

Introduction to Nahum

Kenneth J. Morgan
August, 2016

Background

Prophet's Name

The name נְחֻם, *Nahum*, is based on the verb נָחַם (not occurring in the Qal) meaning *to be sorry* or *to console oneself*. The name Nahum therefore means *comfort* or *consolation*, quite appropriate to his message--one of disaster for Assyria but comfort for Israel.

Identification

Nahum Himself

Nothing is known about Nahum except what may be deduced from his book, and that is very little. Nahum is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, and no one else has the name *Nahum*.

Nahum's Home Town "Elkosh"

Nahum claims to be from Elkosh (1:1). This city is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, and it has not been identified with certainty. There are four theories.

1. Jerome identified it as *Elkesi* or *El Kauze* in Galilee.
2. Some argue that Elkosh is *Capernaum* which means *village of Nahum*. According to this view, the name of the city was changed from Elkosh to Capernaum in honor of Nahum.
3. Ewald and Lange, e.g., argue for *Alqush* on the left bank of the Tigris (the same river on which Nineveh was situated 24 miles to the south) just north of Mosul in Assyria.
4. Finally, others would argue for *Elcese*, a village, according to Pseudo-piphanius, just below Bet Gabre in the territory of Simeon, midway between Jerusalem and Gaza. This view is preferred by Eiselen, Raven, Young, Archer, and Freeman. If correct, Nahum would be a citizen of the Southern Kingdom.

His Style

The book of Nahum, written entirely in lyric poetry, reflects the best of classical Hebrew, comparable to Isaiah. "His descriptions are vivid and graphic; the language is powerful, moving and forceful" (Freeman, *IOTP*, p. 226). "It has been indicated that his style is the most impassioned of all the prophets. All will agree that Nahum has a vividness and forcefulness of style all his own" (Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 189). For Isaianic parallels, compare 1:8-9 with Isa. 8:18 and 10:23; 1:15 with 52:1,7; 2:10 with 24:1 and 21:3; 3:5 with 47:2-3; and 3:7, 10 with 51:19-20.

The Fall of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire

Beginning with Tiglathpileser III (744-727), founder of the Second Empire and conqueror of Damascus, Assyria had its heyday with a series of strong, conquering kings: Shalmaneser V (726-722), Sargon II (722-705), conqueror of Samaria, Sennacherib (704-681), who defeated all of Judah except Jerusalem, Esarhaddon (680-669), who finally subdued all of Egypt, and finally Ashurbanipal (669-633). Following Ashurbanipal's brilliant career, however, the Assyrian Empire declined rapidly. Ashurbanipal was succeeded by his sons, Ashuretililani (633-627) and Sinsharishkun (627-612), two weak kings. Even during the reign of Ashurbanipal a series of revolts in Egypt gained independence for that country. After his death, Babylon revolted under Nabopolassar (625-605), founder of the New-Babylonian Empire and father of Nebuchadnezzar, and a new enemy appeared on the scene: Cyaxeres (625-585), king of the Medes, who ascended to the throne about 624. The Medes conquered Ashur in 614, and in 612 Nineveh, the great Assyrian capital, fell to the combined forces of Media under Cyaxeres and Babylon under Nabopolassar; the barbaric Scythians also seem to have played a part in the defeat of Assyria. Nineveh was looted and completely destroyed, never to be built again.

Of course, the fierce vengeance visited upon Nineveh and Assyria was only to be expected, and it was just a matter of time before the principle in Gal. 6:7 would bring about the violent end of this great empire. For over 100 years Assyria ruled the Near East with unmitigated cruelty. Vicious brutality perpetrated upon conquered armies and populations was the official policy. Ashurbanipal, highly educated and creator of one of the finest ancient libraries, boasted of such atrocities as tearing off limbs, pulling out eyes, impaling, boiling in tar, and skinning alive. God will not tolerate such national behavior, and he was not mocked: what Nineveh, that "bloody city" (3:1), sowed, it also reaped. The heavily fortified city

withstood the siege laid upon it by Cyaxares and Nabopolassar for about 3 months, but--providentially--an unusually severe flood (mentioned only by Greek historian Cresias, 5th cent. B.C.) of the Tigris carried away a part of the great wall and allowed the attackers to gain entrance into the city. Peoples who had been so ruthlessly oppressed now turned upon the oppressor. So thorough and devastating was the destruction of Nineveh at the hands of her enemies that for centuries afterward even its location would be unknown. Only in 1845 did Layard identify a site known as *Kuyunjik* as the remains of ancient Nineveh.

Sinsharishkun perished in the destruction of Nineveh in 612. The Babylonian Chronicle recording the siege has a broken sentence about his end. Some scholars believe that he died in the flames of his palace. After the fall of Nineveh, Cyaxares returned home, while Nabopolassar extended his military campaign west of Nineveh. Further west, Ashurballit II (612-606), with what remained of the Assyrian army, attempted to set up a last Assyrian kingdom at Haran. Nabopolassar continued to push westward and took Haran in 610, again with aid of the Medes. The Assyrians retreated to Carchemish for a last-ditch stand. Ironically, under Necho II Egypt came to aid the Assyrians; he apparently wished to restore Egypt to a world power and feared the growing might of Babylon. It was at this point that Judah enters the picture, and the tragic death of Josiah occurs. In 609 and in disobedience to God (see the amazing statement in 2 Chr. 35:20-24; cf. 2 Kgs. 23:29-30 and note the mistranslation "against" in v. 29), Josiah attempts to stop Necho in his march to Carchemish and is killed for his efforts. Also in 609 the Babylonians, now under Nebuchadnezzar, took Carchemish, overwhelmingly defeated Necho, and destroyed the last remnants of the Assyrian army. Egypt was never again to be a significant world power, and Assyria had ceased to exist.

Date

Nahum prophesied the destruction of Nineveh in 612 as a future event. In 3:8 he refers to the fall of Thebes in 661 before the armies of Ashurbanipal (669-626) as a past event. In addition, no king of Judah is mentioned in 1:1; this fact points to the reign of Manasseh (686-642) rather than Josiah (640-609). Archer prefers 654, though some conservative scholars place Nahum's ministry as late as 625-620. Freeman opts for about 650. If this is correct, Nahum prophesied the fall of this proud capital during the height of its power, some 40 years in advance.

Basic Theme

Nahum's theme involves three aspects: (1) the book is a sequel to Jonah (cf. 1:2-3 with Jon. 4:2); (2) Nahum predicts the destruction of Nineveh; and (3) his message is intended to comfort Israel. Archer, *Soti*, p. 352, expresses it as follows: "His theme deals with the holiness of God, a holiness which involves both retribution toward rebellious unbelievers and compassion toward His own people, especially those who sincerely believe and trust in Him alone. The believer is represented as rejoicing at the sight of God's righteous vindication of His holiness in the destruction of the God-defying power of Assyria."

Outline With Interpretive Comments

I. Judgment upon Nineveh decreed by God (1:1-15)

A. Introduction (1:1)

B. A general description of divine justice (1:2-6)

C. The destruction of Nineveh predicted (1:7-14)

1. God's goodness and wrath (1:7-8)

2. Affliction, once inflicted upon Judah by Assyria, will not be repeated (1:9-14)

D. Comfort for Judah announced (1:15)

II. The siege of Nineveh portrayed (2:1-13)

A. Assyria addressed (2:1-2)

B. The "battle of Nineveh" (2:3-7)

C. Nineveh spoiled (2:8-10)

D. Oppression visited upon the oppressor (2:11-13)

A lamentation and final appeal: "Seek Yahweh, and ye shall live."

III. The reason for Nineveh's destruction (3:1-19)

A. Recapitulation of the attack (3:1-3)

B. The reason for the destruction: her treatment of the nations (3:4-7)

C. The example of No-amon (Thebes) (3:8-10)

D. The doom of Assyria is sure (3:11-13)

E. Defenses will be useless (3:14-17)

F. The people of the city are to be scattered (3:18-19)

Important Passages and Problems

The only critical issue with regard to Nahum concerns its unity and the so-called "acrostic psalm" of 1:2-10. This issue is of little importance and is adequately discussed in Archer, *SOTI*, p. 353, and Freeman, *IOTP*, pp. 229-30.

Bibliography

Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

Feinberg, Charles. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976.

Freeman, Hobart E. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968.