Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: Responses to Questions

# Nahum

*Who is the audience?*

\*\*As usual, it’s Judah. It’s a promise that the superpower that rules over them will be put down.

*Nahum is a message of judgment against Israel’s enemy. Even though it is addressed to Nineveh, it is delivered to Israel. What was the desired response from the audience? Was it that Israel perseveres in their situation? Was it to encourage Israel to organize resistance against Assyria?*

\*\*Actually Nahum doesn’t talk much about Assyria being Israel’s enemy but about its being Yahweh’s enemy and the nations’ oppressor. So in a way what it does is promise a resolution of the question why doesn’t God do anything about evil in the world. There’s no suggestion that Judah is supposed to make war against Assyria. The promises about God’s action point in the opposite direction (“Vengeance is mine”).

*What were God’s chief problems with the peoples on whom he declares judgment?*

\*When it’s the superpower, it’s the fact that it is the superpower, which carries two implications. One is that it thinks it is god and it will be in power forever. The other is that it is ruthless in relation to the peoples it rules.

*Why does God care about Nineveh and want to make an example of them?*

\*\*Remember that Nineveh is not just any city but the imperial capital (it’s like talking about Washington). So this is judgment on the ruthless and self-confident superpower. But this superpower is also Judah’s oppressor.

*If we have to identify with the powerful nation (we are Assyria or Babylon), what should we do about it?*

\*\*Campaign for repentance? Pray for God to keep postponing judgment? Get ready to experience judgment?

*What would Nahum think of Jonah and vice versa? Were they contemporaries?*

\*\*Jonah the prophet was a century or so before Nahum; Jonah the book is usually thought to be a century or so later. Jonah the prophet would agree with Nahum, but Jonah the book has a different angle. For the sake of argument, let’s assume they would violently disagree. The two books then testify to two different sides to Yahweh’s attitude to superpowers—a commitment to bringing them down, and a desire to see them repent.

*Didn’t Nahum have any criticism for Judah itself, with its immorality and cruelty?*

\*\*Perhaps, but if so, it was the Nineveh prophecies that were held onto, perhaps because they were fulfilled.

*Why is there nothing about mercy for Nineveh here?*

\*\*You can look in Jonah for that….

*T would be easy to use these Scriptures to support just war theory, wouldn’t it?*

I don’t think so. First, they are describing something God will do in person; there is no idea that Judah will do anything. Second, they are far more destructive and undiscriminating than just war theory.

# Habakkuk

*In Habakkuk (and also in Jeremiah), the prophet seems to be not simply a mouthpiece for God, but also one who questions God’s motives and actions. It seems as though the prophet is fleshing out the message and attempting to manipulate it. What effect might these doubts and questions have had on the ancient reader in accepting the message as genuine from God? Was this common in prophecy in the Ancient Near East?*

\*\*I don’t know about other Middle-Eastern examples. I imagine the prophet thought that putting the message in the form of questions and answers would communicate (it’s a bit like Genesis 18). You might say that the evidence that he was right is the fact that people preserved his book and put it in the Bible.

*Was it okay to argue with god the way Habakkuk does?*

\*\*He doesn’t get rebuked for doing so. But in the content of what God says, you could say that God puts him in his place. Then he submits. It’s quite like Job.

*Did prophets typically record their private conversations with God?*

\*\*Only when they are not just private conversations! Compare Jeremiah. Here this is Habakkuk’s way of communicating his message.

*I find it startling that Babylon is so crudely used as an instrument of God’s judgment. Given these biblical examples, why are we quick to discard interpretations that claim events like September 11 was an act of divine punishment? Or conversely, why are Christians so set upon defending American imperial power as in alignment with the will of God, when God clearly seems to use empires for other purposes altogether rather than their building up their own glory, or discards empires quickly once their function has been fulfilled? Are there implications here in God’s use of powers like Babylon and Assyria that are or are not theoretically applicable to today’s world?*

\*\*Presumably the reason is that we don’t like the idea of God judging us. I assume that the way the OT describes Assyria and Babylon is indeed something that should scare the pants off the modern world’s one superpower.

*I have a question regarding who God judges.  I see in the prophets that he judges both individuals and nations, yet today i don't hear much thought given to the judgment of an entire nation.  Am I right to assume he would judge nations still today? Do you guess that he still sends prophets to warn them ?  What about the faithful within a judged nation, what are their chances of surviving? I guess the most important question along this line is whether this means we as Christians must think more communally and see ourselves as Christians of a city or a country instead of as individuals or even individual congregations. If we are bound to Christians beyond ourselves this would greatly change our understanding of community and of whom we are responsible to and for.*

\*\*See the previous answer! I don’t know any prophets today but that may be because I am ignoring them. Sometimes the faithful suffer with the faithless – Jeremiah and Baruch did. Yes, your implications are spot on!

# Zephaniah

*Doesn’t 1:2-3 contradict God’s promise to Noah? Has God changed his mind?*

\*\*Maybe. But as usual, we mustn’t be unimaginative. God is trying to get Judah’s attention and the real point comes in 1:4-6. Indeed, maybe vv. 2-3 refer simply to the earth (land—it’s *adamah*) in Judah.

*How can we reconcile God being good with God bringing destruction?*

\*\*Both OT and NT assume that bringing destruction on powerful, ruthless people is an expression of God’s goodness—partly for the sake of their victims.

*Why doesn’t God use a more “surgical” approach to judgment—cutting out the bad and leaving a remnant?*

\*\*Apparently the fact that we think in those terms shows that our thinking is different. The Bible thinks more corporately.

*Why does the text keep shifting from Zephaniah to God as the speaker?*

\*\*The prophets often do that. It’s because the prophet can speak as himself, God’s messenger, so God becomes “he.” Or he can be aware that he is voicing God’s actual words, so God is “I.”

*3:9-20: This doesn’t happen, does it? And if God has wiped them all out, who will recognize Judah in this way (v. 20)?*

\*\*Oh, it’s worse than that, because he has also threatened to destroy Judah, too! We have to be imaginative. Often what God is doing through Prophets is putting before people alternative scenarios. And he is describing Yahweh’s ultimate purpose—what usually happens is something, but not everything, and the full picture stays on the table.

*There’s o mention of a messianic king, only of Yahweh as king. Does this relate to the idea that Yahweh didn’t really want kings?*

\*\*Maybe. But in any case, the messianic king is generally less prominent in OT hopes than it is in Christian thinking. The OT more often thinks about the glorious fulfillment of God’s purpose for Israel and for the world without mentioning a messianic king.