

## The Prophets, Book 12

### Nahum

Very little is known of the prophet Nahum. In the first verse he calls himself "the Elkoshite," i.e. a native of Elkoh, or Elkosh; but the location of this place is unknown. Jerome (347-420 AD) said that Elkoh (Elkosh) was in Galilee and, in his time it was in ruins<sup>1</sup>. The name of Capernaum, the place which would later be the center of Jesus' ministry, means "village of Nahum," so Nahum may have been a native--perhaps a founder--of Capernaum. It is interesting to think that both Jonah and Nahum, the only two prophets known to have been sent to Nineveh, may both have been natives of Upper Galilee, where Jesus would later grow to manhood and center his ministry. This is an interesting possibility; but the simple truth is that we just don't know.

The time of Nahum's life and ministry, on the other hand, is much more easily estimated because of his references to events in world history. It was the time when Assyria was at the height of its power and despotic aggression, having conquered Egypt; and it was before Assyria's own troubles began, with the invasion of the Scythians. Assyria was the super-power of the known World. We can thus place the period of Nahum's writing, with some confidence, at about 650-625 BC. He was contemporary with Habakkuk, Zephaniah and, perhaps, Jeremiah.

Jonah and Nahum, the only prophets that are known to have been sent to Nineveh, took very different messages to the people there. Jonah's message had been a message of mercy and forgiveness to Nineveh, and it brought amazing repentance and righteousness. However, about 150 years later, the city and the nation had returned to their previous paganism and almost unimaginably cruel aggression, and Nahum's message was a message of doom for their sins. His small book is sometimes called "the death song of Nineveh," and rightly so. The fact that God sent prophets at all to such an evil, despotic nation is in itself a tribute to his amazing grace.

***NOTE:** Another, and more lasting expression of God's grace is the existence today of the Assyrian Church (Assyrian Church of the East), founded in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD. God obliterated the Assyrian nation for its paganism and cruelty; but He did not obliterate the Assyrian people. The Assyrian Church traces its origins to the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew. With its headquarters in the unlikely city of*

---

<sup>1</sup> Unger, Merrill: Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Nahum, Book of," p 774.

*Chicago, it has congregations in the Middle East (including Israel), the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Europe.*

Nineveh, founded by Nimrod, son of Cush, grandson of Ham and great grandson of Noah, had been for centuries the capital city of the World's reigning superpower, Assyria. Assyria had already conquered the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and carried the survivors into cruel captivity; it was the terror of the other nations.

Nineveh was the very symbol of irresistible power. Surrounded by huge walls, and further protected by surrounding rivers and canals, the city was generally believed to be impregnable<sup>2</sup>. Uncountable wealth poured into its treasury from spoils of conquest and tribute from conquered nations. Greater Nineveh was also huge. And yet its coming overthrow and destruction by Babylon would be so complete that, 300 years later, Alexander the Great would pass by, unaware that the ruins of a very great city lay under his dusty sandals. The Roman historian, Lucien of Samosata, wrote of it in the 1st Century AD, "Nineveh is perished and there is no trace left where it once was."

Assyria was so completely wiped from the face of the Earth that critical scholars believed the Old Testament's references to the Assyrian Empire were myths. Today, however, Nineva's palaces have been extensively excavated, and its vast library of 100,000 volumes is perhaps the greatest archeological discovery of all time<sup>3</sup>. Once again, critical scholars doubt and deny, then archeologists dig, and the Bible is confirmed.

**A. Author.** The human author was "Nahum the Elkoshite," as he plainly states in the very first verse. Unbroken Jewish tradition identifies the prophet Nahum as the author.

**B. Place and Date.** The book was written in the Southern Kingdom about 650-625 BC, shortly before the sudden overthrow of Assyria by the Babylonians and Medes under Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar's father.

**C. Theme.** The theme of Nahum's little book is simple and emphatic: mighty, cruel, proud, Assyria, and its great capital city, are soon to be destroyed as judgment for their sins of un-repentant paganism, cruelty and greed.

**D. Highlights.** Highlights of Nahum include the following:

1. A Hymn to the Power, Patience and Fury of God. (Chapter 1)

---

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete description of Nineveh's size and defenses, see the study guide to Jonah, highlight 6, "Jonah's Second Chance."

<sup>3</sup> Not only did the library contain the Assyrians' own history, but Assyrian Emperor Ashur-banipal, an archeologist of sorts himself, had had his scribes copy the records of ancient Babylon, 2,000 years before his own time and before the time of the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar. We owe to him (and to the archeologists who discovered and preserved his library) our extra-scriptural knowledge of ancient Babylon.

In powerful, vivid, poetic language, similar to that in the opening of Micah, Nahum begins with a hard-hitting declaration that God is patient and slow to anger, but that He has reached the limit of His patience. In fact, he opens by saying that God is not only offended, but is furious; He calls Nineveh his enemy, and is ready to visit Nineveh with final vengeance. He also describes the unimaginable majesty and power of this furious God; it is an altogether terrifying prospect, and one that will soon come to pass. In verse 14 he seems to be quoting from Isaiah 52:7<sup>4</sup>. In the last verse, Nahum reassures Judah, the surviving Southern Kingdom, that the Assyrians will trouble them no more; and he also urges them to serve God and live under His protection.

## 2. Sudden, Utter Destruction and Slaughter. (Chapter 2)

One will seldom see, and can hardly imagine, a more vivid word picture of a city's being overrun and its soldiers and people slaughtered by a savage conqueror, than the one Nahum writes here about "unconquerable" Nineveh.

The water barrier surrounding and protecting the city is referred to in 2:8. After being surrounded and besieged by the Medes and Babylonians, a sudden rise in the protective rivers will wash away a section of the wall, allowing the attackers to flow into the city like in-rushing water--literally fulfilling the prophecies in 1:8 and 2:6.

*NOTE: The rendering of "Huzzab" in v 7 is a matter of controversy. In the Authorized Version (KJV) the "H" is capitalized, seeming to make it a proper noun, i.e. a name. The context, and the wording of the verse, i.e. "shall be led away captive...and her maids shall lead her...", sounds as if "Huzzab" could be the name of the queen of Assyria, spared and led away captive with her attending women. Yet such authorities as Merrill Unger differ. Most (if not all) modern versions render the word as "it is decreed...."*

## 3. What You Have Sowed, That Shall You Reap--and Don't Expect Sympathy. (Chapter 3)

In jarring, vivid, poetic language, like that in Chapter 1, the doom of Nineveh is pronounced. Verse 2 is particularly vivid; the chariot was the battle tank of its time--the weapon of decision, which made the defending infantryman tremble in his sandals. I can hear the crack of the charioteer's whip as he drives his horses forward; the wheels made a great noise with their large, iron-tired wheels; and chariots had no spring suspension, so that they jumped and bounced over rough terrain. Then come the cavalymen on their huge war horses, swinging swords and spearing people with lances. Don't think that you have a chance to escape--you have no chance. Your people will be slaughtered; the corpses will be so

---

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah lived and ministered about 100 years before Nahum.

numerous that those fleeing will stumble over them. (And Nahum vividly expresses all of this in just three jam-packed verses!)

This horrible slaughter and destruction will be the result of the Assyrians' paganism and cruelty. They had conquered Egypt and Ethiopia, slaughtering their people, smashing babies and small children to death. Their strong men and nobles who had survived the slaughter were bound in chains by the Assyrians and enslaved. As the Assyrians had slaughtered and enslaved the people of Egypt and Ethiopia, so shall it be done to Assyria. Her strongholds shall fall like ripe fruit from a shaken tree; and Nineveh shall be burned.

And, incidentally, don't expect any of the surrounding nations to be sorry for you; they will be rejoicing at your destruction and suffering, because of the cruel way that you have treated them.