

The Bible's Big Story



Nahum

Nahum is one of the more neglected books in the Bible, as it is rarely preached from. Three factors likely explain this: its short length, its place among the minor prophets (often neglected in modern evangelicalism), and its dark, violent content. It has no miracles or heroic stories, and it is not directly about Israel. Yet as Scripture, Nahum was given for edification and deserves a closer look.

Review of Introductory Information

Title: The book is named for the prophet Nahum, whose name means “comfort” or “consolation.” Comfort is a major theme of the book. The name may be a shortened form of Nehemiah, “the comfort of Yahweh.”

Authorship: Almost nothing is known about Nahum beyond the title’s description of him as “Nahum of Elkosh.” Proposed locations for Elkosh include places in Israel, Judah, and Assyria. The tradition linking him to Capernaum (“village of Nahum”) lacks archaeological support, since the city does not appear to predate the second century BC. Although we cannot be certain, given that his message to God’s people is addressed mainly to Judah, Elkosh was most likely a southern city whose location is now lost.

Date: Nahum was written in the mid-seventh century BC. He writes after the fall of Thebes (No-Ammon) around 663 BC, and he foretells the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC as still future. He may have served during the reigns of Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah. Assyria had reached its peak with the conquest of Thebes, so Nahum writes at the beginning of the empire’s end. After Ashurbanipal’s death in 627 BC the empire declined, and Nineveh fell to a coalition of Medes and Babylonians as Nahum prophesied.

Theme & Purpose: About a hundred years after Jonah’s preaching led Nineveh to repent, the city’s wickedness had reached its height. Nahum announces God’s judgment and the certain downfall of Assyria and its capital. A key to understanding the book is recognizing its dual audience. The explicit audience is Nineveh. The implicit audience is God’s people, who are comforted that God’s power, faithfulness, and justice are intact and that oppression will end.

Theme Summary: Nahum announces God’s certain and imminent judgment against Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire, revealing that God is both a just avenger who punishes sin and a secure refuge for those who trust in Him. Because of this, the fall of His people’s oppressor brings comfort and the hope of deliverance.

Redemption Revealed In Nahum

Nahum’s prophecy displays God’s absolute sovereignty in His judgment of Assyria and the deliverance of His people, giving assurance that His redemptive purpose will not fail.

Nahum’s prophecy reveals God’s sovereign power over kings and kingdoms, both in raising them up and in ending them. Assyria threatened the very existence of Israel and Judah. Since God’s promised rescuer was to come through that people, Assyria seemed able to derail His plan of redemption. Nahum pulls back the curtain to show how things really are. God had raised Assyria up, and even in its oppression the empire was under His control as a tool in His hand. In both raising and ending Assyria, God demonstrated His absolute sovereignty over the nations. This is meant to comfort His people with the assurance that, whatever the outward appearances, His plan and purpose are secure.

Nahum exposes the need that only the gospel answers: sinners cannot escape God’s judgment, and no one may presume on His patience.

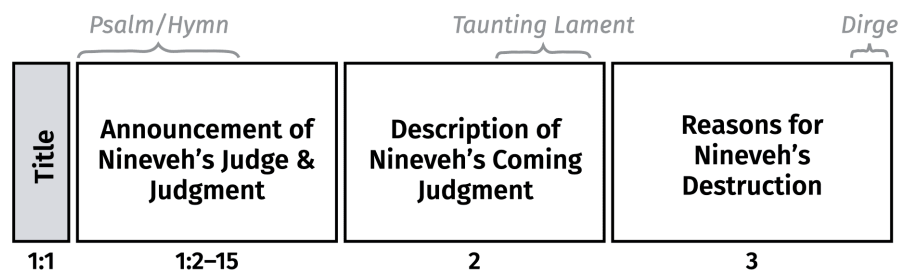
One generation of Ninevites repented through Jonah’s preaching and received mercy, but the nation’s overall sinful course did not change, and their accumulated sins did not escape God’s notice. Once the sentence was given, not even a world power could resist His wrath. Nahum quotes Exodus 34, where God is both slow to anger and One who will by no means clear the guilty. The wages of sin will be paid and no one, great or small, escapes the notice of the perfect Judge. If all have sinned, are all doomed? Nahum sets up a question that only the gospel can answer.

Nahum’s portrayal of the Lord as a stronghold for those who take refuge in Him anticipates the work of Christ, the only refuge from God’s just wrath against sin.

Alongside the promise of certain judgment, Nahum offers hope. In 1:6–7 the rhetorical question “Who can stand before his indignation?” is answered by the declaration that the Lord is a stronghold who knows those who take refuge in Him. The only escape from God’s judgment is to take refuge in Him and His mercy. This shadowy promise anticipates the redemptive work of Christ, who in His death, burial, and resurrection made atonement and bore the full wrath of God for the sins of His people so that God’s justice might be satisfied. Jesus, who is God become man, is the only One who can deliver sinners from God’s wrath. He is their refuge. Those in Christ can take refuge in His substitutionary, atoning work on the cross, knowing He bore the wrath that we deserved.

Notes:

The Structure of Nahum



Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Nahum is often overlooked because it is short, among the minor prophets, and dark in content. What might you be missing by skipping books like this one?
2. Both Jonah and Nahum draw on Exodus 34:6-7, one stressing God's mercy and the other His justice. Why must you hold both together to understand God's character rightly, and what danger comes from presuming on His patience?
3. Assyria seemed to threaten God's plan of redemption, yet Nahum shows it was under His control the whole time. When circumstances seem to threaten what God has promised, how does Nahum's picture of His sovereignty speak to you?
4. Nahum asks, "Who can stand before his indignation?" and answers that the Lord is a refuge for those who trust in Him. How does the work of Christ answer that question for you, and how should it shape the way you view your own sin and your hope?