

# Bible Study Guide– Book of Nahum

Saturday, August 24, 2012

## Background on Nahum

The name “Nahum“ means “comfort” and is related to the name Nehemiah, meaning “The Lord comforts” or “comfort of the Lord.” (Nineveh’s fall, which is Nahum’s theme, would bring comfort to Judah.)

## Timeline of Nahum

Nahum is an early contemporary of Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah. Nineveh, and the Assyrian Empire, was at its height of power. It can be assumed that the book was written before 612 BC because that is when Nineveh was destroyed and since Nahum is predicting the destruction of Nineveh that would be a safe assumption. It is also assumed that it was written after 663 B.C., because Nahum compares the destruction of Nineveh with the destruction of No-amon or Thebes in Egypt which was destroyed in 663 B.C. Thus Nahum probably wrote between 663 and 612 B.C.

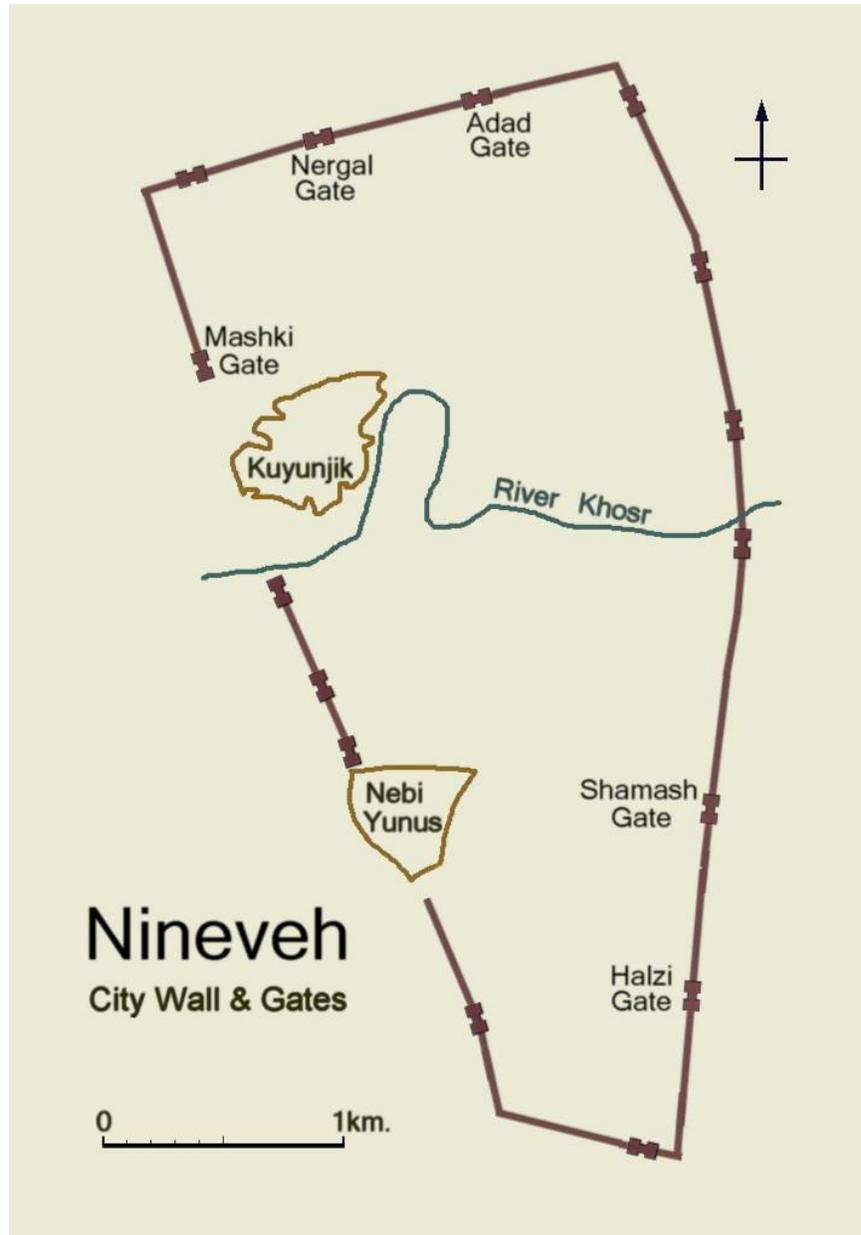
Jonah prophesied to Nineveh about 150 years earlier. It is interesting to compare Jonah's prophesy with Nahum's. Some interesting things to note:

<b>Jonah: The Mercy of God</b>	<b>Nahum: The Judgment of God</b>
800 B.C.	650 B.C.
Emphasis on the prophet - only one prophecy in the whole book	Emphasis on the prophecy - the only thing we know about the prophet is that he was from Elkosh.
Disobedient prophet	Obedient prophet
Obedient Nation	Disobedient Nation - in only 150 years the nation became so bad that it had to be destroyed.
Repentance of Nineveh	Rebellion of Nineveh

## Historical Background

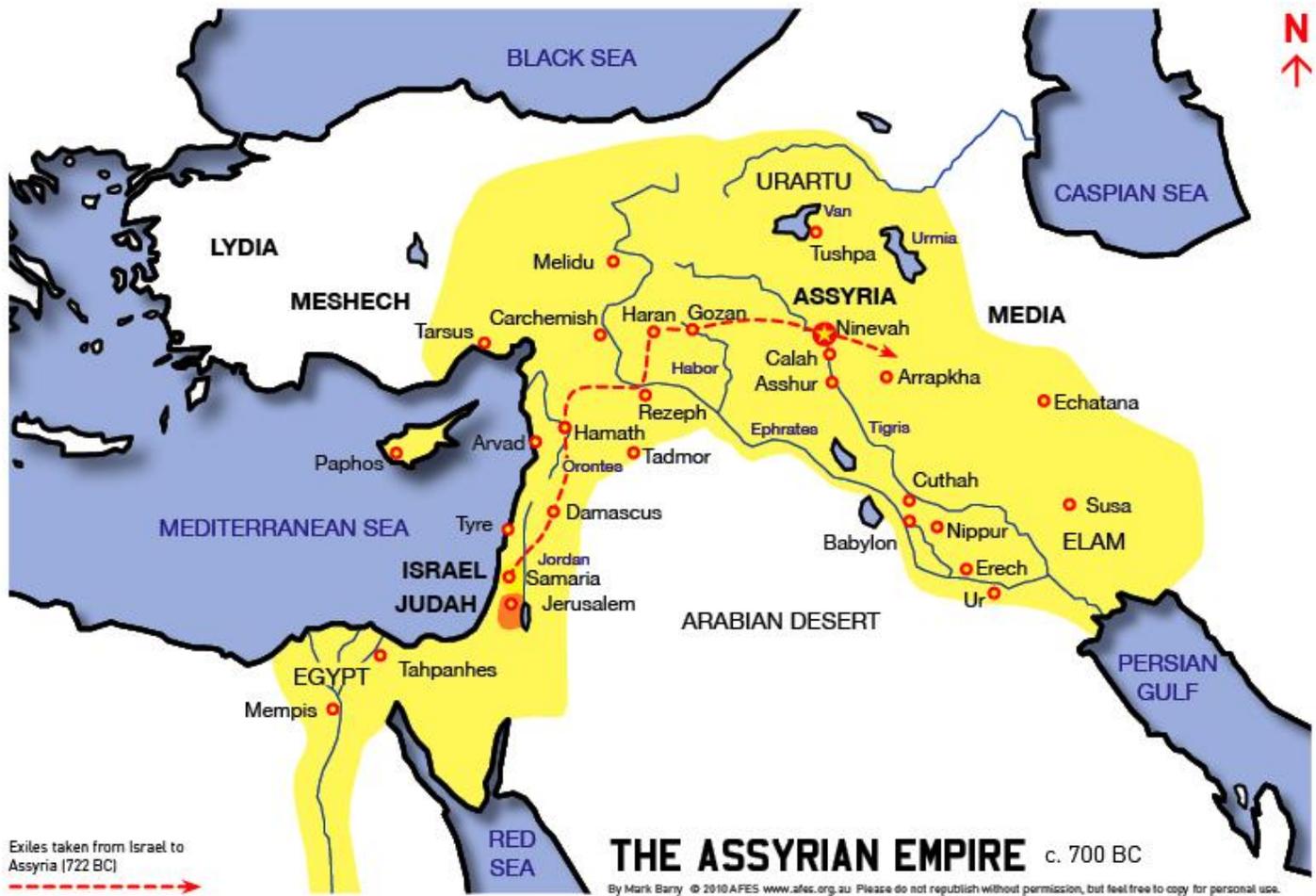
Nineveh was founded by Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-12) and had a long history. It was located on the east bank of the Tigris river. The river acted as the western and southern boundaries of the city. A wall that extended for eight miles formed the northern and eastern boundaries. The city was about three miles wide and eight miles long inside the walls, but there were suburbs that extended 14 miles north and 20 miles south. When Jonah referred to a three day walk across Nineveh (Jonah 3:3) it was no exaggeration.

The city was destroyed by the Babylonians, Medes and Scythians in 612 BC. According to the ancient historian, Diodorus Siculus, the armies laid siege to the city for over two years. In the third year, the Khosr River, which ran through the city flooded, broke down the floodgates and part of the wall which allowed the enemy to come in. This fulfilled part of Nahum's prophecy in 1:8; 2:6 and 3:13



The city was destroyed so completely by the flood and the enemies that when Alexander the Great fought the battle of Arbela nearby in 331 BC, he did not know there had been a city there. Nineveh was never rebuilt, and this confirms Nahum's prediction in 1:9 that “distress will not rise up twice.” It wasn't until 1850 that Nineveh was discovered by archaeologists. It is interesting to read liberal commentaries from before 1850 because they had problems with believing the books of Jonah and Nahum because there was no record of Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria. The destruction of Nineveh and Assyria would be a message of consolation for the nations Assyria had oppressed. Israel and Judah were two of those nations. Israel had been destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrians, but Judah was still around. We need to remember what the Assyrians were like. They burned cities, cut off heads and stuck people on poles.



## Message of Nahum

Assyria was a constant threat and enemy of Judah. Nahum comforts the people of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) by predicting the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The prediction was fulfilled in August, 612 BC when the Babylonians and the Medes utterly destroyed the city, so that until 1845 its existence was questioned. Sir Austen Henry Layard identified the location.

The message of Nahum can be summed up in the good news of 1:15: "Keep your feasts, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked come against you, he is utterly cut off." For Judah, the southern kingdom, to be afraid of Assyria is natural. Consider the threat of the mighty Assyrian empire. They had a centuries-long pressure on the whole Near East. The Assyrians were both powerful and ruthless not to mention successful. In 722 BC they triumphed over the northern kingdom of Israel and they began their infiltration on Judah, much smaller kingdom, with their ideas and their idols.

Judah's *faith* was shaken as they watched the triumphant progress of this kingdom of this world. When they saw the land which the Lord had given to their fathers falling into the hands of a power which ignored and derided His Lordship, they were a people walking in darkness and dwelling in a land of deep darkness. Where was their God? Had He forgotten His people? Had He abdicated? When we are faced with similar feelings of loss this book can help us find God in the midst of these empty feelings.

Nahum was empowered to speak God's answer to this dark agony of His people to pronounce His Word of judgment on the "unceasing evil" (3:19) of Assyria's imperial pride and His Word of promise to His suffering people. It is an expression of faith in the sovereign, unshaken superiority of Judah's God and Savior. "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision." (Psalms 2:4).

The Church and Christians in general can in dark hours, draw courage from this laughter of God. We can learn to hope confidently for the day when He shall set His King upon a holy hill that is higher and more enduring than Mount Zion.

**\*\*\*\*\* Notes To Be Considered In Your Bible Study Of The Book Of Obadiah\*\*\*\*\***

**(Use Them Only As Thoughts; Not A Direct Translation Of God's Word)**

**Chapter 1**

Verse 1 The subject and the author names. 'Oracle' = burden, the doom of Nineveh. 'Vision' a revelation from the Lord.

**1:2-11 HYMN TO THE LORD, THE AVENGER AND PROTECTOR**

1:2-11 The *oracle concerning Nineveh* begins with a hymn which is very general in its adoration of the jealous wrath, the avenging might and the reliable goodness of the Lord. Not until verse 11 does the Assyrian power come into view. The hymn is also markedly traditional in its language and imagery; almost every turn of its powerful poetry can be paralleled from the prophets and poets of Israel. It is as if the prophet were drawing on the hymn book of his people, as men of the church turn to the "*Te Deum*," or "*A Mighty Fortress*" or "*Our God, Our Help In Ages Past*" on great occasions, using the language of their fathers to express the prayer and praise of today's faith.

This general, traditional introduction to the song of triumph over the impending fall of Nineveh serves a purpose. It fixes men's eyes on the God of their fathers, on His wrath, His mercy, His might, and so blocks the all-too-human impulse to consider the triumph of God as their own personal triumph. When this happens, one becomes filled with personal spite and selfish pride. It makes men say "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory" (Psalms 115:1). Thus the prophet helps his people to respond to the summons to keep their feasts and fulfill their vows with a joy tempered by holy fear.

Verse 2-7 A Psalm dealing with the majesty of the Lord.

Verse 2 The Lord is a jealous God Who takes vengeance on His enemies.

Verse 3 The Lord is indeed slow to anger and of great might, but He does not acquit the guilty. Yea, the Lord has His way in the whirlwind and storm, He strides through the universe as the Ruler and Governor of all. This is one of the great passages in Nahum.

Verse 4 - 5 The Lord controls earth, sea, and mountain, and He can destroy all.

Verse 6 No one can stand before Him and endure His anger.

Verse 7 YET the Lord is good. A wonderful statement of the Lord's loving care for all who trust in Him. A great passage in Nahum.

Verse 8-10 Nevertheless, the Lord will destroy with a flood the enemy (Nineveh) completely.

It is useless for Nineveh to plot an escape. The Lord will destroy Nineveh so completely, that Nineveh will not again (twice) threaten Judah.

In disarray and in entanglement, the people of Nineveh will be destroyed.

Verse 11 The reason for the destruction? One (Sennacherib) came against God's people and plotted against and blasphemed the Lord.

Verse 12-13 The Lord speaks to Judah; Though the people of Nineveh be many and strong, they will be cut off. Though they once afflicted Judah, they will no more, because the Lord will break off the yoke of Nineveh.

Verse 14 The Lord's commandment regarding Nineveh. Nineveh's name will be gone, and above all the idols of Nineveh will be destroyed. The mighty will be made vile.

1:15 The first half of the verse is found also in Isaiah 52:7; it contains, and helps define, two terms which became central in the New Testament proclamation:

*"good tidings"* The Gospel, as news of God's action which delivers people from a desperate situation

*"peace"* in the sense of divinely willed and divinely created soundness, wholeness, health, well-being. Nahum's words are therefore one of the countless fingerposts that point to Christ, whose coming means peace on earth (Luke 2:14). Jesus is our peace in person (Ephesians 2:14)

Judah, in keeping her feasts and fulfilling her vows, will be offering praise and thanksgiving to the God who has cut off her oppressor (the wicked) The feasts of Israel commemorate God's saving deeds? (e.g. the Passover) and the fulfilling of a vow is, as the psalter teaches us, the expression of thanksgiving to God.

## **Chapter 2 The Siege and Fall of Nineveh**

### **2:1-13 VISION OF THE FALL OF NINEVEH**

In staccato style the prophet pictures in a series of dramatic flashes, the impending fall of the great city of Nineveh. The city hears the enemy approach and braces itself to meet an attack...

2:1 The enemy is left unnamed. He is identified only by his effect on Nineveh. In the last analysis God Himself is the shatterer. The commands (man the ramparts, etc.) are addressed to the rulers and people of Nineveh.

2:2 This parenthetic word makes clear that *the Lord* is at work here and that the dreadful judgment about to be proclaimed is not an end in itself. God is never merely against something or somebody; His judgment serves His purpose of salvation, the restoration of His oppressed and exploited people, who now resemble a tree with bare and broken branches, stripped of leaf and fruit.

Verse 3-9 A vivid description of the siege and fall. Verse 6 & 8 are very exact, since Nineveh fell because of a great flood that washed out a large section of the city walls. (See also chapter 3: 13b) Nineveh was plundered as it had plundered many. As Nineveh sowed, so Nineveh reaped.  
(Galatians 6: 7)

2:5 It is the king of Assyria, apparently, who summons his officers to supervise a last desperate defense of the city. They rush to the wall, stumbling in their haste, only to find that they cannot drive back the enemy, since the attackers are protected by a *mantelet*, a movable structure which shields them against any missiles hurled upon them from the wall.

2:6 The river gates may be gates that open toward the river, or sluice gates that are opened to drain the moat and so allow the enemy to enter the city. In any case, the opening of the gates seems to be the decisive moment in the taking of the city; panic, flight, and pillage will ensue.

2:7 The queen of Nineveh and her ladies face captivity; they are degraded and carried off. The word translated as "palace" in verse 6b can also mean "temple." Some interpreters therefore take the word "mistress" to mean the statue of Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess of war and of fertility. The *maidens* would then be the sacral prostitutes in her service. This interpretation seems the more probable, since the mistress says nothing and does nothing. This is only natural for a statue. All this time the maidens lament and beat their breast.

2:8 The image of the drained pool pictures the headlong flight of the masses of soldiery, who in their panic are deaf to the commands of their officers.

2:9 The invaders are pictured as urging one another on as they plunder the city.

Verse 10-12 The destruction and desolation is complete. The lion's den, to which the lion brought the prey to the young lions, is no more.

2:10 Devastation and despair are left in the wake of the sacking of the city. Loins were thought of in Old Testament times as the seat of a man's strength and the place visibly affected by affliction (Psalms 66:11) and anguish (Isaiah 21:3)

2:11-12 The prominence of the lordly and ferocious *lion* in Assyrian religion and art may have suggested the picture here used to contrast Nineveh's proud and secure enjoyment of the fruits of her brutal military conquests with the desolation and ruin that awaits her now.

2:13 The judgment of God will effect the fall of Nineveh, not merely a combination of political and military factors; God, not merely the nations that rise to shatter her tyranny; God, the God of justice, is against her. The *messengers* are the Assyrian envoys and officials who represented the political power of Assyria in the empire, as the *chariots* represent her military strength

## **Chapter 3 Nineveh's Destruction the Result of Nineveh's Sin**

### **3:1-7 VISION OF THE JUDGMENT OF GOD UPON NINEVEH**

This second vision covers briefly, much the same ground as the first. But there is an emphasis on the guilt of Nineveh, prepared for by 2:13 and touched on in 2:2 and 2:11-12 but not yet fully spelled out.

Here Nineveh is branded as the city of *blood, lies, and booty* (verse 1) and *the harlot of deadly charms*; the imperial power that combined brute military power with deceitful diplomacy to bring down upon itself the hatred of all who became its victims; there is none to bemoan the fall of Nineveh.

3:2-3 Again, the attack upon Nineveh is pictured---in a series of exclamations. The emphasis on hosts of slain is new.

3:4 The *harlot* is here the picture of malicious seduction and deceit. For an example of Assyrian's deadly charms see the words of the Rabshakeh sent by Sennacherib to demand the surrender of Jerusalem in Isaiah 36:13-20, especially verses 16-17.

3:5-6 Nineveh's punishment is pictured in terms of the public degradation meted out to harlots or adulterous women. (Cf. Ezekiel 16:35-43)

### **3:8 13 ARE YOU BETTER THAN THESE?**

To predict the fall of Nineveh must have seemed to Nahum's contemporaries, perhaps even to Nahum himself as a piece of folly or, at best, wishful thinking. How was this tight-knit imperial organization, with its vast political and military resources, and this city, with its impregnable fortifications, to be overthrown? The answer is given to all men of little faith in these words: God the Shatterer has shattered invincible cities before.

The Egyptian city Thebes was just as strategically located as Nineveh (verse 8), supported by powerful auxiliaries (verse 9), was the capital of a proud empire, had within recent memory (663 BC) fallen before the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and had suffered the cruel fate of a captured city. (verse 10)

3:11-13 Thebes was not situated on the sea, but the broad waters of the Nile river protected her as effectively.

### **3:14-17 YOUR PREPARATIONS FOR YOUR DEFENSE ARE ALL IN VAIN**

In a series of ironic commands Nineveh is told to do her utmost to defend herself, to look to her water supply (this would be a necessity in the event of a siege). She is to strengthen with new masonry her already monumental fortifications. (verse 14) She is to increase the personnel of economic exploitation and political and military administration of conquered territory (verses 15b, 17a)

This will all be in vain; the fire and sword of the enemy will devour everything before him, like a swarm of locusts (verse 15b) and the swarm of officials will disappear as suddenly and mysteriously as a cloud of locusts. (verses 15a, 17b)

Verse 14-15 Prepare for a long siege. But it will be in vain, even if you multiply yourselves as locusts and grasshoppers.

Verse 16 Your once thriving-merchants will be gone.

Verse 17 Your once powerful leaders will likewise be gone.

### **3:18-19 LAMENT FOR THE DEAD CITY**

A short poem is the style of a lament for the dead, stressing the finality of Nineveh's doom, bringing the book of the vision of Nahum to a somber and impressive close.

3:18 *Shepherds* (i.e. leaders) and nobles sleep the sleep of death; leaving a leaderless and impotent people, like a scattered flock, behind them.

3:19 Nineveh's doom is irrevocable; God has struck a fatal blow, Among all the millions of men over whom Assyria once ruled there is none to mourn her fall. All clap their *hands* in wild and vindictive delight at her ruin That is the harvest reaped by men who have sowed *unceasing evil*.

### **Sources**

Concordia Self Study Bible – New International Version *Robert G. Hoerber Editor Concordia Publishing House St. Louis, MO. 1986 pp.1365-1366*

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