

Nahum

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Author

The Elkoshite probably refers to the town he is from (Elkosh). The town's location is not known but it is likely in Judah since the Northern Kingdom was taken captive and dispersed in 722 BC.

The name "Nahum" means "consolation" or "comfort."

Date

The book talks about the destruction of the Egyptian city of Thebes (No-amon) as past tense. That destruction occurred in 663 BC, which suggests the book was written after that and before that city was rebuilt around 653 BC

The coming destruction of Nineveh is the focus of the book. That occurred in 612 BC, so it would need to have been written before then.

The Assyrians are described as having power. The Assyrian power began to decline in 645 BC suggesting a date of writing before then.

Thus it is reasonable to place the writing of Nahum between 660 BC and 650 BC. This would be during the reign of Manasseh in Judah (686 – 642 BC) and not during Josiah's reign (640 – 609 BC).

Setting

Jonah preached God's message to Nineveh around 780 BC and the entire city repented of their evil ways to follow God. Jonah's message came at a time when the Assyrians were being attacked from the north and the invaders were only about 100 miles from their capital city of Nineveh. By 722 BC the Assyrians had returned to their vicious conquering of lands as seen in the capture and dispersal of the northern Jewish tribes. Now, about 130 years after they repented upon hearing God's warning from Jonah, the Assyrians have become so wicked again that God is foretelling the total destruction of their capital Nineveh.

The city of Nineveh (near Modern day Mosul) was founded by Nimrod (Genesis 10:1-12, the son of Cush, the grandson of Ham, the great grandson of Noah) and therefore Nineveh has had a long history before this time. It was located to the east of and near the Tigris River. A wall about eight miles long formed the boundary of the city. The Khoser River ran through the city and filled a canal surrounding the wall before it emptied into the Tigris River. So the city was about two miles wide and three miles long and formed a triangle. Apparently the city had suburbs which extended 14 miles north and 20 miles south of the walled city. Remember that Jonah said it was a three day walk across the city (Jonah 3:3). [See map of the city at right.]



The destruction that God told Nahum to write about the city occurred in 612 BC after a siege by the Medes and Scythians. The sieging army broke the dam which the Assyrians had built to keep the Khoser River at an even flow. When the dam was destroyed the water rushed toward the city, breaking the water gates which were meant to provide water for the residents and it also broke parts of the wall. This allowed the enemy troops to seize and destroy the city. The destruction was so complete that when Alexander the Great fought a battle at nearby Arbela in 331 BC he did not know a city had been there. Its location was not discovered by archaeologists until 1850.

Purpose

The purpose of the book is twofold. First, it gives some comfort to the Jewish people because they are told that God will punish the Ninevites for their wicked ways and what they have done to God's people (the ten northern tribes). Second, it is a veiled warning to the Jewish people who are also falling away from keeping God's commands to warn them that they could also feel God's punishment for not following God's commands. Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians and destroyed in 586 BC (about 65 years after the writing of this book).

The book of Nahum was found as a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls hidden in caves by the Qumran community, known as the Essenes. They wrote peshers (what we would call commentaries) about their scriptures (what we know as the Old Testament). Their peshet on Nahum seemed to be particularly important to them as they compared the irreversible judgments of God upon his enemies and the deliverance of the faithful (seen in the restoration of the tribe of Judah) to their own situation and hopes – the struggles between Demetrius III and the seekers after “smooth things” (which may have been the Pharisees) on one side and Alexander Jannaeus and the Sadducees on the other side.

Some scholars (Robert B. Chisholm and Thomas L. Constable) see an overall structure for the book that is called “chiastic.” In Nahum, the structure looks as follows:

- A Celebrate the demise of Assyria (1:2-15)
- B Call to alarm (2:1-10)
- C Taunt (2:11-12)
- D Announcement of judgment (2:13)
- E Oracle of Woe (3:1-4)
- d Announcement of judgment (3:5-7)
- c Taunt (3:8-13)
- b Call to alarm (3:14)
- a Celebrate the demise of Assyria (3:18-19)

The focus of a chiastic structure is the point of the “>” which in Nahum is the oracle of woe.

Chapter 1

1:1 Translates as “The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.”

This is Nahum's only explanation of who he is and why he is writing this book.

1:2-14 translate as “A jealous and avenging El is YHWH. YHWH is avenging and a possessor of wrath. YHWH takes vengeance on his adversaries and he keeps wrath against his enemies. YHWH is slow to anger and great in power and YHWH shall not at all clear the guilty. In whirlwind and in the storm is his way, and clouds

are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry. He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; the blossoms of Lebanon wither. Mountains quake because of him and the hills dissolve; and the earth is upheaved by his presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can rise against the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire and the rocks are broken up by him. YHWH is good, for a stronghold in the day of trouble, and he knows those who trust in him. But with an overflowing flood he shall make a complete end of its place and shall pursue his enemies into darkness.”

Nahum begins his oracle about Nineveh by acknowledging that God (YHWH) is jealous and avenging wrath on those who are his enemies. He cites the power of YHWH to control the sea and rivers (remember the Red Sea parting and the Jordan River drying up – both for the protection of his people) and that even mountains cannot withstand his indignation (Hebrew word *za'am* means enraged like boiling water) and the heat of his anger (Mt. Sinai quaked when he revealed himself to the Jews there). But, yet, Nahum recognizes that YHWH is good and a stronghold in times of trouble because he knows those who trust him. This should encourage the two southern tribes to put their faith and confidence in YHWH and obey his word. But he (YHWH) will use an overflowing flood to make a complete end of its place (the city of Nineveh fell because a flood of water destroyed a portion of the wall and allowed the armies to invade it). He also says YHWH shall pursue (chase) his enemies (the Ninevite people) into darkness (obscurity).

1:9-14 translate as “What you are plotting against YHWH he shall make a complete end of it. Distress shall not rise up twice. For as long as thorns are interwoven, so with their drink they are drunken. They shall be devoured like stubble fully dried. One who devises evil against YHWH has come out of you, one counseling worthlessness. Thus says YHWH, though they are at full strength and so many, even so, they shall be cut off and pass away. And though I have afflicted you, I shall not afflict you any longer. And now, I shall break his yoke from upon you, and I shall tear off your shackles. YHWH has commanded concerning you: None of your name shall be sown any more. I shall cut off idol and image from the house of your deity. I shall appoint your grave for you are despised.”

YHWH says that what they are plotting against him, he will make a complete end of it. Distress, like what the Ninevites have brought against the ten northern tribes, will not happen a second time (against the two southern tribes). The thorns and drink indicate the Ninevites will be confused (interwoven with each other) when their wall is breached because they will be drunk with what they will be drinking. The one who has devised evil against YHWH who has come out of Nineveh is most likely a reference to their king, Sennacherib (See 2 Kings 18 for his opposition of YHWH). Even though the Ninevites were powerful and numerous as a nation, YHWH declares they will be cut off and be no more in history. God had used the Assyrians to afflict his people but he would no longer use them. Later the Lord would use the Babylonians to afflict the two southern tribes because they were not obeying him. God promises to break the oppression of the Ninevites (Assyrians) against his people like removing a yoke from his people and like removing shackles from them. YHWH’s command that none of their name shall be known no more doesn’t mean that later generations would be ignorant of the Ninevites but that the residents, and particularly the king, would have no heirs. YHWH also promised to destroy their idols and remove them from the city. When the Assyrians (and other nations) conquered a nation they carried off the idols to their gods to show that the Assyrian gods were more powerful. So YHWH is promising to show that he is more powerful than their gods.

In the Hebrew book of Nahum, Chapter 1 ends with verse 14 and Chapter 2 begins with the NIV verse 1:15.

1:15 (2:1 as in the Hebrew version) translates as “Behold, on the mountains the feet of Him bearing good news, proclaiming peace! Celebrate your feasts, O Yahudah. Pay your vows. For the worthless shall not continue any more to pass through you. He is cut off completely.”

This verse more properly fits as a conclusion to the statements of Chapter 1 than it does to open Chapter 2.

Chapter 1 proclaims God's righteousness and that he does not overlook or delay judgment for sin forever, although it may seem to man to be a long time. And although Nineveh had repented when Jonah preached to them, in the 130 years since then the succeeding generations had returned to their wicked ways. So God is proclaiming judgment against the Assyrians and the destruction of their capital city of Nineveh.

Chapter 2

This begins the description of the destruction of Nineveh which continues through Chapter 3.

2:1-10 (Heb 2:2-11) translate as "The one who scatters has come up against your face. Guard the ramparts, watch the road, strengthen your loins, fortify your power exceedingly. For YHWH shall restore the splendor of Yaaqob like the splendor of Yisrael, even though plunderers have plundered them and destroyed their vine branches. The shields of his mighty ones has become red. The mighty men are clothed in scarlet. The chariots shall be with flaming torches in the day of preparation and the cypress trees shall be shaken. The chariots race madly in the streets. They rush wildly in the squares. Their appearance is like torches. They dash to and fro like lightning. He remembers his nobles. They stumble in their march. They hurry to her wall and the covering shall be prepared. The gates of the rivers are opened and the palace is dissolved. And the captive train is uncovered and shall be led away captive. And her handmaids are moaning like the sound of doves, beating on their breasts. But Nineveh was like a pool of water through her days. Now they are fleeing, they cry halt, halt, but no one turns back. Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! for there is no end to the treasure wealth from every kind of precious vessels. She is empty and void and waste. And the heart melts and the knees knock together. And trembling is in all the loins and their faces of all of them collect heat."

Here, the Assyrians are warned that an enemy is advancing toward the city of Nineveh and that they should be on their guard at the city walls and along the roads and that they should build up their power as great as possible. The Assyrians should do this because YHWH is going to restore splendor to Jacob even though the nation has been plundered.

The Assyrians had attacked and overcame the ten northern tribes of Israel and had plundered them of their wealth and people in 722 BC. They had also tried to overcome the two southern tribes, capturing many of the cities but after that surrounding and besieging Jerusalem. This was in accord with Isaiah's prophecy (2 Kings 19:6-7) that Jerusalem would not fall. During the night the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 of the Assyrian army and when this was seen the next morning the Assyrians withdrew to Nineveh (2 Kings 19:32-36). This isn't the story the Assyrians recorded in their annals so they could "save face" and continue to claim they had never lost a battle.

Nahum's prophecy continues describing the attack upon Nineveh, saying that the mighty warriors coming against them will have shields that have become red (indicating blood) and be clothed in scarlet (again indicating blood). Their chariots will be running madly through the streets and appear like torches, dashing around like lightning. This most likely describes the invading army as it dashed through the streets of the suburbs surrounding the great city walls. The city's nobles will run to the city walls in preparation, but the river will be set loose through its gates so that the palace will be dissolved (destroyed) and the city become like a pool of water for days. This shows that the allied armies of the Medes, Babylonians, Scythians and Cimmerians (the last two were most likely related peoples from the area of Anatolia – modern day Turkey) would break the dam of the river running through Nineveh so that the force of the rushing water would break the water gates and flood the city. He proclaims that the people will flee from the city as it floods and refuse to listen to cries that they should halt. Thus the city was plundered of all its gold, silver, and every kind of precious goods. The city would become empty and the people tremble in fear.

2:11-12 (Heb 2:12-13) translates as “Where is the den of the lions and the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion, lioness and lion’s cub walked there with nothing to disturb them? The lion tears in pieces enough for his cubs, strangles for his lionesses, and filled his lairs with prey and his dens with torn prey.”

The Assyrian kings, especially Sennacherib, prided themselves in their ferocity and being fearless like lions. Their youth were likened to lion cubs. God, through Nahum, asks where is the den of the lions where they walk and feed with nothing to disturb them (the city of Nineveh).

2:13 (Heb 2:14) translates as “Behold, I am against you, declares YHWH of hosts. I shall burn up her chariots in smoke, a sword shall devour your young lions. I shall cut off your prey from the land, and no longer shall the voice of your messengers be heard.”

God says he is against the Assyrians. He will burn up their chariots (means of making warfare) and use a sword to devour their young lions. He also says he will cut off from them the peoples upon which they preyed (victimized) and cut off the voices of their messengers. This indicates a complete destruction of not only the city of Nineveh but also the Assyrian nation.

Chapter 3

3:1 translates as “Woe to the bloody city. All of it is a lie and full of plunder. The prey is not withdrawn.”

As often is seen, a pronouncement of “woe” predicts impending judgment. This is the mid-point (or >) of the chiasmic structure and indicates the most important reason for the whole writing. This is different from when God sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh to warn them that the city would be destroyed in 40 days. And then, because they heeded the warning and repented, God did not bring the destruction on them. But during the next 150 years they returned to plundering other nations and being a bloody city again. God says it was all a lie on their part so now there is no warning, only a woe predicting their judgment.

3:2-4 translate as “The noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of the wheel, galloping horses and bounding chariots. Horsemen charging, swords flashing, spears gleaming, many slain, a mass of corpses and no end of dead bodies. They stumble over the dead bodies because of the many harlotries of the well-favored harlot, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations by her harlotries and families by her sorceries.”

This describes the sights and sounds of the battle in which Nineveh would fall: whips urging horse and chariot forward with chariot wheels clattering and horses hoofs pounding the ground, swords flashing and spears gleaming in the light, so many people slain that the mass of corpses seemed to have no end, the soldiers were falling over the dead bodies as they tried to fight. This is like the report of what other cities and nations had experienced when the Assyrians had attacked them. But this scene is the battle as the Assyrians are being defeated because of their evil treatment of other nations. They acted like a harlot, luring a nation with the promise of hope like they had with King Ahaz (2 Kings 16:7-18) and then years later coming to destroy instead of help. The Assyrian worship involved occult practices (magical arts), sexual perversion, and human degradation which they exported to other nations along with their promise of friendship and thus entrapped the people and sold them into slavery.

3:5-7 translate as “Behold, I am against you, declares YHWH of hosts, and I shall lift up your skirts over your face and show to the nations your nakedness and to the kingdoms your disgrace. I shall throw filth on you and make you vile and set you up as a spectacle. And it shall come about that all who see you shall shrink from you and say, Nineveh is devastated! Who shall grieve for her? From where shall I seek comforters for you?”

God again says he is against the Assyrians as he said in 2:13. He says he will expose the naked truth of their condition just as if lifting the skirt of a lady over her head and revealing her nakedness. Not only that, God will throw filth on them so that they will be a spectacle and disgusting to other peoples. Other nations will say that Nineveh is devastated and wonder who will grieve for what is happening to them. It is no wonder that other nations would not grieve for the Assyrians since they have been treated by them so badly.

3:8-10 translate as “Are you better than No-amon, who dwelt among the Nile branches, with water surrounding her, whose rampart was the sea, the wall consisted of the sea? Ethiopia (Kush) was her might and Egypt too, without limits. Put and Lubim were among her helpers. Yet she went into exile. She went into captivity; also her children were dashed to pieces at the head of every street. They cast lots for her honorable men and all her great men were bound with fetters.”

No-amon was the Egyptian capital also known as Thebes. It had been protected by canals and moats fed by water from rivers, and a massive wall. All of this was like what surrounded Nineveh. But all of that hadn't protected the city from being captured by Sargon II, the predecessor of Sennacherib (the current king of Assyria). Thebes had Put (modern Libya) and Lubim (often translated as Libyans) to help protect her and still was overcome by the Assyrians, but the Assyrians have no one to help come to their aid because of had badly they have treated everyone.

3:11-18 translate as “You too shall become drunk. You shall be hidden. You too shall search for a refuge from the enemy. All your strongholds shall be like fig trees with the first fruits; if they are shaken, they fall upon the mouth of the eater. Behold, your people are women in your midst. The gates of your land are opened wide to your enemies. Fire consumes your gate bars. Draw for yourself water for the siege. Strengthen your fortifications. Go into the clay and tread in the mortar. Make the brick mold strong. There fire shall consume you. The sword shall cut you down. It shall consume you as the creeping locust. Multiply yourself like the creeping locust. Multiply yourself like the swarming locust. You have increased your traders more than the stars of heaven, the creeping locust strips and flies away. Your guardsmen are like the swarming locust. Your marshals are like hordes of grasshoppers that camp in the hedges on a cold day. The sun rises and they flee and the place where they are is not known. Your shepherds are sleeping, O king of Assyria. Your nobles are lying down. Your people are scattered on the mountains and no one gathers.”

The Assyrians were going to drink the cup of God's wrath, become drunk, and cease to exist (be hidden). Remember that the city of Nineveh was not rediscovered until 1850 AD. The Assyrian people have so disappeared that there are no people groups that trace their ancestry back to the Assyrians. God says that all the strongholds of the Assyrians would become like ripe figs which fall from the tree into the mouths of people who eat them. Their gates are described as being burned and wide open to their enemies. Even though they build up the city's fortifications and store water for the inhabitants to drink and use to put out the fires burning the walls, those preparations will not protect them. The Assyrian enemies will be like a swarm of locusts that consumes everything in its path. The Assyrian traders would be like locusts that strip the land and then fly away. They will be no help during this destruction. Those military men who were to protect the city will be like grasshoppers that hide in the bushes on a cold day but fly away to parts unknown when the day warms up. The king is warned that his shepherds (spiritual leaders) are sleeping (they don't know truth and can't lead the people to follow it) and his nobles (rich and powerful people) are lying down (either not knowing what is happening or trying to avoid it). The king is told that his people are scattered on the mountains and there is no one to gather them together.

3:19 translates as “There is no relief for your breakdown. Your wound is incurable. All who hear of your report shall clap their hands over you, for on whom has not your evil passed continually?”

With this final statement, God declares that there is no relief for the breakdown of the Assyrian kingdom and that its wound is incurable. Everyone who hears about what is happening to the Assyrians will clap their hands against them because there is no one who has not experienced or heard of their evil doings.

Application

Nahum's book was not written to the Assyrian people and the city of Nineveh. It was not a warning of judgment like God had told Jonah to deliver to the people in the city. This was God's pronouncement that because the people of Nineveh had not continued to follow their claim of repentance and returned to their wicked ways, God was going to bring final judgment upon them so that the city of Nineveh would cease to exist and the Assyrian people would flee into other nations and cease to be a recognized people group.

It is easy to see how the people of Judah would be comforted by knowing God will bring justice upon the Assyrian kingdom for their wicked treatment of other nations and especially their brothers in the ten tribes that had made up the northern kingdom called Israel. But would they recognize their falling away from obeying God's commandments could result in God bringing judgment upon them unless they changed and returned to obeying the commandments? We can see from the history in the books of Kings (2 Kings 25:1-21), Chronicles (2 Chron 36:15-20), and Daniel (Dan 1:1-2) that they must not have learned from Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh because in about one generation God judged them for their disobedience by bringing the Babylonian kingdom against them and allowing them to be taken captive to Babylon for 70 years. (Jer 29:10; 2 Chron 36:21-23) But we also see from God's revelation to Jeremiah that he planned to be merciful to Judah and allow them to return to Jerusalem although they and the land were always controlled by other nations until the end of the 70 "sevens" that was decreed for the Jewish people to "finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy." (Dan 9:24)

We also need to learn that God is just and will punish wickedness like he did with the Assyrians and will also discipline his followers like he did with Judah. We can be comforted that God dispenses justice to those who refuse to acknowledge him and refuse to allow him to rule in their lives as he has the right to do as their Creator. We also need to recognize that God has to discipline his children when they disobey because of his justice.