NAHUM

*Judgment on Nineveh for wickedness and brutality*

TIME PERIOD

Between 663 and 612 BC

KEY VERSE

*"All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?’ Where can I find anyone to comfort you?"*

3:7

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# Introduction

Nahum is one of the least known books in the Bible, but it has a great message: God will judge Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and the greatest empire of that time will fall. Jonah went to Nineveh, and then they repented, but now perhaps 150 years have passed, and it is no longer possible to postpone the judgment. Nineveh was taken by the Babylonians in 612 BC, so Nahum brought this message sometime earlier in the 6th century.

The historical background becomes important here to understand this book. At this time, Nineveh was the world's largest city. Assyria was the great power that had long ravaged this region of the world, and they were indeed one of the most brutal nations in history. One of the kings of this time, Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC), was one of the worst. The Assyrians flayed people alive; their captives often had their tongues pulled out or their hands, feet, noses, or ears cut off, and they beheaded and crucified many. In fact, we can read in 3:10 that they also crushed infants in war and that pregnant women could be cut open.

The book is, therefore, about God judging the worst, most cruel, evil city at that time. Nahum calls Nineveh *"the city of blood"* (3:1) and says it has let its evil impact everyone else. Hopefully, this helps us understand that this would be an encouraging message for Judah. It was a comfort to them that evil would be judged. The name Nahum also means "comfort". Nahum says that no one will think that this was an unjust judgment or feel sorry for Nineveh. Everyone would just be happy for this to happen.

The book can be divided into two parts. Chapter 1 is a kind of introduction where God says that He punishes the guilty, that He will take revenge - and that He is good! God is the good one who punishes evil. It may be that we need to work a little on our associations with judgment and punishment and remember that God is always good, even when He "takes revenge" on evil. Part 2 then becomes chapters 2 and 3, where the actual attack comes, and the city falls; it becomes like a war description with Nahum as an eyewitness even though it had not yet happened.

Nineveh fell in 612 BC and was more or less abandoned after that. It is still in ruins and is located in present-day Iraq. The rest of the Assyrian Empire fell a few years later, in 605 BC.

It is very clear in this little book that God cares about right and wrong. It is a small book full of emotions. Nahum can be uplifting reading for us too if we think of the most evil and cruel thing we know in our time as a parallel to the Assyrians. Then it can become an encouraging book about God's justice and His judgment on evil and brutality. God cares and will judge evil. Again, all of this points to the return of Jesus, when He will come again to judge the whole world. Then there will be an end to all evil forever.

## The bloody city of Nineveh will be destroyed!

*"A prophecy concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite." v. 1*

The book contains the visions of Nahum of Elkosh (1:1); it is a message about Nineveh.

Nineveh: *"The destruction of Nineveh was probably greater than that of any city in the entire history of the world."* (Boice)

"*The book*": Nahum is the only prophet that begins like this. Was it primarily written down?

*"the vision"*: He saw this, formulated it as a message, and wrote it down.

Nahum's name means “comfort.” Elkosh is an unknown place.

## Structure

Chapter 1: What God will do (The destruction is announced).

Chapter 2: How God will do it (The destruction is described).

Chapter 3: Why God will do it (The destruction is justified).

## Dating:

After 663 BC, when No-Amon (Theben/Luxor) was taken by Assyria (3:8).

Before 612 BC, when Assyria was taken by Babylon and Media

## Israel's history with Nineveh

Genesis 10:8-12: Nineveh was founded by Nimrod, the first to establish a world empire.

Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC): *"At that time I received tribute... from Jehu son of Omri."*

(827-824)

Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC):

* Invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 732 BC, deposed King Pekah, and installed Hosea as a vassal king. Deported many and received taxes from Israel. (2 Kings 15:29-30)
* King Ahaz allies with him and pays tribute (2 Kings 16).

Shalmaneser V (727-722 BC): Besieged Samaria in 725-722 BC. (2 Kings 17:3-5).

Sargon II (722-705 BC): Took Samaria and the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. (2 Kings 17:6).

* *"At the beginning of my reign, in the first year of my reign...I carried away 27,290 people from Samaria. I selected 50 chariots as my royal equipment. There I settled people from the lands I had conquered. I set my official over them as governor. I imposed taxes on them as on the Assyrians.”* (The quote has been translated.)

Sennacherib (705-681 BC):

* Siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC and took 46 of the fortified cities of Judah. (2 Kings 18:13)
* Doubled Nineveh's size and made it the world's largest city at the time. An inner wall (circumference 13 km, 30 meters high, and 3 wagons wide) with 1200 towers and 14 gates. An outer wall beyond this.
* His armory, where he kept his chariots, armor, horses, weapons, etc., was 46 acres (46,000 m2) and took 6 years to build.
* *"As for Hezekiah the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke, I besieged 46 of his strong cities with walls, as well as the small towns around them, which were innumerable, by leveling them with rams and by setting up siege engines, by attacking and storming on foot, at mines, tunnels and breaches. 200,150 people, great and small, men and women, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle and sheep without number, I carried away from them and counted them as spoil. He himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage... As for Hezekiah, he was overpowered by the awesome splendor of my majesty, and the Urbies [Arabs] and his mercenaries whom he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, left him.”* (The quote has been translated.)

Assurbanipal (669–631 BC):

* Assyria stretched from the Persian Gulf to Egypt.
* Took the brutality to a new level, worse than anyone had seen before (in Nahum's time).
* People were flayed alive; prisoners often had their tongues pulled out or their hands, feet, noses or ears cut off, and they beheaded and crucified many.
* *“I captured many soldiers alive. The rest I burned… I made a pile of live (men and) heads in front of their gate… I burned their young boys and girls.”* Assurbanipal (The quote has been translated.)

*"That Nineveh against which the prophet thunders divine condemnation had become the concentrated center of evil, the capital of crushing tyranny, the epitome of the most cruel torture."* Walter A. Maier (The quote has been translated.)

# Chapter 1: What God will do

A description of the Lord (1:2-10)

1. The LORD is a jealous God who takes vengeance (Exodus 20:5, 34:14). Zealous: literally, turns very red → jealous (and angry).
2. The LORD takes vengeance and is full of wrath. Revenge: has negative associations for us, but when God is the subject, it always means that justice is done.
3. The LORD avenges his adversaries; he holds his anger against his enemies.
4. The LORD is slow to anger, and his power is great (Exodus 34:6).
5. The LORD does not fail to punish (Exodus 34:7).

Why does the book start like this? What follows is not just the anger and frustration of men; it comes from God's own character. He is both caring and just, and he responds to their suffering from the essence of who he is.

vv. 3-6: The earth cannot withstand the coming of God, and thus not evil earthly powers. Everything and everyone must give way when the Lord comes. Even the rocks are broken when God's wrath against evil and sin comes.

vv. 8-11: Who dares to plot against a God who is described like this?

* The rocks will be broken to pieces → Nineveh will be broken, and all who rebel will be broken (Ps 2:9).
* Nineveh has brought distress upon others for the last time.
* By doing evil to men, they have done evil to God.

v. 7: A sixth thing: The LORD is good! (Exodus 34:6)

* No contrast to the first 5, but just as much what God is! It is because he is good that he is furious with evil and that which afflicts his people and destroys his creation.
* He comes running so that the cliffs are blown up to save his children from evil.

1:11-14: God previously used the Assyrians as a tool to bring His people back to Him (e.g., Isa 10:12). But now they must be stopped and destroyed. It is over.

## Summary of Chapter 1

When God reveals himself, the world trembles. He comes like a desert storm that dries up the waters and causes the most fertile areas to wither (1:3-4). He blows away the mountains because the earth cannot stand before him (1:5-6). It is violent and terrifying when God comes to judge, but not for those who seek refuge in him (1:7). It is God's enemies who will be judged, and this time it was Nineveh for its rebellion against God and its wickedness (1:8-11). God will free Judah from oppression by letting Nineveh fall (1:12-14).

# Chapter 2: How God will do it

## The battle cry (2:1-3)

2:1 — > Isa 52:7 ("brings good news" = preaches the gospel).

*"An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength!"* 2:1

*"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"* Isa 52:7

* It is good news that the evil will end, so they can celebrate the festivals again. There will be peace!
* Said with a messianic overtone that is held far into the future (→ Rom 10:15)

*"And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"* Rom 10:15

2:2 - God is coming against them, so they need to get ready for battle (as if that helps...).

2:3 - The Lord restores his people by destroying their enemies.

## A description of the attack (2:4-11)

**Attacked (vv. 4-5):** Red and scarlet (v. 4) → blood (Heb.: *dam* (blood) - *adom* (red))

**A quick defense (v. 6):** Either the Assyrians stumble in panic, or the attackers are so eager that they stumble.

**The defense does not work anyway (vv. 7-9):**

* The Greek historian Diodorus (1st century BC) says the river Tigris flooded the city.
* Some historians, therefore, believe that the Babylonians and Medes dammed the Tigris to send a tidal wave against the city.
* What the Assyrians did to thousands of others will happen to them themselves. (v. 8)

**The city is left open and defenseless (vv. 10-11):** All the wealth of the world is here. Now it's just a matter of supplying yourself.

## The ravaging lion will be preyed upon (2:12-14)

Assurbanipal boasted of his skills as a lion hunter. He and other Assyrian kings also compared themselves to lions, so that the lion became an Assyrian symbol.

Nahum merges these two images and turns it around: while the Assyrians saw themselves as mighty lions hunting their prey, here they are depicted as lions being hunted instead. Nineveh, the lion's den, will be destroyed.

# Chapter 3: Why God will do it

## Part 1: The sorcery harlot shall be dishonored (3:1-7)

**Woe to the bloody city (1:1-17)**

Why would God do that?

* v. 1-3: Because of cruel imperialism, betrayal, looting, piles of corpses...
* v. 4: Because of political arrogance and idolatry (?)

vv. 5-7: The downfall:

* She shall be dishonored to the whole world by being destroyed.
* A message of joy for the whole world. No one will feel sorry for her. No one will comfort (*naham*) her.

## Part 2: Nineveh will fall like No-Amon (3:8-17)

**Woe to the bloody city (1:1-17)**

* No-Amon: Capital of Upper Egypt (Greek: Thebes, today: Luxor). Destroyed by the Assyrians in 663 BC.
* v. 10: a glimpse of the brutality of the Assyrians
* No-Amon seemed very strong with both natural borders and allied neighbors, but they still fell.
* The same will happen to Assyria. They must be judged for their brutality.

In verses 15-17, the grasshopper image is used in two ways:

1. The overwhelmingly large invader will devour them as a locust swarm devours crops.
2. The traders and guards will not help and protect them but will evaporate like a swarm of locusts. Now the Assyrians are the locusts.

## Part 3: The wicked king is seriously wounded (3:18-19)

*"All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?"* 3:18

* A word to the king of Assyria that it is out with him.
* Assyria was weakened after Assurbanipal's death in 631 BC.
* Nineveh fell in 612 BC, was totally razed by the Babylonians and Medes, and was more or less abandoned after that (1:14).
* The rest of the Assyrian Empire fell a few years later, in 605 BC.

Today, Nineveh is still just ruins. Nineveh is located in present-day Iraq, on the other side of the Tigris, opposite the city of Mosul.

# What does Nahum's message mean today?

God cares more than we do about the evil in the world; he is not a toothless God who passively sits and lets everything pass. He is full of emotion over the evil that constantly destroys his creations. One day he will completely put an end to all evil and brutality and restore his people by destroying the enemy (2:3) because he is good (1:7). This is a message of joy that still comforts. Everything will be fine.