

THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Message:

The judgment of Nineveh and the comfort of Judah both reveal the sovereignty, righteousness, and grace of Yahweh.

Author:

According to the superscription (1:1), the author of the book is Nahum the Elkoshite. Very little is known about Nahum himself and his name only occurs here in the entire Old Testament.¹ The name (נַחֻם) means “consolation” or “comfort,” a fitting designation for his message to Judah. It is generally agreed that the designation “Elkoshite” suggests that Nahum’s hometown was Elkosh. Unfortunately, identification of the site is far from certain. Suggestions have ranged from Galilee (Jerome, Eusebius), including Capernaum (meaning “Town of Nahum”), to the Transjordan, or even a site near Nineveh (Al Ovosh). But many conservative scholars locate Elkosh in southern Judah, between Jerusalem and Gaza. This latter identification would coincide with Nahum’s apparent concern for Judah (Nah 1:12, 15).

Recipients:

Although Nineveh is addressed numerous times in the book (1:11, 14; 2:1, 13; 3:5–17, 19), the original audience was probably Judah (1:15; possibly 1:12–13). The book is about Nineveh but it was for Judah.

Dating:

The Book of Nahum is not specifically dated. The date of the book is surmised by examining the contents. Since Nahum prophesies the defeat of the Assyrian empire, it would have to have been written prior to Assyria’s final defeat in 612 B.C. Furthermore, the references to the destruction of Thebes (No-amon) in 3:8 would suggest that the prophecies were written after Thebes’ fall to Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C. The dating might be narrowed further by noting the general assumption in the book of Assyrian power (see 1:12; 3:1, 4, 16), a power which began to decline around 626 B.C. It is also worth noting that Thebes was rebuilt nine-ten years after the destruction. Since Nahum does not allude to this rebuilding and since the effect of the illustration would be weakened after rebuilding, it seems reasonable to assume that the book should be dated prior to 654 B.C. Taken together, it seems reasonable then to date Nahum around 663–654 B.C.

¹ R. L. Smith suggests notes that Nahum’s name “occurs frequently in Northwest Semitic inscriptions, once in the Arad ostraca (seventh century B.C.) and once in the Lachish letters (seventh century B.C.)” (Ralph L. Smith, *Micah - Malachi*, ed. John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 63.).

Historical Setting:²

Nahum prophesied during the height of Assyrian Empire. It is worth noting that the repentance of the Ninevites in conjunction with Jonah's ministry in Nineveh nearly 100 years earlier apparently did not have lasting effect. Consequently, God once again predicts the judgment of Nineveh but this time, there will be no repentance and Nineveh will be destroyed.

The capital of the Assyrian empire was Nineveh. The city was located on the east side of the Tigris River and was well fortified with walls 100 feet high, surrounded by a moat 150 feet wide and sixty feet deep. There were also 200 towers built along the walls.

The Assyrians were barbaric and cruel, whose leaders boasted of the atrocities that they committed in their many conquests. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and ravaged much of the Southern Kingdom, with Jerusalem the only major city to escape unscathed. A succession of powerful leaders such as Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal established Assyria as the dominating power in the region.

Purpose:

The purpose of Nahum appears to be twofold. First, the book was written to show that God will judge the unrighteous nations. Second, the book was written to comfort God's people (Judah) by showing them that He will destroy their enemies. As Chisholm notes, "The sovereign Lord, who is the most powerful of all warriors, would avenge the harm done to His covenant people by appropriately and thoroughly judging their Assyrian oppressors."³

Contribution:

The major contribution of the Book of Nahum is that it provides clear insight into God's sovereign right to judge all nations. One might add that Nahum shows how divine judgment can be the source of encouragement.

Nahum and the Other Prophets:

Two other Old Testament prophets often figure into the discussion of Nahum. First, on a literary level, striking parallels have been noted between the Books of Nahum and Isaiah.⁴ See the Appendix for a table containing some of the parallels. Since most conservatives believe that Isaiah was written first, this provides an interesting case of intertextuality.

Second, on a historical level, one should read Nahum in light of the Book of Jonah.

² Ibid.

³ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 179.

⁴ See Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 150–51 and Carl E. Armerding, "Nahum," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 453–56.

Nearly 100 years prior to the time of Nahum, Nineveh had experienced a remarkable revival under the preaching of Jonah. Therefore, God withheld judgment. Yet, the wickedness of the Assyrians returned and this time judgment would not be postponed.

JONAH ⁵	NAHUM
The mercy of God	The judgment of God
c. 760 B.C.	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
The Great Fish	The Great Fulfillment

Nahum in the New Testament:

There are no direct quotations of Nahum in the New Testament. However, there are several possible allusions to Hosea 1:6 (Rev 6:17) and Hosea 1:15 (Acts 10:36; Rom 10:15; Eph 6:18).

Literary Issues:

R. D. Patterson and M. E. Travers have suggested that the author of Nahum's "literary skill and artistry rival those of any of the OT prophets."⁶ Nahum contains rhetorical questions (1:6; 3:7-8, 19), metaphors and similes (1:3b, 6, 10, 13; 2:4, 7, 8, 11-13; 3:4, 5-6, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19), inclusions (2:1; 3:18-19), synecdoche (2:4, 10, 13; 3:13), irony (2:1, 8; 3:14, 15), satire (2:11-13; 3:8-13, 14-19) and perhaps most important the use of chiasmus and acrostic.⁷ The importance of recognizing the literary qualities of Nahum is stated well by Patterson:

"Even more important for exegetes of the book is the realization that Nahum's literary skill is not merely a display of his craftsmanship for his readers or a means of enlivening an otherwise colorless statement. Rather, his literary figures not only assist and enrich the understanding of the meaning of the text but are the very form and content in which its meaning is to be apprehended. Further, they demand that the reader respond to their message in the totality of his being. One will not appreciate so fine a piece of literature as Nahum's prophecy unless he approaches it with his whole

⁵ Bruce H. Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 269.

⁶ Richard D. Patterson and Michael E. Travers, "Literary Analysis and Unity of Nahum," *Grace Theological Journal* 9.1 (1988): 45.

⁷ Concerning the latter see *Ibid.*, 55-58.

person—intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally, and, above all, in full dependence upon the Holy Spirit.⁸

Structure:

The structure of the Book of Nahum appears to consist of a superscription (1:1) and three major sections (1:2–15; 2:1–13; 3:1–19).

Outline

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Nineveh's Judge Depicted (1:2–15)
 - A. The Character of the Judge (1:2–8)
 - B. The Condemnation of the Judge (1:9–14)
 - C. The Compassion of the Judge (1:15)
- III. Nineveh's Judgment Described (2:1–13)
 - A. The Call to Nineveh Described (2:1–2)
 1. The call expressed (2:1)
 2. The call explained (2:2)
 - B. The Conquest of Nineveh Described (2:3–10)
 1. Nineveh's destroyers described (2:3–5)
 2. Nineveh's defeat described (2:6–10)
 - C. The Contrast of Nineveh Described (2:11–13)
 1. The great den of the lion (2:11–12)
 2. The great defeat of the lion (2:13)
- IV. Nineveh's Judgment Deserved (3:1–19)
 - A. Because of Nineveh's Sins (3:1–7)
 - B. Because of Nineveh's Stupidity (3:8–11)
 - C. Because of Nineveh's Self-Confidence (3:12–19)

⁸ Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, ed. Kenneth Barker, *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 10-11.

Chart

Superscription	Nineveh's Judge Depicted 1:2–15			Nineveh's Judgment Described 2:1–13			Nineveh's Judgment Deserved 3:1–19		
	The Character of the Judge	The Condemnation of the Judge	The Compassion of the Judge	The Call to Nineveh Described	The Conquest of Nineveh Described	The Contrast of Nineveh Described	Because of Nineveh's Sins	Because of Nineveh's Stupidity	Because of Nineveh's Self-Confidence
1	:2–8	9–14	15	1–2	3–10	11–13	1–7	8–11	12–19
WHO				WHAT			WHY		

Expositional Outline of Nahum:**I. SUPERSCRPTION (1:1)****II. NINEVEH'S JUDGE DEPICTED (1:2–15)**

- A. The Character of the Judge (1:2–8)
- B. The Condemnation of the Judge (1:9–14)
- C. The Compassion of the Judge (1:15)

III. NINEVEH'S JUDGMENT DESCRIBED (2:1–13)

A. The Call to Nineveh Described (2:1–2)

1. The call expressed (2:1) –
2. The call explained (2:2) –

B. The Conquest of Nineveh Described (2:3–10)

1. Nineveh's destroyers described (2:3–5) –
2. Nineveh's defeat described (2:6–10) –

C. The Contrast of Nineveh Described (2:11–13)

1. The great den of the lion (2:11–12)
2. The great defeat of the lion (2:13)

IV. NINEVEH'S JUDGMENT DESERVED (3:1–19)

A. Because of Nineveh's Sins (3:1–7)

B. Because of Nineveh's Stupidity (3:8–11)

C. Because of Nineveh's Self-Confidence (3:12–19)

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Appendix:⁹

THEME	NAHUM	ISAIAH
Messenger coming	1:15 (cf. 12)	52:7
No more invasion	1:15	52:1 (51:22–23)
Liberation from shackles	1:13	52:2
Liberation from affliction	1:12	51:21
Sold into slavery	3:4	52:3
Messenger formula	1:12	52:3
Drunk	3:11	51:21
Ruin	3:7	51:19
Destruction	3:19	51:19
Sword	2:13; 3:3, 15	51:19
Wrath of God	1:2, 6	51:17, 20, 22
Comfort, mourn for	3:7	51:19
Console, comfort	3:7	51:19
Drying the sea	1:4	50:2
Lebanon, Bashan, Carmel	1:4	33:9
Vengeance	1:2	59:17–19
Storm and earthquake	1:3–6	29:6
Withering vegetation	1:4	33:9; 50:2
Waters dried up	1:4-5	42:15
Pact of good news	1:15	52:1, 7
Plunder	2:9–10	24:1, 3
Trembling	2:10	21:3-4
Shame of nakedness	3:5–7	47:2–3
Who can comfort?	3:7	51:19
Whirlwind and fire	1:3, 6	66:15–16

⁹ Bailey, *Nahum*, 146–47.