NAHUM

**TITLE**

The book’s title is taken from the prophet of God’s oracle against Ninevah, the capital of Assyria. **Nahum** means “comfort” or “consolation” and is a short form of Nehemiah (“comfort of Yahweh”). Nahum is not quoted in the New Testament although there may be an allusion to *1:15* in *Romans 10:15 (cf. Isaiah 52:7).*

# CONTENT

A prophecy of God’s judgement against Ninevah (Assyria) for her oppression, cruelty and idolatry, concluding with the announced destruction of the city.

# AUTHOR AND DATE

The significance of the writing prophets was not their personal lives; it was their message. So background information about the prophet from within the prophecy is rare. Occasionally one of the historical books will shed additional light. In the case of Nahum, nothing is provided except that he was an Elkoshite *(1:1),* referring either to his birthplace or his place of ministry. Attempts to identify the location of Elkosh have been unsuccessful. Suggestions include Al Qosh, situated in northern Iraq (thus Nahum would have been a descendant of the exiles taken to Assyria in 722BC), Capernaum (“town of Nahum”) or a location in southern Judah *(cf. 1:15).* His birthplace or locale is not significant to the interpretation of the book.

With no mention of any kings in the introduction, the date of Nahum’s prophecy must be implied by historical data. The message of judgement against Ninevah portrays a nation of strength, intimating a time not only prior to her fall in 612BC, but also probably before the death of Ashurbanipal in 626BC, after which Assyria’s power fell rapidly. Nahum’s mention of the fall of north Amon, also called Thebes *(3:8-10)* in 663BC (at the hands of Ashurbanipal) appears to be fresh in their minds and there is no mention of the rekindling that occurred ten years later, suggesting a mid 7th century BC date during the reign of Manasseh (c. 695 – 642 BC *cf. 2 Kings 21:1-18).*

# BACKGROUND AND SETTING

A century after Ninevah repented at the preaching of Jonah, she returned to idolatry, violence and arrogance *(3:1-4).* Assyria was at the height of her power, having recovered from Sennacherib’s defeat (701BC) at Jerusalem (*cf. Isaiah 37:36-38).* Her borders extended all the way into Egypt. Esarhaddon had recently transplanted conquered peoples into Samaria and Galilee in 670BC *(cf. 2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2)* leaving Syria and Palestine very weak. But God brought Ninevah down under the rising power of Babylon’s king Nabopolassar and his son, Nebuchadnezzar (c. 612BC). Assyria’s demise occurred just as had been prophesied.

# EMPHASES

Yahweh’s sovereignty over all the nations; Yahweh’s execution of justice against cruelty; Yahweh’s overthrow of the arrogant who think of themselves as eternal.

**OVERVIEW**

Nahum is an unrelenting denunciation of, and pronouncement of God’s judgement against Assyria for her own unrelenting cruelty as master of the nations. As such, Nahum stands in contrast to the book of Jonah, which depicts at an earlier time, Yahweh’s concern for even His bitterest enemy, Assyria. But now Assyria’s sin has “reached its full measure” *(Genesis 15:16),* and Yahweh’s famous patience is at an end. The key to Nahum’s message is *1:7,8* which simultaneously expresses comfort for Judah and destruction for Ninevah.

The overall progression of the prophecy is straight forward. It begins with a Divine Warrior victory hymn *(1:2-8),* the last lines of which *(vs.7,8)* serve also to introduce the first major oracle *(1:9 – 2:2).* This is followed by a vision of Ninevah’s ruin *(2:3-10),* plus a taunt *(vs. 11-13).* Next comes a series of oracles and taunts that declare the absolute certainty of Ninevah’s demise *(3:1-17),* concluding with a satirical dirge over the fallen empire *(vs. 18,19).*

# UNDERSTANDING NAHUM

The book of Nahum is a carefully crafted and executed piece of poetry in which a whole variety of prophetic forms – hymns, salvation, doom, taunt, dirge – are carefully interwoven so as to effect what is basically a “woe oracle” over Ninevah (Assyria), along with a salvation oracle over Judah. Part of Nahum’s mastery is his immediate introduction of Yahweh *(1:2-6)* followed by the interweaving of oracles against Ninevah and to Judah, without mentioning Judah until *1:15* and Ninevah until *2:8* (the NIV supplies the names earlier to help the reader through the alternating pattern in the first oracle). All of this is expressed in poetic style with a whole variety of parallelisms and evocative imagery.

For the biblical/historical background to Nahum see *2 Kings 17 –23* and *2 Chronicles 33,34.* Three things about this background are essential for understanding Nahum.

1. he is prophesying while Assyria is still at the height of her powers *(1:12)* having earlier established her presence in Egypt by conquering Thebes *(3:8* c. 663BC).
2. Assyria was well known among the ancients, even as verified by her own kings, as the most cruel of conquerors. Her treacheries were legendary and barbaric, including the total destruction of peoples that were conquered (as with Israel, for example, who all but lost her identity when the people were resettled in Assyria and the land itself was resettled with pagans *2 Kings 17:3-6, 24-41).*
3. during the whole period in which Nahum could have prophesied, the kings of Judah (Manasseh and Josiah) were vassals of Assyria. This means Nahum’s prophesying was politically incorrect in every way - except from Yahweh’s point of view.

Nahum, like Obadiah, is primarily directed against a foreign nation. The theology that lies behind this is also true of all the Hebrew prophets – that Yahweh is sovereign over the entire universe, including the nations as well as Judah, plus His covenant with Abraham in which He promised that “whoever curses you I will curse” *(Genesis 12:3).* Judah’s servitude to Assyria, plus her present political insignificance (except for Assyria’s need for access to Egypt), is to be understood in the light of God’s omnipotence and justice. In reading Nahum, the reasons for Yahweh’s judgements against Assyria are important – besides her idolatries *(1:14),* her most pronounced sin is cruelty and injustice. She has enslaved nations *(3:4).* Her cruelty is endless *(3:19).* Even her merchants have stripped the lands clean *(3:16).* Against these evils, God’s own goodness and compassion *(1:7)* stand as polar opposites.

*These notes have drawn heavily on “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D. Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.240-242) and to a lesser extent:*

* *“The MacArthur Bible Handbook” by J. MacArthur (Thomas Nelson Publishers 2003, pp.251-253)*
* *“Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament” by I.L. Jensen (Moody Bible Institute 1978, pp.436-441)*

**NAHUM**

**1:1 – 8 Triumph of the Divine Warrior**

This opening is not “case-specific” but introduces Yahweh as triumphant in the holy war, who as the all-powerful Ruler of the cosmos (vs.4,5) takes vengeance on His enemies (vs.2,6,8) – while at the same time He is the God who is slow to anger, good and compassionate (vs.3,7 echoing Exodus 34:4-6)

**1:9 – 2:2 Ninevah’s Ruin and Judah’s Salvation**

Here we find comfort to Judah (1:12,13,15; 2:2) alternating with judgement to Ninevah (1:9-11,14; 2:1). The last in series (2:1,2) serves to set in motion the vision that follows.

**2:3 – 13 Vision and Taunt over Ninevah’s Fall**

Nahum now picks up the ‘attacker’ from 2:1, describing in striking terms the nature of Assyria’s overthrow at the hands of Babylon (vs.3,4,9,10) while Ninevah’s own mustering of troops will be to no avail (vs.5-8). In light of that vision, Nahum then taunts Assyria as a lion (Assyria’s national symbol) without a den (vs.11,12), concluding with a word from Yahweh that summarises both the vision and the taunt (v.13).

**3:1 – 7 A Pronouncement of Woe and Taunt over Ninevah**

Ninevah’s doom is pronounced (vs.1-3), again with Babylonian troops in view, while the reason for doom (v.4) uses the imagery of an alluring harlot as the means of enslaving the nations. This taunt begins the way 2:11-13 ends “’I am against you’ “ declares the Lord Almighty.”

**3:8 – 19 Concluding Taunts and Dirge over Aassyria’s Fall**

After a satirical taunt over Ninevah (vs.8-11 in light of her destruction of Thebes in Egypt) Nahum presents a series of insults (vs.12-17) and concludes with a satirical dirge (vs.18,19) that ends with a question. The only other prophetic book to end this way is Jonah, also regarding Ninevah, whose question stands in instructive contrast to this one.

*These notes are a full summary of “How to Read the Bible Book by Book” by G. Fee and D. Stuart (Zondervan 2002, pp.242-243)*

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