

Nahum

IN HIS HISTORICAL SETTING

By Robert A. Street

UNLIKE MOST of the prophets, Nahum does not mention any king of any country to help identify his historical context. Nahum says only he was an Elkoshite. Even the location of Elkosh is uncertain.¹

Nahum's message was described as "The burden of Nineveh" and "the vision of Nahum" (Nah. 1:1, KJV). The reference to Nineveh is an excellent place to begin with setting Nahum in history. Nineveh,

Below: Overlooking ruins at Capernaum on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Some believe the name reflects that

Nahum may have come from here. Locals today refer to "Capernaum" as Kfer Nahum, meaning "Village of Nahum."

however, had a long history (see Gen. 10:11). Nahum referenced the fall of the Egyptian city of No-Amon (Nah. 3:8), also known as Thebes.

Using this historical background, dating the book is not extremely difficult. Taking the fall of Nineveh sets the latest date for the book, its *terminus ad quem*; the traditional date is 612 B.C. The earliest date for the book, its *terminus a quo*, is the fall of Thebes (or No-Amon). Thebes fell to Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C.

Thus, the historical setting is between 663 and 612 B.C. Recognizing that the prophet Nahum was seeing the fall of Nineveh as a future event, a date in the middle is appropriate. Thus, "Nahum preached... probably between 630 and 626."²

Assyrian Dominance

The historical setting and background for Nahum was one of Assyrian (Ninevite) oppression, which actually began in the eighth century with Tiglath-pileser III (reigned 744-727 B.C.), who captured and controlled the Fertile Crescent from the Persian Gulf to Gaza. He actually aided Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) in defending Judah against the Syro-Ephramitic alliance. A later Assyrian monarch Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) invaded and conquered Lower Egypt in 671 B.C. A few years later Assyria's King Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.), son of Esarhaddon, destroyed





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Left: Rising in the background is the ancient site of Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria. In the mid-1800s, an Englishman, A.H. Layard, conducted the first major excavation of the site and unearthed Sennacherib's palace. Later excavations unearthed massive palaces belonging to Ashurbanipal and

Esarhaddon.

Below: Clay tablet known as the Annals of Tiglath-pileser III (ruled 744-727 B.C.) records details about some of the building operations and military campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III. The text mentions the kings of Ammon, Ashkelon, Edon, Gaza, Judah, Moab, and Tyre.



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Thebes in 663 B.C. After conquering Thebes, Ashurbanipal, who was “the last strong king of Assyria,”³ placed Psammetichus I (Psamtik) on the throne of Egypt. This was the same Psamtik who revolted against Assyrian control and gained independence in 654 B.C. Perhaps, the rebellion at home made it impossible for Ashurbanipal to deal harshly with Psammetichus. Shamash-shum-ukin, who was Ashurbanipal’s brother and the king of Babylon (a sub-kingdom of Assyria at this time), formed an alliance with Elam and Arabia that sought to overthrow Ashurbanipal. The alliance did not accomplish its goal, even though it continued to fight until about 648 B.C. and the death of Shamash-shum-ukin.

When the eight-year-old Josiah (2 Kings 22:1) became Judah’s king in 640 B.C., Ashurbanipal had subdued the entire ancient Near East. During the latter years of Ashurbanipal’s reign, the Assyrian Empire suffered from decay. Ashurbanipal became more interested in art and scholarship than in running his empire.

At Ashurbanipal’s death in 627 B.C., his son Ashur-etel-ilani (627-623 B.C.) ascended the throne.

Coinciding with Ashurbanipal’s death were rebellions by both the Babylonians under Nabopolassar in 626 B.C. and the Judean vassals. Furthermore, the Media Empire began its rise, as did the threat of the Scythians, from the area now known as the Steppes of Russia.

All of these forces were more than the Assyrian Empire could bear. The Assyrian monarch Sin-shar-iskun (reigned 623-612 B.C.) lost two chief Assyrian cities, Ashur in 614 B.C. and Nineveh in 612 B.C.

This conflict impacted tiny Judah. Going back to 722 B.C. and the destruction of Samaria, Judah was really all that was left of the once proud Hebrew nation. The Judean kingdom existed mainly as a vassal state under Assyria’s control until the death of Ashurbanipal.

Kings of Judah

A cursory examination of three kings of Judah during the years between the fall of Thebes and the fall of Nineveh can help us better understand Nahum’s historical setting. The Judean monarch at the

fall of Thebes was Manasseh, who was basically an idolatrous and evil ruler; he “made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 21:16, KJV). Second Chronicles adds that Manasseh repented in his later years. Second Kings, however, is not so generous in its evaluation of Manasseh. Amon, Manasseh’s son, reigned only two years before his servants assassinated him (2 Kings 21:19-23). Following Amon’s assassination, his eight-year-old son, Josiah, became king.

Josiah asserted political independence while the rebellion was taking place in the other countries following Ashurbanipal’s death. Josiah’s assertion of political and religious freedom was spurred on when workers discovered the Book of Law (probably parts of Deuteronomy) in 622 B.C. while rebuilding the temple.⁴



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Above: View of the Jezreel Valley as seen from Megiddo. The armies of Pharaoh Neco II defeated King Josiah and his soldiers at the Battle of Megiddo in 609 B.C.

Left: Excavations at Haran. Assyria's King Ashurballit II, trying to hold on to power, attempted to establish at Haran a surrogate Assyrian capital and government after Nineveh fell in 612. B.C.

Assyria's Demise

The actual death throes of Assyria occurred under Ashur-uballit II. After Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C., Assyria's King Ashur-uballit II retreated to Haran "where he tried to establish an Assyrian government in exile."⁵ The resistance continued, and in 610 B.C., the Babylonians captured Haran. In 609 B.C., Pharaoh Neco II marched to join forces with the Assyrians. At Megiddo King Josiah met the Egyptian monarch, who was on his way to Haran. In the ensuing battle, Josiah died; his forces were defeated (2 Chron. 35:20-24). Josiah seems to have been supporting the

rebels against Assyria. Jehoahaz, Josiah's son, was Judah's next king.

Jehoahaz served only three months before Neco replaced him with Jehoiakim (Eliakim), another of Josiah's sons. Neco took Jehoahaz captive to Riblah in Hamath and demanded tribute money, which Jehoiakim paid. Jehoahaz was later sent from Riblah to Egypt, where he died.

After Megiddo, Neco continued to Haran to help the Assyrians as they fought the Babylonians. His help, though, was of no avail; the Babylonians were victorious. Undeterred, Neco continued his campaigning on behalf of Assyria.

In 605 B.C., Neco and the Egyptians, along with the remnants of Assyria's army, suffered a crushing defeat at Carchemish at the hands of the Babylonians. With Assyria's defeat and Babylon's victory at Carchemish, Judah became subject (vassal) to Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar.

The historical period of Nahum was evil both inside and outside of Judah. Not only did the Assyrians worship a multitude of gods, the people of Judah did not remain faithful to the Lord. What Nahum did was to offer hope to Judah and Jerusalem that the oppression would end and God would comfort His people. The enemy, symbolized by the city of Nineveh, would be utterly and totally destroyed. It was. **B**

1. According to Pseudo-Epiphanius, the location was in Southwest Judah near Begabar, modern Beit Jibrin. Jerome placed Elkosh at Hilkesi of Galilee (modern El-Kauzeh). The city of Capernaum (translated "village of Nahum") has been proposed but is unlikely. A location on the Tigris River at Alkush (Al-Qush, Alqosh) opposite of Nineveh was proposed in the 16th century. The tomb of Nahum is said to be at Alkush.

2. James Travis, "The Historical Setting of Nahum," *Biblical Illustrator* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 26.

3. Burlan A. Sizemore, Jr., *The Centuries of Decline* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1970), 73.

4. *Ibid.*, 74.

5. Gwendolyn Leick, *Who's Who in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

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