

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Nahum

No one likes being in the path of imminent disaster, nor is the menacing threat of enemy invasion a pleasant thought. Can God protect in such circumstances? Will God judge wicked aggressors? Nahum's reply is a clear yes. Nahum's prophecy assures us that God still controls earth's history. His messages are a warning to oppressors and a comfort to the oppressed.

Setting

In Nahum's time, the kingdom of Judah was in danger of being swallowed by a great superpower, the Assyrian empire. From Nineveh, the capital, the great king Ashurbanipal (668–626 BC) brought Assyrian might to its zenith. Its military power and cultural influence spanned the length and breadth of the ancient Near East. Even the age-old city of Thebes had felt the conqueror's heel ([3:8–10](#)).

These circumstances were less than encouraging for Nahum and the people of Judah. Israel, their sister kingdom to the north, had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah now faced the same imperial enemy. To make matters worse, Ashurbanipal had recently captured Judah's king, the wicked Manasseh (697–642 BC), and taken him to Babylon ([2 Chr 33:10–11](#)). Following his release from captivity, a repentant Manasseh ([2 Chr 33:12–17](#)) attempted to undo his former wickedness ([2 Kgs 21:1–18; 2 Chr 33:1–9](#)). Despite his efforts, his prior evil influence still permeated the land. A cloud of doom hung over God's people. Thus, Nahum's prophetic messages of Nineveh's fall and of hope for Judah's future were timely.

The seeds of Assyria's fall were already being sown in Nahum's day. After King Ashurbanipal repelled a strong coalition of enemies to the west and resisted his brother's challenge to the throne, he busied himself with literary and artistic pursuits. Affairs of state languished, and Assyria grew increasingly weak. After Ashurbanipal's death (626 BC), one after another of the great cities of Assyria began falling to foreign invaders. Then the unthinkable happened—Nineveh itself fell in 612 BC, as Nahum had predicted.

Summary

Nahum opens his prophecy by depicting God's power in two striking poetic passages, [1:2-6](#) and [1:7-11](#). These poems portray God's sovereign judgment against wickedness and his goodness toward those who put their trust in him. The opening verses give assurance that God will administer his justice fairly.

Nahum then explains what God's sovereign justice means in the flow of history ([1:12-15](#)). No nation is so great that it will not pay for its evil, and God is aware of the plight of those who are oppressed. The prophet assures the people of Judah that they will soon know changed circumstances. Peace and stability will return, and God's people will be able to enjoy the uninterrupted worship of God.

After predicting the siege of Nineveh and the return of normal conditions in Judah ([2:1-2](#)), Nahum describes the fall of the Assyrian capital in two vivid portrayals ([2:3-10](#); [3:1-7](#)). Between the two accounts, Nahum contemplates Nineveh's destruction in a brief, taunting song. With biting satire, he declares God's intention of bringing an end to proud Nineveh's greed ([2:11-13](#)).

Nahum builds upon his second description of Nineveh's fall through another satire of the city. Nineveh would be no more defensible than Egypt's capital, Thebes ([3:8-13](#)), which Assyria had destroyed. Nahum closes his prophecy with yet another piece of satire ([3:14-19](#)). Sensing the hopelessness of Nineveh's plight, he taunts the city's citizens by urging them to call upon all their resources in order to defend themselves. Of course, that would do no good. Nineveh would lie fatally wounded with no one to help or even mourn her passing.

Author

Beyond the little that can be gleaned from his writings, nothing is known of Nahum, the author of this short prophecy. In the Hebrew text, he is identified as “Nahum the Elkoshite” ([1:1](#)). Elkosh could be his clan name, but more likely it was his hometown, which was probably located in southwest Judah. The details of the book show that he was well acquainted with the city of Nineveh.

Date

Nahum mentions the fall of Thebes (663 BC; [3:10](#)) and predicts the fall of Nineveh, which occurred in 612 BC. Therefore, Nahum spoke these prophecies sometime between 663 and 612 BC. Exactly when he did so within this span of years is debatable. It may have been sometime late in the reign of Manasseh (around 648–645 BC), perhaps during Manasseh's attempted reforms after being released from Assyrian captivity ([2 Chr 33:12–16](#)). Or it may have been later, during the early or middle part of righteous King Josiah's reign (640–609 BC).

Meaning and Message

No empire, however great, is beyond God's scrutiny. Sooner or later, all must give an account of their actions to the Lord. The reality of God's righteous and sovereign justice lies beneath the predicted judgment of Nineveh and Assyria. He is in control of everyone and everything on earth, and he has concern for all who suffer, whether from the horrors and atrocities of war or from some other oppression. A burdened humankind can be confident that divine justice will ultimately prevail.

God is long-suffering ([1:3](#)), and his people must be patient. The assurance that this good and caring Lord ([1:7](#)) has a distinct purpose for his people ([2:2](#)) encourages them to a life of faith and trust. Beyond the book's menacing tone lies the good news of hope ([1:15](#)). The prophet predicts a coming day when God's people will once again worship him in wondrous peace and joy. They will at last be free from those who would take away their freedom.

Subsequent writers of Scripture found in Nahum's good news a promise of the good news of Christ ([Rom 10:15](#); see also [Isa 52:7](#)), who provides the opportunity for deliverance from sin. Knowing that the unbeliever faces an even greater doom than that of fallen Nineveh motivates a missionary effort to carry the good news of salvation and eternal life through Christ to a dying world.