

THE TYNDALE BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY LECTURE, 1977

JONAH'S NINEVEH

By Donald J. Wiseman

When I accepted the invitation to deliver this lecture, a number of considerations were in mind./1/ The least, though not without interest, was that it would be thirty years since Professor G. Aalders' Tyndale Lecture, *The Problem of the Book of Jonah* (1948), which still figures in some modern bibliographies.

Secondly, the rôle of archaeology in Old Testament studies is currently being much questioned, though the controversy is at the moment concentrated on the Patriarchal period./2/ The questioning is based on a methodology which tends to make presuppositions about the nature of the text in its final form dominate both interpretation and date, and which allows an unlimited speculation about the development of both the text and its contents both historically and theologically./3/

In this biblical studies are, at present, at variance with Ancient Near Eastern studies, where documents can usually be dated, not merely by objective criteria such as the size, shape and arrangement of the document and the script employed, but sometimes by other internal criteria, and by external factors such as dated colophons and archaeological context, as well as by comparison with other dated texts including their

- 
1. Delivered in January 1978 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London under the title 'Archaeology and the Book of Jonah'.
  2. E.g. J. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (BZAW 133. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974); J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975).
  3. So R. E. Clements, *JSS* 22 (1977) 90-92.

distinctive local handwriting./4/ Various aspects of a text, not least its literary form and content, can often be subject to rigorous comparison diachronically with similar compositions. For example, new evidence shows us that the texts sometimes labelled 'Legends of Agade', which purport to recount actual historical episodes in the time of Sargon and Naram-Sin of Agade, c. 2300 B.C., were certainly written down by the Old Babylonian period; some of the later versions (e.g. *Šar tamhari* - 'King of Battle') usually taken as a late composition, propagandistic fairy tale or historical romance can now, on the basis of new discoveries of earlier sources, be shown to be based on a serious and reliable historical record./5/

It is now increasingly recognized that there is often an interplay of sources we call historical chronicle, biography, omen type literature (i.e. historical record plus prediction), epic and that ill-defined category commonly called 'myth'. It is often impossible, and usually unwise and unnecessary, to assign elements to specific 'genres'. It is noteworthy that the increasing concern with structuralism and other features confirm that there is no basic linguistic distinction between these literary genres. This is breaking down the former reliance on a literary analysis which assigns repetitive sections, phrases or words, or standard phrases introducing direct speech, to any one author or school. This particularly applies to variants which have been shown to result from the recording of texts by those who normally spoke or sang their compositions.

- 
4. R. D. Biggs, *Or.* 43 (1973) 39-46; M. A. Powell, *Or.* 43 (1974) 398-403. A text cannot be dated only on the basis of grammar and vocabulary.
  5. *B.Arch.* 70 (1976) 103-128.

My choice of *Jonah* was perhaps influenced by the renewed trend to examine each book of the Old Testament in its archaeological context;/6/ and also by the repeated statements of commentators on the book of Jonah to the effect that 'an interesting feature is its "old world" air'./7/ Moreover, the comment by Allen that 'the book of Jonah is like some ancient pot spirited away from its stratum and site and presented to a curator as an archaeological conundrum' roused me, as did his assertion that 'a knowledge of the original situation is necessary for the interpretation of any parable addressed to its contemporaries'./8/

### *Current Interpretations*

On certain elements in the book of Jonah most modern commentators appear agreed. These include the basic division by chapters: the episode of Jonah's avoidance of the command of Yahweh to make a proclamation concerning Nineveh in that city (1:2), which led to the incident of the great fish (which occupies only three verses - 1:17; 2:1,10 - though more space in discussions); the Psalm of 2:1-9; Nineveh and its repentance (chapter 3); and Jonah's self-pity and disagreement with Yahweh (chapter 4).

The text itself is virtually unquestioned, with few manuscript variants, but its dating is less easily defined. Most argue that it cannot be later than the third century, as it is mentioned in Ben Sira (49:10) and possibly cited in Tobit (14:4,8). The upper limit is the identity of 'Jonah ben Amittai' (1:1) with the prophet of the same name from Gath-Hepher,/9/ who according to 2 Kings 24:25 prophesied to Jeroboam II (c. 786-746 B.C.) the extension of his kingdom to Davidic size.

- 
6. E.g. C. A. Moore, 'Archaeology and the Book of Esther', *B.Arch.* 38 (1975) 62-79.
  7. L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 176.
  8. *Ibid.* 188 (*italics mine*).
  9. Possibly Ḥirbet ez-Zerra' near el-Meshed, NE of Nazareth.

From the vast corpus of writings on Jonah there emerge three major schools of interpretation which may be summarized as follows:

(a) *Allegory* Jonah as 'dove' stands for Israel; his flight symbolizes the failure of God's people to fulfil their mission; Babylon is said to be the fish which swallowed God's people during the time of exile, disgorging them at the return. The latter must be hardly wrung from the episode in which this creature is clearly shown to be a divine creation, and a means of deliverance not of punishment. Allegory here would be of a different nature and extent to any elsewhere in the Old Testament or in ancient literature.

(b) *Parable* For the majority Jonah is a story with a moral and didactic aim, but scholars differ as to whether it is as a protest against narrow-minded nationalism or a profession of the universalism of God, especially in his love. Some stress the element of parody or satire,<sup>/10/</sup> or of the imaginative tale. Others have emphasized its 'missionary' outlook.<sup>/11/</sup>

If this is a parable it is unique in its length and lack of explanation compared with others in the Old Testament and in the inclusion of 'miraculous elements', absent from all other ancient Near Eastern parallels. This is especially remarkable if 'the cogeneity of the parable depends on its verisimilitude as portraying a human situation'.<sup>/12/</sup>

In practice many commentators, like Allen, define the literary form as 'a parable with certain allegorical features'. For him the 'old world air' may be part of 'the imitation of a prophetic narrative, presented as if it were an old story culled from a prophetic

- 
10. M. Burrows, *Translating and Understanding the OT* (1970) 95-97; J. A. Miles, 'Jonah as Parody', *JQR* 65 (1974-5) 168-181; so also L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 178.
  11. R. E. Clements, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *VT Supp.* 28 (1975) 16-28, challenges this strongly.
  12. D. W. B. Robinson in D. Guthrie et al. (ed.), *New Bible Commentary Revised* (London: IVP, 1970) 746.

collection'./13/ Emphasis is put upon the references back to the similarities with the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the former's mission to Sidon (1 Kings 17:8) or that of Elisha to Syria (2 Kings 5:1ff), both concerned with combating aspects of Baal worship and marked by 'miraculous' elements in a mission concerned with judgment (1 Kings 17:1) and justice. Note is made of parallels with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (גְּמֹרָה - Gen. 19:25,29) and the theme of collective punishment reminiscent of their overthrow and of the Flood, and of the moral charge of 'violence' (cf. Gen. 6:11,13). Jonah's rôle is compared with that of the divine messengers sent to announce the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:1,15). From this Allen, the first so far as I know to draw these parallels, deduces that 'this rather than any previous prophetic experience is the precedent for Jonah's mission'./14/

Commentators interpreting Jonah as parable are forced to support their view with a delineation of certain elements which are said to be characteristic of that genre. Among these, we are told, is 'surprise and hyperbole'. Surprise is a characteristic of 'a prophet's journeying to Nineveh to deliver his message' as is also 'Jonah's refusal to shoulder his prophetic burden' (though Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah also initially shrank from this commission). 'In fact this little book is a series of surprises; it is crammed with an accumulation of hair-raising and eye-popping phenomena, one after the other. The violent seastorm, the submarinelike fish in which Jonah survives as he composes a song, the mass conversion of Nineveh, the magic plant... the bombardment of the reader with surprise after surprise in a provocative manner suggests the author's intention is other than simply to describe historical facts.' While we are told these episodes are 'not impossible but improbable' it is in this vein argued that the author 'meant to arrest our attention and focus it on his message' (despite this being differently interpreted by all commentators) 'by means of a string of improbabilities'./15/ It must

---

13. L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 177; cf. p. 181.

14. *Ibid.* 176.

15. *Ibid.* 176.

be noted that these same phenomena are argued by others as tilting against any historical interpretation./16/


(c) *History* Until comparatively recent times this line of interpretation was followed by most Jewish and Christian scholars. The latter reinforced their belief in the historical nature of the narrative from the emphasis placed by Jesus Christ on the 'sign of Jonah' as prefiguring his own death and resurrection and on the repentance of the men of Nineveh in the face of Jonah's preaching as condemning the unbelief of Christ's own day (Mt. 12:39-41; Lk. 11:29-30). His assertion that 'now one greater than Jonah is here' would carry little conviction if the men of Nineveh were mythical.

Those who follow the historical interpretation may well have to rest on the fact that absence of evidence is no evidence of absence of fact; they probably do disservice to their cause if they assert unsubstantiated parallels or resort uncritically to denunciation of other hypotheses.

It is my purpose here to use archaeology (with its attendant evidence of the ancient texts it alone can unearth) to evaluate some of the hypothetical statements made against any possible historical background for the book of Jonah.

It is not feasible in a single lecture to be comprehensive, and I may well be criticized for not centring on 'the great fish', which lies outside the provenance of archaeology. I am of course aware of the references by Tiglath-pileser I (c. 1100 B.C.) to the massive and unusual fish he hunted off the Phoenician coast./17/ I do not subscribe to the view

- 
16. E.g. J. A. Bower, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai...Jonah* (ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 3-5.
  17. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions II* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976) 23,30,132 (the *nāhiru*, lit. 'blower', is described as a 'sea-horse'). Shipping activity off the Phoenician coast included a naval battle in the time of Shalmaneser V (*Semitica* 26 (1976) 71-79).

that even the name of the ancient city of Nineveh, first referred to in texts c. 2220 B.C. as *urūnina* or *urūninua* (the latter like the Heb. נִינְוָה perhaps reflecting Hurrian influence, *Nina* + *wə*), has symbolic significance. The logographic rendering of the name, used as an emblem of the goddess *Nina*, or *Nanše*, is  *ēš* + *ku<sub>6</sub>* (*nūnu*) i.e. house of fishes or masses. There is no evidence that another form of the sign was a combination of *ha* + *lam* = *zāh* 'destruction'. Extraordinary theories have been based upon this. Trumball argued that the inhabitants of Nineveh linked Jonah with an incarnation of the god *Dagan* (in reality a god of corn);/18/ others postulate a connection between this sign and the 'great fish'. No details are given how Jonah could have represented a deity to the Ninevites or how the name of a city written with a sign depicting a fish within an enclosure, said to be the uterus of the goddess *Nina*/*Ishtar*, comes to be related to the incident of a prophet rescued from within the belly of a great fish.

Archaeological evidence does, however, throw light on a number of aspects of the book of Jonah which have been the subject of some scepticism.

#### *The Size of the City of Nineveh*

It is sometimes emphasized that the references to Nineveh by the descriptive epithet 'that great city' (1:2 repeated 3:2; cf. 4:11) aim to underline its physical size, perhaps as symbolic of the magnitude of the mission which faced the prophet. Admittedly some dismiss this use of the adjective as only part of the general hyperbole or exaggeration of the writer (גדול occurs 14 times in Jonah). It is argued that emphasis is laid on the 'colossal size' of Nineveh,/19/ comparison being made usually with *Nebuchadrezzar's* boast, 'is not this great Babylon which I have built?' (Dan. 4:30). Yet the designation 'great' (גדול) of a city outside these two references is confined to one statement about Jerusalem (Jer. 22:8; 'why has *Yahweh*

---

18. H. C. Trumball, 'Jonah in Nineveh', *JBL* 11 (1892) 53-60.

19. L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 222.

done this to this great city') and the description of Gibeon in Josh. 10:2 as 'a great city like one of the royal cities', which points to the status of the city as an *important* royal capital (so NIV) rather than specifically to its physical size (Gibeon was only ten hectares in extent).<sup>/20/</sup> The interpretation of Nineveh as a large city (as indeed it was) must therefore rest on other references.

Jonah 3:3, a parenthesis, describes Nineveh as עִיר גְּדוֹלָה לֵאלֹהִים מְהֻלָּךְ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים interpreted as 'great to God', a use of אֱלֹהִים as a means of expressing the superlative, 'a very great city', though others have argued for 'God-sized', 'a divinely great city', i.e. a vast city, even by God's standards.<sup>/21/</sup> It is not impossible that here the author is stressing the polytheism of Nineveh with its worship of many gods, borne out by the presence of temples dedicated to the gods Nabû, Aššur, Adad and Ninurta in addition to Ishtar of Nineveh and others throughout its history.

This leaves the description of Nineveh as a 'city of a going of three days', i.e. it took three days to cross (3:3). Only here is מְהֻלָּךְ normally taken to be a linear measure denoting a length of road or journey. In Neh. 2:6 Artaxerxes would well know the distance and length of time needed to travel from Babylon to Palestine, a route, at least via Samaria, customarily taken by the mounted Persian postal courier service. His question concerned the length of Nehemiah's absence from his duties: 'How long will your journey be and when will you return?'. The use of the noun in Ezekiel (42:4 etc.) and Zechariah (3:7) is of a special architectural feature of 10 cubits or so, and may refer to a raised covered way between buildings. It can be asked whether, since the Akkadian noun *mālakum* is used frequently and early,<sup>/22/</sup> there is sufficient ground for classifying the seven occurrences of מְהֻלָּךְ in Biblical Hebrew as 'late'.<sup>/23/</sup> What can also be

- 
20. J. B. Pritchard, *Gibeon* (Princeton UP, 1962) 12.
  21. L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 221; cf. D. Winton Thomas VT 3 (1953) 210-6 for the superlative.
  22. W. von Soden, *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (1972) 594.
  23. So *BDB ad. loc.*



questioned is whether the 'three days' necessarily denotes a journey time. Even if it does so the phrase 'a three day journey' may not necessarily denote the size of the city. This has been taken to mean different things:

(a) *The size of the city itself*, whether its diameter or circumference. But even at the modest designation of a day's walk at 17 miles per day this would be a distance of over 50 miles. There is no mention of the means of travel, and travellers of status from Syro-Palestine usually rode. The maximum axis of Nineveh at any period was much less than three miles.

Following the work of Layard at Nineveh in 1843 it was customary to suggest that the distance might reflect the circumference of the walls after Sennacherib's enlargement of the city from an area of 9300 cubits to 12,515, which it was assumed gave walls of a circumference of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles./24/ I, probably wrongly, revived this view following our survey in 1951 of the  $4\frac{1}{2}$  mile circuit of walls at Nimrud (Calah), a city of half the size of Nineveh, which lies 22 miles to the south./25/ I do not know of any description of the size of an ancient city by the circuit of its walls. Herodotus' description of Babylon describes the walls only as part of its architectural features./26/ Certainly the walls of Nineveh as so far excavated and restored are an imposing testimony to the grandeur of the ancient capital. Even a day's journey would mark an enormous city and the largest city of the later empires in the same land (Samarra) is at the most 10 km at its longest dimension. Jonah (3:4) set out on a day's journey to the city but there is no textual evidence that 'Jonah trudges for a whole day and yet he has not

- 
24. On the size of the walls and city of Nineveh see F. Jones, 'The Topography of Nineveh', *JRAS* 15 (1855) 295-324 (1,800 acres, cf. Nimrud 890 acres); R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, *A Century of Exploration at Nineveh* (1929) 120-125; T. Madhloum, 'Excavations at Nineveh', *Sumer* 23 (1967) 76-82.
  25. *Iraq* 14 (1952) 28.
  26. O. E. Ravn, *Herodotus' Description of Babylon* (Copenhagen: Arnold Busck, 1942) 16-24.

reached the heart of the city',/27/ or that he preached his message in various areas./28/ It is as likely that the 'three day' journey could refer to the day of arrival in the city, followed by the customary day of visiting, business and rest, then the day of departure. This suggestion would accord with the ancient oriental practice of hospitality whereby the first day is for arrival, the second for the primary purpose of the visit and the third for return. This is in keeping also with the time-scale of the event of which the 'sign of Jonah' was taken as a parallel, both the three days and nights in the ordeal of the deep (Jonah 1:17; cf. 2:6) and of our Lord's visit to Hades (Mt. 12:38-40).

(b) *The size of the administrative district* The possibility that the 'city of three days' journey' might be a reference to a metropolitan district comprising Nineveh itself, Aššur, Calah (Nimrud) and even Dūr-Sarrukēn (Khorsabad), all capital cities within 1-3 days' walk of each other, has long been an attractive explanation. Research shows that all these three major cities were continually occupied in the period c. 850-614 B.C. and were never mutually exclusive. For much of this time they housed many exiles and prisoners engaged on building activity. While the administrative texts of this period show that returns (e.g. for census, taxes, etc.) were made to one major centre, usually but not always Nineveh, there is not yet conclusive evidence from Assyrian administrative texts that Nineveh was viewed in this light. A possible exception might be the presence of the Harran census texts within the capital's archives./29/ I myself have given wide advocacy to this view of the extent of Nineveh by my suggestion

- 
27. L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 222.
  28. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the OT* (London: IVP, 1970) 909.
  29. F. W. Fales, *Censimenti e catasti di epoca neo-assira* (Rome, 1973) 8-12.

that the area which stretched 30-60 miles in diameter could be included in the Hebrew text, whose use of נִינְוָה in each case could not, like an Assyrian text distinguish between the metropolis proper (<sup>ā</sup>*ninua*), and the whole district (*ninua*<sup>ki</sup>) or both (<sup>ā</sup>*ninua*<sup>ki</sup>), since prefix and postfix determinatives are not normally employed in Hebrew as in Assyrian./30/ This interpretation remains possible.

### *The Population of Nineveh*

The other possible indication of the size of Nineveh is derived from its designation as a place of 'more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and much cattle' (4: 11). This phrase has been taken traditionally to mean children - thus leading to population estimates ranging up to 600,000 for the city. But there is no evidence known to me of the use of this expression to denote infants.

Many Jewish/31/ and Christian interpreters have argued, however, that this stands for the whole population, who were characterized as unable to distinguish between various forms of religion, especially monotheism (the right) and polytheism seen in nature, and the worship of the constellations which was a mark of the Assyrians. 'The Ninevites deserve compassion as virtual children compared with the Jews'; they were 'spiritual minors'. /32/

The expression נִינְוָה occurs only three times in the Old Testament (including once without נִינְוָה taken in this way, Deut. 1:39)./33/ The meaning 'to distinguish, discriminate' derives from 2 Sam. 19:36 where 80-year-old Barzillai protests that he is unable to taste food and wine and so judge what is good or bad. The

---

30. NBD, 889; quoted also by R. K. Harrison, *op. cit.* 909.

31. *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11 (1971) 821.

32. L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 234-5.

33. J. Barr, *JSS* 15 (1976), 18ff argues for נִינְוָה as 'inclusive'.

semantic range of יָדָא is now more widely understood as including 'to recognize as dominant' in special treaty covenant relationships./34/ Negatively it also denotes those who cannot make a decision which would enable them to become still, quiet and at rest, which is apt for Jonah 4:11./35/

The expression 'right hand' and 'left hand' in both Hebrew and Akkadian, apart from its use literally or geographically for south and north (Gen. 13:9), occurs figuratively only five times and always of not deviating to the right or left, i.e. turning aside from the divine law and revelation. Thus the stress in 4:11 may be that the people cannot bear responsibility since they lack the knowledge of the law of Yahweh. The use of the phrase 'right hand and left hand' in Babylonian texts as a synonym for 'truth and justice' or 'law and order' is significant here./36/

It is, however, usually taken that the figure 120,000 is to be understood in a general way as a very large number thus denoting 'a teeming population, myriads of creatures for whom God cared and dumb animals galore'. /37/

Unless we are to dismiss Jonah 4:11, as some do, as part of the exaggeration of the Book of Jonah, some attention must be paid to the archaeological evidence for the size of population of ancient cities. In April 1951 we discovered at Calah (Nimrud) a stela of king Aššur-nāṣir-apli II which made a statement of the large numbers of persons he entertained at the opening of his new city, palaces and temples in 865 B.C.,/38/ much as did Solomon

- 
34. BASOR 184 (1966) 36-8.
  35. J. A. Emerton, JSS 15 (1976) 145-180.
  36. D. J. Wiseman, 'Law and order in OT Times', Vox Evangelica 8 (1973) 3ff. For the equation of 'right and left' with *d<sub>k</sub>ittum* u *d<sub>m</sub>ēšarum* see references in CAD 10 (M/II) (1977) 117-8.
  37. L. C. Allen, op. cit. 234.
  38. This revised date follows J. A. Brinkman, A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia, An. Or. 43 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1968), 186f, n. 1143.

(1 Kings 8:65-66) and Sennacherib later./39/ He claimed a total of 69,574 persons entertained for ten days. In publishing this text six months after its discovery I wrote, 'If this (69,574) is a true census figure it compares with the figure of 120,000 given by Jonah (iv:11) as the population of Nineveh whose walls enclose an area twice that of Kalhu (Biblical Calah).'/40/ I discussed, and demonstrated, this idea with Mallowan, who directed the expedition, and he quoted it repeatedly,/41/ as have others since.

From further research I now think that I may have over-estimated the population of Calah. The guests there are precisely described as '47,074 workmen and women summoned from all the districts of my land; 5,000 high officials, the delegates from... (here the text names 12 localities including Syrians, Phoenicians, and peoples from the West) ... and 16,000 souls from Calah itself and 1,500 *zarīqu*-officials from all my palaces. A total of 69,574'. (lines 141-148). Since the 'happy peoples of all the lands were sent to their homes with rejoicing' (lines 153-4), this agrees with the requirement that neighbouring cities and provinces should provide help for such major building projects and that on completion of the work the workers should return home. The only exception would be that part of the labour brought in as prisoners of war who were then allocated to high officials within and outside the city./42/ Moreover the *zarīqu*-officials may have included some at least who would have returned to Aššur-nāṣir-apli's other royal establishments (including Nineveh) as implied by *ekallātia kališina* (lines

- 
39. D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago, 1924) 116, lines 65-76.
  40. D. J. Wiseman, *Iraq* 14 (1952) 28.
  41. E.g. in his preliminary reports, *Illustrated London News* July 28 1952; *Iraq* 14 (1952) 20-22; and later *Nimrud and its Remains* (London: Collins, 1966) 72, and his 1969 Schweich Lectures (unpublished).
  42. D. J. Wiseman, 'Everyday Life in an ancient Assyrian Capital City', the second Bonham Carter Memorial Lecture given to the British School of Archaeology in Iraq on 22 June 1977 (as yet unpublished).

148-9). This might give an estimated population for Calah of say 16,000 locals, 1,000 officials and 1,000 foreigners employed, as in David's capital, in the royal bodyguard, i.e. c. 18,000 to which some addition for dependants is required.

This text is the only one from the ancient Near East giving precise figures for such occasions. The population figure proposed for the upper and lower towns of Ebla (260,000) is not so far supported either by a survey of Tell Mardih or from published texts./43/ The number may turn out to be an estimate based on population figures for a region round the city. Ishida argues for a population of Jerusalem in the time of David's major development there of 5,680. This comprised 40 members of the royal family, with 100 servants, 600 men of the standing army and a like number of foreign mercenaries, plus officials, clerks and their household members which he estimates at 4,260. He indicates that this compares almost exactly with the population of the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1972 census with a density of c. 127-664 persons per hectare. /44/

Many who take the 120,000 as a general figure, symbolic of the large population of Nineveh, support this on the widely held assumption that the use of הָיָה in 3:3 implies that the city was no more and details would rely upon distant memory. But the study now quoted in support of the Qal perfect in prose as denoting completed action in a statement about the past does not do full justice to all its occurrences, nor does it allow for the position of the verb here following the subject in emphatic position following *wāw*, i.e. 'Nineveh was a very great city'./45/ This alone cannot be the basis for dating the story late.

#### *The Mass Repentance of Nineveh*

First, a word about the possibility of foreign visiting prophets. Men from one city-state entering another for

43. G. Pettinato, *B.Arch.* 39 (1976) 47.

44. T. Ishida, *Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel* (BZAW 142. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977) 133.

45. G. S. Ogden, *VT* 21 (1971) 451-2.

specialist advice whether political, medical or for religious purposes are now attested from the Mari texts onwards./46/ Prophets, like the Assyrian *barû* seers, were among delegations which both accompanied and advised armies (as with Ahab and Ben-hadad and his coalition of 32 kings (1 Kings 20:13,28) and Jehoshaphat going to war (1 Kings 22:6) with his four hundred prophets)./47/ Indeed Jonah ben Amittai is cited in such a context in 2 Kings 14:25. Such men were also included among the delegations sent from one country to another to negotiate terms of inter-state treaties/48/ which, even if of the vassal-type, involved the overlord in certain obligations. Research shows that there were no resident ambassadors from foreign powers at the Assyrian court throughout the first millennium B.C. and contact between major powers was by special messenger (*mār šipri*) as the occasion required. The 5,000 *šerāni* (LÜ.MAH.MEŠ) at the Calah ceremony were such persons. The approach of these messengers or delegates, sometimes included in groups of up to 1,000 persons, was duly monitored and reported to the palace, e.g. 'The delegate from Cilicia is spending the night at Kar-Shalmaneser'. 'The *šerāni*-officials from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab and Ammon entered Calah on the 12th.'/49/ Another foreigner is at Nisibin, stated to be the head of the 'Nineveh road', interestingly enough three days' journey from the capital/50/ or 'the men from Karalla have entered Kaksa, a day's march from the city'.

- 
46. E.g. H. Finet, 'Les Médecins au royaume de Mari', *Annuaire de l'Institut de Phil. et d'Hist. Orient. et Slaves* 14 (1954-7) 126,130.
  47. ARM II 22:24 (*bārû* with troops).
  48. References sub *bārû*, CAD 2 (B) (1965) 123-5; sub *āpilu*, CAD 1 A/II (1968) 170 (cf. also TCL 18 155:26 for the instance of a diviner's approach to the palace. That these officials were sent by foreign countries is shown by the use of *šaprūti*).
  49. Iraq 20 (1958) 187 (No. XL, ND. 2656, 5'-10''); 17 (1955) 134-8 (No. XVI, ND. 2765 r.34-37).
  50. Text quoted in T. G. Pinches, *The Old Testament in the light of the historical records of Assyria and Babylonia* (London: SPCK, 1902), 384-5.

Sometimes the governor of a city en route to Nineveh (e.g. Guzana, Gozan) enquires whether he should send on a messenger to the palace, and asks if he will be entertained at royal expense. All such delegates brought in audience-gifts (*nāmurtu*) and were received by both officials and palace. There is therefore no difficulty in a prophet being received by the leaders of the city (3:5), though he would probably have had to establish his *bona fides* first.

Jonah's prophecy or message 'In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown' (3:4) reads like the apodosis of a prediction of a type readily understandable to the Assyrians. Since it 'touched, affected' the king (3:6; יָלַח has this sense here rather than as a hapax ('came to' the king; so AV), and was used of divine judgment, cf. Job 4:5; Jer. 51:9), he or his message would be brought to the king. The fact that the latter sat on the throne (3:6) may also indicate that the prophet was received in official audience. The immediate response shows clearly that the message was taken as affecting not only the city of Nineveh, as was obvious from the statement, but also the king and his position. The only situations which fulfil these criteria in Assyrian omens are invasion of the land by an enemy, divine wrath attested by a major, i.e. total, solar eclipse, famine accompanied by an epidemic, and flood.

(a) *Invasion*. There is only one other instance in the Old Testament of a call to mass fasting and repentance as in Jonah 3:7. Prior to the reading of Baruch's scroll in Jerusalem in the ninth month of Jehoiakim's fifth year the call went out to all the people of Jerusalem and to all who had come into it from the villages of Judah to take such action (Jer. 36:9). The precise date (604 B.C.) associates this with the Babylonian advance of that year recorded in the Babylonian Chronicle.<sup>51</sup> The action was presumably successful in that in the event the Babylonians turned away from Jerusalem and against a coastal city whose name is broken in the text, but is possibly Ashkelon or Ashdod.<sup>52</sup> An Aramaic papyrus letter from Saqqara

51. D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1956) 28.
52. A. Malamat *IEJ* 18 (1968) 142-3; W. H. Shea, *BASOR* 223 (1976) 61 argues for Aphek.



dating from this time is an appeal from one such city for help against the approaching enemy. However, so far as we know, the threat of an invasion rarely affected Nineveh until towards the end of its long history in 614-612 B.C.

(b) *A total solar eclipse.* Throughout the ancient Near East, from at least c. 1000 B.C., though probably from as early as the Old Babylonian period, planetary phenomena were recorded. Observations were connected with historical events and from this arose a reference work series which came to be used also for predictive purposes: the series *Enuma Anu Enlil* consists of seventy or more tablets of which Tablets 16-22 relate what will happen in the event of 'a solar eclipse which turns day into night'. Tablet 23 covers the same subject with different principles and interpretative approach resulting in more general prognostications. Another omen series (*dšamaš bēl dīnim*) deals with the same subject./53/ The rarity of the total eclipse always portended something of special significance and pointed to a major public disaster. While affecting individuals the predictions were not aimed at them but at the country as a whole or at the royal family and nobles and at the overthrow of the dynasty and city. These so-called 'judicial omens' were copied also in the West./54/ Such interest in celestial observations is attested both at Ugarit/55/ and in the times of the judges when there were those who knew the course of the stars (Judges 5:21). The reversal of the sun's shadow by ten degrees in the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20: 10-11) might have been related to a partial eclipse. A total eclipse, recorded for the 26th of the month Siwan in the seventh year (of Simaš-Šipak) when 'the day was turned to night and fire was seen in the midst of

- 
53. E. F. Weidner, 'Die astrologische Serie Enūma Anu Enlil', *Afo* 14 (1941/4) 172-195; 17 (1954-6) 71-81 (tablets 1-22).  
 54. D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (London: British School of Archaeology at Ankara, 1953) Nos. 451-2; cf. *RA* 50 (1956) 12.  
 55. *I Achat* 50 194, 201.

heaven', has been calculated as May 9th 1012 B.C./56/ The clearest attested solar eclipse, which has since become the earliest astronomically fixed date in Assyrian history, occurred in the eponymate of Bur-Sagale, governor of Guzana in the tenth year of Ashur-dān III, computed as June 15th, 763 B.C.,/57/ significantly during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753) and the lifetime of Jonah ben Amittai.

The predictions related to such eclipses usually, as recorded in the Nineveh versions of *Enuma Anu Enlil*, include such statements as 'the king will be deposed and killed and a worthless fellow seize the throne'; 'the king will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine'; 'a deity will strike the king and fire consume the land'; 'the city-walls will be destroyed'./58/ All these were in keeping with the divine warnings seen through famine, pestilence, wild animals and the flood known throughout the ancient Near East (e.g. in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Old Testament).

In Assyria reports were sent in to the royal palace at Nineveh by the leaders of teams of ten experts located at Ashur, Calah and at Nineveh itself. Factual statements and predictions were always given in brief form and presumably elaborated by the Chief Secretary and interpreted orally. Interpreters might differ among themselves. One Aqqulanu discredits the report of another as 'worthless omens'; in another letter Mār-Ištar writes, 'Heaven forbid that some expert should tell the king my lord something wrong about the meaning of an eclipse which predicted the death of the king of Amurru'. 'Yesterday Ištar-šum-ereš (Deputy Secretary of State) got into an argument with Nabû-ahhē-eriba inside

- 
56. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1975) 135 (No. 17 ii 14). I owe the calculated dates to Dr. F. R. Stephenson of the School of Physics, University of Newcastle.
  57. *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* II (1938) 430 (sub Eponymen).
  58. My translations of apodoses from the series *Enuma Anu Enlil*.

the palace about the observation of the planet about which the king has written me. They left in the evening, have both made the observation, examined its meaning and were satisfied./59/

It is noteworthy that comment and interpretation was provided by observers from outside Assyria, notably Babylonia but possibly from other places also. These explain the action to be taken in the event of a total eclipse. A total eclipse is to be a time of solemn fasting when the king hands over the throne to a substitute king (of Nineveh) until the danger passes. The *šar puhi* ritual is now well attested./60/ 'The substitute king of the city took the signs on himself. Because of what reason had you enthroned a substitute king?'/61/ A related series of omens, *šumma ālu*, stating the effects of the divine wrath upon the city, concentrates on the actions of animals also at such a time. Thus all prognostications in the Assyrian series telling of solar eclipses specify their effect on the king, animals and the land, as does Jonah (3:7-8), which also specifies that the king stepped down from the throne and laid aside his royal robes (3:6).

(c) *Earthquakes*. An earthquake (*rîbu*) was attributed to divine wrath. 'When the god Adad is angry the earth trembles':/62/ 'When you O god (Ninurta) march, heaven and earth quake'./63/ Factual reports of earthquakes were made to the royal court by the same experts as recorded eclipses for Nineveh,/64/ with recommendation for the ritual to be observed so 'that the gods will cause it to pass away'. One scribe asks, 'Were there no earthquakes in the time of the king's father and forefathers? As for

- 
59. The examples are taken from A. L. Oppenheim, 'Divination and Celestial Observation in the late Assyrian Empire', *Centaurus* 14 (1969) 97-135.
  60. W. G. Lambert, *Afo* 18 (1957) 288f; 19 (1960) 119; S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, AOAT 5.1 (Neukirchen, 1970) Nos. 26-30.
  61. S. Parpola, *op. cit.*, No. 30, 13-14.
  62. IV R 2 28 No. 2a, 11-12.
  63. II R 19a 3-4.
  64. *Iraq* 4 (1937) 186-9.

me since I was then so young, I did not notice earthquakes'. Earthquakes are recorded at Nineveh in the time of Shalmaneser I, Aššur-rēša-iši, and for the month Siwan in the reign of Aššur-dān (possibly the contemporary of Jeroboam)./65/

A major earthquake was indeed a significant happening in the reign of Jeroboam according to Amos 1:1 ('In the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake'). Its effect was noted by Isaiah (6:4) and seen by Zechariah as symbolic of coming judgment, 'You shall flee as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. And Yahweh shall come...' (14:5). An earthquake was taken as a divine manifestation (1 Kings 19:11-12 - though there Yahweh was not in the earthquake) which coincided with strong winds and preceded fire. 'You shall be visited by Yahweh S<sup>e</sup>baoth with thunder and with earthquakes, with a great noise, storm and tempest and exceedingly destructive fire' (Isa. 29:6). It heralded collective punishment (1 Sam. 14:15; Isa. 5:25; Nah. 1:5; Amos 9:1) and thus the end of the age (Ezk. 38:19-23).

Throughout the Old Testament, as in Assyrian texts, an earthquake was taken as a portent affecting the king and his kingdom and linked with a prophetic interpretation of it. Because of it a foreign prophet Elijah will go to Damascus, Syria, his own nation's scourge and oppressor, to anoint a new king Hazael (1 Kings 19:15). When Haggai says that once again Yahweh S<sup>e</sup>baoth will cause a quake in the heavens and earth affecting both dry land and sea this 'will shake all nations' (2:5,7). By Zerubbabel this was taken as a message concerning the overthrow of foreign nations: 'I will shake the heavens and the earth and will overthrow royal thrones and will destroy the power of foreign kingdoms' (Hag. 2:21). Jeremiah, though perhaps figuratively, foresaw the earth quaking at the sound of the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. (50:46).

It is to be noted that Jonah's pointed prophecy, 'In 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown (נִפֹּחַ)', would remind

his Jewish hearers of the sudden overthrow of a city such as Sodom (Gen. 19:21,25,29; cf. Dt. 29:23), or of a people (Ammon, 2 Sam. 10:3) or of the wicked in general (Amos 4:11). They would realize that the word is primarily used of a change whether of throne (Hag. 2:27) or of attitude, heart or situation. Only here is the Niphal נִפְּלָה used of the overthrow of a city and its use may involve overtones, or even a play of meanings with 'upheaval' and 'change of heart', of which the prophet was later to accuse Yahweh.

An Assyrian hearer would also interpret Jonah's prophecy or omen (*adi arbât ūmē āl<sup>ki</sup> ninua<sup>ki</sup> innabak*) in a similar ambivalent way. *Abāku* was used both for 'to overthrow, bring to judgment, take away (of men and animals)' and 'to turn upside down';/66/ in the Niph'al (IV theme) 'to be reversed, change of behaviour and judgment on sin'./67/ It is so used in an apodosis relating to a solar eclipse ('the king will be driven from the throne')/68/ and in the latter sense 'I forgave (changed, reversed) his countless sins and disregarded his offence'./69/ Such a double meaning or word play on 'overturn' and 'change of heart' of which the prophet was to accuse Yahweh (ch. 4) would also be in the minds of the Assyrian wise men. This old view has much to commend it and it is not for us today to think it 'oversubtle'./70/

While it is not usual for Assyrian predictions of national disaster through eclipse, earthquake, famine, fire or flood to have a specific period of time associated with them, some do./71/ Though 'forty days' could be a general designation for a month or more its use in the Old Testament in association with fasting and waiting (1 Kgs. 19:8; Exod. 24:18; cf. Num. 13:25, 14:34) may be applicable here also.

- 
66. CAD 1 A/II 8-9 (some argue for a differentiation of two separate roots *abāku*).
  67. R. Borger, *Asarhaddon* 41 i 23; cf. *LKA* 29q 13.
  68. A. Virolleaud, *Astrologie Chaldéenne: Samas* 31, 59; 9, 48.
  69. H. Winckler, *Sargon* pl. 32:51; A. Lie, *Sargon* 89.
  70. As does L. C. Allen, *op. cit.* 222, n. 14.
  71. Omens may project 'a certain time' for fulfilment. This is common, with dates 2-32 days ahead, in medical omens (R. Labat, *Traité akkadien de diagnostics et pronostics médicaux* (1951) 12:17; 13,23, 27; 17:25,75).

(d) *Famine*. Famine and epidemics were another sign of divine wrath which could lead to mass repentance and mourning to avert them. It may be asked whether the strict regime enjoined in Jonah 3:7 may not be associated with either an absence of supplies, perhaps due to loss through flood and contaminated water, as predicted in other Assyrian omen texts. It may be no coincidence that among the references to the reign of Aššur-dān III of Assyria in the eponym lists are several to famine (*mutanu*) whether at the beginning and end of, or throughout, a period of seven years. These notices are in addition to those indicating the total solar eclipse and other upheavals and revolts. Brinkman has shown that these phenomena were similarly associated in a later time when there was also 'no king in the land'. It will be seen that in the days of Jeroboam II, when Jonah ben Amittai would be telling of an expansion of Israel which would lead to contact with Assyria, external records allow for those very significant events which would turn Assyria to repentance.

#### *The Historical Setting*

It has been suggested that the time of Jeroboam II and his prophet Jonah ben Amittai coincided with a period of Assyrian weakness./72/ Adad-nērāri III (810-783 B.C.), according to the Rimah stela, exacted recognition from Ia'usu (Joash) of Samaria and this could well have been an occasion for the exchange of diplomatic missions./73/ As has been shown, in the reign of his successor Aššur-dān III there was famine in 765, recurring in, or lasting to, 759 B.C. In 763 there occurred the ominous solar eclipse. All this gave rise to rebellions in various cities until 758 B.C. when the king went to Guzana (Gozan) and thereafter stayed for two years quietly in his land. It may be that the 'calamity and violence' of Jonah 3:8 could refer to such a time, for his initial call had been to 'Go to Nineveh and make a proclamation about it, for their calamity has come to my notice' (1:2). It is not

- 
72. E.g. W. W. Hallo and W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971) 132.
  73. S. Page, *Iraq* 30 (1968) 148, 8; see also D. J. Wiseman, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* V (1977) 281.

impossible that the message from an unnamed Assyrian king to Mannu-ki-Aššur, the Governor of Guzana from 793 B.C., comes from this reign. 'Decree of the king. You and all the people, your land, your meadows will mourn and pray for three days before the god Adad and repent. You will perform the purification rites so that there may be rest (*qulū*, silence).'/74/ The same might apply to a royal letter that 'this mourning in the month Siwan concerns all the people of the land'./75/ The association of the king and his nobles in a decree (Jonah 3:7) could be a consequence of a period of interregnum (*šar puhi*) and does not necessarily reflect a late (Persian) custom as some have supposed.

It is submitted that this survey of some of the events which might lie behind the account of Jonah's visit to Nineveh supports the tradition that many features in the narrative exhibit an intimate and accurate knowledge of Assyria which could stem from an historical event as early as the eighth century B.C. The story of Jonah need not be considered as a late story or parable, valuable and long lasting as many of the lessons and interpretations derived from it have been, and will doubtless continue to be, for Jew, Christian and Muslim alike.

---

74. E. F. Weidner, *The Inscriptions from Tell Halaf* (Afo Beih. 6, 1940) 13f, No. 5.

75. ABL 518, 5.