

# Nahum 3:8-13

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*The prophet Nahum draws a lesson from Assyria's history to predict the destruction of Nineveh.*

The city of Nineveh thought she was invincible, but her power was nothing before the all-powerful God. In 722 BC, Nineveh defeated Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel. She thought she did it because she was mighty. But the LORD was the one using Nineveh to discipline His covenant people for their disobedience and evil deeds (2 Kings 17:7–18).

God used Nineveh's malicious intent for His own purposes. But God is just, and ultimately all will come to justice. Two common ways God applies justice are:

- To give people over to their desires (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28), and
- To give people the measure they gave to others (Matthew 7:2).

God is going to give Nineveh the full measure of the cruelty and destruction that they meted out to other peoples.

As Nahum predicted Nineveh's fall, he compared her with *No-amon*, one of the strong cities in the ancient world. He began with the question, *Are you better than No-amon?* The term *No-amon* is the Hebrew name for Thebes, derived from the Egyptian name meaning "City of [the god] Amon" (Jeremiah 46:25; Ezekiel 30:14).

The city named *No-amon* was the capital of ancient Egypt and the center of worship to Amon, the Egyptian sun god, during the era of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC). She had a strategic location since she *was situated by the Nile River*, about 400 to 500 miles from her mouth ([see map](#)).

The city of *No-amon* had many canals. She *had the waters around her, whose rampart was the sea, whose wall was the sea*. The canals served as a barrier to protect her against enemy invasion.

The spectacular city of *No-amon* served as a testimony to the mighty empire Egypt had created. Ancient peoples describe *No-amon* as the most magnificent city of any ancient civilization anywhere in the world. In those days, she was at the peak of her powers: *Ethiopia was her might and Egypt too, without limits*.

The location translated as *Ethiopia* is "Cush" in the Hebrew text ([see map](#)). It refers to the area south of Egypt. The place got its name from Cush, the oldest son of Ham (Genesis 10:6). In ancient times, the area called "Cush" covered most of what is now modern Sudan and even some of present-day Ethiopia. But *No-amon* was so strong that she extended her power to *Ethiopia* and *Egypt*. Even *Put* and *Lubim* were among her helpers.

The country named *Put* likely refers to the area along the African coast in what is now Somalia. It borders Egypt (Jeremiah 46:9; Ezekiel 27:10). *Lubim*, on the other hand, is the country in North Africa located immediately west of Egypt (2 Chronicles 12:3; Ezekiel 30:5). The people of *Put* and *Lubim* were friendly to the people of *No-amon*. They provided supporting resources to *No-amon*, thus contributing to her military strength.

The city of *No-amon* was so great that no one would have dreamed she would fall one day. Yet, she fell to the Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal in 663 BC and *became an exile*. Indeed, *she went into captivity*. That is, the Assyrian army captured *No-amon* and carried her people into exile. In addition, *her small children were dashed to pieces at the head of every street*.

The *street* was where ancient people gathered for public meetings (Ezra 10:9; Nehemiah 8:1). It often symbolizes open communication and widespread exposure. To be *in the street* is to be accessible to the grand public, visually and audibly. As such, wicked deeds done “in the streets” constitute high-handed acts of defiance to attract the attention of people (Jeremiah 44:17). That is why the Assyrians humiliated the people of *No-amon* by smashing their children to death *in every street*.

They even *cast lots for her honorable men*. This indicates that the *honorable men* become possessions of the Assyrians; they were enslaved. Just as the soldiers cast lots for Jesus’s tunic, the Assyrian leaders apparently cast lots to see who got the choicest men of Thebes as their possessions (Matthew 27:35).

The term for *lots* refers to stones thrown to decide on a matter, like dice. In the ancient world, people practiced lot casting widely because they thought the result reflected the divine will. In the Old Testament, the Israelites *cast lots* in a variety of circumstances such as to determine who would go first in an attack (Judges 20:9), to divide a land (Numbers 26:55-56) or garment (Psalm 22:18), to determine the order of the priests and their duties, etc. (1 Chronicles 24:5-19; Nehemiah 10:34).

In our passage, the Assyrians *cast lots* to determine who would get the most *honorable* man of *No-amon* as a captive. And *all her great men were bound with fetters*. *No-amon*’s rulers were all captured and enslaved. The Assyrian soldiers bound the leading men of *No-amon* with chains.

Since the sacking of *No-amon* is spoken of here as a past event, the book of Nahum would be placed some time between 663 BC, when *No-amon* was defeated, and 612 BC when Nineveh was destroyed. The timeline of relative major events would then be:

722 BC, Assyria destroys Samaria/Israel, and exiles its people.

663 BC, Assyria destroys No-amon/Thebes

612 BC, Babylon in league with the Medes destroy Nineveh, capital of Assyria

Nahum’s question to Nineveh, *Are you better than No-amon?* requires a negative answer. The city of *No-amon* seemed invincible at first, but she fell to the Assyrians in 663 BC. The point of

comparison is this: if it could happen to *No-amon*, it would surely happen to Nineveh since she was no better than *No-amon*. Like *No-amon* before her, Nineveh too would suffer shame and defeat. The misery and humiliation Nineveh visited upon *No-amon* would be visited upon her.

Therefore, Nahum proceeded to describe the ease with which the city of Nineveh would fall. He stated, *You too will become drunk*. Drunk people often stagger around and fall. The psalmist David made that clear when he said to the LORD, “You have made Your people experience hardship, You have given us wine to drink that makes us stagger” (Psalm 60:3).

In our passage, the term *drunk* is used figuratively for Nineveh. The idea is that the city would stagger and fall as she drank from the cup of the wrath of God (Isaiah 51:17). Not only would Nineveh stagger and fall under the LORD’s judgment, but she would also be concealed. As the prophet declared, *You will be hidden*; it will disappear from view.

The prophecy of Nahum was fulfilled exactly as predicted. When Nineveh fell to a coalition of Babylonians and Medes, the city was *hidden* for more than two thousand years until archaeologists uncovered her remains. The city’s first excavation was by the French archaeologist Paul Emile Botta in 1842. Five years later, the English archaeologist named Austen Henry Layard made a more impressive excavation. His book entitled, *Nineveh and Its Remains: A Narrative of an Expedition to Assyria*, records important findings such as King Sennacherib’s palace, the city walls, sculptures, gardens, etc.

Not only would Nineveh be *hidden*, but also, she would look for a place to which she would go to escape God’s wrath. As Nahum said, *You too will search for a refuge from the enemy*. Unfortunately, Nineveh’s attempt would be unsuccessful because nobody can flee from God’s presence (Psalm 139:7–12).

The city of Nineveh would find herself in a hopeless situation and would become weak. Nahum described this desperate situation using two metaphors. In the first, he said, *All your fortifications are fig trees with ripe fruit*. The term *fortification* denotes a high point that is set to provide refuge for people (Deuteronomy 3:5). A *fortification* was often built on high mountains and was meant to be impenetrable, allowing people to be protected from their enemies (see for example Numbers 32:17, 36; 2 Kings 10:2, Jeremiah 34:7; Ezekiel 26:4–12). However, Nineveh’s *fortifications* were good for nothing because they were like *fig trees with ripe fruit—When shaken, they fall into the eater’s mouth*.

The prophet pictured Nineveh’s *fortifications* as *fig trees* because such trees were common in ancient Israel. Fig trees reached an average height of 10–20 feet. The first fruit appears in February before the leaves appear in April/June. When the leaves appear, the fruit is usually ripe (Hosea 9:10). Ancient people often cultivated *fig trees* not only because their leaves provided shade but also because their fruits are delicious (Micah 4:4; John 1:48). Ripe figs would fall from the *tree* with ease if given a slight shake or push. So, too, Nineveh’s *fortifications* would be easy pickings for the adversary. Such *fortifications* would be destroyed easily that they would be like fruit trees dropping their figs into waiting mouths.

In the second metaphor, Nahum said, *Behold, your people are women in your midst!* In ancient times military might was largely a matter of physical strength. An army of women would be at a severe disadvantage. It would be like a modern contest between a men's football team and a women's football team. Likewise, Nineveh would be helpless because her troops would have inferior fighting skills before the invaders. As a result, the prophet declared, *The gates of your land are opened wide to your enemies.*

Ancient *gates* were places where several central activities took place. For instance, they were the places where the Israelite elders sat and dispensed judgment (Deuteronomy 21:19). They were also the places where people made public announcements. Thus, when the writer of Proverbs personifies wisdom, he states, "At the head of the noisy streets she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings" (Proverbs 1:21).

More to the point of this passage, *gates* were part of a city's protection against invaders. When the *gates* are closed, the enemy remains outside. But Nineveh would be vulnerable because her *gates* would remain open. Why would Nineveh's *gates* remain wide open? The prophet answered that question in the next line and said, *Fire consumes your bars.*

In ancient times, *gates* and doors were usually locked with *bars* made of wood or metal that slid into openings in the posts. The *bars* would secure the *gates* to prevent outsiders from entering to hurt the residents of the city (Deuteronomy 33:24; Amos 1:5). In the case of Nineveh, her land would stand defenseless before the invaders because *fire* would consume her *bars*. This is a picture of a city that has fallen. Once the gates are open, the invaders will surge through and destroy the city. God would allow the enemy to enter Nineveh and destroy her because of all her wicked deeds.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>8</sup> Are you better than No-amon,  
Which was situated by the waters of the Nile,  
With water surrounding her,  
Whose rampart *was* the sea,  
Whose wall *consisted* of the sea?  
<sup>9</sup> Ethiopia was *her* might,  
And Egypt too, without limits.  
Put and Lubim were among her helpers.  
<sup>10</sup> Yet she became an exile,  
She went into captivity;  
Also her small children were dashed to pieces  
At the head of every street;  
They cast lots for her honorable men,  
And all her great men were bound with fetters.  
<sup>11</sup> You too will become drunk,  
You will be hidden.  
You too will search for a refuge from the enemy.  
<sup>12</sup> All your fortifications are fig trees with ripe fruit—

**When shaken, they fall into the eater's mouth.**

**<sup>13</sup> Behold, your people are women in your midst!**

**The gates of your land are opened wide to your enemies;**

**Fire consumes your gate bars.**