



THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

The Prophecy of Nahum

INTRODUCTION TO NAHUM

All introductory material has been excerpted from *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

Author

The name Nahum means “comfort” and is possibly an abbreviation of a fuller form, such as Nehemiah, which means “Yahweh comforts”. This prophet’s name is followed by the designation “the Elkoshite” (1:1), a possible reference to the location of his birth and/or his later prophetic activities.

As in the case in most prophetic books the prophet himself receded behind the message. Nahum was often incorrectly regarded as narrow nationalist who, inspired by feelings of hatred and vengeance, proclaimed his message of judgment against Nineveh and at the same time extended the promise of unconditional salvation to the Judahites, his own people. This view overlooks the reality that this book belongs to the literary form of prophecies against foreign nations (e.g. Is. 13-23; Jer. 46-51; Am. 1-2; Ob.). Nahum, as a true servant of God, was inspired by the knowledge of the Lord’s universal dominion over the kingdoms of this world. In this book we meet a prophet who was deeply aware of the incomparability and power of God. He was also a gifted poet, as was his predecessor Isaiah. Employing a wealth of imagery and pictorial language, he vividly portrayed the total destruction of Nineveh by an anonymous enemy and so voiced the universal relief and joy of all those who had suffered under the oppressive regime of this merciless tyrant.

Time and Place of Writing

Date: 663-612 B.C.

The reference to the coming destruction of Nineveh provides the first clue to the date of the prophecy. Nahum announced this event (3:5-7) before it happened (612 B.C.). In 3:8 the prophet referred to the capture of Thebes, the once magnificent capital of Egypt, by the Assyrian armies of Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.) in 663 B.C. It is therefore clear that Nahum was a seventh-century prophet and roughly contemporary of Zephaniah, Jeremiah and (possibly) Habakkuk.

Purpose

To comfort Judah by announcing future judgments against Nineveh.

Finding Christ in Nahum

The book of Nahum contains no direct Messianic prophecies, yet the expectations of judgment against Nineveh and of salvation for God’s faithful people are ultimately fulfilled by Christ. Jesus and his apostles declared salvation for God’s people and judgment against his enemies. In fact, Christ began his judgment and salvation in his first coming (Jn. 5:22-30). The spiritual warfare in which the church is constantly engaged (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 6:10-17) continues this process today. Moreover, when Christ returns in glory he will destroy all opposing powers and hand over the kingdom to his Father “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT NAHUM

Welcome Back to Nineveh—What’s Gone on Since Jonah?

When we hear about Nineveh (the centerpiece of the Assyrian empire), the first prophet we will likely think about is Jonah, as he went to the land as a prophet. However, another prophet also devotes his message to the city of Nineveh, the prophet Nahum. Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BC), while Nahum is best dated between 663-612 BC. What was going on in Nineveh between these prophets?

In 722 BC, the northern 10 tribes (kingdom of Israel) fell to Assyria and posed a constant threat to Judah for the years after. During this time, King Ahaz of Israel (Isaiah 7) had aligned himself with Assyria in an alliance, which would lead to the nation continually faces with the decision to submit or resist Assyria. When Ahaz’s successor Hezekiah rebelled against Assyria, the ruler Sennacherib invaded Judah and threatened Jerusalem, which was miraculously delivered by the hand of God (Isaiah 36-37; 1 Kings 18-19). Domination of Judah continued under the rulers Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal (681-633), with Manasseh king of Judah being taken into captivity for a time (2 Chronicles 33:1-11; also affirmed in Assyrian records). In fact, it seems that Assyria’s power climaxed around 664 when it conquered Thebes (see Nahum 3:8). Therefore, while Assyria had repented under the ministry of Jonah, it seems that they quickly fell back into their wicked ways and its power threatened Judah with political servitude, social disintegration, and loss of the worship of the LORD. Assyria was a constant threat to the Judahite mind.

“Nuke Nineveh” Nahum.....Means Comfort?

When you read the book of Nahum, you will be reading a prophetic oracle against a foreign nation, discussing the wrath of God. It is a book filled with judgment and doom. Yet, the name Nahum means “comfort” or “consolation.” How is a book of judgment a message of consolation?

When one remembers that Nineveh is part of Assyria and Assyria is the enemy of Judah, God’s people, one recognizes that Nineveh represents the enemies of God. God will judge His enemies! God will deliver His people from their enemies; judgment on the enemies of God means peace for the people of God. At the same time one sees the wrath of God on His enemies, one sees the mercy of God on His people. Furthermore, people reading this book had seen that God will punish His covenant people, as they saw the northern kingdom fall (as prophesied by Amos!) but would he punish the enemies of Israel? They might be asking, “Where is justice?,” a question similar to what Habakkuk would ask (in the very next book!). The book gives the answer that God will defeat His enemies. A day of judgment will come upon God’s enemies, which comforts His people.

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith 33.3, “Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity (Luke 21:27, Luke 21:28; Rom 8:23-25; 2Cor 5:10, 2Cor 5:11; 2Thess 1:5-7; 2Pet 3:11, 2Pet 3:14)”.

Now, Prophesying Against Nineveh, Hailing from Elkosh, coming in at 3 Chapters Long.....NAAHHUUUMM!

Superscription (1:1)

We are not given a date for the message of Nahum, so we must determine it from internal evidence.

Hymn to Wrathful/Good God (1:2-11)

To many, this might seem like an unusual hymn, as it focuses on the wrath, jealous, and vengeance of God on His enemies. However, the phrase “The LORD is slow to anger” (1:3) has similarities to Exodus 34:6 (echoed in Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Note the similarities and the differences, noting what this might mean for the message of Nahum as a whole.

Exodus 34:6-7	Nahum 1:3
The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.	The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished.

While the other occurrences of this phrase point to the mercy of God, Nahum focuses on the power and the justice of God in the way he adjusts the traditional formula. God does forgive sin but he will also punish sin! After discussing the power of God over the earth (1:4-5) and the inability of humans to stand against that power exercised in His wrath (1:6), Nahum mentions the goodness of God (1:7). This might seem a little out of place but it makes perfect sense, as in the midst of His destruction of His enemies is His deliverance of His people; God is good in that He does not destroy all (even though they desire it) but saves those who call on Him. In the midst of His judgment, we see His mercy. However, the focus remains on those who do not call upon the LORD and their judgment (1:8). This hymn then moves to the application of this truth—who do people plot against the LORD (1:9-11)? It makes no sense...but sin makes no sense!

Judging Enemies, Delivering People (1:12-2:2)

This section features messages to both Judah and Nineveh. For Nineveh, God’s judgment comes upon them (1:14, 2:1) while for Judah, God’s hand of deliverance has come (1:12-13; 1:15; 2:2). Cutting down Nineveh (1:12) and breaking its yoke (1:13) restores the majesty of Jacob (2:2), as the destruction of Nineveh is “good news” in that it allows Judah to fulfill its proper worship of the LORD (1:15).

Dramatic Description of Nineveh's Destruction (2:3-10)

This section describes the destruction of Nineveh, in poetry that both makes it vivid as well as restrained. In many ways, the description sounds like an eyewitness to the event, portraying the soldiers, shields, chariots, battle, pursuit, and defeat. Therefore, this future event is as good as done! The mighty city that has conquered and oppressed countless other cities will feel a taste of its own medicine.

Where is Your Strength NOW? (2:11-13)

After describing what will happen to Nineveh, the message turns to a taunt (2:11-12), asking where the strength of the great lion has gone. Nineveh had been like a lion, wreaking havoc on the world, but now, the lion has been defeated. In 2:13, the LORD directly declares His anger towards Nineveh.

Woe for a Sinful City (3:1-4)

Between the taunts, a woe is announced against the city (3:1), describing its great ruin (note the staccato terms in 3:2-3) and then giving the justification for its destruction in 3:4, as Nineveh had enslaved others. The destruction that comes on Nineveh is deserved!

Taunt You a Second Time (3:5-19)

Again, the LORD declares that He is against Nineveh and proceeds to taunt them. God announces that He will bring Nineveh into disgrace before the rest of the world (3:5-7). He then taunts them through a look at history by referencing the fall of Thebes (3:8). Just as Thebes fell, so will Nineveh (3:8-13). Nahum then plays the role of a watchmen announcing the people of Nineveh to take alarm, but it will be of no avail (3:14-15a). The greatness of the city is then compared to that of locusts, as the great numbers, merchants, and princes will all be destroyed (3:15b-17). The rulers of the Nineveh are unable to deliver the people (3:18). The book concludes by noting that other nations will rejoice upon the fall of Nineveh because of its great evils it has done (3:19). Ironically, like the book of Jonah, Nahum's message also ends with a rhetorical question, this time directed at Nineveh rather than Jonah.

In Case You are Wondering

Assyria began to see problems as early as 652 BC and greatly weaken around 630 BC, experiencing a Civil War. During this same period, the Babylonians began to rise in power. In 612 BC, Nineveh would eventually fall, with the Medes (allies with the Babylonians) likely the ones who destroyed the city. The decline of Assyria coincides with the rise of Judah under the good king Josiah (640-609), who brought the law back to Judah. Sadly, though, the nation of Judah would also fall to the hands of the Babylonians, with initial groups of exiles in 605 BC and 597 BC and 586 BC seeing the fall of Jerusalem. The fall of Nineveh would not spell permanent peace for Judah, as the people of God continued to rebel against the LORD, who brought them out of Egypt!

Tell Me Again, Why is this Stuff in the Bible?

This book can pose many problems to Christians when they read it. Some Christians have problems applying the book because of its specific historical situation, as it pertains to a particular group of people at a particular time and place. Since the prophecy was fulfilled by the destruction of Nineveh, why do we even care about the book? However, if one looks at the movement of the book, one sees that it moves from general principles (hymn of chapter 1) about God to specific principles in the situation (judgment and comfort at the destruction of Nineveh). Furthermore, the book actually rarely directly mentions Nineveh and Judah, so its content stays surprisingly general. Therefore, we, too, can look at these general principles and move to our specific circumstances.

In thinking how to apply the book, though, we run into problems with the issue of wrath and mercy. One might find a contradiction between the wrath of God seen in a book like Nahum, which seems to rejoice at the destruction of one's enemies, and the commands to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt 6:43-48; Rom 12:14-21). First of all, one must note that this would be a problem before the New Testament commands, as these commands are also in the Old Testament (Ex 23:4-5; Lev 19:18); one finds wrath and mercy in both Testaments. One must note, though, that the destruction comes from God, not from the people. The people of Judah are never commanded to hurt the Nineveh; they are simply told about the reality of their destruction. This corresponds with the idea of Romans 12:19: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (which ironically enough comes from the Old Testament!, see also the prayer of the saints in Rev 6:10). However, how can the people of Judah rejoice at the destruction of their enemies?

In thinking through the issue of judgment here, we must remember that this is not an issue of a personal vendetta but the kingdom of God. That is, the people are not seeking personal revenge but for the kingdom of God to be made real in the world and react to the evil that opposes God being destroyed. Because of their abhorrence of evil, they rejoice on its punishment because that means that God's kingdom comes; the plea for justice is aimed at evil, not at people. Unfortunately, too many times we do not react to the evil around us; we tolerate it rather than seeing its abhorrence; we can learn a little from their response. Wanting evil to be punished but loving our enemies are not contradictions, as seen in the example of David. He never sought to harm his enemy, Saul, and did not rejoice at his death, but also prayed many of the imprecatory Psalms. He had a zeal for the glory of God but also a love for his neighbor. Therefore, these two ideas do not contradict one another in practice.

In fact, as one sees the punishment for sin (and the mercy that God offers in the gospel), it compels one to pray for one's enemies, that they might discover this truth. This is seen in the examples of Jesus (Luke 13:34—"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!) and Paul (Rom 9:3-4a— For "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my

brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel”), concerned over the fate of lost people (also see Ezek 33:11). However, we can only feel this way if hell is real, if sin is really judged in the pains of hell forever. Though we do not want to see people face the wrath of God, we acknowledge that God is glorified even in the judgment of his enemies, as noted in Westminster Confession of Faith 33.2.¹ The praise goes to a God of justice but one is still saddened by the fate of the lost. It is “loving the sinner and hating the sin.”

After wrestling through some of these issues, we can see the applicability of the book to our lives, as Christ will defeat all His enemies. “Christ executes the office of a king in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.” (WSC, 26). We must remember that these enemies are spiritual in nature (Eph 6:12). While Christ has already defeated them (Col 2:14, 15), there remains a day when that defeat will be complete (1 Cor 15:25-26; Rev 20:7-15). We live in the already-not yet tension of Christ’s kingdom; He is restraining them and will one day completely defeat them. We experience battles and trials in varying degrees in life, but Christ will defeat them and bring His kingdom in its fullness! Amen!!

WHY IT MATTERS—DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Pick a few of the following questions to discuss as you feel led:

1. Why do you think that the church stays away from teaching on books like Nahum? How can you communicate its value to others (Christians, non-Christians)?
2. How can we communicate the true picture of God (justice and mercy) to our community, our family, our friends, etc.
3. What are some “enemies of Christ” in our lives and our world? How does Nahum speak to these issues? How does this affect how we view our struggles in life?
4. How should we handle those who oppose the values of the kingdom of God?
5. How does seeing the destruction of Nineveh portrayed affect your view of your own sin? Your view of those who do not know Christ?

Please close by responding to God in prayer. In addition to your personal responses to the message of Nahum, consider praying for:

1. Christians undergoing physical oppression and hardships, they might be kept safe
2. Christian undergoing spiritual oppression, for the defeat of Christ’s enemies
3. For the unsaved in our families, circles of influence, and community

¹ WCF 33.3: The end of God’s appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect (Matt 25:21; Rom 9:23); and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate who are wicked and disobedient (Rom 2:5-6; 9:22; 2Thess 1:7-8). For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord (Matt 25:31-34; Acts 3:19; 2Thess 1:1-12) but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power (Matt 25:41, 46; 2Thess 1:9)