

The Historic Jonah

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Ever since the prophet Jonah first penned the little book that is known by his name, some two thousand six hundred years ago, the most extraordinary notions have circulated concerning both him and his ministry. Some early rabbis claimed that he was the son of the widow of Zarephath, the lad whom Elijah had restored to life.¹ Others, yet again, imagined him to have been the servant whom Elisha sent to anoint King Jehu.² Jonah is also pointed out as having two tombs! One lies at Nineveh, and the other at Jonah's home-village of Gath-hepher, just a stone's throw from the town of Nazareth. And so it has gone on down the ages, until today we are informed that Jonah did not even exist! The book of Jonah, we are asked to believe, is nothing more than a pious fable, a moral tale written some time after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Exile; a story told around camp-fires that has all the historical validity of a Grimm's fairy-tale.

Unfortunately, and not without incalculable loss, this latest view has prevailed. Most modern Christian (and Jewish) authors will, if they mention Jonah at all, speak of him only in terms of parable and myth, usually in tones that amount to little less than an apology. Very few indeed, and I personally know of none, will attempt to speak of Jonah in a purely historical sense.³ This is very odd, to say the least, because Jonah enjoys more support from Jewish and Assyrian history than a great many other characters of the ancient world whose existence few historians would doubt. There is, indeed, something very sinister about the out-of-hand way in which Jonah is dismissed from serious discussion by modernist critics and historians. This sinister aspect has, perhaps, to do with the fact that Jesus spoke of Jonah in a historical sense, and He referred to Jonah in direct reference to His own forthcoming resurrection from the dead.⁴ Could it be, perhaps, that if modernists can cast doubt upon the historicity of Jonah, then they will also have license to cast doubt upon the words and teachings of Jesus Christ and the truth of His resurrection? The two are intimately connected, and any dismissal of the historicity of Jonah should be treated with a great deal of suspicion.

As our study progresses, it will be seen that not only does Jonah enjoy the support of recorded history, but also that the subsequent histories of both Israel and Assyria could not have followed their respective paths had Jonah not been there to influence them. As we have already noted, Jonah enjoys the support of more factual historical evidence than most other characters of the ancient world. As an example, historians in England are increasingly accepting that King Arthur (a **dux bellorum**, or warlord) not only existed, but did the things that are written of him; yet there is considerably less material and circumstantial evidence for the existence of King Arthur than there is for Jonah! It will therefore be seen that if we insist on denying to Jonah his rightful place in history, then that denial will bring about a serious abuse of the historical method. Such an abuse would be, to say the least, unwarranted, and its continuance based upon something rather more than a mere pretence to learning. We are, however, fortunate in our study in that the dates in which Jonah was active can be easily ascertained. For example, we are told that he was active in one part of his ministry during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel.⁵ Jeroboam II reigned for forty-one years from 783-743 BC. From this we may assume that Jonah was born around the year 800 BC. The date of Jonah's visit to Nineveh can also be assessed with far more certainty than is usually admitted, to the year 745 BC or very shortly after, the year when Tiglath-pileser III (the 'Pul' of the Bible)⁶ came to the throne of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser III went on to reign until the year 727 BC, and we will see that the phenomenon of Assyria's history during the reign of this king, owes much of its nature to the mission of Jonah. Before we can fully appreciate what happened after Jonah's visit to Nineveh, however, we would do well to briefly examine the history of Assyria up to his time, and the character of the Assyrian nation as a whole.

"...MERCILESS, FIRST IN WAR..."

From the very beginnings of its existence, shortly

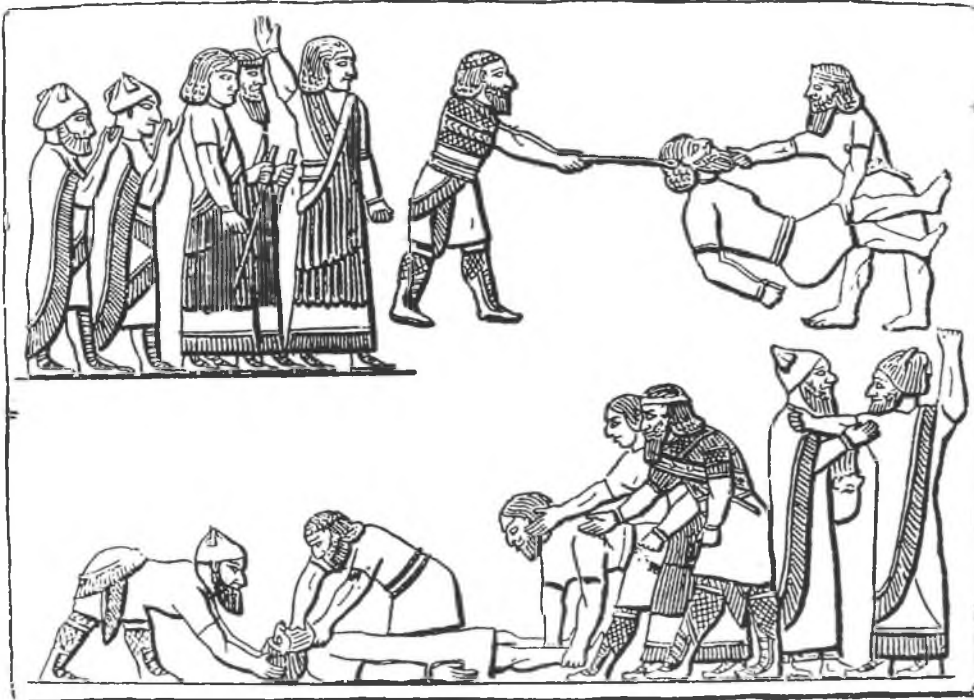


Figure 1. An example of pointless Assyrian cruelty, the tearing out of tongues.

Figure 2. To stop the victims struggling while their eyes were dug out, they were tethered by a hook through their upper lips.



after the dispersal of the nations from Babel, Assyria had shown itself to be an extremely cruel race. The Assyrian character was endowed with a viciousness and spite that has never been surpassed, perhaps only being equalled by the propagators of the Third Reich in recent times. However, whereas the Nazis at Nuremburg sought every means to deny or minimise their guilt, the Assyrians openly boasted of it, even recording for posterity their delight in inflicting unspeakable sufferings and genocide upon the surrounding nations. While it can be said of the Roman and other empires, that they contributed substantially towards the cultural improvement of their conquered subjects, this cannot be said for Assyria. Rather, their conquered subjects could only look forward to such 'benefits' as being impaled alive en masse, burnt, disembowelled, flayed alive, eyes and tongues torn out and other unspeakable atrocities, and Assyria stands alone among all the nations of the world in that all these murderous practices were deliberate and calculated policies of state (see Figs. 1 and 2).

It would be a grave mistake indeed to assume that such a wickedly cruel and vicious disposition spoke of an aggressive masculinity. The very opposite, in fact, is true. Many of the Assyrian monarchs and members of government were sexual perverts, transvestites and effeminate. Indeed, these were the very leaders who would seek to outdo their predecessors in deeds of hideous sadism. A portrait of one such king is provided for us by Diodorus, a Greek historian, who has recorded the behaviour of one of the most famous of Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal (known to the Greeks as Sardanapalus):

"He ruled his empire dressed in the clothes of a woman, effecting a female voice whenever he spoke, and bathed himself in such luxurious unguents and perfumes that his entire body was more delicate than that of the most luxury-loving woman." (see Fig. 3)

In his palace, Ashurbanipal indulged in such debased and inhuman orgies that it would be in the poorest taste to even hint at what went on there. Suffice it to say that such vices invariably go hand in hand with an equally debased cruelty. Another such mindless pervert once boasted:

"The nobles I flayed. . .three thousand captives I burned with fire. . .I left not one hostage alive. I cut off the hands and feet of some. I cut off the noses, ears and fingers of others. The eyes of numerous soldiers I put out. Maidens I burned as a holocaust."

Shalmaneser III once boasted that he "destroyed,



Figure 3. Note the pronounced effeminacy of this minor official's features.

devastated and burned with fire. . .I destroyed two hundred and fifty cities". Another, was to derive much satisfaction from the fact that "not a man of them escaped. Their corpses I hung on stakes. I stripped off their skins and covered the city walls with them". (see Fig. 4)

Yet other kings were to describe themselves as "merciless, first in war, king of the world". . ."a mightily hero clothed in terror". . ."a consuming, unquenchable fire". . ."the terrible hurricane who fills the plains with blood".

It is significant, no doubt, that the historian can search Assyrian inscriptions in vain for the word "mercy", only finding it when it is preceded by the word "without". Indeed, to continue describing this people's utterly perverse nature would be to weary the senses and exhaust all language in searching for suitable words with which to portray the unspeakable depths to which they had sunk. Suffice it to say that such unrelenting cruelty could not be exercised forever with complete impunity. The years preceding the accession of Tiglath-pileser III were to see a violent and persistent reaction set in, a backlash from the very nations that Assyria had sought to destroy. The world, indeed, had wearied of her as of



Figure 4. A typical battle scene. Note the systematic butchery, especially the slow decapitations occurring in the centre.

some bloated parasite. Assyria's days, it seemed, were numbered.

By about 800 BC, which was roughly the time in which Jonah was born, Assyria had grown into a formidable empire. Virtually unopposed, she had wrung all the wealth and power that there was to wring out of the surrounding nations. At the turn of the century, however, ominous cracks were appearing in the empire's foundations. Like all empires, before or since, Assyria had reached the stage where she had over-stretched herself. Her resources and military might were no longer sufficient to maintain the subjugation of her conquered peoples. The vast machinery of government, the outposts and garrisons, and the necessary fortifications and supplies were all consuming wealth that Assyria no longer possessed.⁸ And while the morale of the Assyrian armies was sinking to an unprecedented level, her subject peoples were finding it easier every passing day to stand up and defy her.

This general, and seemingly irreversible decline in Assyria's fortunes became more pronounced as the century wore on. In about the year 770 BC, the

peoples of Ararat (known to the Assyrians as the Urartu), began to throw off their yoke of subjection. The Assyrians, under Ashur-dan III (771-754 BC), suffered an overwhelming defeat at their hands. Such a defeat had been virtually unheard of since the beginnings of Assyria's expansion in 1250 BC, when Tukulti-ninurta I conquered the states of Babylonia.

The victory of the Urartu heralded the beginning of the end, and it was as if a beacon had been lit in the ancient world, a signal that was to tell the surrounding nations that Assyria was at last vulnerable and open to defeat. Then, in 763 BC⁹, there occurred a total eclipse of the sun which blacked out all the lands that lay under Assyrian's dominion. This eclipse was regarded by the Assyrians themselves as a terrible omen that warned of approaching disaster. All of which did nothing to lighten the growing mood of pessimism and defeatism then pervading the empire.

The year 754 BC was to see the death of Ashur-dan III, and the coming to power of Ashur-nirari V. If this present king entertained any hopes of reversing the political and economic decline of Assyria, then he

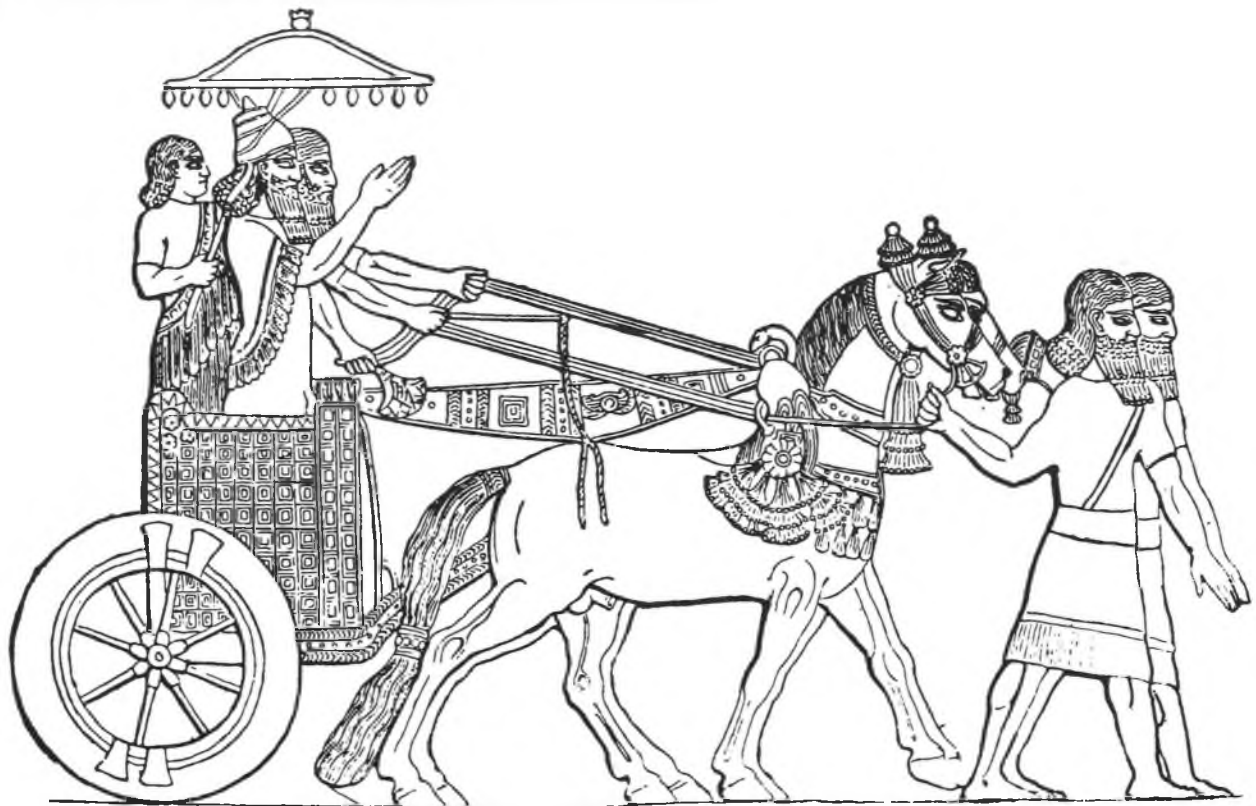


Figure 5. Tiglath-pileser III. It was during the first years of his reign that the neo-Assyrian empire was born. He was able to boast that he had conquered forty-two nations and their kings. This is in complete contrast to the state of the empire when he first took over.

was to be quickly disillusioned, for it was during his reign that the empire was to be rent asunder by the bloodiest civil-wars in her long history. Indeed, Ashur-nirari himself was to fall in battle, slain by the opposing factions of his own countrymen in the year 746 BC. It was as if the empire was turning in upon itself in an orgy of suicidal destruction. At the same time, the “men of the north”, the Urartu, were once more on the offensive. The southern states of Babylonia broke out into open revolt, and the Assyrian armies, divided as they were, were powerless to stop them. Each passing day saw the rapidly diminishing resources of the Assyrian military machine, and the battle-fields were strewn with the growing number of Assyrian dead. It was at this point in history that Tiglath-pileser III ascended the throne in the year 745 BC. It was also the time of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, the king’s capital city, and some of the most remarkable events of history (see Fig.5).

“YET FORTY DAYS. . .”

Even in such a brief sketch as this, it is very easy to see how increasing despair and ruin were taking their toll upon the spirit of the Assyrian people. Indeed, we can see with hindsight how the Assyrian

government and nation were being prepared both psychologically and spiritually for the arrival of Jonah and the message that he was to bring them. His warning of “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown”, carried with it a terrible ring of truth. With the Urartu and others on the rampage and baying for blood, with open revolt in the southern, and hitherto subject states of Babylonia, with the continuing civil-wars, and with the complete inability of either king, government or armies to pull off an eleventh-hour rescue, Jonah’s message was to be all too feasible. Indeed, the final destruction of Nineveh, and the total annihilation of the Assyrian empire was not only possible, it was becoming increasingly likely with the turn of each new event.

THE COMING OF JONAH

God’s preparing of the Assyrian nation for the positive response that they were to give to Jonah and his message now takes on a curious, but not altogether surprising twist. Indeed, this preparation was to culminate in an astounding series of events; events, moreover, that harked back to the very earliest days of Assyria, when the false gods that she was to worship were first being conceived. It is not unknown in history for God to somehow use the

beliefs of pagan nations in such a way as to demonstrate His own Power and Being. After all, each of the Ten Plagues were designed to demonstrate to Pharaoh and his priests the complete inability of Egypt's 'gods' to control their own dominions. Consider, for example, the Plague of Darkness. This was directed specifically against Ra and Horus. These were the very gods who were believed to rule over the sun. They were shown, however, to share the same inability of Egypt's other false gods to protect their dominions against the Hand of the God of Israel. It is in the light of God's thus using pagan beliefs that we can more fully understand the nature of Jonah's mission, and, in particular, the role that was to be played by the great fish that swallowed Jonah, later to disgorge him onto the shores of the Assyrian empire.

To properly understand this, we must consider what the Assyrians themselves believed, and how those beliefs and the approaching collapse of their nation were to prepare them for the appearance of Jonah.

In his book, *Chaldean Genesis* (1876), George Smith, the Assyriologist, cites the writings of Berosus (c.330-260 BC), a Babylonian priest who recorded many of the myths and legends of the early Mesopotamians. Among many other things, Berosus records the fascinating story of a certain 'Oannes'. He writes:

*"At Babylonia there was (in these times) a great resort of people of various nations, who inhabited Chaldea, and lived in a lawless manner like the beasts of the field."*¹⁰

"In the first year there appeared, from that part of the Erythraean Sea" which borders upon Babylonia, an animal endowed with reason, by name Oannes, whose whole body was that of a fish; and under the fish's head he had another head, with feet also below similar to those of a man, subjoined to the fish's tail. His voice too, and language were articulate and human; and a representation of him is preserved to this day."

*"This being (Oannes) was accustomed to pass the day among men, but took no food at that season; and he gave them an insight into letters and sciences, and arts of every kind. He taught them to construct cities, to found temples, to compile laws, and explained to them the principles of geometrical knowledge. He made them distinguish the seeds of the earth, and showed them how to collect the fruits; in short, he instructed them in everything which could tend to soften manners and humanize their lives. From that time, nothing material has been added by way of improvement to his instructions."*¹² (see Fig.6)

It is clear from Berosus' own narrative that the Assyrians and Babylonians held Oannes in the highest esteem. After all, he it was (so they believed) who had taught them horticulture and agriculture, mathematics and geometry, architecture and city-planning, writing and the sciences, religion and civilisation, law and jurisprudence. Everything, in fact, upon which their entire existence as a nation depended. All their knowledge and understanding had come (so they held) from a fish-like man who had



Figure 6. Oannes (far right) as depicted on a very early Babylonian cylinder seal.

come out of the sea to teach them. Indeed, as Berosus himself implies when he says that nothing material has been added to the teachings of Oannes, this being would have to return if there was anything subsequently essential for the Assyrians to learn. And it is here that we find the very purpose of God's preparing the great fish to swallow Jonah, and later disgorge him (according to Josephus) onto the shore of the Euxine Sea.¹³

While we cannot know for certain the Assyrian equivalent of Jonah's name, we can at least be sure that it was not dissimilar to that of Oannes. The resemblance between the two names, even before such transposition, is remarkable.¹⁴ Unknown to the Assyrians, however, was the fact that a greater than Oannes was here. Here was no mythical figure dreamed up by an undiscerning pagan philosophy. Here was a living prophet of the Ever-Living God to Whom the Assyrians, in common with all mankind, owed their very creation and continuing existence!

Judging by the attention that marooned sea-monsters attract in our own day, it is easy to envisage the tremendous impact of such a monster disgorging a living man who then proceeded to a certain city to warn it of coming destruction. To those who had been nurtured on the story of Oannes, such an event would seem that Oannes himself had returned according to all that was laid down in the ancient legends. How else could God have achieved the effect that was so necessary to the accomplishment of His Will? The Assyrians would hardly have heeded a prophet (and a despised Israelite, at that), who rode into Nineveh on donkey, or as a passenger in a desert caravan. There was only one way, it seems, in which to startle and surprise the Assyrians into a positive response to Jonah's message, and that was by God Himself staging what has proved to be one of the most spectacular events of history.

On its own even this, perhaps, may not have been sufficient to drive the Assyrians into a response to the message that Jonah brought them. They would also need to be in particularly distressed state of mind, driven into a corner by political, economic and military events over which they had no control, and which were pushing them inexorably further towards complete devastation. We have seen, in fact, that just such conditions prevailed at this very point in history, and thus the Assyrians may even have been importuning their gods for a teacher or deliverer of the stature and wisdom of their beloved Oannes (see Fig. 7). Most assuredly, they were both psychologically and spiritually prepared for just such an event and message as Jonah was about to deliver. Elsewhere in the Bible, it is recorded of both Joseph¹⁵ and Daniel¹⁶ that the pagans esteemed them

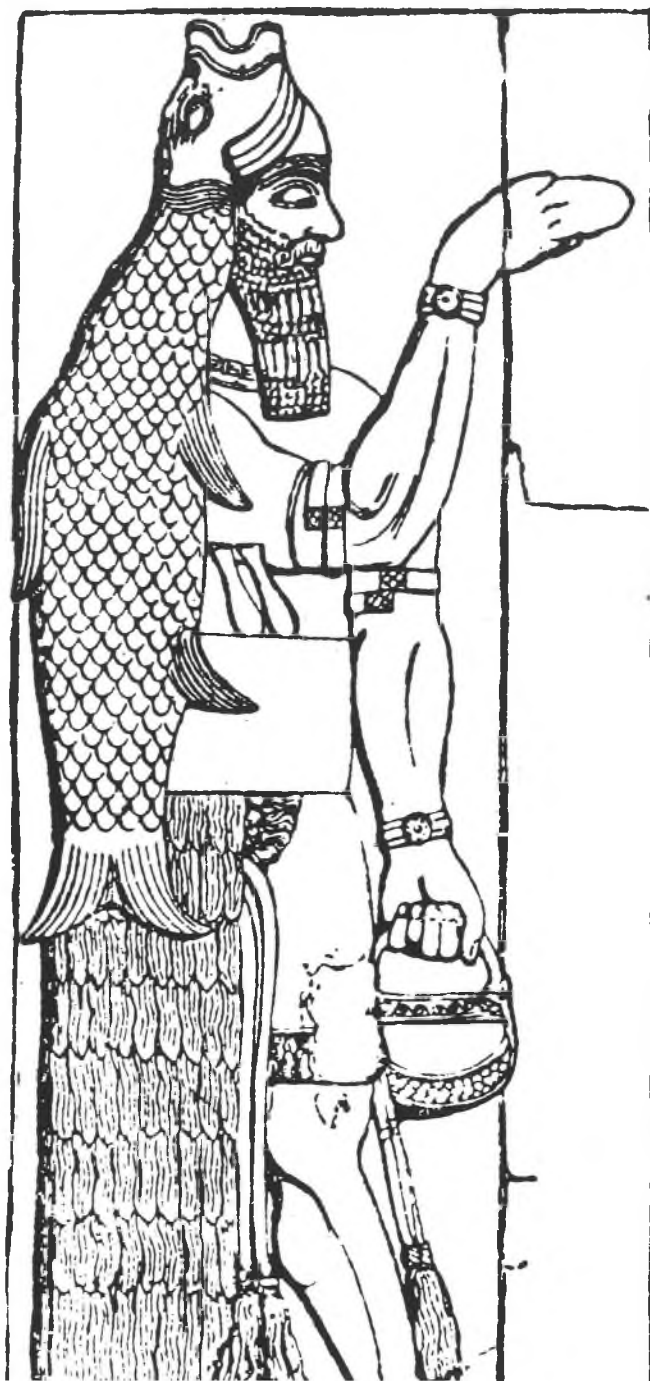


Figure 7. Oannes as portrayed by the Assyrians of Jonah's day (from a palace at Nimrud).

to be filled with "the spirit of the gods"; and the Assyrians undoubtedly esteemed the dramatic appearance and message of Jonah to be likewise endowed with divine power, which, of course, it was. As unregenerate pagans they could, of course, only perceive this according to their own darkened understandings, but nevertheless the recognition of the divine was there, and God was to use that imperfect perception for the accomplishment of His own perfect Will.

THE TIDE TURNS

The results of Jonah's mission to Nineveh, and the repentance of the Assyrians (as temporary and shallow as this later turned out to be), was nothing less than the complete reversal of Assyria's fortunes. Almost overnight, it seems, the empire underwent a total revival. Where defeat had so recently been staring them in the face, the Assyrians were now enjoying decisive victories. Where there had been economic collapse, there was now available wealth and a reasonable stability. Political turmoil and civil unrest now quietened down. In other words, the disaster-prone empire that Tiglath-pileser III had 'inherited',¹⁷ was almost unrecognisable after the inauguration of his reign. Shortly after he took over the rule of the empire, something dramatic, almost disturbing happened to turn on its head Assyria's forthcoming and imminent destruction. What exactly happened nobody knows, but this sudden revival is quite inexplicable if we try to account for it purely in terms of human ingenuity and to the exclusion of Jonah's historic role. God, as Jonah had feared He would, had intervened directly in the affairs of Assyria, not only staving off her certain annihilation, but actually causing her to prosper.

It is fashionable, of course, for modern historians to assume that Tiglath-pileser himself had saved the day, but better kings than he had fought to rescue the empire and they had failed miserably, for all their ingenuity and determination. Indeed, he had ascended the throne at the time when the empire was on the very brink of collapse, its final annihilation being only some forty days or so away, as the Assyrians themselves were quick to acknowledge. No! Something happened at this time that is completely baffling if we are to deny the reality of God's intervention at this point in Assyria's history. Indeed, the profundity and suddenness of it all are the very hallmarks of divine intervention. Rather, it is because of God's direct intervention that Assyria's life was to be extended a further one hundred and thirty years or so until she finally expired in 612 BC.

AN OBVIOUS QUESTION

By now we are, of course, asking why God should ever have countenanced the survival of a political system that had embraced such gross wickedness, and had embarked upon such a thoroughly murderous and evil way of life as this. To Jonah and his contemporaries, it was only right and proper that Assyria should perish, and the sooner the better. Hence Jonah's initial reluctance to go to Nineveh in the first place.¹⁸ God had consistently destroyed whole nations for much less, and no nation on earth at that time could have matched Assyria in having

plunged to such depths of depravity. Or could they? There was one nation, as it happens, who could be said to have exceeded even this. Her conduct was, if anything, all the more reprehensible because she had from the very beginning, been given a full knowledge of God and His Law. Indeed, she was the very repository of that Law, and that nation, of course, was Israel.

At this moment in history, Israel, under Jeroboam II, was a very strong nation indeed. She had enjoyed a considerable period of prosperity and was even expanding her borders. The only nation who may have been strong enough to withstand or defeat her would have been Assyria, had Assyria herself not undergone such a dramatic decline. But, in spite of her growing strength, or perhaps because of it, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had all too quickly rejected the One True God, and had turned, instead, to those of the pagans. Indeed, to merely say that Israel had "adopted" (as some historians term it) these pagan gods, would convey neither the readiness, nor indeed, the ravenous hunger with which she pursued the iniquitous practices of her idolatrous neighbours. Time and time again, Israel was to be admonished, coaxed and virtually begged to return to God by the prophets He had sent her, but all to no avail. And as if it were not enough for God's pleadings to be ignored, Israel had even openly persecuted many of those who were sent to win her back. Her first love had turned to a cold and calculated indifference, and that indifference had turned to an undisguised contempt for the only One Who could have saved her from its consequences.

"...TWO LEGS, OR A PIECE OF AN EAR..."

One of the prophets who were to warn Israel of the consequences of her apostasy was Amos of Tekoa. Unlike Jonah, it was given to Amos to clearly state not only the sins of Israel, but also the fearful judgment she must undergo if she persisted in her wilful rejection of God. The instrument of that judgment was to be a revived nation of Assyria, whose own destruction, ironically, had been averted by the preaching of Jonah. The desolation of Israel was to be total and irrevocable, and her incalculable loss was graphically foretold by Amos:

*"Therefore, thus saith the Lord, an adversary there shall be round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee. . . As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out. . ."*¹⁹

Never before had the Chosen People undergone such a fearful separation from God's protecting Hand, but then again neither had they ever before so wilfully and decisively separated themselves from Him, nor offered Him such blatant provocation under rulers who were cast in the mould of Jeroboam II, their present king.

Such gross iniquities as were practised by Israel in the days of Jeroboam II, did not lend themselves to ready or easy repentance. Here was no mere backsliding or failure to keep the Law in all its parts. Such a thing would have been easily remedied, and could even, perhaps, be "winked at", depending upon the real desires of the people to serve their God, albeit misguidedly. No. Their real depths of iniquity ran far too deep for God to have either ignored them or taken them lightly.

One hideous example of the depths to which Israel had sunk, can be seen in their worship of just one particular 'god'. What, indeed, we are about to witness is a thing that is so gross and despicable that it almost beggars description, and was such a sickenly murderous practice as to totally lack any form of justification!

Some six hundred years or so before Jonah was born, the nation of Israel was receiving, through Moses, the Law of God. Many of the precepts and commandments that were laid down had to do with ceremonial purity, care of the poor, the redemption of slaves and so on. There was one thing, however, that was specifically forbidden them, and that was the very ancient practice of "passing their children through the fire to Moloch".²⁰ This abomination was carried out from the earliest times appearing first in Babylonia, from where it spread to Syria, Phoenicia, and thus to Israel.

The name of Moloch comes from a Semitic word meaning "king", and his idol was made with the arms outstretched in front, palms turned upward, to receive the sacrificial offering. These arms were hinged at the shoulders, and in the base of the idol was a furnace which, when lit, would heat the arms and hands to red heat.

From among the worshippers a married couple would be selected by the priests of Moloch to provide their first-born infant for sacrifice. At the propitious moment, the babe would be placed by the officiating priest onto the hands of the idol, and as soon as the poor child was placed onto the red-hot hands loud drums would roll in an attempt to stifle its screams. With the weight of the child upon them, the arms swung down to deposit the still-living babe into the heart of the furnace. Sometimes, when the hands of the idol had grown too hot, the flesh of the tiny victim would adhere to the metal, and this necessitated the priest having to knock or scrape off the screaming

child into the furnace beneath. And this sickening, disgusting crime was perpetrated in the hopes of increased fertility! To add to these horrors, there were gross sexual abominations, not fit to be mentioned, that were practised openly in the worship of these hideous gods, and which were combined with ritual killings in an insane lust for all that is unholy and unclean.

It is only by considering such revolting crimes as this that we can come anywhere near to fully appreciating the Satanic depths of wickedness and cruelty into which this people had degenerated. Was it any wonder that the Holy One of Israel was thoroughly sickened and revolted by it all, and was now committed to this nation's certain destruction? Such monstrous crimes were the very antipathy to the holiness of life to which the Israelites had been called, and for which God had separated them from the world. Had there remained within them but the tiniest spark of decency, then such abominations would never have gained the foothold, or rather the stranglehold that they did. The entire nation was thoroughly reprobate and fit only for condemnation.

The pagan nations of the world at least had the excuse that the ways of God had never been revealed to them. Indeed, they had little choice but to stumble blindly along in the darkness of human depravity. But for Israel there could be no such excuse. She had known from the very beginning the Ways of her God, but she had wilfully and knowingly chosen another path. Little wonder indeed that the men of Nineveh were to quite literally rise in judgment against such a generation. As iniquitous as they were, they had at least repented at the preaching of Jonah. Israel, however, had placed herself beyond the pale of any hope of redemption or mercy, and all that was now needed for her final condemnation was the passing of but twelve short years or so, when the books would be finally opened and the hand of judgment would fall with an irrevocable severity.

THE FALL OF ISRAEL

It is with typical irony that God's totally justified indignation was to make itself felt through the armies of Assyria under the command of the very king who had repented at the preaching of Jonah, Tiglath-pileser III. Neither is it perhaps without significance that the fall of Israel was not to begin until after the preaching of Jonah at Nineveh in 745 BC. Before that year, Israel had enjoyed, in spite of her iniquity, a lengthy period of flourishing trade and prosperity under Jeroboam II. Only some eighteen months were to pass, however, after Jonah's arrival at Nineveh, when the people of Israel were to witness the death of Jeroboam in 743 BC. There now began a period of

rapid decline in Israel's fortunes, so frightening in its suddenness, that was to witness utter political chaos, with all the sufferings and hardships that that inevitably entails.

The son of Jeroboam, Zechariah, was to reign after his father's death for but six short months, before he was brutally assassinated at the hands of Shallum, who promptly usurped the throne. Then, with that poetic justice that has always been the scourge of unworthy kings, Shallum was to reign for only thirty days before he himself was assassinated by Menahem. Thus, the year of Jeroboam's death saw the coming to power of no less than three kings, the assassinations of two of which were accompanied by all the murders and intrigues that are such an integral part of a nation's imminent collapse.

Anarchy began to hold the people in its merciless grip, and gone forever was the general safety of the realm that its subjects had hitherto enjoyed. If Israel, however, had hoped for better times under Menahem, then she was to be bitterly disappointed. The men of Tiphseh had thought to resist Menahem's rule, and for their complicity they were murdered to a man. Menahem's spite, however, was not to be so easily satisfied with merely the deaths of all these men, for he immediately gave the order to his followers for them to put all the women and children of Tiphseh to the sword. Those women that were found to be with child he ordered to be ripped open, the bodies of their unborn children becoming the sport of the soldiers.²¹

The reign of this thoroughly godless monarch thus began as a reign of abject terror. From his ill-gotten throne, however, Menahem was to witness the alarming about-turn of Assyria's fortunes and the menacing approach of her armies, who were once more baying for blood. The records that have so far been recovered from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, confirm the Biblical account of Menahem's paying off the Assyrians with the massive tribute of one thousand talents of silver, a sum that had to be paid annually.²²

Naturally it fell to his subjects to provide this enormous sum. But who, after the terrible example of this man's spite upon the poor inhabitants of Tiphseh, would so much as dare to withhold payment or murmur against it? Such a crippling debt had an inevitable but nonetheless devastating effect upon the economic well-being of Israel, and, as is usual under such circumstances, even basic food became a luxury that was all but out of reach for the poorer inhabitants. Poverty, hunger and despair began to wreak their terrible havoc among the people of the Northern Kingdom, but for those who had so wilfully rejected the only One Who could possibly have saved

them, this was to be merely the beginning of sorrows. Whatever sour wine they were drinking now, it was to prove sweet indeed compared to the bitter dregs that were to come.

The reign of Menahem's son, Pekahiah, proved to be as fruitless for the welfare of his subjects as his father's reign before him. It says something, I suppose, for the dreadful iron grip of Menahem upon the fears of his subjects, that his son was able to succeed him at all. Pekahiah, however, merely "did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord", and his rule was to hold sway for but two short years when finally, in his palace at Samaria, he was slain as the result of a conspiracy that was led by one of his officers, Pekah by name.²³

Pekah then usurped the throne of Israel, and it was in his reign that the blow finally fell at the hands of the Assyrian army. Down from the north in 733 BC, swept the armies of Tiglath-pileser, destroying the fortresses that had hitherto guarded the northern approaches to Israel, and which, again ironically, had been restored by Jeroboam II under the advice of Jonah.²⁴ After the Assyrians had treated the fortress garrisons in the time-honoured way of torture and murder, the invaders overran Galilee and all the land along the Mediterranean coast. Those inhabitants who were deemed worthy of the attentions of the Assyrian torturers were flayed alive, disembowelled, burned or blinded, while the remainder were force-marched in chains to Assyria to await resettlement in the lands of the Medes. As for the land of Israel, it was immediately annexed and divided up into three military governorships.

After this initial onslaught, when the "Assyrian had come down like a wolf on the fold", there remained of the kingdom of Israel only the city of Samaria and the surrounding hill-country of Ephraim. In order to forestall any further "rebellion", Tiglath-pileser III set Hoshea the task of murdering Pekah, and allowed Hoshea to rule as a puppet-king over what was left of Israel, Hoshea, in turn, paying Assyria an annual tribute.

Tiglath-pileser's effective reign, however, came to an end in 727 BC, and the Assyrian empire was ruled jointly by himself and Shalmaneser V. Taking advantage of this split-monarchy Hoshea made overtures to Egypt for help in throwing off the Assyrian yoke, and for this "rebellion" Shalmaneser V sought day of reckoning with him, having him clapped in irons and laying the city of Samaria under a terrible three-year siege.

At the end of 721 BC, Samaria capitulated, and once more the earth was to be stained red with the fruits of Assyrian vengeance. The remaining inhabitants were removed in chains to Assyria, whence they were never to re-emerge as a nation

until our own times. As for what used to be the Northern Kingdom of Israel, all that has been left upon the face of the earth are a few archaeological remains, ruins and dead cities, the “two legs, or a piece of an ear” of Amos’ prophecy.

NINEVEH: “A PLACE FOR BEASTS TO LIE DOWN IN”

Having so effectively performed her role as the divinely-appointed instrument of vengeance against reprobate Israel, Assyria was herself to sink in the mire of her own iniquities. After the dispersal of the Ten Tribes of Israel, the fortunes of Assyria were once more to decline, only this time there was not to be a Jonah to avert her final collapse. One of the first real signs of this decline was to be seen in the abortive attempt of Sennacherib to lay siege to Jerusalem in the year 702 BC.²⁵ Sennacherib, who had styled himself as a “mighty hero, clothed in terror”, doubtless harked back to the role of Tiglath-pileser III as God’s appointed avenger, and accordingly claimed that “The Lord said unto me, Go up against this land and destroy it”. It would appear from this unwarranted boast that Assyria was very aware of the One Who had turned certain disaster into sudden victory only some four decades previously, and that Assyria had been appointed as His scourge. This undoubted awareness, however, was merely taken as licence for the empire to return to her old ways.

What had clearly not occurred to the Assyrians was the fact that God, in using them in this way, had merely been using a filthy rag with which to mop up an equally filthy people. But if Assyria, in her insufferable arrogance, thought that this somehow made the filthy rag into something holy, then she was to learn to her eternal cost that this was not so. God was to make His opinion of Assyria known through the pen of the prophet Nahum in words that carried a terrible finality, and which could leave no doubt whatever as to her guilt and fast approaching ruin:

“I WILL MAKE THY GRAVE; FOR THOU ART VILE.”²⁶

Sennacherib’s own records confirm the Biblical account that he failed to take Jerusalem. Indeed, as God had promised, not one Assyrian arrow was to be loosed against the city, and not one of her inhabitants were to perish in the siege; events that were unheard of in any Assyrian siege either before or since. After returning to Nineveh with the loss of 185,000 of his men, Sennacherib was to be murdered by his own sons, and “Esarhaddon his son ruled in his stead”.²⁷

Esarhaddon’s reign (680–669 BC) saw yet

another expansion of the Assyrian empire in his invasion of Egypt, and the reign of his successor, Ashurbanipal, saw this conquest extended as far as Thebes. But as a dying star will suddenly expand only to collapse inwards upon itself, so the Assyrian empire was likewise to collapse. The effect of this sudden expansion was merely to thin out the Assyrian forces over a very large area, added to which was the crippling cost of keeping such a vast army operative in the field. Assyria was therefore already fighting a lost battle when her enemies finally closed in for the kill, and God was to give her up to their insatiable vengeance.

To deny his enemies the satisfaction of shedding his blood, the last king of Assyria,²⁸ in 612 BC, made of his palace at Nineveh an inferno, perishing by his own hand in its flames. Wagner himself could hardly have contrived such a dramatic exit from the world’s stage, but so complete was the destruction of Nineveh that in only a few years even her very name was to be forgotten. As Colin Wilson tells us:

“Two centuries later, the Greek mercenaries of Cyrus were retreating up the Tigris valley — the famous story is told by Xenophon — when they passed the gigantic ruins of Nineveh and Calah. They were baffled by the mystery of these great empty cities, whose immense fortifications made them look impregnable. All Xenophon could find out — from local peasants — was that the cities had been miraculously depopulated by direct intervention of the gods. The conquerors who had terrorized the Middle East for so many years were no longer even a legend.”²⁹

And so was lost to the world for some two and a half thousand years the city that had cried **“I AM, AND THERE IS NONE BESIDE ME”**. Her ruins lay covered over in the dust until their discovery in the nineteenth century, to the end that, in these days of so much doubt and scepticism, the Word of God should be seen to be infallible, irrevocable and supremely trustworthy.

CONCLUSION

In this all too brief survey, we have witnessed one of the most dramatic, eventful and tragic phases of world history. We have witnessed the growing corruption and inevitable condemnation of two great nations, Israel and Assyria, and just how closely entwined their respective destinies were to be. More importantly, however, we have also witnessed the appearance and historic role of a man who, we are asked to believe, did not exist! Rather, we have seen that his activities were crucial to the destinies of

both Israel and Assyria, and that his role was the pivot upon which all subsequent events were to turn.

Thus, it has become clear that the dismissal of Jonah from the historic scene is, to put it mildly, unwarranted. His relegation to “myth” and “fable” is based solely upon the somewhat fanciful notions of ‘modernist’ and liberal scholars. These same scholars were once saying that Nineveh and Assyria were themselves mere legends dreamed up by the Jews. These baseless notions were, of course, quietly dropped upon the discoveries of archaeology, but their continued dismissal of Jonah (and indeed other parts of the Bible) is seen to be equally baseless. Faced with such a vast amount of evidence to the contrary, this unreasonable stance must be due not simply to a mere pretence of learning, but to something far more insidious. The madness, after all, that had so firmly seized Israel in the days of Jonah, had merely begun by her making silly excuses for not believing the Word of God. Their madness, however, was to end only in the total and supremely sobering vindication of that Word.

was slain in the civil-war. Whether he had anything to do with his brother's death or not is uncertain.

18. The charge that Jonah's reluctance was an act of cowardice can be dismissed. One didn't have to be a prophet in those days to realise what Assyria's revival would mean to Israel.
19. Amos 3:11–12.
20. See Amos 5:26; and Leviticus 18:21.
21. 2 Kings 15:16; cf. Amos 1: 13.
22. 2 Kings 15:19.
23. Pekah and his followers bitterly resented Pekahiah's policy of submissiveness towards the Assyrians, especially his paying them a massive tribute.
24. 2 Kings 14:25.
25. For what are clearly eyewitness accounts, see Isaiah 36:1 through to 37:38; and 2 Kings 18:13 through to 19:37.
26. Nahum 1:14.
27. Sennacherib's assassination occurred in 681 BC, and is fully verified in the Assyrian records.
28. i.e. Sin-shar-ishkun.
29. Wilson, C., 1984. **A Criminal History of Mankind**. Granada, London, p.141

FOOTNOTES

1. 1 Kings 17:24.
2. 2 Kings 9:1–2.
3. As an example, Jonah does not even merit a passing mention in Werner Keller's otherwise comprehensive book **The Bible As History**, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1974.
4. Matthew 12:38–41; Luke 11:29–32.
5. 2 Kings 14:25.
6. Modernists once said that the Bible was wrong because no Assyrian king had ever been called ‘Pul’. This name (Pulu), however, appears in the Babylonian Chronicle as the native name of Tiglath-pileser III. Could it be that, unlike the modernists, the men who wrote the Bible knew what they were talking about?
7. “. . .the fabulous Ashurbanipal. . .whom the Greeks remembered as a transvestite tyrant who wore women's robes and painted his lips.” Brackman, A. Eyre, 1980. **The Luck of Nineveh**. Methuen, London, p.3.
8. Ctesias of Babylon tells us that the Assyrian army once numbered 1,700,000 infantry, 200,000 cavalry and 16,000 war chariots. The sheer cost of maintaining such a standing army must have been staggering.
9. This occurred on June 15th, 763 BC.
10. Berosus here seems to be referring to the days prior to the scattering of the nations from Babel.
11. i.e. the Persian Gulf.
12. Smith, G., 1876. **The Chaldean Account of Genesis, etc.** Sampson Low, London, pp. 39–40.
13. i.e. the Black Sea.
14. The Hebrews, of course, did not pronounce the ‘J’ in Jonah's name, pronouncing it ‘Yonah’. An interesting parallel occurs in the English name ‘John’, which becomes ‘Johannes’, pronounced ‘Yohannes’ in Latin and German.
15. Genesis 14:38.
16. Daniel 5:11.
17. Tiglath-pileser III (previously the governor of Calah), was apparently the brother of his predecessor Ashur-nirari V, who