

NAHUM

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

Nahum emerged during the decline of the Assyrian Empire in the 7th century BCE, one of the most volatile periods in the ancient Levant. His oracles can be dated with some accuracy to after Assyria’s destruction of the Egyptian capital of Thebes in 663 BCE (an event he references) but before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE (an event he anticipates with poetic force). The 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.

Nahum is situated within a moment of profound geopolitical upheaval. Assyria had been the dominant imperial power since the early 8th century and was greatly feared for its military brutality and political terror. However, the Assyrian empire was weakening as Babylon, still ostensibly under Assyrian imperial control, began to rebel. The success of the rebellion signalled a shift in regional power. Because of Assyria’s weakened position, Josiah of Judah was able to initiate reforms that sought to undo the idolatry and political compromises of Manasseh and to restore covenant faithfulness in Jerusalem.

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

The book offers no geographic clues beyond calling the prophet “the Elkoshite.” Interpreters across centuries have proposed several locations for Elkosh, with each proposal carrying its own historical weight and theological implications:

- Galilee—Early Christian tradition, beginning with Jerome, identified Elkosh with a small Galilean village called *Helkesei*. This identification situated Nahum within the northern kingdom, among communities shaped by Assyrian conquest and domination.
- Southern Judah—A Judean location, based on some linguistic parallels and literary evidence, reflects the concerns of 7th-century BCE Judah and places the prophet within the religious and political reforms of Josiah.
- Assyria—Elkosh was a city near Nineveh itself, making Nahum an Israelite or Judahite exile living under Assyrian rule. In support, the entirety of Nahum is an oracle specifically targeted against Nineveh. There is a striking lack of any interest in Jerusalem’s cult, politics, or internal

NARRATIVE UNITS in NAHUM

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| 1:2-8 | Hymn of the Divine Avenger—to the coming of the divine warrior, a common OT 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—including apocalyptic imagination (2:4-10), a funeral lament (3:1-7), and the Song of Triumph (3:8-19). |

reforms (sharply contrasting his contemporaries like Zephaniah and Jeremiah). The book may have functioned, then, as a letter of encouragement sent to Judahite sympathizers in Jerusalem and Judah who opposed Assyrian domination.

Nahum's message was one of assurance that Yahweh remained faithful even when Judah seemed powerless, and that Assyria's collapse was 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 has but a single, uncompromising message: God will judge Nineveh. Nahum's opening hymn (Nah 1:2–8) presents God as both avenger of injustice and refuge for the oppressed. On the one hand, divine wrath is not arbitrary but the necessary and measured response to violence. 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 was a dramatic reversal of fortunes as the predator became the prey, the oppressor became 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 the theological declaration that God confronts and dismantles violent empires. For Nahum, no power built on cruelty can endure and 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 and as 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 enemy, will not prevail.

Moreover, the punishment of Israel will end, and liberation will come. The fall of Nineveh is more than a political collapse; it is a theological declaration that God 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 "consolation," and the book offers consolation to Judah by proclaiming the end of Assyria's domination. Yet this consolation is borne from deep solidarity with suffering. Liberation for Nahum is a theological

construct—a sign that God has remembered the wounds of God’s people. The prophet’s words become a memorial to the rage and grief of a chronically oppressed community.

And so Nahum embodies a striking duality, speaking God’s judgment with fierce conviction all while giving 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 the oppressed became the very ground on which God’s justice was revealed. In this way, Nahum stood 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 have drawn on themes, imagery, and theology present in Nahum, particularly as they link deliverance with the announcement of the Gospel.

Early church authors outside the New Testament read Nahum typologically, seeing in his descriptions of God’s power signs fulfilled in Christ. Tertullian, for example, interpreted 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. Tertullian echoed a broader patristic pattern that saw the violent natural imagery in the prophet as a testimony to Christ’s dominion over creation. Nahum’s portrayal of Nineveh as the archetype of a corrupt, oppressive world power, moreover, shaped early Christian moral imagination as Nineveh became a symbol of “apostate Gentiledom,” a figure for the world-system opposed to God. This reading was rooted in early Christian interpretations of Pagan 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? 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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