



# GOD'S MESSAGE *for* NINEVEH

BY BRYAN E. BEYER

A tributary of the Tigris River at  
modern Diyarbakir, Eastern Turkey.



**T**HE BOOK OF JONAH records a most unusual event. God actually called one of His prophets to travel to another country to prophesy His message to its citizens! Many prophets spoke words of judgment against other nations (Isa. 13–23; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32), but no other Old Testament prophet specifically received God’s commission to visit and denounce a pagan city. Furthermore, the people to whom Jonah spoke actually listened to him!

Ancient Nineveh lay approximately 500 miles northeast of Jonah’s home in Galilee. The city occupied the west bank of the Tigris River in a region that today comprises part of Iraq. The Bible first mentions Nineveh in Genesis 10:11-12 in connection with Nimrod, “a mighty hunter before the Lord” (Gen. 10:9, NIV) but gives no other details about the city. The city did not become Assyria’s capital until much later—toward the end of the eighth century B.C.

Archaeological excavations at Nineveh (modern name Tel Kuyunjik, pronounced Koo-YOON-jik) began in 1842 and continued for about 30 years under the leadership of several different archaeologists. Those who excavated there found impressive evidence of Assyria’s greatness. King Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) built a palace on the southwestern portion of the site. The palace covered 5 acres and boasted 71 rooms. The palace walls portrayed battle scenes from Assyrian conquests, including the siege of Lachish, an important city of Judah.

Ashurbanipal (669-628 B.C.), one of Assyria’s last kings, later built a palace of his own on a northern portion of the site. His library—a collection of 20,000 tablets—preserved great works of literature, as well as letters, religious texts, and royal court

records. Much of what we know of Assyria’s history comes from this amazing collection.

The Assyrians were highly skilled in warfare and often oppressed their subjects and treated captives of war cruelly. The inscriptions of Assyrian kings recorded their boasts of burning cities, terrorizing its peoples, and killing those who led the revolts against them.<sup>1</sup> On Assyrian palace walls, reliefs (three-dimensional wall-carvings) portrayed the execution of conquered enemies. Cruelty and ter-



**Above:** This panel from the North Palace at Nineveh shows Ashurbanipal’s garden. Court officials holding double sticks oversee the proceedings. Musicians play a lyre, a vertical harp, and double pipes.  
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTODAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (508/34)

ror provided frightening deterrents to all who might consider challenging Assyria’s right to rule.

Old Testament prophets likewise described Assyria’s military cunning. Isaiah said Assyria’s purpose was to destroy and deal treacherously with its enemies (Isa. 10:7; 33:1). The Assyrians captured booty, seized plunder, and trampled conquered people into the ground (10:6). Their haughtiness and pride displayed themselves quite clearly as the citizens and leaders alike boasted of their own

power as the key to their success (10:8-13; 36:4-5; 37:24-25). They taunted those they opposed, sometimes resorting to disgusting word pictures to demoralize their foes (36:12). They mocked the God of Israel and blasphemed His name (37:10,22,23). At the same time, they invoked His name in their propaganda campaigns if it suited their military purposes (36:10).

Nahum, whose book focused on God’s judgment against Assyria, especially highlighted Nineveh’s wickedness. Nineveh had plotted evil against the Lord and fully deserved His contempt (Nah. 1:11,14). Its army exhibited an impressive appearance—flashing shields, mighty warriors, and chariots that raced madly through its streets (2:3-4; 3:2-3). Their ferocity compared with that of lions (2:11-12)! Nahum also decried the city as being bloody and full of lies (3:1). His references to harlotries and sorceries (v. 4) denoted both sexual and spiritual impurity and immorality. In times of battle, Assyria’s army humiliated and demoralized its enemies, binding great men in fetters and even dashing children to pieces (v. 10). Nahum

announced that the same judgment Nineveh had inflicted on its enemies would soon befall Nineveh and its people.

Interestingly, despite Assyria’s cruelty, the prophet Isaiah also depicted Assyria as God’s instrument of judgment against His own people. Isaiah described Assyria as the rod of God’s anger—a rod the Lord used to judge Israel and Judah (Isa. 10:5-6). The Lord had actually won Assyria’s victories as He guided the course of history (37:26-27), granting Assyria dominion in accordance with His plan. Ironically, Assyrian leaders never realized this fact, but instead boasted in power they thought originated with



themselves (10:7-11; 37:24-25).

Jonah probably ministered during the early eighth century B.C.—based on a reference to him in 2 Kings 14:25. If so, he may have prophesied during the time of Adad-nirari III of Assyria (810-783 B.C.). Adad-nirari III extended his influence into Palestine and received tribute from Jehoash, Israel's king. Moreover, his defeat of Damascus probably rescued God's people from Syrian domination. Some interpreters believe he was the unnamed "savior" described in 2 Kings 13:5.

Approximately 40 years after Adad-nirari III's death, Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 B.C.) came to power and elevated Assyria to the status of empire. He incorporated local

conquered territories into provinces for more effective administration. He also established the practice of deporting and/or intermixing conquered peoples into new regions of the empire (2 Kings 17:24). Under Tiglath-pileser III's rule, Assyria rose to new heights of domination and eventually incorporated both Israel and Judah under its control (2 Chron. 28:16,20-25).

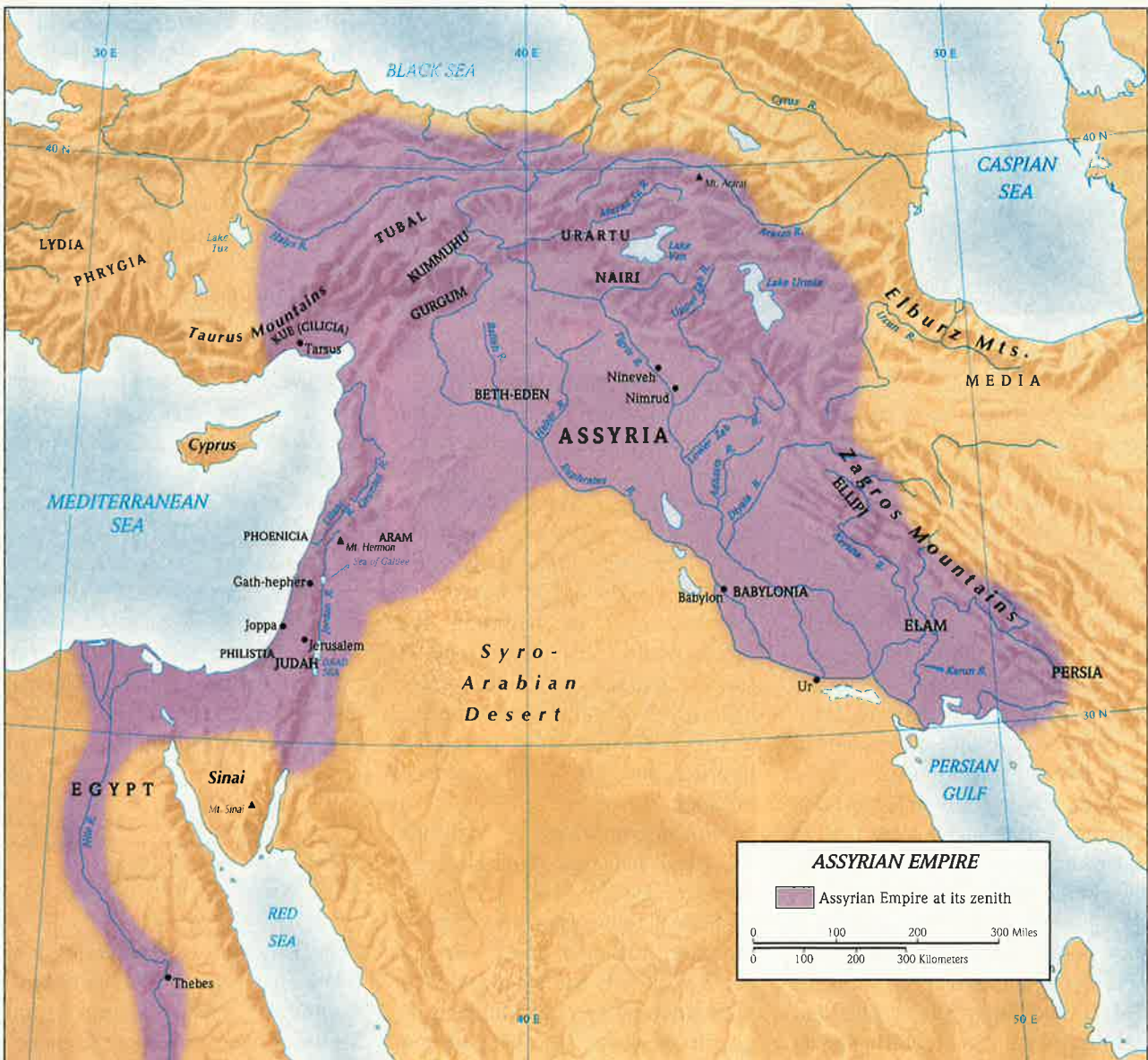
We do not know exactly when Jonah prophesied to Nineveh, since the Book of Jonah does not provide the name of Nineveh's king (Jonah 3:6). Some interpreters have argued that Assyria must have been experiencing a time of severe weakness when Jonah appeared at Nineveh. They believe no leading city of an

empire as mighty as Assyria would have listened to a foreign prophet—especially a populace with such nationalistic fervor as its own literature attests. They further find it inconceivable that a strong Assyrian king would humble himself before a Hebrew prophet. Interpreters who hold this view usually date the time of Jonah's visitation between Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-pileser III, when Assyria was not as strong.

Other interpreters argue that Jonah's message could have come at virtually any time due to the nature of

## LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Jonah 2:10–3:10







ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS (7/7/06)

**Left:** Gypsum cast replicas of the original stone human-headed winged bulls that graced the palace of Ashurnasirpal II, one of the earlier rulers of Assyria (883-859 B.C.). Nineveh was the the Assyrian capital.

had continued. They, therefore, may have concluded that some unknown deity must have brought the existing problems on the city. When a Hebrew prophet appeared and announced Nineveh's overthrow in 40 days, the leaders may have decided Jonah's appearance provided the answer they sought. Under such circumstances, the people's belief and the king's edict—although surprising and perhaps exceptional—would have been in keeping with the perspective of a polytheistic community desperate to determine a solution to its problems (Jonah 3:7-9). God responded to their spiritual gropings by sparing the city (v. 10), an act of grace Jonah did not understand and deeply resented. Centuries later, Jesus humbled the religious leaders of His day by pointing out the repentance of the Ninevites during Jonah's days (Matt. 12:41-42). Contrastingly, the Ninevites had listened to Jonah, but Jesus received little positive response from His audience.

Unfortunately, Nineveh's response to Jonah's preaching proved short-lived. The Assyrian Empire continued to weaken throughout the latter half of the seventh century B.C. Meanwhile, Babylon asserted its independence in 626 B.C. under the leadership of Nabopolassar, whose son Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 B.C.) would take the Chaldean Empire to new heights. In 612 B.C., however, a coalition of Medes and Chaldeans sacked Nineveh, fulfilling the prophetic words of both Zephaniah and Nahum (Zeph. 2:13-15; Nah. 2:8-10). The Assyrian Empire would not rise again. **B**

Assyrian religion. The Assyrians worshiped thousands of gods and goddesses, though far fewer deities formed the core of the Assyrian pantheon. Asshur was chief Assyrian god, and the Assyrians saw each military victory as extending Asshur's supremacy over the inhabited earth. However, any deity—including the Lord God of Israel—might potentially exert his/her influence on Assyria.

Polytheism revealed one of its serious flaws when adherents faced times of crisis. People often assumed that difficult circumstances—floods, famines, plagues, economic hardship, defeats in battle—represented a deity's judgment against them. Consequently, they would seek to regain the favor of the offended deity. They believed if they prayed the correct prayer and offered the appropriate sacrifice, the deity would forgive the people and heal the land. The problem lay in

determining exactly which god or goddess the people had offended.

The Assyrian clergy developed an elaborate system of rituals and incantations to appease the various deities.<sup>2</sup> They would begin with the names of the major deities, invoking their forgiveness and blessing and offering the prescribed sacrifice. If favorable results did not come, the priests would call on the names of lesser deities. Eventually, they believed, they would determine the identity of the offended deity, appease him/her, and life would revert to normalcy.

Jonah prophesied to a people who desperately needed to hear God's message. He probably arrived at Nineveh at a time when the city faced especially difficult times. Perhaps Nineveh's priests had offered all their incantations, prayers, and offerings to placate the gods, but the problems

<sup>1</sup> See Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds. *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 137-147.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-221.

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