

# Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Nahum

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For a book whose namesake means “comfort,” there is not much comfort to be found in Nahum.

This brief prophetic book is comprised of a collection of poems celebrating the devastation of the Assyrian empire. Images of war—chaos, death and destruction—dominate this book and might make it difficult to select a passage for a study or sermon, and to declare, “Thanks be to God.”

## Focus of Nahum

Nahum opens with the designation, “An oracle concerning Nineveh,” the renowned city of the vast and powerful Assyrian empire. The opening describes what follows as a vision of the prophet Nahum (1:1).

The book does not reveal any biographical information about the prophet, apart from his association with the town Elkosh, whose precise location remains unknown to us.

The major concern addressed in the book—the destruction of the Assyrian city Nineveh—occurred in 612 B.C. The Neo-Assyrian empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea, through the land of Israel, and over to the Persian Gulf for much of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. It maintained rule over this large territory through vast military and administrative systems (Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, p. 602).

Throughout the centuries, the people of Israel and Judah were subject to

military campaigns, deportations and economic oppressions of various leaders of the empire. So, it should not be surprising to find writings anticipating or celebrating its downfall.

The radical claim of Israel's prophets, however, is the downfall of Assyria is not due ultimately to the military power or resources of the conquering armies—the Babylonians and the Medes, the next superpowers on the ancient horizon—but is the work of God, who punishes the wicked.

The prophet calls his audience to look at the events of history through the lens of God's power and justice, in this case identifying the Assyrians as the recipients of judgment in their demise.

## Poetic justice

The opening poem of Nahum celebrates the terrifying power of the LORD. Drawing upon a well-known description of God's character from Exodus 34:6-7, Nahum zeroes in on God's wrath while lauding the LORD as "slow to anger but great in power," who "will by no means clear the guilty" (1:3). Assyria's time is up.

The poem describes the LORD's control over the wind and the seas, and the shaking of the earth and all who dwell in it at the LORD's appearance (1:3b-5).

After these statements of awesome power, the prophet follows with a word of warning and condemnation for Nineveh (1:9-14) and a word of hope for Judah. The bad news of destruction for Assyria is good news for Judah (1:15).

# Scenes of destruction

Following the celebration of the LORD's power and establishing the fate of Assyria, the remaining two chapters turn to a description of the empire's violent end, particularly the devastation of Nineveh.

The prophet taunts this great city with images of chaotic battle scenes. After describing battle in the streets of Nineveh leading right to the doorstep of the palace, the prophet cleverly turns Assyrian royalty's "national symbol," the lion, into a taunt (2:10-12) as the prophets asks, "What has become of the lions' den" (2:11).

He then returns to a gruesome description of the devastation of the city: "Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies" (3:3). The city is personified as a disgraced and humiliated woman with no one to comfort her (3:4-7).

The final words of Nahum address the king of Assyria directly, taunting the king with the claim that everyone who hears of his death will rejoice, "for who has ever escaped your endless cruelty" (3:19).

## Present application

What do we do with this text in our own day? Do we gleefully await the judgment of the LORD on our enemies? Do we attribute the "punishment of the wicked" to everyone who experiences the gruesome reality of war? Our own canon of Scripture tells us these are not adequate responses.

Nahum is the seventh book in a series of smaller prophetic books often called the Minor Prophets in Christian tradition. In Jewish tradition, they are known as the Book of the Twelve—smaller prophetic books collected over time, and eventually transmitted and read together on a single scroll.

When read in isolation, Nahum is a book that celebrates the demise of a mighty empire, “those enemies” getting their just deserts. If we flip back two books to Jonah, we see a prophet reprimanded by God when he became angry at God’s salvation of this same city, Nineveh.

Together with Jonah, we also should read Habakkuk, which calls out the people of God for their own atrocities and proclaims the Babylonians as instruments of judgment against God’s own people.

Over and again, the Book of the Twelve presents the LORD is just and compassionate, a God of both judgment and restoration of the whole earth, and calls the people of God to remain faithful (Nogalski, *Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, pp. 503-504).

## **Present suffering**

We do not have to look far to find someone whose reality is close to the descriptions of violent chaos in Nahum.

Rather than recoil at the violence of the text, or find a paper-thin connection to our own individual experience, we might ask the LORD to open our eyes to suffering and injustice, and offer this cry for vengeance on someone’s behalf—such as a Ukrainian Christian enduring constant terror; a woman suffering silently at the hands of an abuser; or people on the receiving end of terrors described in Nahum, who desperately need the LORD to be on their side.

May we, by praying to the God of justice on their behalf, be on their side as well.

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*For further study:*

*Davis, Ellen. Opening Israel's Scriptures. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.*

*Nogalski, James D. The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi. Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, Ga.: Smith and Helwys Publishing, 2011.*

*Peterson, David L. The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.*

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