

# A brief introduction to the book of Nahum

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**Abstract:** The present research aims to provide a brief reading on the text of Nahum 1:1-3, investigating the history of interpretation of the book of Nahum, the historical setting and providing a brief exegetical analysis of the first three verses. For this research, primary sources were investigated to provide a text analysis, and secondary sources were accessed to reconstruct the historical setting and the history of the interpretation of the book. First, the history of interpretation of the book will be addressed, starting from the time of the prophet, the new testament times, passing through the Church Fathers, the Reform Era and finally will be described what interpretations the modern interpreters hold. Second, the historical setting of the book of Nahum will be addressed, followed by the audience that the author intended to reach and the literary structure of the book, including key words for the interpretation of the passage. Finally, an application of the passage for the present days and the modern believers is done, followed by the conclusion of the present research.

**Key words:** Nahum; Nineveh; Oracle; Exegesis; Wrath.

## Uma curta introdução ao livro de Naum

**Resumo:** O presente artigo tem como objetivo fornecer uma breve leitura do texto de Naum 1:1-3, investigando a história da interpretação do livro de Naum, o cenário histórico e fornecendo uma breve análise exegética dos três primeiros versos. Para essa pesquisa foram utilizadas fontes primárias para análise do texto e fontes secundárias para a reconstrução do cenário histórico tanto do período do livro como do estudo da história da interpretação. Primeiro, a história da interpretação do livro é introduzida, iniciando-se pelo período do profeta até as correntes de interpretação modernas. Em segundo lugar, o cenário histórico de Naum é abordado, seguido pela audiência do livro a qual o autor pretendia alcançar, além da estrutura literária do livro, incluindo palavras-chave para a interpretação da passagem. Finalmente, uma aplicação da passagem para os dias atuais é realizada, seguida da conclusão da presente pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Naum; Nínive; Oráculo; Exegese; Ira.

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The book of Nahum has been regarded among scholars from the Church Fathers period to present as well as Christians in general throughout the ages as a book that shows an angry God, full of wrath and willing to destroy his enemies. This vision apparently goes into the opposite direction of the book of Jonah, regarded as the book that precedes Nahum due to its message of repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital of the world at that time. Throughout the centuries, the book of Nahum had different interpretations. The study of the history of these interpretations is essential to understand not only how the book was perceived and assimilated in the past, but to see the effects of comparison and analysis to current days.

Many interpretations of the book of Nahum have remained, particularly the interpretation of the book as allegorical. This interpretation was common during the Church Fathers period and still holds a place among modern scholars. The historical interpretation proposed by Martin Luther and followed by many conservative scholars seems to be the most adequate alternative, along with the internal evidence of the book. Therefore, it is imperative that an exegetical analysis of the first three verses of the book must be done in order to understand the purpose of the author and the literary structure. In addition, the understanding of the historical setting of the book is essential for a correct interpretation of the text, especially in the case of Nahum, who is not a frequently mentioned prophet in the scriptures by other authors, and therefore, calls for external evidence as well. The expansion of the territory by the Assyrians in the days of Jonah and Nahum was followed by an expansion of cruelty against the nations that were dominated over, and certainly, the audience that Nahum intended to reach shared the same feelings of the prophet. However, due to their current political and social situation, it seemed that YHWH had abandoned them. The first three verses of Nahum come as a comfort for the nation, as YHWH it is demonstrated as full of wrath against the enemies of the people of Judah.

## History of Interpretation

The history of interpretation of the book of Nahum begins with the book itself, and from the Old Testament period to present time the book has been interpreted differently. In this section of the paper, different views throughout the centuries of the interpretation of the book of Nahum are addressed. Concerning the content of the book, Christensen (1996, p. 187) states that “the book of Nahum is best read as a complement to the book of Jonah”. Both books have Nineveh as their focus: on one hand, Jonah presents the salvation and compassion of God, and, on the other, Nahum focuses on God’s wrath. The editors of the Septuagint who placed the book of Nahum after Jonah also attest this interpretation (COGINS AND HAN, 2011, p. 7), whereas in the masoretic text this pattern is not necessarily followed. Christensen (1996, p. 188) suggests that “The history of interpretation so far as the book of Nahum is concerned begins with the book itself, which is a reinterpretation of a central text from the Torah in a moment of need so far as Israel’s national security was concerned”.

The book of Nahum played an important role in the Qumran community where fragments of ancient scrolls contained interpretation of passages from Nahum were found. These scrolls were regarded as relevant and applied to the context in which this community lived (COGGINS, 1985, p. 14). An allusion to the book of Nahum appears only one time in the New Testament in Romans 10:15, and the book is quoted only few times by the Church Fathers. Concerning the

book in the Christian tradition, the Church Fathers applied many aspects of the book to their context and experiences, since Nineveh had become clearly a symbol of evil (YEE AND PAGE JR, 1985, p. 14). Therefore, the two traditions of interpretations appeared in many patristic commentaries within Christian circles: the allegorical and the literal. Nevertheless, Jerome, for instance, recognizes both allegorical and literal aspects in his writings. Kelly (1975) states that:

His procedure is to take a verse or two and explain the literal sense, or what he calls 'the history,' basing himself for this on his new translation and on information supplied by Jewish mentors. Then he passes to the allegorical to 'spiritual' interpretation, using now the Septuagint-based old Latin and relating the prophet's words to Christ, the Church, or the destiny in store for believers or sinners, or drawing from them moral or ascetic lessons (KELLY, 1975, p. 165).

Although Jerome had two interpretations, one being in a sense Christological, most of the church's fathers as, for instance, Theodore of Mopsuestia, read the book of Nahum in the light of the book of Jonah. In his commentary on the book of Nahum, he states that they repented because "they were seized with such a dread at a simple treat made by an unknown man" (HILL, 2007, p. 245). Theodore, however, states that repentance from the inhabitants of Nineveh did not last for a long time and "when God allowed them to show their true colors, they adopted such a depraved attitude and such ferocious and vicious behavior as to attack all the people of the ten tribes and take them captives" (2007, p. 245).

Moving forward to the Reform era in the Christianity, Martin Luther assumed a historical approach concerning the book of Nahum, being taken as contemporary of Isaiah and speaking in light of what was happening in the kingdom of Judah at that time and the coming destruction of Nineveh. Summarizing the message of Nahum, Luther states: "The book teach us to trust God and to believe, especially when we despair of all human help, human powers, and counsel, that the Lord stands by those who are His, shields His own against all attacks of the enemy, be they ever so powerful" (CHRISTENSEN, 1996, p. 189). Both Luther and Calvin also agreed that the judgment was merely postponed once the punishment was ceased and, therefore, the repentance (COGGINS and HANS, 2001, p. 7).

Modern scholars hold different interpretations among themselves, agreeing in part with some reformists, Church Fathers, the critical school and other schools of interpretation. Some interpreters hold the idea of the book of Nahum as a testimony of God's fair rule in history, while some scholars have placed the prophet in the nationalistic prophet category, among the "false prophets" condemned by Jeremiah. An example of this line of thought is Smith, who credits the prophet Nahum as "a representative of the old, narrow and shallow prophetism finds its place in the Canon of Scripture" (BRIGGS, 1911, p. 281). The idea that Nahum prophecies only against Nineveh and do not point out the sins of the people of Judah at the same time seems to be unacceptable to Smith. He traces a parallel between Jeremiah and Nahum who were contemporaries, and according to his interpretation they belonged to different religious and political parties, and "if Nahum was not in active opposition to Jeremiah, he was at least indifferent to his efforts" (BRIGGS, 1911, p. 282). Other interpreters believe that the book of Nahum can perfectly fit in an earlier date than 612 BCE, which is often assumed by conservative scholars. According to Christensen, the revolt of Manasseh and the situation that existed in Judah around 652 to 648 BCE

would fit the occasion well. The revolt would have taken part because it was assumed that the days of Assyria were numbered (1996, p. 191-92). Following this analogy, Christensen states that:

The book would then have taken on deeper meaning as part of the theological basis for the subsequent resurgence of Judean independence under King Josiah, especially after the death of Ashurbanipal in ca. 630 BCE. The final destruction of Nineveh in 612 would have been the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy and would thus explain its inclusion in the canon (CHRISTENSEN, 1996, p. 192).

In addition, Christensen asserts that according to the original acrostic hymn in Nahum 1, the prophet presents two sides of God's character: God is slow to anger, an allusion from the book of Jonah, but God will unleash his wrath for those who defy him. In his vision the book of Nahum must be interpreted "within its present literary context as part of the structural center of the Book of the Twelve" (1996, p. 194).

## Historical Setting

The historical setting of the book of Nahum is related to the Assyrian empire and its last days of dominion over the Judean kingdom. The allusion of the fall of Thebes, or No-Ammon, capital of Upper Egypt, a catastrophe dated of 664/663 BCE places the book after these events, since the destruction of Thebes is mentioned as in the past, Nineveh however, as imminent but still to happen (BRUCE, 1986, p. 938). Therefore, it provides a strong support to date the book between 663 and 612 BCE, the latter, the year of the fall of Nineveh. Nineveh earned the status of capital of the Assyrian Empire after Sennacherib transferred the royal city from Dur Sharrukin to Nineveh in 705 BCE. During Sennacherib's reign, the Assyrians devastated the whole kingdom of Judah except Jerusalem. Hezekiah's father Ahaz was a loyal Assyrian vassal, and according to Na'aman (2005):

Kept the Judean territory intact in a period in which the larger kingdoms of Hamath, Damascus and Israel were annexed, and Judah's western neighbors (Gaza, Ashkelon and Ashdod) were conquered and plundered. Hezekiah reigned from 715/14 – 686 BCE, and apparently continued with his father's policy in the first decade of his reign, although details of these years are missing (NA'AMAN, 2005, p. 112).

Nevertheless, "a shift in Hezekiah's policy took place after the death of Sargon II in 705 BCE. Hezekiah rebelled and organized an anti-Assyrian coalition and secured Egyptian support for the league" (NA'AMAN, 2005, p. 112). At that time, in Babylon, Marduk-apla-iddina II, also known as Merodach-baladan, seized the throne for nine months (703-702 BCE) and sent envoys throughout the Assyrian empire, including the kingdom of Judah. Since the situation in Mesopotamia was becoming very delicate for Sennacherib, Hezekiah took advantage of all of that to withdraw his allegiance to the Assyrians, relying on his new league. According to Bright (2000, p. 285): "as revolt spread up and down Palestine and Syria a sizable coalition was formed. The king of Tyre was a ringleader, with other Phoenician cities also involved. In Philistia, though Ashdod and Gaza were cool, Ashkelon and Ekron were deeply committed". Hezekiah invaded some of the Philistine's cities that were not willing to raise up against Assyria and had success, his success is also verified in the "Azekah inscription (also known as 'Letters to the God Assur') which refers

to ‘[the city X] a royal city of the Philistines which Hezekiah had taken and fortified for himself’ (EVANS, 2009, p. 175).

Hezekiah was putting special pressure on those towns that had refused to participate in the revolt, e.g. Gaza [2 Kings 18:8]. Having secured an alliance with Egypt, Hezekiah became a ringleader in the revolt, and although Moab, Edom and Ammon may also have sympathized with the rebellion, they did not offer any resistance when Sennacherib’s army came to Palestine. Aware of the fact that Sennacherib would not look with good eyes to the rebellion, Hezekiah reinforced the cities’ walls throughout the kingdom, including Jerusalem, stopped the water from the springs which were outside of the city, and also reinforced his military arsenal (2 Chr. 32:4-5). After dealing with the Babylonian revolt led by Merodach-baladan, Sennacherib turned his attention to the West. Moving southward along the coast, Sennacherib found resistance in Tyre and replaced its king with a king of his own choice. Nevertheless, the kingdoms of Ashkelon, Ekron, and Judah remained stand. Sennacherib advanced and defeated a combined army of Egyptians and Ethiopians at Eltekeh in the coastal plain, which had come to assist the rebels. Sennacherib continued to advance, defeating Philistine cities and turning his attention to Judah (BRIGHT, 2000, p. 285-86).

Now as Sennacherib moved against the kingdom of Judah that was left standing alone, he besieged Lachish, which guarded the entrances to Jerusalem. The biblical account of 2 Kings 18:13-14 mentions only Lachish among all the fortified cities of Judah, but the annals of Sennacherib found in The Oriental Institute Prism, also known as “Sennacherib’s Prism,” boasts more details:

As for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not submit my yoke, 46 of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small cities in the neighborhood, which were without number, by levelling with battering rams and by bringing up siege engines, by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels and breaches, I besieged and took (those cities). 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep, without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. Himself, like a bird in a cage I shut up in Jerusalem his royal city (LUCKENBILL, 1924, p. 32-33).

Although many years have passed after the campaign of Sennacherib in Palestine, the consequences of Hezekiah’s rebellion were still present and took many years until the reign of Josiah for Judah recover part of the Judean territory. In addition, “vast districts were grievously damaged; their resettlement was a slow and gradual process” (NA’AMAN, 2005, p. 330). The reign of Ashurbanipal comprised the last days of Assyrian greatness, and the Assyrian empire fell apart soon after his death in 633 BCE. The expansion of Judah was connected to the disintegration of Assyrian authority, combined with revolts from vassal states. The death of Ashurbanipal and the beginning of the decline of Assyria placed Josiah in a good position to start his religious reforms and expansion of the kingdom through former borders of Assyrian provinces in the former territory of Israel (AHARONI, 1979, p. 401).

While reforms were happening throughout the Judean kingdom, Assyria continued to disintegrate and a war between former provinces was about to start. Although weak, Assyria gained support from Egypt that used to be subjugated by Assyria – but realized that a weakened Assyria would be a lesser evil compared to the emerging power of Babylon. In addition, Egypt expected to expand its territory once again throughout the Palestine and Syria. The Babylonians on the other hand, gained support from the Medes, who were becoming powerful in northwestern Iran (HOERTH, 1998, p. 361).



A cuneiform tablet discovered in 1923 tells about the circumstances in which the city of Nineveh was captured and destroyed, as it is known today. It is a Babylonian chronicle about events of the tenth to seventeenth years of the reign of the king of Babylon that gives the date 612 BCE and accounts of what happened in the city of Nineveh (PARROT, 1955, 76-77). The Egyptians went to action and supported the Assyrians. Although this intervention was not decisive, they were able to prevent the coming treat for a while. These operations started around 616 BCE and continue until the complete fall of the Assyrians. In 614 BCE the Medes, commanded by Cyaxares, took Ashur which was the ancient capital. Following that, Nabopolassar made an alliance with the Medes, and in 613 BCE they launched attack in the Middle Euphrates, but the Assyrians were able to resist. Finally, in 612 BCE, the Scythians joined the Babylonians and Medes, and the coalition launched a large attack against Nineveh and after three months, the city was totally destroyed (WALTON, 2009, p. 150).

## Audience

The audience of Nahum consists of the people of Judah, and although the prophet addresses the Assyrians, his words are not directed to them. According to Sweeney (2000, p. 421): “The ability to point to the downfall of the city, whether real or anticipated, is a key element in the prophet’s rhetorical strategy to convince his audience that YHWH is indeed the powerful and just ruler of all creation who punishes Nineveh for its abuse of other nations”. Nahum tries to convince his audience to abandon their doubts about the supposed powerless of YHWH facing the evil city of Nineveh and that He is indeed the cause of the fall of the city (SWEENEY, 2000, p. 421). Doubts concerning the power of YHWH because the long term of yoke under the Assyrian empire were among Judeans, and apparently no response or act from God towards his people.

## Literary Structure

The book of Nahum is divided in two main sections: chapter 1 and chapters 2 and 3. In the introductory verse of the book, the word *maśśā* (מַסָּא), generally understood and translated as an oracle or a prophetic utterance is one of the two most common types of material in the prophetic books, which are divided in oracles of salvation and oracles of judgment, the latter being subdivided into: (1) oracles of judgment against other nations, and (2) oracles of judgment against Israel or Judah (O’BRIEN, 2009, p. 21). Chapter 1 describes God’s judgment towards Nineveh, its proclamation and prediction of the end of the city and the dispersion of its inhabitants. Chapters 2 and 3 seems to follow the same pattern with detailed application to Nineveh (GAEBELEIN, 1985, p. 453).

## Text and Key Words Study

The text according to the New American Standard Bible:

1. The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.
2. A jealous and avenging God is the Lord; The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies.
3. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will

by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is his way, and clouds are the dust beneath his feet.

In verse one, the noun “*h<sup>a</sup>zōn*” (חזון) appears in relation with the proper noun “*nahūm*” (נחום). The noun “*h<sup>a</sup>zōn*” (חזון) occurs 35 times in the Old Testament literature, most in the prophets’ books, for instance, I Samuel 3:1, Isaiah 1:1, Lamentations 2:9, Daniel 8:1, in all the cases it is related with a vision or revelatory word to a prophet.

The adjective “*qannō*” (קנניא) and the verb “*nōqēm*” (נקם) in the verse two are in connection with the God of Israel in this context and provides a general description about the character of God that is central to the message of the book, and an example of “*qannō*” (קנניא) is found in Joshua 24:19. The adjective “*qannō*” (קנניא) appears only related to God, being restricted to the context of worship of idols over God, and in any other instances it is used to describe human jealousy. God wants his people to love him and to choose to do so, and this adjective characterizes his will rather than a human jealous that provides a negative reaction. Besides being “*qannō*” (קנניא), the Lord is also looking for “*nōqēm*” (נקם), avenge. This verb can be translated in relation for human beings and to God (HOLLADAY, 1988, p. 245). It comes from the root “*nāqām*” (נקם) and in this specific context means God’s revenge against his enemies, in this case Nineveh, which had been the enemy of Israel and Judah for centuries. Although Nineveh was previously used as an instrument of discipline by God against his children – the people of Israel and Judah –, now God is avenging his people and other nations that were under Nineveh’s cruelty and yoke. Other occurrences of the verb “*nāqām*” (נקם) are seen, for instance, in Genesis 4:15; Prov. 6:34 and Isaiah 61:1-2. The noun “*šārāw*” (צרי) translated as “adversary” or “enemy” is used in relation with “*YHWH*” (יהוה) the God of Israel, who is the “owner” “*va`al*” (בעל) of the wrath and revenge against Nineveh. The noun “*va`al*” (בעל) is in connection with the proper noun “*YHWH*” (יהוה) therefore stating that these actions come from the Lord and not from the prophet Nahum who is the one having the vision. The noun “*hēmāh*” (חמה) is used 124 times in the Old Testament, mainly in the poetic and prophetic literature, especially the book of Ezekiel. When used with “*nāqām*” (נקם) in contexts related to God, He demonstrates His heat or wrath against idolatry (Eze 24:8), but also against the enemies of Israel e.g. Nah. 1:2 (STRONG, 2010, p. 90). This part of the speech of Nahum constitutes the challenge of YHWH to Judah and Assyria, and according to Sweeney (2000, p. 427) is “demarcated by a hymn in verses 2-8 and by the very clear relationship between the question in verses 9-10 concerning YHWH’s power and the portrayal of that power in the hymn”.

On verse 3a, the adjective “*erek*” (77א), meaning “slow”, “patient”, and the noun “*’apayim*” in this context meaning “anger” are in connection with the proper noun “*YHWH*” (יהוה) and provide a dualism. At the same time that God is slow to act, patient with the guilty as it was the case when the Lord had mercy upon the king and the city of Nineveh (Jon 3:10; 4:2), He will by no means in 3b, “*yenaqeh*” (ינקח) or clear the guilty. The space of time between Jonah’s ministry that occurred in Jeroboam II’s reign around 793-43 B.C. and the book of Nahum dated around 663-12 B.C. is approximate 150 years. God had granted the people of Nineveh at least one century of mercy after the preaching of Jonah. But He is also a God of justice and his “*maššā*” (משש), though not coming during Jonah’s visit in Nineveh, would come later upon the ninevites during the destruction of the city by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C and the final destruction of

the Assyrians in Carchemish by the Babylonians in 605 B.C. The statement of verse 3b, “in whirlwind and storm is his way, and clouds are the dust beneath his feet” according to Sweeney (2000, p. 429): “introduces YHWH’s role as mater of the cosmos or the natural world by calling up the natural imagery of a whirlwind and storm to convey YHWH’s power and capacity for destruction”. God is strong, He is in control of nature and certainly has the Assyrians under His control.

## Application

The answers for the prayers of God’s people may sometimes be “no” or “wait”. It happened with the people of Judah who lived before the events in Nineveh took place, and like us today the heathens were apparently always winning and taking advantage and dominating over the weaker and honest people. However, in His proper time, God will have his revenge and will make justice against the enemies of His people. God is jealous in the sense that he loves His people and wants the best for each one of His children; but, as was the occasion in the past, had to leave his people under the dominion of the Assyrians because they were leaving His ways, His purpose, and losing the opportunity of redemption. The same can happen to the people of God nowadays, but if they choose God’s path, they have the opportunity of salvation and God’s wrath and revenge will turn against those who persecute and challenge the children of God. The people of God long for the promise of the Day of Judgment, when God will make justice on behalf of them.

Throughout the ages, the book of Nahum has been interpreted differently by many scholars, including the Church Fathers whom have shared allegorical and literal interpretations about the book. Luther on other hand, supports an historical interpretation and is followed by many conservative scholars, who also look for the internal evidence of the book, considering the book as piece of literature within the twelve prophets. The historical setting of the book of Nahum fits in the period between 664/663 B.C.E since the author alludes to the fall of Thebes, capital of the Upper-Egypt and the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. that it is imminent to happen.

The text of Nahum 1:1-3 demonstrates that, opposed to Smith’s interpretation, is the Lord of Israel who makes revenge on behalf of his people rather than Nahum, who is only the bearer of the message of God. Nineveh is the adversary of YHWH who is the owner of the wrath against the city. To consider Nahum as a cult-prophet because he only prophesies against Nineveh and not Judah does not explain or makes a correct point concerning the grammatical structure of the verse and the whole book. Christensen as previously mentioned, demonstrates God’s attributes of being slow to anger referring to Jonah, but also seeks justice against his enemies, enemies of his chosen people, which supports in one’s opinion of the correct interpretation of the book of Nahum. YHWH had given the Assyrians many opportunities of mercy throughout the years, including the warning of the prophet Jonah, a warning that intended to lead the Ninevites to repentance. The lack of repentance and the constant crimes against humanity, which the Assyrians were so famous for against their enemies including the nation of Judah, gave YHWH no choice, but to take vengeance for his people and declare a *maśśā* against the people of Nineveh.



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