

STUDIES IN THE  
**OLD TESTAMENT**

Adult Bible Equipping Class  
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**OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:**

**Nahum**

To the Christian longing for the day of good tidings, the message is clearly set forth in the new covenant. Paul, in Romans 10:15, extolled the preaching of the gospel of salvation with a quotation from this ancient book of judgment [Nahum]: "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" . . . . When the forces opposing God are so firmly ensconced and the flickering lamp of God's people is at the point of extinction, however, it is easy for the remnant to forget. Nahum reminds us, as do the ruins of Nineveh, that God himself is the ultimate Ruler. He will have the final word.

Carl E. Armerding, "Nahum," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:457

**I. Introduction**

Nahum represents one of the "forgotten" books of the OT. Until recently, it received little if any scholarly attention, and even then, its theological value was questioned. One commentator opined that "the whole prophet is a paean of triumph over a prostrate foe and breathes out the spirit of exultant revenge . . . . In Nahum, a representative of the old, narrow and shallow prophetism finds its place in the canon of Scripture."<sup>1</sup> Modern scholars and even conservative Christians find a book like Nahum difficult to appreciate. Its seemingly vindictive rhetoric, its harsh and vengeful pronouncements, all against an ancient and extinct foe, all combine to create a work that seems unapproachable to the contemporary Christian. But, like Obadiah, there is more to Nahum than meets the eye.

**A. Date & Authorship**

Regarding the authorship and date of the book of Nahum, we can be certain on three points: (1) The Book was composed by a prophet named Nahum; (2) Nahum hailed from a town called Elkosh; (3) The book was written sometime between 663 B.C. and 612 B.C. Beyond these three basic facts, no certainty may be gained. Nahum is mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> John M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Micah, Zephaniah, and Nahum*, ICC (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark/New York Scribner, 1911), 281.

nowhere outside of this book, and the prophet provides no background details about him or where he came from.

### 1. *Location of Elkosh*

The location of the town of Elkosh is a mystery as well. Eastern medieval tradition associates it with al-Kush, a town located in ancient Assyria across the river from the ancient ruins of Ninevah. This would imply that Nahum's family was among those taken into captivity during the fall of northern Israel in 722 B.C. Jerome, however, identified it with Elkesi in Galilee. Others have suggested that the town is actually Capernaum, while still others have proposed that the town was actually located in Judah. In reality, however, all these possibilities are tenuous and near impossible to validate without more evidence, and "while we are fascinated by such questions, we must admit that in the final analysis the location of Nahum's birthplace or place of activity is of no real significance to the meaning of the Book of Nahum."<sup>2</sup>

What is equally fascinating and much more interpretively significant is the meaning of Nahum's name—"compassion"—fascinating and confusing considering he composed a book focused almost entirely on the downfall of Nineveh. Yet a careful reading will notice that this prophet gives hope to his readers while he gives doom to their enemies. In reality, the judgment on Nineveh promises salvation for the people of God, and ultimately, that is what the book is about.

### 2. *Date of Composition*

As for the time of its composition, the only certainty is that it must have been composed after 663 B.C. but before 612 B.C. Why the certainty of these two dates? Regarding the first, Nahum references the historical fall of the city of Thebes, called "No-ammon," as a rhetorical device to dismantle Nineveh's confidence in their own security. Just as the mighty city of Thebes fell to Assyria, so Assyria herself will fall. The fall of Thebes occurred in 663 B.C., making Nahum's prophecy date sometime after that event.

Regarding the second date, 612 B.C. marks the fall of the city of Nineveh and the final collapse of the Assyrian empire. Given that the book clearly intended to predict this event, it had to have been written before the event occurred. Critical scholars have dated it to as close to the event as possible, on the (skeptical) grounds that only then would Nahum have known that the city's fall was imminent and virtually guaranteed. However, as Longman puts it, "On the basis of this approach his 'prophecy' is really political-military insight."<sup>3</sup> In other words, it wouldn't have taken much effort to forecast what would inevitably transpire by the last few years of Assyria's existence.

As will be discussed below, by the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 B.C. and the rise of Babylonian independence under Nabopolassar in 626 B.C., the Assyrian empire had

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<sup>2</sup> Tremper Longman III, "Nahum," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 766.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

weakened to such an extent that the downward inertia was next to impossible to correct. Yet Nahum describes an Assyria that is "full" and "many," (1:12), indicating an intact and formidable nation. This limits the time of composition to sometime before 627 B.C., possibly even as early as 640 B.C.<sup>4</sup>

### B. *Historical Background*

The fall of the Assyrian empire is an interesting historical study. Armerding writes that "the downfall of the Assyrian colossus has been characterized as one of the greatest riddles of world history."<sup>5</sup> Rising to power at the end of the second millennium, Assyria had tyrannized the ANE for over 700 years. Armerding goes on to write that no other nation "had dominated world affairs in the second millennium B.C. as had imperial Assyria. Arrogant, self-sufficient, cruel, and assertive, the Assyrians had dominated every small nation in the region at one time or another from the days of the first Tiglath-pileser (1115-1067) onward."<sup>6</sup>

Israel herself was well aware of Assyria's dominance, for she had been used as Yahweh's agent numerous times to judge Israel for her unrighteousness. During the 9th century, Shalmaneser III had forced tribute from Jehu, and Adad-nirari III had subjugated Israel during the reign of Omri. As Israel's covenant treasons perpetuated, Assyria's role as God's disciplinarian began to escalate. Tiglath-pileser III invaded Israel and subjugated it, overthrowing Pekah and establishing Hoshea as an Assyrian puppet. He then swept into Judah and took tribute from Jehoahaz.

By the end of the 8th century, northern Israel fell to mighty Assyria, when Shalmaneser, in response to Israel's revolt, ransacked the land and besieged the city of Samaria. The city eventually fell to his son Sargon II in 722 B.C., and the nation's inhabitants were deported and assimilated into Assyria. From there, Assyria's eyes fell on Judah, who had taken an anti-Assyrian stance when Hezekiah ascended the throne. This new policy was met with the full might of Sennacherib's aggression, who invaded Judah and took a number of fortified cities before his army was decimated during their Jerusalem siege.

Even after Assyria's military withdrawal from the region, they still maintained dominance over Judah into the 7th century under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. But the reign of Ashurbanipal (668-633) initiated the beginnings of what would be a sudden and massive descent of the empire. His brother Samas-sum-ukin had been seated by his father Esarhaddon on the throne of Babylon to quell the unrest that was churning up amongst the Chaldeans. But in 652 B.C., his brother united with the Chaldean tribesmen and revolted against Ashurbanipal, drawing him into a costly war that drained the nation's resources as well as the king's strength. The ruler that had once managed to dominate Egypt, conquer the mighty Thebes, and bring Assyria to the height of its power, had by

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<sup>4</sup> Mark F. Rooker, "Nahum," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 460; Carl E. Armerding, "Nahum," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:451; Longman, "Nahum," 767-8.

<sup>5</sup> Armerding, "Nahum," 7:451.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:456.

the end of his life completely lost control of Egypt. From this point on in Assyrian history, there is little historical records, and the remainder of Ashurbapinal's life remains relatively obscure. "Uncharacteristically, during this period no great conquests are attributed to the Assyrian monarch, who had apparently withdrawn Haran, abandoning the government of the empire to his successors."<sup>7</sup> He died in 627 B.C., and only a year later Babylon revolted under the leadership of Nabolpolassar. Stricken with a power struggle between Ashurbanipal's sons, each vying for the throne, Assyria was ultimately incapable of staving off Babylon's rebellion. In 612 B.C. the city of Nineveh fell, not to the Babylonians, but to the Medes, who had allied with Babylon. Nevertheless, Assyria became a vassal of Babylon and never again recovered from its decline.

## II. Major Themes

The book's opening verse clearly establishes that Nahum's prophecy concerns the city of Nineveh, and thus by representation, the empire of Assyria. Yet the book of Nahum is about much more than the surety of Nineveh's demise. Rather, the book must be read in the context of a people sorely and mercilessly oppressed for centuries—a people seeking resolution to their horrific experiences at the hands of a nation that seemed to execute its cruel, imperialistic desires devoid of any divine accountability. As Armerding explains,

Nahum stands as an eloquent testimony to the particularity of God's justice and salvation. To the suffering remnant, there was little question that God would and did punish his own covenant people; but whether he was equally able and willing to impart justice to the powerful heathen nations surrounding Israel was untested. . . . The severity and kindness of God were both under scrutiny: the former as to whether it applied only selectively to his own people, and the latter in the context of God's ability and desire to bring about ultimate salvation for those who were faithful to him.<sup>8</sup>

Nahum's words answer these questions by reinforcing two equally-important truths for his readers: God is in control, and when he comes he will execute justice and save those who trust in him.

The key to the book of Nahum is understanding the opening hymn (1:2-8).<sup>9</sup> The poem is arranged as a partial acrostic, where each line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. In vivid language pregnant with dramatic imagery, it portrays the appearance of Yahweh in a divine theophany. He comes as the Divine Warrior to exercise his sovereignty over the earth. He is "avenging and wrathful" against his adversaries (1:2). He is "slow to anger and great in power," a just God who will "by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (1:3a). His presence is like a devastating storm (1:3b), and before him the entirety of the cosmos withdraws in terror (1:4-5). His might is matchless, and he has no opposition (1:6). For those "who take refuge in him," he is "good, a stronghold in the day

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7:450.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7:456.

<sup>9</sup> Longman, "Nahum," 776.

of trouble" (1:7). But he will "pursue his enemies into darkness" and break out against them "with an overflowing flood" (1:8).

The imagery presented here is intentionally familiar. Israel had seen this kind of theophanic display. They had witnessed the Divine Warrior fight against their enemies during their exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan. They had experienced the immensity of his presence as he descended in lightening and cloud upon Mt. Sinai. They were recipients of Yahweh's self-revelation as a God of judgment and mercy. "Nahum thus stands firmly in Israel's prophetic tradition as one inspired to interpret the complexities of the present and future in the light of the past."<sup>10</sup>

Yet the song that opens this book is broader than Nineveh and Judah. It "presents a picture of God applicable for all times—he is the Warrior who judges evil."<sup>11</sup> Only after Nahum establishes the theological fact of Yahweh's sovereignty does he move to the presentation of Nineveh's downfall, where all the generalities of the hymn find particular realization.

Over four hundred years of Middle Eastern history pointed in the same direction: Assyria and her gods were in control, if there was in fact any control over universal historical direction. Back in Jerusalem each brief fling at independence by a petty monarch ended in disaster. The temple on Zion had survived over the years, but the shadow of destruction already lay over it. The worship of Yahweh in the mid-seventh century had already disappeared from the north and was threatened by syncretistic forces in the south. Nineveh stood, with her gods, as the capital of the most powerful kingdom the world had ever seen. "Where, then, is your God?" the skeptic might rightly ask. "And if he exists, what kind of God is he?"<sup>12</sup>

The book of Nahum answers that very question by describing the coming of Yahweh as a "jealous and avenging God . . . slow to anger and great in power . . . and will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (1:2-3). Nahum proclaims that Nineveh, who had devised and "plotted evil against Yahweh" (1:9-11) would be "cut off and pass away" (1:12). They had been used as God's disciplinary instrument against Judah, but now the time had come for Yahweh's discipline to fall on Assyria (1:12). Judah would finally be free of Assyrian oppression (1:13). The nation would come to an end, along with its paganism (1:14), and the news of their downfall will be met with celebrations in the land of Judah (1:15).

The remainder of Nahum's prophecy (chs. 2-3) particularize the implications of the opening hymn to the city of Nineveh. In chapter 2, Nahum describes in vivid imagery the city besieged by an army dressed in red uniforms and shields, metal-clad chariots, and spears (2:3). They sweep through the city inflicting massive damage (2:4). They open up the flood gates of the Tigris river, allowing the waters to wash away the palace (2:5), an historical element realized in striking historical detail when the Medes and Chaldeans di-

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<sup>10</sup> Armerding, "Nahum," 7:449.

<sup>11</sup> Longman, "Nahum," 776.

<sup>12</sup> Armerding, "Nahum," 7:456.

verted the river into the city and flooded it. The city is plundered (2:9), the inhabitants slaughtered (2:10-12), and her military destroyed (2:13).

In chapter 3, the prophet announces a woe oracle over the city (3:1-7), outlining its destruction and humiliation. Then, he moves on to emphasize Nineveh's helplessness. In her might, Assyria had managed to overpower and capture the mighty city of Thebes (3:8-10). Just like it, Nineveh will be overtaken and they are defenseless against the might of the God (3:11-15a). Like a devastating swarm of locusts, which multiplies without number, strips the land, and then moves on, so Assyria's army would flee at the first sign of their enemy (3:15b-17). Nahum ends his prophecy with a funeral lament over the fate of the nation. Their future is fatal and irreversible, and when the nations hear of their downfall, they will all celebrate that the Assyrian tyrant has finally been vanquished (3:18-19).

Thus, the theology of Nahum combines the interwoven themes of Yahweh's absolute sovereignty and Judah's hope that the Divine Warrior would indeed appear and alleviate their oppression from Assyria. What Nahum describes in Yahweh's judgment of Nineveh foreshadows the ultimate Day of Yahweh when God would intervene into man's affairs, establish his absolute authority on the earth, vindicate his people, execute judgment on his enemies, and save his people.

And just like Judah, the church now lives in light of the promise of the coming Day of Yahweh. Christians know that they worship a God who is absolutely sovereign over history and the world. Yet they remain stricken by the realities of a sin-cursed world, and continually oppressed by God's enemies. Their hope, then, like Judah before them, is found in the knowledge that "God [is] a Warrior who fights for his people. . . . When we read the Book of Nahum in conjunction with the Book of Revelation, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is coming again at the end of time to put an end to all evil, whether spiritual or human (Rev. 19:11-21)."<sup>13</sup> Or, as Armerding eloquently states it,

When the forces opposing God are so firmly ensconced and the flickering lamp of God's people is at the point of extinction, however, it is easy for the remnant to forget. Nahum reminds us, as do the ruins of ancient Nineveh, that God himself is the ultimate Ruler. He will have the final word. There is good news for the people of God. Just as years later the aged Simeon could pray in confidence (Luke 2:29-32): "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel," so the waiting supplicant in Nahum's day could look ahead to such a day. It was then—and continues today—to be the hope of the people of God: our eyes shall see the salvation of the Lord.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Longman, "Nahum," 777.

<sup>14</sup> Armerding, "Nahum," 7:457.

### III. Purpose

The combination of Nahum's emphasis on God's sovereignty, his judgment of his enemies, and the hope of his people for future liberation from their enemies, leads to the following purpose statement:

*Yahweh gives hope to his oppressed people by promising to judge Nineveh for her cruel acts and immoral deeds.*

### IV. Literary Style & Structure

Commentators have lauded the book of Nahum as a literary masterpiece. Longman writes that "Nahum's literary style has been regarded as among the most effective of all the Old Testament writers."<sup>15</sup> Rooker comments that "as a literary craftsman Nahum has few rivals among the writers of the OT."<sup>16</sup> Driver remarks that "Nahum's poetry is fine. Of all the prophets he is the one who in dignity and force approaches most nearly to Isaiah. His descriptions are singularly picturesque and vivid . . . ; his imagery is effective and striking . . . ; the thought is always expressed compactly; the parallelism is regular."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Nahum demonstrates a thorough aptness for utilizing the Hebrew language and style for rhetorical effect. Some of the stylistic features in the book include the following features:

1. Vivid imagery (1:2-8; 2:3-5, 10, 11-12; 3:2-3, 15, 17-18)
2. Rhetorical questions (1:6; 3:7-8, 19)
3. Ellipsis (3:2)
4. Apostrophe (2:11-12)
5. Metaphor and simile (1:10; 2:7, 12; 3:4, 12, 17)
6. Assonance and alliteration (2:11)
7. Synonyms (1:6)
8. Irony (2:1, 8; 3:14-15)
9. Satire (2:11-13; 3:8-13, 14-19)
10. Chiasm (1:2; 3:1-7)
11. Parallelism (3:15)

Longman explains that "the style of writing in the book fits well with its message. The poetry is compact; the images vivid."<sup>18</sup> He goes on to quote the words of Robert Lowth, who in 1753, commented thus:

None of the minor prophets, however, seem to equal Nahum in boldness, ardour and sublimity. His prophecy, too, forms a regular and perfect poem: the exordium is not merely magnificent, it is truly majestic; the preparation for the destruction of Nineveh, and the description of its downfall

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<sup>15</sup> Longman, "Nahum," 771.

<sup>16</sup> Rooker, "Nahum," 461.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 11th ed. (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1913), 336.

<sup>18</sup> Longman, "Nahum," 771.

and desolation, are expressed in the most vivid colours, and are bold and luminous in the highest degree.<sup>19</sup>

Structurally, it has proven difficult to identify how the book should be divided. Thus, commentators have proposed several approaches to understanding its structure. Some, such as Cathcart and Armerding, have proposed a two-part outline.<sup>20</sup> Rooker,<sup>21</sup> however, suggests a three-part structure which has been adopted here:

#### NAHUM

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>Nineveh's Judge</b>	<b>Nineveh's Judgment</b>	<b>Nineveh's Destruction</b>
Subject Prophet	The Manifestation of God (1:2-6)	Nineveh's Attackers (2:1-5)	Destruction and Humiliation (3:1-7)
	The Lord's Care for Judah (1:7-12a)	Nineveh's Defeat (2:6-13)	Futility of Nineveh's Defense (3:8-17)
	The Joy of Deliverance (1:12b-15)		Funeral Lament (3:18-19)
1:1	1:2	2:1	3:1

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Longman, "Nahum," 771.

<sup>20</sup> Kevin J. Cathcart, "Theology of Nahum," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:963-4; Armerding, "Nahum," 7:453, 459.

<sup>21</sup> Rooker, "Nahum," 462.