

Known Intimately  
*Loved Ultimately*

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*God's pursuit of His people  
through the Twelve Prophets*

(Volume 2 – The Babylonian Period)

Bruce Green

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## Foreword

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“Known intimately, loved ultimately”—it’s not difficult to understand how this could apply to the message of the gospels, but the prophets? They’re dripping with judgment and scathing condemnation for Israel and Judah (as well as a few other nations). Our summation for them would be more along the lines of “Move along people, nothing to see here but God dealing with a few centuries worth of wicked lives and impenitent hearts. They all got what they deserved.” And with that, the message of the prophets is reduced to the epitaph for a gravestone! I suppose I understand this. It’s a concise description that insulates us and keeps everything simple.

Of course, the problem is the prophets aren’t simple and we’re not called to dispassionately put a label on them and move on. From the roar of Amos’ lion, to Hosea’s marriage to a prostitute, to Jonah’s aquatic adventures (all covered in the first volume of this work), to Habakkuk’s writing on the wall, to Zechariah’s mysterious visions, to Malachi’s prophecies about John and Jesus (covered in this volume), they are utterly engaging. And yes, they do have a lot to say about judgment, but we need to hear it. They tell us that God’s patience isn’t inexhaustible and our opportunities to repent aren’t unlimited. But they also inform us that these judgments are part of God’s severe mercy and painful grace in an effort to bring His people back to Him. And maybe the biggest surprise of all—we learn that judgment is not the last word for the prophets. After unflinchingly detailing the wrath that was to come, they went on to speak in the loftiest images of better days ahead.

Who would have thought it but God?

All of this is true because the people the prophets addressed were known intimately and loved ultimately by God. Read through their writings and it's clear that God is no blind lover. He was fully aware of everything that was going on in the lives of His people (and disgusted by much of it). Nonetheless He was committed to them because of who He is. Their faithlessness didn't change His love (ask any parent). He sent the prophets to teach, encourage, warn, and correct. When the people failed to respond, He sent the Assyrians and the Babylonians. While these judgments were punitive and a consequence of their evil choices and behavior, they were more than that. They were remedial—intended to purge and pull them back into God's orbit. This is ultimate love: God's willingness to do whatever it took to affect a course correction because He was unwilling to give up on them.

At the end of the day, this is exactly what we need as well—Someone who knows us even better than we know ourselves and loves us enough to call us away from our tiny agendas to the vastness of His purposes and the glory of His kingdom. This is exactly what Jesus did when He arrived on the scene and precisely why He was referred to as “the Prophet.”

### ***Known Intimately, Loved Ultimately***

is an entry level look at the Twelve. It contains an overview of each prophet and his ministry, devotional pieces that explain and develop major themes, questions to facilitate small group or class discussions, and an FAQ section. None of these are a replacement for reading the text. In fact, the way to get the most out of this book is to read it in accompaniment with the writing of the particular prophet.

The Twelve are rich, profound, and challenging in their messages to us. They are anything but minor, and we neglect them to our poverty. May God bless you richly as you hear their voices today. If you have comments or questions, send them to me at [brucewgreen@gmail.com](mailto:brucewgreen@gmail.com). I'd love to hear from you.

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# Introduction

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What follows is a brief historical sketch to provide you with some background concerning the times in which The Twelve ministered. More detail for each prophet will be given when we get to their individual writings.

What was the world like three thousand years ago? In the tenth century BC, there was Athens but no Rome. Iron and alphabets were trending up while powers like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon were down. This meant the smaller nations of the eastern Mediterranean were able to establish themselves. Twelve Hebrew tribes that migrated from Egypt a few centuries before formed a somewhat shaky coalition under the rule of a Benjamite named Saul. He was succeeded in the kingship by David (of Goliath fame), who was then followed by his son, Solomon, who oversaw construction of, by all accounts, a spectacular temple. Combined, these three ruled Israel for over a century.

Sometime around 930 BC, the uneasy union between the twelve tribes shattered when Solomon's son, Rehoboam, promised harsher, more oppressive policies than his father. The ten northern tribes departed and formed their own kingdom that was variously referred to as Israel, Ephraim, and Samaria (which became its capital under Omri—1 Kings 16:23-24). The tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to Rehoboam and were known as the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital.

## Introduction

KINGDOM:	ISRAEL	JUDAH
<b>Also Known As:</b>	Northern Kingdom Ephraim, Samaria	Southern Kingdom
<b>Number of Tribes:</b>	Ten	Two
<b>Capital:</b>	Samaria	Jerusalem
<b>First King:</b>	Jeroboam	Rehoboam

A man named Jeroboam became king of the ten northern tribes. God promised him that if he would “do what is right in My eyes by obeying My decrees and commands,” he and his descendants would rule over Israel (1 Kings 11:38ff). Despite these assurances, Jeroboam’s fear that the people would return to Jerusalem to worship at the temple drove him to set up centers of worship in Bethel and Dan with golden calves, false priests, and a faux festival (1 Kings 12:26ff). This led to the eradication of his house (13:34; 15:29ff).

The kings after Jeroboam continued in his ways, and Israel spiraled downward. Judah was diseased but not in as desperate shape. God intervened through Elijah and Elisha in the ninth century and later through the writing prophets beginning around the middle of the eighth century: **Hosea**, **Joel**, **Amos**, **Jonah**, and a little later, Isaiah and **Micah**. (Those belonging to The Twelve are in bold print). However, the people of the northern kingdom were especially stubborn and unwilling to listen. Finally, God brought the Assyrians against them in a series of invasions.

During the reign of Menahem (752-742 BC), the two and a half tribes living on the east side of the Jordan were conquered and its people were sent into exile (1 Chronicles 5:23ff). In the time of Pekah’s rule, Gilead, Galilee, and Naphtali were attacked and their inhabitants dispersed (2 Kings 15:29). Finally, there was a three-year siege of Samaria during Hoshea’s kingship that ended in 721 BC with most of the remaining population being

exiled (2 Kings 17:5-6). Although the deporting (and importing) of people would continue for another half-century (Isaiah 7:6; Ezra 4:2, 10), Israel was without a king, a capital, and the vast majority of its people. A little more than two hundred years after its inception, the northern kingdom was effectively no more.

- Judah lasted longer and fared better because unlike Israel, it did have a few good rulers (Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah come to mind). Sadly though, they were the exception rather than the rule, and the people were generally unresponsive to them as well as the prophets of that time: **Nahum**, Jeremiah, **Zephaniah**, and **Habakkuk** (seventh century). Finally, God sent Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians who invaded the southern kingdom three times over the course of twenty years (605-586 BC), and Judah was sent into exile in Babylon. The prophet Daniel was part of the first exile in 605, and Ezekiel was part of the second in 597. In 586, Zedekiah was removed from the throne, Jerusalem destroyed, and the bulk of the remaining people deported.
- Israel never returned from its exile as a national entity, but Judah did. Jeremiah predicted their return after seventy years (Jeremiah 29:1-14). Ezekiel, Daniel, and **Obadiah** spoke to these exiles and pointed to better days for the nation. In 538 BC, the people of Judah make the first of three recorded trips back to Jerusalem. This initial trip was approved by the Persian king Cyrus and led by Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-2). **Haggai** and **Zechariah** spoke to this group and encouraged them in the rebuilding of the temple and other matters. A second group returned in 458 BC during the rule of Artaxerxes and was led by Ezra (Ezra 7). The book of Esther fits in between the first and second trips, as it deals with events under the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus, father of Artaxerxes. Thirteen years after Ezra's group returned (445 BC), Nehemiah led a third group back (Nehemiah 2). **Malachi's** ministry probably began not



## Introduction

long after Nehemiah's group arrived to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Here's a chart that summarizes the ministry of The Twelve.

PERIOD	DATE	ISRAEL	JUDAH
Assyrian	782-700BC	Hosea, Amos Jonah	Joel Micah
Pre-Babylonian	640-606BC		Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk
Exile	605-539BC		Obadiah
Restoration	539-432BC		Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

A word about dates—biblical chronology on the whole is a less than exact science due to the multiple, complex issues involved in the determination of many ancient dates. What system of dating/calendar the writer is using, whether they are rounding up, or down, or being exact—these are the kinds of questions for which we often have no definitive answer. Therefore, establishing just about any ancient chronology (like the kings of Israel and Judah) involves making assumptions (some of which are more reasonable than others but still unprovable). With that in mind, here's a timeline that provides a broader context for the Twelve in terms of their place in biblical and world history.

1050-1010 – Saul’s reign

1010-970 – David’s reign

970-930 – Solomon’s reign

930 – Israel divides into northern and southern kingdoms

**Hosea**

**Joel**

**Amos**

**Jonah**

745 – Tiglath-Pileser III/Pul comes to power in Assyria and the empire begins to reassert itself

**Micah**

721 – Samaria is destroyed and its people exiled; the northern kingdom is no more

701 – Sennacherib invades Judah

**Nahum**

**Zephaniah**

612 – fall of Nineveh

**Habakkuk**

605 – Babylonian empire begins

605 – Nebuchadnezzar’s first visit to Jerusalem

597 – Nebuchadnezzar’s second visit to Jerusalem

586 – the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar

**Obadiah**

539 – Medo-Persian empire begins

538 – decree of Cyrus; return of exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua

**Haggai**

**Zechariah**

458 – return of exiles under Ezra

445 – return of exiles under Nehemiah

**Malachi**

432 – Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

330 – Greek empire begins under Alexander the Great

PART TWO:  
THE PRE-  
BABYLONIAN  
PERIOD

(640-606 BC)

NAHUM

▪

ZEPHANIAH

▪

HABAKKUK

# NAHUM

**Nahum was written**

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Probably during the middle of the seventh century BC.

**Nahum was written to**

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Judah, since Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians and most of its population deported by 721 BC.

**Nahum's ministry**

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We know almost nothing about Nahum other than what he tells us in 1:1. His ministry was probably sometime during the reign of Manasseh, Amon, or Josiah.

**Nahum's contemporaries**

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Possibly Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk.

**Historical background from Kings and Chronicles**

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2 Kings 21:1-23:30; 2 Chronicles 33:1-35:27.

**Interesting fact**

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Like the book of Jonah, Nahum is also about the city of Nineveh.

# NAHUM

The people of Israel and Judah had a long, troubled history with the Assyrians. The first interaction we know of occurred in the middle of the ninth century BC. One of the Kurkh Monoliths lists King Ahab of Israel as part of the coalition of kings who fought against the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III at the Battle of Qarqar (853 BC), where the Assyrians were seeking to establish a foothold in Syria. Although the Assyrians lost the battle, they won the war as a reference coming from the Black Obelisk (composed during latter part of Shalmaneser III's reign) indicated Jehu (three kings after Ahab) was paying tribute to the empire.

After Shalmaneser III's death in 823 BC, Assyria was weakened by a series of internal problems and their influence over the eastern Mediterranean nations waned. Payment of the tribute wasn't re-established until Tiglath-Pileser III invaded Israel during the reign of Menahem (752-742 BC). The area east of the Jordan was conquered, and its people were sent into exile (1 Chronicles 5:26). Assyrian control continued and extended into Judah, where the wicked Judean king Ahaz submitted to Tiglath-Pileser III in order to secure protection from the forces of Syria and Israel (2 Kings 16). This led to another invasion of Israel during the reign of Pekah. More territory was taken and its inhabitants deported (2 Kings 15:29).

Hoshea succeeded Pekah as king of Israel. He submitted to the

Assyrians for a while, but then decided to form an alliance with Egypt (2 Kings 17:3-4). This was a fatal mistake as the Assyrians invaded what remained of the nation during a three-year siege, defeated them and sent the remaining population into exile (v. 5-6).

With the northern kingdom out of the picture, Assyria continued to torment Judah. In 701 BC, Sennacherib invaded the country, captured 46 fortified cities and set his sights on Jerusalem, but Yahweh intervened (2 Chronicles 32:20-22). Despite this, Assyrian dominance continued through Manasseh's reign, which came to an end in 642 BC.

For over 200 years then, Assyria had brought its own brand of brutality and heartache to Israel and Judah. At times they had been Yahweh's instrument in disciplining His people (1 Chronicles 5:25-26; 2 Kings 17:5-23; Isaiah 8:5-8), but now their time had come. A century before God had sent Jonah to Nineveh (then a principal city of the empire), and they repented. Now they were past that point, and judgment was headed their way (Isaiah 10:5ff).

Nahum was written sometime after the Egyptian city of Thebes was destroyed by the Assyrians in 663 BC when the empire was still at the height of its power (see Dillard and Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, on 3:8ff). This agrees with Nahum 1:12 where Assyria is described as having many allies and being numerous. It seems most likely then Nahum was written sometime between the latter part of Manasseh's reign (from 663 BC) and the time Josiah began his reforms in 628 BC.

### **Nahum: Nineveh is no more**

- Introduction (1:1)
- God's character and Nineveh's collapse (1:2-15)
- The Fall of Nineveh: "I am against you" (2:1-13)
- The Fall of Nineveh: "I am against you" (3:1-19)

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## Whatever Happened to . . .

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*“Although they have allies and are numerous,  
they will be destroyed and pass away.”*

(Nahum 1:12)

We’ve all had that conversation, haven’t we? Despite the prevalence of social media, time still has a way of unraveling relationships, acquaintances, and contacts. Phrases like, “out of sight, out of mind,” exist for a reason. Then one day, something happens to jog our memory, a person pops into our mind, and the next thing you know we’re asking the question, “Whatever happened to . . . ?”

This phenomenon isn’t restricted to individuals; it applies to families (the Rockefellers and the Roosevelts), groups of people (the Incas and the Shakers), and nations (the Soviet Union and South Vietnam). They’re in the spotlight one moment, and in the next they’ve not only exited the stage—they’ve left the building. They’re no longer on anyone’s radar. To borrow another phrase, they are “here today and gone tomorrow.”

Most of us have heard of the Assyrians somewhere along the line. We might remember them from a history class since they existed as a kingdom for almost two thousand years (from 2400 BC to 600 BC). Along with Egypt and Babylon, they occupy a prominent role in the Old Testament as an enemy of Israel and Judah.

It requires a bit of effort, but it’s well worth it to imagine the size of the shadow they cast over Judah during the time of Nahum. It would be fair to say Assyria was to Judah what Goliath

was to the army of Israel (1 Samuel 17). If you haven't read the story lately, v. 11 reminds us "Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified."

"Dismayed and terrified"—that's exactly how Judah felt in regard to the Assyrians. After all, they had haunted their region of the world for two centuries, defeating Israel and deporting the survivors, invading Judah and capturing its fortified cities. Assyria was their worst nightmare.

Nahum's message that Nineveh (capital of the empire) would fall must have seemed ridiculous at a certain level. They had plagued Israel for a longer time than automobiles, television or airplanes have been around. And just as we can't imagine life without these things, it must have been difficult for Judah to believe Assyria would be no more.

But that's exactly what happened. In her work *The Ancient Near East*, Amelie Kuhrt writes, "The sudden disappearance of the Assyrian Empire, which seemed impregnable and solid, especially in the period of the seventh century, is a phenomenon as yet poorly understood . . . The change is sudden and abrupt; the process and circumstances, and possible underlying causes, all remain obscure."

Like Goliath, the Assyrians towered over the people of God until a prophet named Nahum was raised up by Yahweh to say, "Your time is up!"

"This is what the Lord says, 'Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be destroyed and pass away' (1:12). There's nothing obscure about that.

And that's how Assyria became part of the "Whatever happened to . . ." club.

## QUESTIONS

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1. Why is it at the time, powerful nations seem so invincible? What does history teach about such a perspective?
2. What kind of lessons should we learn from God's judgment upon Nineveh?