

# WHO WAS THE 'KING OF NINEVEH' IN JONAH 3:6?

Paul Ferguson

## Summary

*This article seeks to show the title 'king of Nineveh' is not an anachronism. Comparison with Aramaic use of the north-west Semitic mlk, important in a north Israelite context, may suggest that a city or provincial official might have been under consideration. Cuneiform evidence seems to suggest that no distinction is made between city and province in designating a governor. Common custom was to give provincial capitals the same name as the province. This could explain the fact that the book of Jonah says the 'city' was a three day walk (3:3).*

## I. The 'King of Nineveh'

The Hebrew phrase *melek nīnēveh* ('king of Nineveh') is found in the Old Testament only in Jonah 3:6. It never occurs in any contemporary documents. Most literature proceeds on the assumption that the author used this expression to refer to the king of the Assyrian empire. It has often been suggested that this wording indicates the author wrote centuries after the fall of this nation.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. 'King of Nineveh' vs 'King of Assyria'

If this be the case, then one must consider why, if the author of the book lived centuries after the 'historical Jonah' of 2 Kings

---

<sup>1</sup>W. Neil indicates this term 'could hardly be used if the Assyrian empire had been in existence.' See 'Jonah' in *IBD* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 966; L.C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 186. However, in the later supplementary volume G. Landes states: 'This assumption should be abandoned': see 'Jonah' in *Supplementary Volume to IBD* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 490.

14:25, he would ignore the usual designation 'king of Assyria'. This phrase is found thirty times in 2 Kings 18-20. This problem is heightened by the fact that he is in the habit of meticulously selecting exact phrasing from the 'Kings corpus'.<sup>2</sup>

It is further compounded by the fact that the book mentions nothing about 'Assyria' or the 'Assyrian empire'. One would expect that a post exilic author would betray some trace of the strong memory of Assyrian war crimes denounced by the prophet Nahum. Yet Nineveh is presented as a large city faced with doom rather than a super-power threatening to swallow her neighbours. The evil denounced in the book has not passed on the whole earth (Na. 3:19) but consists of violence within their own territory (Jon. 3:8).

It does not seem plausible that a writer living long after the eighth century BC would ignore a wide body of tradition about the 'evil empire', invent an apparently unique title ('king of Nineveh'), and confine his descriptions to local level. It will be the purpose of this paper to probe the possibility that the portrayal of Nineveh in the book of Jonah fits the historical scenario of the mid-eighth century BC rather than the traditions current hundreds of years later.

Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) restored the vitality of the Assyrian empire. He is the first sovereign to impose regular governmental administration as far west as Palestine. While others had merely received sporadic tribute, he incorporated these territories into provinces. This king did not appear till shortly after the historical Jonah.<sup>3</sup> After 732 BC large slices of Jeroboam II's domain in north Israel were organised into Assyrian Provinces. After 721 BC all of the northern kingdom

---

<sup>2</sup>Some examples are: Jon. 1:1 and 2 Ki. 14:25; Jon. 3:1-3 and 1 Ki. 17:2-10; Jon. 4:3 and 1 Ki. 19:4. It is very difficult to explain how an author writing centuries later could find Jonah's village and the name of his father yet not know the usual designation for the Assyrian monarch ('king of Assyria').

<sup>3</sup>P. Garelli, 'Achievement of Tiglath-Pileser III: Novelty or Continuity?' in M. Cogan and I. Eph'al (eds.), *Ah, Assyria* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991) 46. Assuming that Jonah's prophecy in 2 Ki. 14:25 is a genuine predictive prophecy, this would place his ministry in the first half of the eighth century BC before the victories of Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). A revitalised Assyria after 745 would not seem to fit the crisis situation portrayed in the book.

was incorporated into the Assyrian empire's governmental structure. Samaria, Megiddo, Ramoth Gilead and Qarnaim, cities under Israelite control in Jonah's day, became provincial capitals with a governor's palace in each city. Archaeological evidence seems to suggest that business was carried on in the Assyrian language.<sup>4</sup> From this time on people would think in terms of an Assyrian empire rather than a far off king who sometimes made incursions into the West.

## 2. North Israelite and Aramaic Use of *MLK*

At this time the north-west Semitic word for 'king' (*mlk*), especially when associated with a city, often meant 'governor' of a province rather than king over a nation. This is clearly displayed on a bilingual statue from Gozan, a western Assyrian province. This is the only text of any size so far discovered in both Aramaic and Assyrian. The Aramaic word *mlk* is regularly translated with the Assyrian *šakin* which means 'governor'.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted at this point that the language of the book of Jonah is not pure, official, Jerusalem dialect. As early as 1909 S.R. Driver suggested that some of the unusual linguistic features in this work 'might possibly be compatible with a pre-exilic origin in northern Israel'.<sup>6</sup> In 1961 Otto Loretz extended Driver's remark in the light of more recent advances in comparative Semitics. His conclusion is that the linguistic oddities in the book all relate to a northern Israelite dialect.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>For a suggested map of Assyrian provinces in the former area of the northern kingdom see Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-yonah, *Macmillan Bible Atlas* (New York: Macmillan, 1977) 95. For influence of Aramaic and Assyrian on dialects of Biblical Hebrew see M. Cogan and H. Taylor, *II Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 7-9; E. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1982) 71-73; A. Hurvitz, 'Aramaisms in Biblical Hebrew', *IEQ* 18 (1968) 236.

<sup>5</sup>Assyrian lines 8, 9, 15 and 19 have *GAR.KUR* [= *šakin māti*] *URU gu-za-ni* while the corresponding Aramaic lines (6, 7, and 13 have *mlk:gwzn*. See A.A. Assaf, P. Bordreuil and A.R. Millard, *La Statue de Tell Fekherye* (Paris: Etudes Assyriologiques, 1982) 13, 23; A.R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, 'A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions' in *BA* 45 (1982) 135-41.

<sup>6</sup>S.R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1956 repr.) 322.

<sup>7</sup>O. Loretz, 'Herkunft und Sinn der Jona-Erzählung' in *BZ* 5 (1961) 18-29.

Unfortunately, beyond the Samaritan ostraca little archaeological evidence is available about this dialect.<sup>8</sup> What is known is that with Phoenicia on the West and Aramaic kingdoms on the West and North, there must have been a considerable amount of amalgamation. Aramaean incursions into Galilee began as early as the war between Asa and Baasha in the early ninth century BC (1 Ki. 14:20). An extended Aramaic inscription was recently discovered at Tel Dan probably dated around 841 BC.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that Aramaic could probably have been understood in north Israel.

In an Israelite context early Aramaic influence on the language would be more prevalent than in the South. Thus when 1 Kings 20:1 mentions that Benhadad had 32 kings with him, the meaning would be 32 heads of cities rather than monarchs over kingdoms. Aramaic influence is further indicated in this chapter by the remark that even in the days of Benhadad's father Aramaeans had established bazaars in Samaria (v. 34).

## II. Interchangeability of City and Province Names

The German archaeologist Walter Andrae found 135 stone monuments in the city of Aššur. Most of them are probably from the century just preceding the historical Jonah. Some of these stelae actually designate the governor of Nineveh by substantially the same cuneiform signs used on the bilingual statue. In one stele he is called the 'governor of the city of

---

<sup>8</sup>G.A. Rendsburg ('On the writing BYTDWD in the Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan', *IEJ* 45 [1995] 24-25) indicates that many features of northern Hebrew had Aramaic parallels because Israel looked to Aram as a cultural centre. Rendsburg is preparing a full scale study of northern Hebrew found in sections of Kings which relate to the northern kingdom. See for the moment his *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup>A. Biran and J. Naveh, 'An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan', *IEJ* 43 (1993) 81-98. For a recent attempt to revise the dating see *idem*, 'The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment', *IEJ* 45 (1995) 1-18.

Nineveh' (no. 128) and on another the 'governor of the province of Nineveh' (no. 66).<sup>10</sup>

Both expressions could be expressed in Hebrew by the phrase 'king of Nineveh' (*melek nīnēveh*). Apparently in such contexts Assyrians did not carefully distinguish between a province or a city.<sup>11</sup> The terms could be used interchangeably.

The same basic phrasing occurs in the eponym lists. These are the names of Assyrian officials who had the honour of having the year named after them. Governors of Nineveh held this office in 789 and 761 BC<sup>12</sup> Their names were Ninurta-mukin-aḫi and Nabu-mukin-aḫi respectively.<sup>13</sup> This would be the general period in which Jonah would have performed his ministry. It is possible, but by no means certain, that either might have been the official described in Jonah 3. This article offers the suggestion that perhaps the governor of this province was the leader referred to in Jonah 3:6.

The question might arise that if the official in Jonah 3 is the governor, why is he called the 'king' of Nineveh? The answer is partly due to the fact this title is used in a north Israelite context under Aramaic influence where it had a broader meaning.

It should also be kept in mind that during this period governors of provinces ruled as kings, virtually ignoring the king in Kalah. It should also be remembered that in the first few years following 763 BC revolts were common and it is not clear who is king and who is not.

The bilingual Tel Fekherye statue found at Sakin near Gozan exemplifies the Assyrian custom of naming provinces

<sup>10</sup>W. Andrae, *Stelenreihen in Aššur* (WVDOG 24, 1913) 62, 63, 84, 85.

<sup>11</sup>In his second campaign Sennacherib turned over captured Kassite cities to the governor of the city of Arrapha (also a province). R. Borger, *Assyrische Lesestücke* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) II.6.

<sup>12</sup>A.R. Millard, *Eponyms of Assyrian Empire 910-612 BC* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1994) 7-8; A. Ungnad, 'Eponymen' in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1938) 412. 'Limmu' in CAD (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1973). The nature of the office of eponym is not completely clear. It is thought to have something to do with cult. Judging from examples in CAD it also carried with it some administrative responsibilities.

<sup>13</sup>Millard, *Eponyms*, 58.

after their capital cities. The governor of Gozan is called literally the 'the governor of the land of the city of Gozan'. (*GAR.KUR.URU. gu-za-ni*).<sup>14</sup> The convention in such contexts was to refer to the city along with the territory it possessed. This agrees with the Biblical style where a city would include also the pasture land around it and its suburbs (Jos. 13:23; Nu. 35:3).<sup>15</sup>

### 1. The Size of Nineveh

It has been often suggested that the author of Jonah was unaware of the size of Nineveh because he stated that it took three days to cross it (3:4).<sup>16</sup> This is based on the assumption that the area of the city must be restricted to the size of its walled portion. This assumption is, of course, totally gratuitous. Based on this idea the municipality of Jerusalem today would be only half a mile across.

Cuneiform writing employed by scribes at this time had special signs ('logograms') to mark a word as the name of a city or province. As previously mentioned these signs can be used interchangeably. To the scribes 'city' and 'province' had the same meaning, especially when the city and province bore the same name. An Assyrian scribe could have used his logograms to write 'the territory possessed by the city of Nineveh was a three day walk.' It is of interest to note, by the way, that in the time around the eighth century BC scribes used the 'city' sign to designate the governor of the province.<sup>17</sup>

In 705 BC when Sargon built his new capital 12 miles north of Nineveh, he indicated he built it in the territory of Nineveh, using the term *rebet URA Ninua* ('the city of Nineveh's

<sup>14</sup>Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard, *La Statue de Tell Fekherye*, 13.

<sup>15</sup>This idea is also probably present in the annals of Sennacherib: see Borger, *Lesestücke*, I.38.

<sup>16</sup>Neil (*IBD*, 966) calls this 'an awkward problem'. The actual perimeter of the walled part of Nineveh was about eight miles. See also R.C. Thompson, 'The buildings on the Larger Mound of Nineveh', *Iraq* 1 (1934) 95.

<sup>17</sup>S. Parpola presents a cross-section of the passages where Nineveh occurs with various logograms for city and province in *Neo-Assyrian Toponyms*, (AOAT 6; Neukirchen: Butzon and Bercker, 1970) 262-67.

quadrangle')<sup>18</sup> This would be about a day's walk from Nineveh to the North, while the old capital, Kalah (17 miles to the South) would also be a day's walk.<sup>19</sup> Emil Forrer, in his study of Assyrian provinces, indicates that Kalah would have been the southern boundary of the province of Nineveh.<sup>20</sup>

Genesis 10:11, 12 may be an attempt to give a rough approximation of the size of the province of Nineveh. Kalah (Assyrian *Kalhu*) and Nineveh are mentioned along with two other places. The listing of these four localities is followed by the terse notation 'that is the great city'. Von Soden's Assyrian dictionary suggests one of these locations (Rehoboth-Ir) may be the Hebrew equivalent of *re-bit Ninua*.<sup>21</sup>

The approximate area of the province of Nineveh is outlined on a map published by the French Archaeologist André Parrot. He called this area the 'Assyrian triangle'. He suggested that this was the area the book of Jonah designates as a three day walk.<sup>22</sup>

While it is impossible to trace the exact boundaries of this province, it of interest to note that on Forrer's map of pre-746 BC borders the area of Nineveh at its largest stretch would have been almost exactly a three day walk. D.J. Wiseman has observed that an 'official' at the head of the Nineveh road would have had a three-day walk to get to the capital.<sup>23</sup>

It should be observed that while the expression 'walk of three days' (*mahālāk šēlōšet yāmīm*) could be a straight linear distance, it does not have to be. Its Assyrian counterpart (*mālaku*) was often used of a circuitous route followed on a military campaign. It could also be used to express units of

<sup>18</sup>Borger, *Lesestücke*, 55.

<sup>19</sup>A day's walk in ancient Mesopotamia has been estimated as about 15 miles; cf. W.W. Hallo, 'Road to Emar', *JCS* 18 (1964) 63.

<sup>20</sup>E. Forrer, *Die Provinzeinteilung des assyrischen Reiches* (Leipzig: Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1920): see the map opposite pp. 5 and 35.)

<sup>21</sup>W. von Soden, *Akkadische Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz) 964; also L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexicon zum AT* (3rd edition by J.J. Stamm; Leiden: Brill, 1990) 1132.

<sup>22</sup>A. Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955) 17, 85-86.

<sup>23</sup>D.J. Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', *TB* 30 (1972) 43.

time. In his annals the Assyrian king Aššurbanipal stated that 'for a distance of 15 days [*ma-lak 15 ūmē*] I defeated him.'<sup>24</sup>

This idea is also present in the Hebrew Bible. When the Persian king asked Nehemiah how long his journey (*mahālāk*) would be, he would hardly be asking how long it took to go to Palestine and back. He would have known how long postal couriers took to bring his reports and business documents from this area of the world. The king, rather, wanted to know how long it would take Nehemiah to accomplish his mission.

This Hebrew term is relatively rare in the Old Testament. It is used in three other places besides the book of Jonah (Ezk. 42:4; Zc. 3:7; Ne. 2:6). The use of the word as a distance rather than an architectural term outside the book of Jonah occurs only in Nehemiah. It is not found in Hebrew or Aramaic until the Christian era.

Thus evidence for the word is far too meagre to classify it as a 'late' word as does Brenner.<sup>25</sup> Two Aramaic words occur in the inscribed statue found near Gozan previously were found only in the Christian era. This indicates that great caution should be used in classifying rare words as late.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Nineveh as a Royal City

Although in the first half of the eighth century BC Nineveh was one of three royal cities, it is not the official Assyrian capital city. It did not have this status until 705 under the rule of Sennacherib. Matters of official administration seem to have been centred in the cities of Kalah and Aššur. At the time the prophet Jonah lived, Nineveh was an important city standing on the brink of disaster.

The archives of the Assyrian governor of Gozan (Tell Halaf) dating from the beginning of the eighth century were published in 1940. None of the letters of the Assyrian king to

<sup>24</sup>M. Streck, *Assurbanipal* (Leipzig: Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1916), Vol. 2, 56 (V.77:24), (III.2).

<sup>25</sup>A. Brenner, 'The Language of Jonah as an Index of its Date and Composition' (Hebrew), *Beth Miqra* 24 (1979) 400. This is denied by G. Landes, 'Linguistic Criteria and the Date of the Book of Jonah', *Eretz Israel*, 16 (1982) 147-69, esp. 159.

<sup>26</sup>Millard and Bordreuil, 'Statue from Syria', 139.



the governor come from Nineveh. They are either from Kalah or Aššur. When the governor travelled to Assyria on official business, he went to the aforementioned cities but not to Nineveh.<sup>27</sup>

It would be very unusual, if it were intended to denote the king of all Assyria in Jonah 3:6, that he should make the decree binding in Nineveh and ignore his own capital city. Destruction of such an important city would certainly have had a great effect on the whole Assyrian heartland. His residence and capital, only a day's walk to the South, would be especially threatened by such a close disaster.<sup>28</sup>

The question might occur why this city was chosen as the stage of action since it was not the capital of Assyria. Why had the evil of the city reached heaven's special attention (Jon. 1:2)? There has certainly never been any shortage of urban corruption. The reason evidently lies in the fact that the people of Nineveh at this time are ready for a prophetic message and will react positively to it. This seems to have been the prophet's chief fear (4:1ff).

### III. Assyrian Nobles and Decrees

If this decree originated with the governor, it is not unlikely that such a radical, unusual enactment would need the endorsement of the city and provincial fathers. This would agree with the fact that it was made by 'the king and his great

---

<sup>27</sup>J. Friedrich *et al.*, *Die Inschriften von Tell Halaf* (Berlin: 1940) 4, 20. For the various capitals of Assyria see L. Levine, 'Cities as Ideology: Ashur, Nimrud and Nineveh', *Bulletin for the society for Mesopotamian studies* 12 (1986) 1-7; A.K. Grayson, 'Nineveh as capital of the World: Rome on the Tigris', *ibid.*, 8-13.

<sup>28</sup>Adad-Nirari II (810-783) thought Nineveh important enough to place his royal decree there wherein he granted to an already powerful governor an additional province: see J.N. Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 115-116. R.C. Thompson indicated that this king finished the palace begun by his father there. The city was at times the summer residence of the king. Apart from repairs to the temple of Nabu in 788 no building was done there till the end of the eighth century BC: see R.C. Thompson, 'Buildings on Mound of Nineveh', *Iraq* 1 (1934) 100-103.

ones' (*gēdōlāyv*; Jon. 3:7). In the 1950s and 1960s the archives of the governors of Kalah were uncovered. The business and administrative documents are witnessed by a number of nobles besides the governor himself. Interestingly one of these documents concerning the governor of Kalah was witnessed by a man having the same name as an earlier governor of Nineveh along with five others.<sup>29</sup>

In his study of Assyrian administrative officials J.V. Kinnier Wilson states that in addition to the governor of Nineveh there would be three officials called *hazannāte* who would witness government documents. These men not only had 'single-handed charge of a city' but were also responsible for the outlying territory around the town. There would have been three of these in each of the three royal cities.<sup>30</sup> They were not top provincial officials but would certainly not be bypassed in the administration of a municipality as important as that in Jonah 3.

Interestingly these officials are sometimes called *šakin tēmi*, which means 'administrator of the decree'.<sup>31</sup> This word is related to the word for 'decree' (*ta'am*) in Jonah 3:7. It has sometimes been suggested that the use of this word with the sense 'legal document' is characteristic of late biblical Hebrew.<sup>32</sup> The fact that *tēmu* appears in Assyrian with this meaning makes this unlikely.<sup>33</sup>

### Powerful Nobles (783-745 BC)

It should be noted that we possess very few inscriptions written by the king of Assyria during the first half of the eighth century

<sup>29</sup>J.N. Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* (British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1973) 135-36

<sup>30</sup>J.V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Nimrud Wine Lists* (British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1972) 7. See also *Hazannu* in CAD, 164-65.

<sup>31</sup>CAD, *ibid*. Most of the passages cited are from Babylonian boundary stones.

<sup>32</sup>For a critical evaluation of so-called late words in Jonah see Landes, 'Linguistic Criteria'. Landes believes many words previously thought to be indices of late dating might instead be north Israelite dialectal usages.

<sup>33</sup>On *ta'am* as a late word see P. Laurence, 'Assyrian Nobles and the Book of Jonah', *TB* 37 (1986) 121, fn. 4; Landes, 'Linguistic Criteria', 156-57.

BC. Chapter 6 of Borger and Schramm's introduction to Assyrian royal inscriptions covers 781 to 745 BC. This chapter is unique in that it is largely a discussion of monuments made by Assyrian nobles rather than the king himself.<sup>34</sup> This is, of course, due to the fact that royal inscriptions from the period are a rarity. The same is true of Kataja and Whiting's work on grants, decrees and edicts of the Neo-Assyrian period. There is roughly a forty-year gap. The decrees and grants end with Adad-Nirari III (783 BC) and do not continue again until Tiglath-Pileser III (745 BC).<sup>35</sup> The only land grant bearing a possible date within this period is problematic because of the gaps in the text.<sup>36</sup>

This period of scarcity in royal record was called the 'forty lean years' by W.W. Hallo.<sup>37</sup> During this time of revolts, famines and other natural disasters, the Assyrian empire almost passed out of existence. Sometime around the great solar eclipse of 763 BC, conditions would have been optimum for the reception of Jonah's proclamation (Jon. 3:4).

During the era in which Jonah lived the Assyrian empire was broken up into different areas ruled by a few powerful nobles paying lip service to the Assyrian king.<sup>38</sup> A.K. Grayson has carried out a detailed study of Assyrian officials and power in the eighth and ninth centuries BC. He notes that a peculiar feature of this period is that a few officials gained exceptional power in the state and threatened the very

---

<sup>34</sup>R. Borger and W. Schramm, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königinschriften II* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 120-24. Postgate's *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants* considers only one royal decree for the years of Adad-Nirari III (810-783 BC); see pp. 118-20.

<sup>35</sup>L. Kataja and R. Whiting, *Decrees and Gifts of the Neo-Assyrian Period* (State Archives of Assyria XII, 1995) *passim*.

<sup>36</sup>Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants*, 26.

<sup>37</sup>W.W. Hallo, 'From Qarqar to Charchemish', in D.N. Freedman and E.F. Campbell (eds.), *Biblical Archaeologist Reader 2* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 166-69. Hallo wondered if the book of Jonah might contain a memory of the near collapse of the Assyrian empire during this time.

<sup>38</sup>A.K. Grayson, 'Studies in Neo Assyrian History II: the 8th century BC' in *Corolla Torontoensis: Studies in Honor of Ron Morton Smith* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1994) 74.

foundations of the monarchy. He used a data base of 155 officials in his study.<sup>39</sup>

These nobles, acting independently of their king, wrote their own stelae. Shamshi-ilu even wrote monuments in royal style without mentioning the king's name. A monument from this period discovered in Turkey during the 1960s gives an interesting example of a noble's power. Here it is the king (Adad-Nirari IV, 753-745 BC) and Shamshi-ilu who jointly set the parameters of the border and grant land.<sup>40</sup> This same noble had monuments boasting of his victory over Urartu in which no mention is made of the king. He does, however, present two lists of his own titles in a single text.

Shamshi-ilu does not directly claim to be king but makes various insinuations that he possesses royal sovereignty. He wages war not by the king's authority but by the command of Aššur, the Assyrian national god.<sup>41</sup> He calls his provincial capital 'the city of my lordship' (*URU bēlūtīya*).<sup>42</sup> He states that no 'previous king' (*šarri mahrē*) had dared attack this foe.<sup>43</sup> The same noble set up a victory stele only thirty miles north of Nineveh in which he describes his victories over foes from the North in extravagant language found only in royal inscriptions. In this monument he makes no mention of the king.<sup>44</sup>

Before and after the period 783-745 tax exemption is only granted by royal decree. There are, of course, no surviving examples of such grants made by the king during this period. It

<sup>39</sup>A.K. Grayson, 'Assyrian officials and power in the 9th and 8th centuries BC', *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* VII/1 (1993) 21.

<sup>40</sup>V. Donbaz, 'Two Neo-Assyrian Stelae in the Antakya and Kahramanmaraş Museums', *Annual Review of RIM Project* 8 (1990) 7.

<sup>41</sup>B. Oded has presented evidence that going to war in the name of Ashur was the prerogative of a king: 'The Command of the God as a reason for going to war in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions' in *Ah, Assyria*, 232. See also Grayson, 'Studies', 76-77.

<sup>42</sup>F. Thureau-Dangin and M. Dunand, *Til Barsip* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, 1936) 148; Garelli, 'Achievement of Tiglath-Pileser', 47, 49.

<sup>43</sup>Thureau-Dangin and Dunand, *Til Barsip*, 146.

<sup>44</sup>The text is VAS 1.69. It was briefly discussed by C.F. Lehmann-Haupt in *Materialien zur älteren Geschichte Armeniens und Mesopotamiens* (Berlin: Weideman, 1907) 45-47, 177. It will be fully published in Grayson's forthcoming RIMA 3 volume. The provenance of the stone depends on the words of the local vendor.

is therefore surprising to read on the stele of Bēl-Ḥarran-Bēl-Ušur that he grants himself tax exemption for one of his own cities.<sup>45</sup>

Such situations would be unheard of after 745 BC when the strength of the Assyrian monarchy was revived by Tiglath-Pileser III. During the period under discussion, however, it was the rule and not the exception for nobles to act like kings. It is not therefore surprising that the decree of Jonah 3:7 included nobles along with the king.

### III. Conclusion

By way of summary it should be noted that there is an intriguing body of evidence that suggests the 'king of Nineveh' in Jonah 3:6 may not have been the head of the entire kingdom of Assyria but only governor of the province of Nineveh. This would be the way the word *mlk* would probably have been interpreted in a north Israelite context. This would be especially true when it was associated with a city rather than a country.

To describe the leader in Jonah 3 as 'king of Nineveh' the author had purposely to ignore the common title 'king of Assyria' in favour of a very unusual title. Moreover the territory possessed by Nineveh in Jonah 3:3 agrees well with the actual area included in the province of Nineveh.

It is not likely that the king of the whole Assyrian nation would by-pass his own royal capital in making a decree about a key city of the heartland. This would be especially important since Nineveh was within a two day journey from his usual royal residence and capital, Kalah.

The fact that a provincial governor could make such a decree without consulting the monarch in Kalah agrees well with conditions in mid eighth century BC Assyria. It should be remembered that this is a period for which we possess few, if any, decrees written by the Assyrian king himself. The fact that he did not by-pass his provincial and municipal nobles is consistent with documents found in the governors' archives.

---

<sup>45</sup>D.D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1927) I.295-96.

Since the 'king of Nineveh' in Jonah 3:6 is anonymous, it is not possible to determine his exact identity. This article has shown, however, that the title 'king of Nineveh' is not an anachronism. The very fact that there is no occurrence of such an appellation in any late or early documents outside the book argues against this. A late author attempting to reconstruct an eighth century BC scenario would likely have been careful to use more familiar terms to describe the leader in Jonah 3:6.