

Jonah's Nineveh

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By Wilbert R. Gawrisch

It is frequently asserted that the Nineveh to which God sent the prophet Jonah was the capital of Assyria. Theodore Laetsch, for example, in his excellent commentary, *The Minor Prophets* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), writes, “[Jonah] kept on until he came to Nineveh, the capital city of the Gentile world empire” (p 234).

In an interesting study with the above title in the *Concordia Journal* (January 1992, pp 40-49) Jay Lemanski points out that Nineveh did not become the capital of Assyria until Sennacherib moved the seat of his government there when he came to the throne in 704 B.C. From 2 Kings 14:25, which tells us that Jeroboam II restored the boundaries of Israel “in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher,” it seems quite clear that Jonah’s ministry is to be dated in the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). Assyria’s capital at that time was Kalhu, modern Nimrud, the Calah of Genesis 10:11, which lies 24 miles south of Nineveh on the east bank of the Tigris River in the country today known as Iraq.

It is significant, as Lemanski notes, that the king who urged his people to repent of their sins in response to Jonah’s preaching is not called the king of Assyria but “the king of Nineveh” (Jon 3:6). It is known that during the time of Uzziah of Judah (767-740 B.C.) and Jeroboam II of Israel, Assyria was virtually prostrate. Its kings, Shalmaneser IV (782-773), Assurdan III (772-755), and Assurnirari V (754-745), were weak. They stayed at home and did not venture to undertake expeditions of conquest. As a result of the empire’s weakness, local rulers took over direct control of various city-states. It is noteworthy that the name Assyria does not occur in the book of Jonah. Lemanski suggests that “it is quite possible that Nineveh at the time of Jonah’s ministry was an independent or semi-independent city-state with its own ruler” (p 46).

Quite plausibly, this is the reason the Bible designates its ruler as “the king of Nineveh” and not “the king of Assyria,” and the people over whom he ruled who repented at the preaching of Jonah, as Jesus also affirms (Mt 12:41; Lk 11:32), were only the inhabitants of Nineveh, not the Assyrian nation as a whole.

Lemanski’s article demonstrates that the archaeology and literature of Mesopotamia can help us to a better understanding of the political situation in Assyria and Nineveh in Jonah’s day. For this we will be grateful.