

NAHUM - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. What would be missing from your picture of God if Nahum were left out of the Bible? Does it seem to you that these few books are especially full of violence? Could it be that the Jews who put them in the canon cherished these books as promises that God would wipe out their enemies?

We know almost nothing of Nahum (whose name means "comforted") except that he is described as coming from the city of Elkosh. Unfortunately, we do not know where Elkosh was, either. There are two places that have been suggested as possible sites for Elkosh. One is located north of Nineveh about 50 miles and if this is the site, it would suggest that Nahum's family were from the northern 10 tribes and at this point in time they were in Assyria as captives. Some have suggested that Nahum came from somewhere around the Sea of Galilee because the Aramaic name, Capernaum, where Jesus carried out much of his ministry means "village of Nahum". The only other Nahum mentioned in the Bible is among the ancestors of Jesus. (Luke 3:25) The name does appear on an ancient Hebrew seal on a jar handle, and in some manuscripts from Phoenicia.

Nahum probably prophesied about 640 BC because in Nahum 3:5-7 it clearly discusses the future downfall of Nineveh while in Nahum 3:8-10 it speaks of the downfall of Thebes as past. Thebes fell in 663 BC and Nineveh was conquered by the Medes and the Babylonians in 612 BC. Nineveh was in its heyday during the reign of Ashurbanipal who reigned from 669-627 BC. During those years Assyria either ruled or received tribute from most of the nations in the fertile crescent from Egypt to Babylon and further south.

Nineveh had repented 150 years earlier (790 BC?) following the preaching of Jonah, but had later swept down on the northern kingdom of Israel and destroyed it. (722/723 BC; See 2 Kings 17) Sennacherib scattered the people of Samaria (the capital) and the northern ten tribes of Israel who disappeared from history. Nahum's family may have been among those taken back to Assyria (See above). A short time later however, as the Assyrians under Sennacherib were besieging Jerusalem during the days of Hezekiah, 185,000 of their troops were struck dead by the angel of the Lord (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36; 2 Chronicles 32:21, 701 BC). Sennacherib returned to Nineveh in shame and was killed by his own sons in 681 BC.

Assyria was known for its cruelty in dealing with its enemies or those who tried to rebel from among its captives. They sometimes would beat such a person until he was black and blue and then skin him alive! (See Micah 3:3 where the rulers of Israel were even doing it!) It is clear even from the speech of Sennacherib (Isaiah 36:5-20) that they were a very proud people who thought their "god" Ashur was the special "god" of the king. Ashur was pictured as a sun with wings and a tail and sometimes as a tree representing fertility. As the principle "god" of the Assyrians, however, he was regarded as a special "god" of war. War became a part of their national religion and participation in warfare was regarded as an act of worship of Ashur. Fortunately, when Assyria was conquered the worship of Ashur disappeared but the idea that one might die in battle as an act of religious devotion is still prevalent in that part of

the world. They also worshiped many of the Babylonian “gods” including Shamash, the “sun-god”, Sin the “moon-god”, Ea the “god of rivers” and Ishtar the “great goddess of fertility”.

It is interesting that two books of the Bible are written exclusively to the Assyrians—Jonah and Nahum. Considering all that we know about the Assyrians, it seems that very strong language was all they could understand! It is quite possible that the Jews were very happy for the strong language against their enemies!

“AUTHOR: The name ‘Nahum’ means ‘comfort,’ ‘consolation,’ or ‘relief.’ The prophet came from Elkosh (1:1). Though the location of Elkosh is unknown, suggestions include Capernaum (lit., ‘village of Nahum’), a site in Assyria, or a site near Lachish. Nothing more is known of him.
“DATE: 663–612 B.C.

“In Nahum 3:8-10 the destruction of No Amon, i.e., the Egyptian city of Thebes, is treated as a past event. Nahum, therefore, must have been written after Assyria captured Thebes in 663 B.C. Furthermore, Nahum prophesies the fall of Nineveh, which took place in 612 B.C. It is not possible to be certain about a precise date within the period 663–612 B.C., though 1:15 could indicate that Josiah’s reformation of 621 B.C. (2 Kings 22-23) was fresh in the minds of the people.

“THEME: The Doom of Nineveh

“Nahum single-mindedly proclaims the doom of the Assyrian capital Nineveh. Among the reasons for the condemnation of the city are the inhumanities of the Assyrian army (Nahum 2:12) and the vices of the city (Nahum 3:4). The nature of God, specifically His wrath, His holiness, His justice, and His power, makes it inevitable that His enemies will perish (Nahum 1:2-10); this lesson is of permanent significance.” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

“Nahum was a native of the city of Elkosh, the location of which is not known for certain. It may be identified with Capernaum (Kaphar Nahum, lit., ‘Village of Nahum’), which was renamed in honor of its most famous citizen. Probably, then, Nahum was born in Galilee, but during Israel’s defection moved to Judah and in Jerusalem took up his ministry in behalf of Judah against Nineveh.

“The purpose of Nahum’s prophecy is twofold: (1) to deliver a message of judgment and destruction against Nineveh; and (2) to give comfort to Judah, so recently ravaged by Assyria. Since Assyria is doomed, it will constitute a threat no longer...

“The prophecy of Nahum is dominated by a single idea, the doom of Nineveh. In describing this doom, Nahum writes lyric poetry of the highest quality. It has been called the most poetical of all the prophetic writings, and certainly is the most severe in tone of any of the Minor Prophets.” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

“This often neglected and disparaged book provides us with an important key for understanding past, present, and future history. Events do not occur as mere happenstance, but every particular of history is determined by the will, purpose, and power of God. In the opening hymn (Nahum 1:2–8) and especially in Nahum 1:2,3 (the ‘text’ of Nahum’s sermon), we learn that the Lord’s government of history is in accordance with His character as the covenant God. He demands undivided submission everywhere and from everyone. Rejection of Him and of His law leads not only to the necessary consequences of chaos in society and in nature, but inevitably evokes His personal displeasure, resulting in just retribution.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

“**Theology:** How does the mood of the Book of Nahum accord with the sentiment of the Sermon on the Mount? Although the Lord Jesus certainly spoke of loving one’s enemies (see

Matt. 5:43-48), He strongly warned of the inevitability of judgment (see Matt. 5:21,29,30; 7:13,23). He said that 'all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (see Matt. 26:52). If ever the words of Jesus concerning the sure destruction of those who live by violence had a direct application, it was to Nineveh. In the conquest of the ancient world, the Assyrians were merciless and cruel. Their atrocities included everything from burning children to death to chopping off hands. **In many ways, the Book of Nahum is a theology of the maxim of the sword.** Nineveh had an international reputation for bloodthirsty acts of repression, destruction, and wantonness. God could not be good if He failed to call such an evil nation to account. **The theology of the Book of Nahum is a theology of the goodness of God in bringing about the final destruction of those who oppose His will and abuse His people.**

"Nineveh was not only a city in the ancient world that received the promised judgment of God, **it is also a prototype for the coming judgment of God** on all workers of wickedness. Those who know that the Lord is good may rejoice in the fact that He avenges aggressive acts against His people (Nahum 1:7, 8).

"The seriousness of coming judgment is never a call for complacency among God's people. Implicit in any announcement of doom is a call for holy living on the part of God's people and an urgent call for them to bring the message of salvation to those who, apart from salvation, will experience the wrath of God. Judgment is God's 'unusual act' (see Isaiah 28:21), but it ultimately arises out of the goodness and justice of God." (*Nelson Study Bible*)

2. Does God sometimes punish His children by just allowing them to reap the consequences of their own behavior, while at other times He has to actually bring on the punishment?

Considering all that has been said in the Scripture about God's wrath and what He does when He gets "furious" it is most likely that God in most cases just allows people to reap the natural consequences of their own behavior. When they are worshiping all sorts of idols and false "gods" the true God has to step back and let them suffer the consequences. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in the past. (See **Deuteronomy Teacher's Guide #8** and Deuteronomy 8:15; **Judges Teacher's Guide #9** and Deuteronomy 31:16-18; Joshua 7:1-12; 23:16; Judges 2:12-14, 19-23; Judges 3:7-9; Judges 10:6-12) There are times when God has acted to preserve some connection with mankind such as at the flood when almost nobody seemed to be listening to Him any more. He has repeatedly used crisis interventions to get our attention so He can have a chance to say something important about Himself or about our relationship with Him.

3. When children go astray from their Christian roots, is it their fault, or their parents' fault, or both? (John 9:1-3) Would it be fair to say of a human parent who had come to his wits end in trying to deal with his child, when he allows that child to reap the consequences that he is showing his wrath? Would wrath be the best word to use? How do you describe God's so-called "emotional reaction" to sin? (Nahum 1:1-6,8-10) Should we call that "divine displeasure?" Is it "wrath?" Why would the Bible call it "wrath?" Can you think of a better word? How do you think God should react to sin? How should He portray Himself as reacting to sin? Is it possible that God sometimes uses this type of language to startle us or to wake us up to realize the seriousness of what is going on? Does God always do as He did in Nahum and almost immediately describe His love and His fairness? (Nahum 1:7)

Look at # 2 above. God's wrath or anger can be summarized as follows:

God's wrath is nothing more than His letting go and handing over, in

loving disappointment, those who are “bent on leaving” Him anyway, thus allowing them to reap or experience the tragic and awful consequences of their own destructive and rebellious behavior.

There are many illustrations of this in Scripture: Hosea 11:7,8; and Romans 1:18,24,26,28 just to mention two of the most descriptive. God as our Divine Parent is never responsible for our going wrong. He was not responsible for the evil that developed in Lucifer’s mind. God did however create all of us with freedom and the possibility of sin.

The use of the word “wrath” or “anger” in the Bible is another example of God speaking in our language so we can understand. God does not exhibit anger or wrath in the common human form, but He wanted us to take it seriously when He spoke certain words or discussed certain consequences and so He described them as His “wrath” or “anger”. If He did not speak in strong language we would be inclined to disregard what He says. This is especially the case when He speaks in the third angel’s message (Revelation 14:9-11) where God is giving His final warning to the human race.

4. Is it not likely that if Nahum had spoken in kind, gentle words to the people of Nineveh who were so cruel, that they would have despised the Hebrew prophet and the Hebrew God? Considering the story of Jonah, which took place about 150 years earlier, is it possible that the Ninevites now thought, “We don’t have to take this God too seriously. After all, He didn’t do anything the last time He threatened us?” Don’t we have other references about people taking advantage of God’s kindness? (See Romans 2:4) Did the Ninevites recognize that Yahweh, the God of Israel and Judah, was the One who destroyed their army?

People who were as cruel as the Assyrians needed to be spoken to in very strong language before they would pay much attention. Jonah also spoke in very strong language. And the Ninevites listened to Jonah. This is evidence enough that God’s use of strong language is sometimes effective. The fact that God was gracious and did not destroy them when they repented may have been given by some of them as an excuse for not changing, but this shows an incredible misunderstanding of God and His character.

5. Is it possible that God cared enough about the Assyrians that He hoped that His captive children might bear a witness to them? Is God just working on, century after century, to win a few people from each generation—a few Canaanites, a few Jews, a few Egyptians, a few Assyrians, a few Babylonians, a few Romans, a few Europeans, a few Americans—and after He’s won enough, then He’ll say the work is done?

We have already seen that two entire books of the Bible, Jonah and Nahum, and their complete recorded messages were for the benefit of the Assyrians. There are many other passages and even some other books in the Bible primarily written for the benefit of other peoples: Obadiah; Daniel; parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. It is true that the Scriptures were given primarily to the Jews, but they were to spread that message to the world. They, of course, failed to do as they were instructed, but God did His best to get the word out to the whole world.

6. **How can God inspire serious reverence and respect without causing fear?** If people come to understand how loving and kind God really is and how He feels about them, how is He supposed to maintain reverence? [Compare *Jonah - a Teacher’s Guide* #8]

Throughout the Old Testament God is continually going back and forth between speaking very harshly and getting a fear response, and then acting more loving and kind and losing the respect of the people. (See Romans 2:4) To maintain reverence without fear is one of God’s

most challenging tasks. How would you do that? Think of times when God inspired “fear” and temporarily got peoples’ attention like Sinai (Exodus 20:18-20); the she-bears (2 Kings 2:24); Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-11); Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Numbers 16:1-35); Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1-8); etc. This is certainly not God’s ideal way of handling things! God wants us to do what is right because it is right. He wants to treat us as friends.

7. How often do we feel that everything that happens is a result of something that we are doing? If suddenly we realized that a great revival was taking place in the world, would we stop to ask if maybe God had finally had to give up on us and do something for His own name’s sake or would we immediately assume that the revival was a result of our own efforts?

God’s plans will succeed whether or not we are involved. God is not dependent on us to accomplish what He needs to do. God must be shown to be right even if every single human proves a failure. (See Romans 3:3,4) So the question we need to be asking is: Are we promoting or hindering the progress of the gospel? Are we on God’s side or not? God has been waiting for us for almost 2000 years now. He did His part in the life and death of Jesus. All the questions raised in the minds of the beings of the universe were answered by the life and death of Jesus. God is waiting for us, we are not waiting for Him to do something.

8. Is it true that the closer God’s children come to the point where He can no longer help them, the louder He raises His voice, the more seriously He speaks? (See Revelation 14:6-12) Can you imagine Jesus speaking in the words of books like Jonah and Nahum? Or was it the Father? Or the Holy Spirit?

I think this is clearly demonstrated in the whole pattern of Scripture. Just before the northern Kingdom of Israel went into exile there were multiple warnings. Then before the southern Kingdom of Judah went into captivity, there were more warnings. What would you expect a loving parent to do as He sees His children approaching a disaster? As a child unknowingly wanders closer to the edge of some perilous danger what does the parent watching from a distance do? Does he quietly suggest that it would be better to step back? Would he dare to shout at the top of his lungs? God at times is doing just that as He watches His children destroying themselves.

9. If the children of Israel had done what God wanted them to do in the first place, would there ever have been the need of messages and messengers like Jonah and Nahum? What did the angels learn from Jonah and Nahum?

It should be clear that the descendants of Abraham were chosen to give a message to the world. Because they failed in doing so, God had to choose these much inferior methods to try to reach certain groups in certain situations where He knew that they might be responsive to His pleadings. Surely the angels were aware of the extraordinary lengths to which God was willing to go to get His message out to at least a few other people besides those who had failed to appreciate it and spread it.

10. What is Nahum 2:4 referring to?

Some have suggested that this verse might refer to a modern day freeway with lights on the automobiles and trucks etc. Some have even suggested that it might have been a vision of tanks with flamethrowers! It is much more likely that Nahum saw something similar to what he was familiar with in his day. He probably saw chariots with lanterns for some kind of nighttime vision as used by the attackers of Nineveh.

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Ellen White's Comments

“Divine love has been stirred to its unfathomable depths for the sake of men, and angels marvel to behold in the recipients of so great love a mere surface gratitude. Angels marvel at man’s shallow appreciation of the love of God. **Heaven stands indignant at the neglect shown to the souls of men.** Would we know how Christ regards it? How would a father and mother feel, did they know that their child, lost in the cold and the snow, had been passed by, and left to perish, by those who might have saved it? Would they not be terribly grieved, wildly indignant? Would they not denounce those murderers with wrath hot as their tears, intense as their love? The sufferings of every man are the sufferings of God’s child, and those who reach out no helping hand to their perishing fellow beings provoke His righteous anger. This is the wrath of the Lamb. To those who claim fellowship with Christ, yet have been indifferent to the needs of their fellow men, He will declare in the great Judgment day, “I know you not whence ye are; depart from Me, all ye workers of iniquity.” Luke 13:27. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 825 (1898); *Christian Service* 92; *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1898.

Other references:

***Jonah Teacher’s Guide* #13; *Psalms Teacher’s Guide* #6,8.**