

# NAHUM

“And now I will break off his yoke from you  
and snap the bonds that bind you.” (NAHUM 1:13)

## HISTORICAL SETTING

*a brief sketch of the history within the narrative flow and at the time of writing*

The prophet Nahum emerged during one of the most volatile periods in the ancient Levant—that is, during the decline of the Assyrian Empire in the 7th century BCE. His oracles can be dated sometime after Assyria’s destruction of Thebes (Egypt’s capital) in 663 BCE — an event he references — but before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE, which he anticipates with striking poetic force. A preferable dating places Nahum’s preaching during the reign of Josiah of Judah (641–609 BCE), making him a near contemporary of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah.

This situates Nahum within a moment of profound geopolitical upheaval. Assyria — long the dominant imperial power, feared for its military brutality and political terror — was weakening. Babylon, still under Assyrian overlordship, had begun to rebel, signaling a new shift in regional power. In Judah, Josiah’s reforms were underway, seeking to undo the idolatry and political compromises of his predecessor Manasseh and to restore covenant faithfulness in Jerusalem.

Against this backdrop, Nahum’s proclamation interprets Nineveh’s impending collapse as divine judgment. His message is not merely political analysis but theological conviction.

Because the Book of Nahum offers no geographic clues beyond calling the prophet “the Elkoshite,” interpreters across centuries have proposed several locations for Elkosh. Each proposal carries its own historical weight and theological implications.

- Galilee (the northern kingdom)—Early Christian tradition, beginning with Jerome, identified Elkosh with a small Galilean village called *Helkesei*. This identification situated Nahum within the northern landscape of Israel among communities shaped by Assyrian conquest.
- Southern Judah—A possible Judean location is based on linguistic parallels and internal evidence. Nahum’s perspective reflects the concerns of Judah and places the prophet within the religious and political reforms of Josiah, alongside contemporaries such as Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah.

### **NARRATIVE UNITS in AMOS**

- 1:2-8 Hymn of the Divine Avenger—a hymn to the coming of the divine warrior, a common Old Testament form
- 1:9-15 Oracle of Hope for Judah—proclamations regarding Jerusalem’s and Judah’s hope, addressing alternately the people of Nineveh
- 2-3 Oracle concerning the Fall of Nineveh—oracles against Nineveh that foresee Nineveh’s downfall, including apocalyptic imagination (2:4-10), a funeral lament (3:1-7), and the Song of Triumph (3:8-19).

- Assyria—Scholars have proposed an alternative setting for Nahum by locating Elkosh near Nineveh itself. In this view, Nahum may have been an Israelite or Judahite exile living under Assyrian rule. Supporting this is the prophet’s striking lack of interest in Jerusalem’s cult, politics, or internal reforms—a contrast to contemporaries like Zephaniah and Jeremiah. If Nahum was writing from within the Assyrian sphere, his book may have functioned as a letter of encouragement sent to Judahite sympathizers in Jerusalem and Judah who opposed Assyrian domination.

In this reconstruction, Nahum’s message becomes the assurance that Yahweh remains faithful even when Judah is powerless, and that Assyria’s collapse is not only possible but imminent. His vivid oracles of Nineveh’s downfall would have offered hope to communities long crushed by imperial violence. Whether spoken from Judah or from exile, Nahum’s proclamation interprets Assyria’s unraveling and Babylon’s rising rebellion as signs that empires built on brutality cannot endure, and that God’s justice will outlast them.

### **THEMATIC & LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS**

**Vengeance against Nineveh** — Nahum’s opening hymn (1:2–8) presents God as both avenger of injustice and refuge for the oppressed. Divine wrath is not arbitrary but the necessary, measured response to violence, even as God remains a stronghold for all who seek shelter. This dual portrait frames the book’s single, uncompromising message: God will judge Nineveh. Assyria, once an instrument of divine judgment against Israel, has become an empire sustained by brutality, terror, and exploitation. Its downfall is therefore portrayed as an act of divine justice.

Nineveh’s collapse becomes a dramatic reversal of fortunes: the predator becomes prey, the oppressor becomes desolate. Nahum’s imagery underscores a profound moral inversion — what Assyria inflicted on others returns upon itself. In this vision, the fall of Nineveh is not merely geopolitical change but a theological declaration that God confronts and dismantles violent empires, that no power built on cruelty can endure, and that the suffering of the oppressed is never forgotten.

**The Sovereignty & Faithfulness of God** — Throughout Nahum, history bends toward God’s purposes. Nations rise and fall, but Yahweh’s justice endures. The prophet interprets Assyria’s decline and Babylon’s rise as evidence of divine governance — a reminder that geopolitical upheaval is never outside God’s sovereignty. The execution of judgment reveals the steadfast faithfulness of the LORD, who has not abandoned Judah. Assyria, the relentless enemy, will not prevail forever.

Nahum proclaims that the punishment will end, and liberation will come. Just as God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, God will deliver those crushed beneath Assyria’s violence. The fall

of Nineveh is therefore more than political collapse; it is a theological declaration that God confronts and dismantles empires built on oppression. In Nahum's vision, divine justice breaks the power of brutality, restores hope to the afflicted, and demonstrates that God's commitment to the oppressed is unwavering.

**The Comfort of God & a Memorial to Rage** — Nahum's name means "comfort," and the book offers comfort to Judah by proclaiming the end of Assyria's domination. Yet this comfort is born from deep solidarity with suffering. Liberation in Nahum is not merely political; it is theological — a sign that God remembers the wounds of God's people. The prophet's words become a memorial to the rage and grief of a chronically oppressed community.

Nahum embodies a striking duality: he speaks God's judgment with fierce conviction, and he gives voice to the trauma of the people without dilution or distance. He does not separate divine speech from human pain; instead, he creates a dialogue in which the anguish of oppression becomes the very ground on which God's justice is revealed. In this way, Nahum stands as both comforter and truth-teller — a prophet whose proclamation holds together the severity of judgment and the tenderness of divine remembrance.

## **TYPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

### *SELECTED USES OF NAHUM IN THE IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS*

While not quoting or referencing Nahum directly, the New Testament authors drew on its imagery and theology, linking deliverance with the Christian announcement of the Gospel.

Early church authors read Nahum typologically, seeing in his descriptions of God's power signs fulfilled in Christ. Tertullian, for example, interprets Nahum 1:4 ("He rebukes the sea and makes it dry") as a prophecy foreshadowing Jesus' authority over the storm on the Sea of Galilee. This reflects a broader patristic pattern: violent natural imagery in the prophets becomes testimony to Christ's dominion over creation. Nahum's portrayal of Nineveh as the archetype of a corrupt, oppressive world power also shaped early Christian moral imagination: Nineveh becomes a symbol of "apostate Gentiledom," a figure for the world-system opposed to God — a reading rooted in early Christian interpretations of Gentile idolatry

## **MORAL IMAGINATION**

### *QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCOVER NAHUM'S RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY READER*

- When you consider Nahum's portrayal of God confronting violent empires, what forms of injustice today feel most in need of divine intervention? How does this shape your prayer life?

- Nahum gives voice to the rage and grief of an oppressed people. Where do you see communities today carrying similar wounds, and how might the church listen more faithfully?
- Nahum's name means "comfort," yet his message is fierce judgment. How do you hold together God's comfort and God's confrontation of wrongdoing in your own faith?
- Assyria becomes the archetype of oppressive power. What modern "empires" — political, economic, or cultural — exert destructive influence today?
- Nahum promises that suffering will end and liberation will come. Where do you see signs of hope in places marked by conflict, fear, or exploitation?
- What might Nahum teach our parish about resisting injustice, supporting the vulnerable, and proclaiming God's faithfulness in difficult times?
- Who are the chronically oppressed in your community or society? How do they speak of their memory of rage and pain? How do you respond to the trauma?
- Nahum frames geopolitical upheaval as evidence of God's governance. How do you understand God's presence in the rise and fall of nations today?

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