3) Doom to come upon Nineveh because of her sins (1:9-15)
  - (A) Scheming against God (1:9-13)
  - (B) Results of Nineveh sin (1:14-15)
    - (a) God's command for Nineveh's final destruction (1:14)
    - (b) Judah will rejoice over Nineveh's fall (1:15)

### II. Nineveh's doom described (Nahum 2:1-13)

- (1) The coming of Nineveh's enemies (2:1-2)
  - (A) Announcement of Nineveh's approaching enemies (2:1)
  - (B) Purpose of the coming of enemies: Israel's restoration (2:2)
- (2) The attack of Nineveh's enemies (2:3-10)
  - (A) The enemy army approaches (2:3-5)
  - (B) The enemy army enters the city (2:6-7)
  - (C) The enemy army desolates the city (2:8-10)
- (3) Nineveh to be destroyed as a lion's den is destroyed (2:11-13)
  - (A) Nineveh compared to a lion's den (2:11)
  - (B) Nineveh's young lions to be destroyed (2:12-13)

### III. Nineveh's doom deserved (Nahum 3:1-19)

- (1) Nineveh's harlotries (3:1-7)
  - (A) Woe pronounced (3:1)
  - (B) Attack from the Army (3:2-3)
  - (C) Sins of harlotry (3:4)
  - (D) Attack from God (3:5-7)
- (2) Nineveh's mistreatment of other nations (3:8-10)
- (3) Nineveh's false security (3:11-19)
  - (A) Destruction predicted (3:11)

- (B) Nineveh's complete defenselessness (3:12-18)
- (C) Final destruction described and applauded (3:19)