

**2**

**NAHUM**



# **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction to Nahum

Judah had felt the oppressive power of Assyria since Assyria's westward expansion under Tiglath-pileser III in 734. His successor, Shalmaneser, conquered the northern kingdom, Israel. In 721 he was replaced by Sargon II, whose son, Sennacherib devastated Judah in 701. Jerusalem managed to hold out, largely because the Assyrian army had to withdraw to fight in the east, but Judah had to pay a massive tribute. It was Sennacherib who chose to make Nineveh his capital.

Nahum is delighting in the imminent fall of Nineveh, the capital of the Empire that had destroyed Israel, annexed the land to the east of the Jordan, controlled Philistia, and for over a century had kept Judah in subjection, even insisted on worship of the Assyrian gods in the temple of Jerusalem.

Assyria's decline was evident by 627 when Ashurbanipal died. Nineveh was captured by the Medes, with Babylon's backing, in 612. Two years earlier the religious capital, Ashur, had fallen. Nahum's oracles fit best some time in the period between 620 and 612, a decade or so after Zephaniah.

By Nahum's time the reforms of Josiah were taking effect. Zephaniah had urged his countrymen to change their ways. He had also promised the blessing of YHWH on the remnant who did. Nahum takes all this for granted. His focus concentrates on the fulfillment of Zephaniah's promise. Assyria is on its knees, and Nineveh, the capital of the mightiest empire, could not hold out any longer. Nahum gives expression to the pent up feelings of subject Judah against its powerful oppressor. His is powerful poetry. The sudden shift from image to image sustains the excitement of the reader still today. Imagine its effect on Nahum's contemporaries. He understands the imminent fall of Nineveh as YHWH's doing, and a huge sign of the blessings that YHWH is bringing his reformed people. His exultant joy at the fall of Assyria is also delight in the faithfulness of YHWH to his people.

### Inspired by Nahum?

Any people who have experienced the collapse of an oppressive enemy will understand Nahum's joy. Though our understanding of the place of God in warfare differs from Nahum's, he can still encourage us to believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Though oppressive abuse of power can appear to dominate our world, evil cannot avoid the consequences that come in its train.

We cannot, however, follow Nahum in seeing mass destruction as an appropriate response to evil. We would do well to 'balance' a reading of Nahum by contemplating the final words of the book of Jonah:

Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

– Jonah 4:11

As we contemplate Jesus giving his life in love on the cross, we can listen as he says: 'Take courage. I have conquered the world' (John 16:33). Love is a stronger force in our world than anger, revenge and hatred.

# **THE FALL OF NINEVEH**

**NAHUM 1:1 – 3:19**

**<sup>1</sup>An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.**

**<sup>2</sup>[א] A jealous and avenging God is YHWH, YHWH is avenging and wrathful; YHWH takes vengeance of his adversaries and lays up anger for his foes.**

**<sup>3</sup>YHWH is slow to anger but great in power, and YHWH will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.**

**[ב] His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.**

**<sup>4</sup>[ג] He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and he dries up all the rivers.**

**[ד] Bashan and Carmel wither, and the bloom of Lebanon fades.**

**<sup>5</sup>[ה] The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt away.**

**[ו] The earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it.**

The editor introduces Nahum's words as an 'oracle' (נְבִיאָה, māśśā'). It's focus, as already stated in the Introduction (page 42) is on Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

This is the only prophetic writing to be termed a 'book' (סֵפֶר, sēper). The prophet is speaking out of an enlightenment that he has received from God. His call is to share with others what he 'sees'; hence it is called a 'vision' (חֲזוֹן, ḥazōn; see Isaiah 1:1).

'Nahum' means 'comfort' This is either the prophet's personal name, or it is a name given to him because of the content of his oracle. Elkosh appears to be his place of origin. One ancient suggestion places it in the old tribal area of Simeon to the southwest of Jerusalem.

Verses 2-10 speak of God's anger, that is to say, God's determination to punish crime. The rest of the oracle will make it clear that Nahum is preparing his listeners for God's action against the Assyrian capital for the crimes Assyria has committed against the peoples it has oppressed for so long. Verses 2 to 8 is a fragment of an acrostic poem. Verse 2 begins with the first consonant of the Hebrew alphabet [א], and each successive unit begins with the next consonant. We find this literary device in a number of the psalms (see Psalm 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). On YHWH's action understood as punishment see the comment in the Introduction pages 16-17 and 18. No one can wish away the effects of unjust actions. The second part of verse 2 breaks the acrostic pattern, as does verse 3. This may indicate that they are later comments introduced into the original text.

From the second part of verse 3 through to verse 5 Nahum sings of YHWH the lord of creation and the ways in which his 'anger' is manifested in the natural world.

After declaring that no power can resist God's punishment, Nahum speaks of God's anger as a fire. The Deuteronomists write:

YHWH your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.

– Deuteronomy 4:24

This is followed by further illustrations of what happens when YHWH's anger is unleashed (verse 6).

In verse 7 Nahum offers a contrast. YHWH's anger is terrible, but he is a protective shelter for those who put their trust in him. Again we read in Deuteronomy:

I YHWH your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

– Deuteronomy 5:9-10

The knowing to which Nahum refers in verse 7 is the knowing that occurs only where there is intimacy.

The first part of verse 8 appears to be incomplete. Presumably it went on to speak of the destruction of YHWH's enemies, in contrast to the protection offered to those who trust him. This is developed in the rest of the verse.

Verse 9 declares the folly of trying to overcome or avoid YHWH's will. The words 'no adversary will rise up twice' is an assurance that Assyria will not rise again to oppress Judah.

The Hebrew of verse 10 is obscure. The meaning seems to be that even though the enemy is dangerous (like tangled thorns) and hard to burn (when wet from flooding), they cannot avoid YHWH's anger. God will consume them as easily as dry straw.

**6[ר] Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?**

**[נ] His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.**

**7[ט] YHWH is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble;**

**[ו] he knows those who take refuge in him,<sup>8</sup> but with an overflowing flood ...**

**[ז] He will make a full end of his adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.**

**<sup>9</sup>Why do you plot against YHWH? He is about to bring about a complete end, for he will not take vengeance twice against his foes.**

**<sup>10</sup>Though they be like thorns tangled and soaking wet, they are consumed like dry straw.**

**<sup>11</sup>From you one has gone out who plots evil against YHWH, who counsels wickedness.**

**<sup>12</sup>Thus says YHWH, "Though they are at full strength, and there are many of them, even so they will be cut off and pass away.**

**Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. <sup>13</sup>And now I will break off his yoke from you and snap the bonds that bind you."**

**<sup>14</sup>YHWH has commanded concerning you: "Your name shall be sown no longer; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the cast image.**

**I will make your grave a place of insult and reproach."**

**<sup>15</sup>Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off.**

In this section (1:11-15), Nahum moves from threats against Nineveh to assurances of God's comfort and liberation to Judah, and back again. In verse 11 he seems to be referring to Sennacherib's leaving Nineveh to attack Jerusalem – an attack that ravaged Judah, but failed to capture Jerusalem (701).

In verses 12-13 there is an abrupt change of focus. Nahum is assuring his audience that the long years of subjection have at last come to an end. Judah had to suffer the consequences of its infidelity, and Assyria played a large part in that, but that is all finished. God will afflict Judah no more. Rebellion throughout the empire is bringing Assyria down. Now that the fall of Nineveh is imminent, the yoke that has kept Judah bound is about to break, and Judah will be free at last.

In verse 14 Nahum shifts back to Nineveh. The 'you' appears to be Nineveh's king. The threat is that he and his children will be completely wiped out. Likewise with the carved or molten images of his gods. The houses of their gods will be emptied. Assyria has been taking the gods of subject peoples to its temples – proof of the weakness of the conquered gods. Now it will suffer the same fate.

Instead of the grave of the king being a memorial to his honour, it will provoke nothing but insult and scorn.

Verse 15 follows the verse numbering of the Latin Vulgate. It is verse 1 of chapter 2 in the Hebrew and Greek. The focus swings back to Jerusalem. News was signalled from one hilltop to the next. So certain is the fall of Nineveh, it is as though a signal to that effect has already been dispatched. It will shortly reach Jerusalem. Freed from the Assyrian yoke, the people of Jerusalem will be free to celebrate their religious festivals without having to conform to Assyrian demands. It is the oppressor's turn to be 'cut off'.

Verse 1 is addressed to Nineveh. Nahum is warning the city that the forces that will scatter its inhabitants are already on the move. He dares the city to put in its best efforts at defence. They will come to nothing!

Nineveh's best efforts to defend itself will come to nothing for it is YHWH who is determining the outcome. Israel resembles a vineyard that has been ravaged and stripped bare. This includes its rulers. That is all changing. YHWH is restoring his people and their king (indicated here, it seems, by the word 'Jacob') to their former glory.

In verse 3 Nahum paints a powerful picture of the forces advancing to destroy Nineveh. Are the shields and clothes and chariots red and crimson and flashing from the reflected light of the sun? This is an army from heaven. The war horses are eager for the fray.

In verse 4 we see the army approaching the city walls through the fields. The sunlight reflected from the chariots appears as lightning from heaven. In verse 5 the protective shields covering the soldiers are set up. In verse 6 the gates by the river give way and the army sweeps into Nineveh. The mighty king of Assyria trembles.

The Hebrew text of verse 7 is obscure. The reference may be to Ishtar the goddess of Nineveh. In verse 8 we see those defending the city fleeing in disarray, and in verse 9 the victorious troops plunder the city's treasures.

In verse 10 we witness the panic of the people of Nineveh.

**2:1** **A scatterer has come up against you. Guard the ramparts; watch the road; gird your loins; collect all your strength.**

**2** **For YHWH is restoring the pride of Jacob, as well as the pride of Israel, though ravagers have ravaged them and ruined their branches.**

**3** **The shields of his warriors are red; his soldiers are clothed in crimson. The metal on the chariots flashes on the day when he musters them; the chargers prance.**

**4** **The chariots race madly through the fields, they rush to and fro through the open spaces; their appearance is like torches, they dart like lightning.**

**5** **He calls his officers; they stumble as they come forward; they hasten to the wall, and the defensive shield is set up. <sup>6</sup>The river gates are opened, the palace trembles.**

**7** **It is decreed that she be exiled, her maidens led away, moaning like doves and beating their breasts.**

**8** **Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. "Halt! Halt!" — but no one turns back. <sup>9</sup>"Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of treasure! An abundance of every precious thing!"**

**10** **Devastation, desolation, and destruction! Hearts faint and knees tremble, all loins quake, all faces grow pale!**

The lion hunt

**<sup>11</sup>What became of the lions' den, the cave of the young lions, where the lion goes, and the lion's cubs, with no one to disturb them?**

**<sup>12</sup>The lion has torn enough for his whelps and strangled prey for his lionesses; he has filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh.**

**<sup>13</sup>See, I am against you, says YHWH of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions; I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall be heard no more.**

The defeat of Nineveh is likened to YHWH, Israel's warrior God, hunting a pride of lions. Assyria once ruled the world, like a lion. No more!

The might of Assyria is no match for the power of YHWH. Her military hardware will be burnt, her children cut down by the sword of the invaders. The booty that she has acquired from her prey will be taken and her emissaries who once ruled the world from Nineveh will never be heard of again.

Nahum rejoices once more over the approaching fall of Nineveh. This time he addresses the city itself. In verses 1-3 in a few words he invites the listener to see and hear the offensive against the city, including the massacre of its population.

In 2:11-13, Nahum used the image of a lion hunt. Here in 3:4-7, Nineveh is likened to a humiliated prostitute. Assyria has seduced many nations into compliance with her empirical ambitions, only to enslave them.

In verses 5-7 it is YHWH who is speaking. 'I am against you' (compare 2:13). Nineveh will undergo the shame meted out for fornication and adultery (compare Hosea 2:3). All who see the humiliated city will flee in horror. No one is there to bemoan her fate.

The reference to Thebes (present Luxor, some 700ks upstream on the Nile) is probably to its sacking by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in 663 – a sacking from which it never recovered. When the Nile rises the city is flooded. At the time of her fall Egypt was ruled from Cush (the 25th dynasty). Put is probably an area of modern Lybia. Their combined forces were no match for Assyria. Now it is Nineveh's turn. Its people are, as it were, in a drunken stupor (verse 11). They will seek refuge, but find none!

**<sup>1</sup>Woe! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end to the plunder! <sup>2</sup>The crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and jolting chariot! <sup>3</sup>Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end – they stumble over the corpses!**

**<sup>4</sup>Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery. <sup>5</sup>I am against you, says YHWH of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame. <sup>6</sup>I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle. <sup>7</sup>Then all who see you will shrink from you and say, "Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?" Where shall I seek comforters for you?**

**<sup>8</sup>Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, water her wall? <sup>9</sup>Cush was her strength, Egypt too, and that without limit; Put and the Libyans were her helpers. <sup>10</sup>Yet she became an exile, she went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; lots were cast for her nobles, all her dignitaries were bound in fetters. <sup>11</sup>You also will be drunken, you will go into hiding; you will seek a refuge from the enemy.**

Nineveh's fall

**<sup>12</sup>All your fortresses are like fig trees with first-ripe figs – if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater.**

**<sup>13</sup>Look at your troops: they are women in your midst. The gates of your land are wide open to your foes; fire has devoured the bars of your gates.**

**<sup>14</sup>Draw water for the siege, strengthen your forts; trample the clay, tread the mortar, take hold of the brick mould! <sup>15</sup>There the fire will devour you, the sword will cut you off.**

**It will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust, multiply like the grasshopper! <sup>16</sup>You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust sheds its skin and flies away. <sup>17</sup>Your guards are like grasshoppers, your scribes like swarms of locusts settling on the fences on a cold day – when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they have gone.**

**<sup>18</sup>Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. <sup>19</sup>There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is mortal.**

**All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?**

Nineveh will suffer a fate similar to the treatment it meted out to Thebes. Nineveh is ripe for the plucking. It is consumed with as much eagerness as one consumes the first figs.

Nahum challenges Nineveh to muster all its forces to defend itself. The destruction of the city is assured.

Even if the Assyrians could increase in number like locusts, it would do them no good. Like the locust, the merchants (verse 16) would not stay to defend the city, but would attempt to fly off. It is the same with those responsible for guarding the city (verse 17).

In verses 18-19 the king is addressed. The situation is hopeless, and he himself will be killed.

The whole world is overjoyed at the end of the city