

## THE SIGN OF JONAH

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Following Jesus' healing of the blind and dumb demoniac, a story recorded by both Matthew and Luke,<sup>1</sup> the Pharisees attributed his power to do so to Beelzebul,<sup>2</sup> the ruler of the demons.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' response to this—that the prince of demons would hardly cooperate in the destruction of his own satanic work—elicited in turn from his detractors the request that he show them a sign whereby his miraculous works could be authenticated as having divine origin. The implication, of course, was that if Jesus denied being empowered by Beelzebul he must give evidence that his power came from God, for that was the only alternative.<sup>4</sup> Jesus then made the remarkable statement that “a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt 12:39 *NIV*).<sup>5</sup>

The full import of the term *sēmeion* cannot be discussed here,<sup>6</sup> but its basic theological meaning is well known: It is a miraculous act produced to authenticate its agent and to induce faith in God on the part of the observer.<sup>7</sup> Jesus did indeed perform many signs in the presence of his disciples and of unbelievers alike (see esp. John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30), but never in response to the challenge of or for the selfish benefit of the

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<sup>1</sup>Matt 12:22-37; Luke 11:14-26.

<sup>2</sup>This spelling (var. Beedzebul in Aleph and B) is supported by the better Greek MSS and reflects the Hebrew *ba'al zēbūl*, an epithet of Baal nowhere attested in the OT. The Ras Shamra texts describe him as *zbl b'l (arš)* (e. g., *UT* 49, III-IV:3, 9, 21, 29, etc.), “the prince, lord of earth,” but never as *b'l zbl*, “the lord, the prince.” 2 Kgs 1:2, however, refers to the god of Ekron as *ba'al zēbūb*, “lord of flies,” an obvious paronomasia and polemic against Prince Baal. The Syriac and Vulgate, which usually follow MT, no doubt introduced the form Beelzebub into our English versions of the NT. For the root *zbl* see especially M. Held, “The Root ZBL/SBL in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Biblical Hebrew,” *JAO S* 88 (1968) 90-96.

<sup>3</sup>This function of Beelzebul was developed by the rabbis in the post-OT period and was the basis for the Pharisees' assertion that Jesus was effective against the demon world by virtue of his dependence on Beelzebul. See the *Testament of Solomon*, where “Beelzeboul” is referred to as the “prince of the demons”; he identifies himself further as the one who has “the power to make appear before [Solomon] all my subject spirits” (cited in A. S. Rappoport, *Myth and Legend of Ancient Israel* [New York: KTAV, 1966] 1. 88 ff.). In Mishnaic Hebrew *zēbūl* came to mean “house,” so in NT times this prince was “lord of the house” (cf. Luke 12:17, 21; Matt 10:25).

<sup>4</sup>Only Matthew specifies that the sign request came from the Pharisees, but Luke's account is in no wise contradictory. For other examples of signs being demanded of our Lord see Matt 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 2:18; 6:30; cf. 1 Cor 1:22.

<sup>5</sup>Luke's wording is practically identical; cf. Luke 11:29.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, K. H. Rengstorf, “*sēmeion*,” *TDNT* 7 (1971) 200-261.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1892) 39.

Pharisees and scribes, the “wicked and adulterous generation.”<sup>8</sup> And these signs were frequently effective in achieving the end that men might believe “and have life through his name” (John 20:31; cf. 2:11, 23).

To the Pharisees and scribes, however, Jesus denied the *sēmeia*, promising only that they would in time be given the “sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29). On the basis of the Matthean account most interpreters of this phrase correctly see that Jesus is making an analogy between Jonah’s three days and three nights of incarceration in the belly of the fish and Jesus’ confinement to Sheol.<sup>9</sup> Equally correctly, many go on to suggest that Jonah’s miraculous experience is a prophetic type of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.<sup>10</sup> But this type is of necessity limited as a sign by its application to the scribes and Pharisees and other post-resurrection witnesses, including this present generation. Matthew, however, proposes a correspondence between the experience and the preaching of Jonah on the one hand and the subsequent repentance of Nineveh on the other. More pointedly, Luke states that Jonah was a sign “to the Ninevites” (Luke 11:30).<sup>11</sup> Most scholars are satisfied to see Matthew’s version as an embellishment of Luke’s,<sup>12</sup> but the phrase “to the Ninevites” is in fact an addition not found in Matthew in so many words—though, as we have suggested, it is implicit in Matthew. The point that Luke, especially, is making is that Jonah was in some way such a powerful sign to the people of Nineveh that they repented at his preaching.<sup>13</sup>

This paper is an attempt to clarify how Jonah was such a persuasive sign to Nineveh. The basic clue is given by our Lord himself, who says that the sign consists of Jonah’s survival in and regurgitation from the belly of the great fish. This series of supernatural events made such a profound impact on the people of Nineveh that they repented in sackcloth and ashes.

It is important first of all to locate Jonah within a cultural and historical con-

<sup>8</sup>For the idea that “wicked and adulterous generation” is a technical term to describe the scribes and Pharisees as opposed to the *‘am hā’āreš* cf. Matt 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:16-26.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. J. A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist, 1886) 276-277; W. C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907) 139. The Greek formula for analogy, *hōsper . . . houtōs*, clearly points in the direction of a type-antitype relationship; cf. Matt 24:37, 38-39; Rom 5:19. Luke’s formula is similar; *kathōs . . . houtōs*. J. Jeremias argues convincingly that Johan became a sign to the Ninevites because he had been delivered from the fish and not because of his preaching or any other reason; cf. Jeremias, “*Iōnas*,” *TDNT* 3 (1971) 409.

<sup>10</sup>L. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 194-195. Whether Jonah died or not is incidental to Jesus’ analogy, for all he is intending to compare is the miraculous deliverance of both from an irretrievable situation and after a three-day period. For a history of the various interpretations of Jonah see R. H. Bowers, *The Legend of Jonah* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>Interestingly, Luke does not mention in what respect Jonah was a sign (i. e., the three days and three nights of Matthew), but clearly he expects his readers to know the Jonah story and to understand in what sense Jonah was a sign—not just to the scribes and Pharisees, but also to the Ninevites.

<sup>12</sup>E. g., W. C. Allen, *Matthew*, 138-139.

<sup>13</sup>The name Jonah should probably be taken as a genitive of apposition with *sēmeion* so that he himself is the sign. Cf. Rengstorf, “*sēmeion*,” 233.

text.<sup>14</sup> He was a native of Gath-hepher, a small village doubtless located on the site of modern-day Khirbet ez-Zurra', about three miles northeast of Nazareth.<sup>15</sup> His prophetic ministry included words of instruction to Jeroboam II, whose dates therefore provide at least a general chronological frame of reference.<sup>16</sup> We may take the midpoint of Jeroboam's reign, 773, as a starting point and examine the Assyrian historical/chronological evidence for the period to see what it yields.

The turn of the eighth century saw Adad-nirari III (811-783)<sup>17</sup> reigning, first of all as a minor under his powerful mother Sammuramat. By 805 he was able to undertake westward campaigns against the Aramaeans who then threatened Israel and Judah.<sup>18</sup> After a period of prosperity his later tenure suffered decline both because of the rise of prominent kings in the west, such as Jeroboam and Uzziah, and the encroachments of the Urartians from the north. His successor, Shalmaneser IV (783-773), was able to do little more than defend the homeland against the menacing Urartians.<sup>19</sup> Ashur-dan III (773-755), brother of Shalmaneser, was even less successful in reversing the deterioration in foreign affairs, and he also had to contend with plagues and internal revolt around the year 760.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Obviously we consider Jonah to be an historical figure and not merely the hero of a fictional story. Both OT and NT allusions to him establish his genuine historicity; see 2 Kgs 14:25 and the Matthew and Luke passages cited above.

<sup>15</sup>See map 72 in Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

<sup>16</sup>Jeroboam II fits into the king lists of Israel and Judah as follows:

<i>Israel</i>	<i>Judah</i>
Jehu (841-814)	Ahaziah (841)
Jehoahaz (814-798)	Athaliah (841-835)
Jehoash (798-782)	Joash (835-796)
Jeroboam II (793-753)	Amaziah (796-767)
Zachariah (753-752)	Uzziah (790-739)

These dates and relationships are detailed in my *An historical Survey of the Old Testament* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1966) 246-247.

<sup>17</sup>The dates in this section are those of W. W. Hallo, "From Qarqar to Carchemish: Assyria and Israel in the Light of New Discoveries," *BA* 23 (1960) 34 ff. For Adad-nirari cf. S. Dalley, *Iraq* 30 (1968) 139-153; P. Hulin, *Sumer* 26 (1970) 127-131; A. Millard and H. Tadmor, *Iraq* 35 (1973) 57-64; D. J. Wiseman, *Iraq* 15 (1953) 135 ff.; *Iraq* 26 (1964) 118 ff.

<sup>18</sup>He is likely the "savior" mentioned in 2 Kgs 13:5 who was sent by Yahweh to deliver Jehoahaz of Israel. The Kalakh inscription on which this campaign is recorded is translated by A. L. Oppenheim in *ANET*, 281-282.

<sup>19</sup>For Shalmaneser IV cf. J. Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees: Studia Pohl 1* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), no. 54; F. Thureau-Dangin, *RA* 27 (1930) 11 ff.

<sup>20</sup>These difficulties are documented in the Assyrian eponym chronicle, a convenient publication of which is found in E. Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Chicago: University Press, 1951) 209-215. See especially year 765/4, "a plague in the land"; 763, "revolt in city of Asshur. In the month of Simānu an eclipse of the sun took place"; 762, "revolt in the city of Asshur"; 761, "revolt in the city of Arrapha"; 760, "revolt in the city of Arrapha"; 759, "revolt in the city of Guzana. A plague against Guzana"; 758, "peace in the land" (Thiele, *Numbers*, 212).

Ashur-nirari V (755-745) succeeded his brother, but matters only became worse for Assyria.<sup>21</sup> It is Hallo's verdict that the memory of these forty lean years of Assyria's history may be preserved in Israelite tradition by "attaching the legend of the near-collapse of Nineveh to Jonah."<sup>22</sup> Though Hallo obviously fails to take the Jonah story as sober history, his tongue-in-cheek observation may accurately describe the Assyrian background implied in the OT (and NT) record.

Unfortunately it is the reign of Ashur-dan III, the king who we suggest is the one whom Jonah encountered, that is most lacking in documentation.<sup>23</sup> Probably this in itself is indicative of the profound calamity that swept over the land in his time, a calamity that also may have made a powerful spiritual impact on the king as he heard the words of judgment from the Hebrew prophet.

Whether or not the identity of the king of Assyria mentioned in the book of Jonah can be determined, the impression that the prophet made on him and his city is certainly credible against the historical backdrop of the first half of the eighth century. But the matter of Jonah's being a sign to Nineveh goes beyond such historical identifications in any case. Let us turn to a consideration of the city of Nineveh itself: its founding, its traditions, its religion.

Nineveh was one of the most ancient of the Assyrian cities, with traceable roots going back to the Uruk period (ca. 4100-3100).<sup>24</sup> Its name from earliest times was formed of the composite Sumerian logogram NINUA (=NINA), the interior sign of which is KU<sub>6</sub> or, in Akkadian, *nūnu*, "fish."<sup>25</sup> The meaning of the outer sign is unclear since it no doubt underwent transformation in its composite orthographic development.<sup>26</sup> A town of identical name (Nina) near Lagash worshipped the fish-goddess Nanshe, so it is suggested that she was also the chief deity of early Nineveh.<sup>27</sup> The logogram NINUA can also be read NANŠE, an obvious sup-

<sup>21</sup>For Ashur-nirari V cf. A. Millard, *Iraq* 32 (1970) 174.

<sup>22</sup>W. W. Hallo and W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 168. For another description of this period (783-745) and an assessment of its decline cf. S. Smith, *CAH*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge: University Press, 1929), 3. 29-31.

<sup>23</sup>W. Schramm, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 2. 123, says, "Von Assur-dan III . . . besitzen wir keine eigenem Inschriften."

<sup>24</sup>Cf. A. Falkenstein in *The Near East: The Early Civilizations* (ed. J. Bottéro *et al.*; New York: Delacorte, 1967) 24-26; M. Mallowan in *CAH*<sup>3</sup> (ed. I. E. S. Edwards *et al.*; Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 1/1. 401.

<sup>25</sup>See R. Labat, *Manuel d'Épigraphie Akkadienne* (Paris: University Press, 1963), signs 200 and 589; T. Bauer, *Akkadische Lesestücke* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1953), 2, sign 104.

<sup>26</sup>Some scholars read the sign EŠ=Akk. *bitu*, "house" or "place," which would yield EŠ.KU<sub>6</sub> (HA), "place of fish." It can also be read AB (Akk. *tāmtu*), "sea," so the picture is that of a fish in the sea. Cf. Labat, *Manuel*, sign 128.

<sup>27</sup>H. Lewy, *CAH*<sup>3</sup>, 1/2. 730-731. Nanshe is identified also as a daughter of Ea/Enki, the god of fresh water, wisdom, culture and magic. Cf. K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1974) 287-288; T. Jacobsen, "Formative Tendencies in Sumerian Religion," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. G. E. Wright; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) 360. T. G. Pinches identified this daughter as Nina and says that she is the goddess "with whom the name of Nineveh is apparently connected" (*The Old Testament in the Light of the Historical Records and Legends of Assyria and Babylonia* [London: SPCK, 1902] 64).

port for this connection.<sup>28</sup> The name of Nineveh, "Fishtown," is highly intriguing then in considering the meaning of Jonah as a sign to Nineveh, a matter to be elaborated presently.

Berosus has preserved an Assyrian tradition to the effect that Assyria's arts and sciences were brought from the Persian Gulf by a half-fish, half-man deity called in the Greek Oannes.<sup>29</sup> A representation of this god may be detected on bas-reliefs from Kouyunjik.<sup>30</sup> Their excavator, Austen Layard, had previously found a similar relief at Khorsabad, a figure having human form to the waist and the extremities of a fish.<sup>31</sup> Place names are commonly aetiological in nature,<sup>32</sup> so the myth describing the founding of Nineveh by a fish-god is incidentally confirmed by the name itself.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Cf. V. Scheil, "La déesse Nina et ses poissons," *RA* 15 (1918) 127 ff.

<sup>29</sup>Oannes is the Greek equivalent of Ea (Akkadian) or Enki (Sumerian), god of the earth. His abode was in the Apsû, the fresh water ocean. It may be tempting to see a linguistic connection between Greek Oannes and Hebrew *Yôná*, a view suggested by L. Spence, for example, in *Myths and Legends of Babylonia and Assyria* (London: George G. Harrap, 1916) 87. More likely one should compare with Sumerian U-Anna or something similar, about which more later. Cf. C. F. Lehmann-Haupt, "Berossus," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (ed. F. Ebeling and B. Meissner; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1938), 2. 4. Berossus says of Oannes that "he had the whole body of a fish, but above his fish's head he had another head which was that of a man, and human feet emerged from beneath his fish's tail; he had a human voice, and his image is preserved to this day [third century B. C.]. He passed the day in the midst of men without taking any food; he taught them the use of letters, sciences and arts of all kinds, the rules for the founding of cities, and the construction of temples, the principles of law and of surveying; he showed them how to sow and reap; he gave them all that contributes to the comforts of life" (cited in G. Maspero, *The Dawn of Civilization* [New York: Frederick Ungar, 1894], 2. 546) D. O. Edzard, "History of Mesopotamia and Iraq," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1974), 11. 965, derives the name Oannes from (Sumerian) U-Anna or (Akkadian) Umanna, a second name for Adapa, the bringer of civilization. While this is phonetically possible, the name Nanshe also comes to mind. This Sumerian fish-goddess interpreted dreams and was concerned with justice. Cf. J. J. M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972) 46. See also, for a translation of the part of the Berossus treatise "Babylonian History" that contains the Oannes story, C. Doria and H. Lenowitz, *Origins* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 237-240. Berossus' writings, their preservation in Eusebius (via Polyhistor), and other literature on the matter are discussed by W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 134-137.

<sup>30</sup>Layard, the excavator of Kouyunjik (Nineveh), describes his discovery of colossal bas-reliefs on each side of an entrance to a large chamber as follows: "It combined the human shape with that of the fish. The head of the fish formed a mitre above that of the man, whilst its scaly back and fanlike tail fell as a cloak behind, leaving the human limbs and feet exposed. . . . We can scarcely hesitate to identify this mythic form with the Oannes, or sacred man-fish, who, according to the traditions preserved by Berossus, issued from the Erythraean Sea, instructed the Chaldeans in all wisdom, in the sciences, and in the fine arts, and was afterwards worshipped as a god in the temples of Babylonia" (A. H. Layard, *Discoveries Among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* [New York: Putnam, 1853] 343).

<sup>31</sup>Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (New York: Appleton, 1856) 352-353.

<sup>32</sup>For a sane treatment of aetiology see A. P. Ross, "The Table of Nations in Genesis" (Th. D. dissertation; Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976) *passim*.

<sup>33</sup>There is obviously some confusion as to the identity of the being involved. Is it Oannes (Ea/Enki) himself or an offspring such as Nanshe/Nina? Since the Berossus tradition knows of several fish-like beings who come from the Apsû bringing civilization, all related to Oannes, it matters little. What is important is that Jonah reminded the Ninevites of one of these beings at least. Cf. Pinches, *Old Testament*, 62-63; E. R. Hodges, *Cory's Ancient Fragments* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1876) 51-52.

The connection between this myth and the story of Jonah should be obvious.<sup>34</sup> Jonah, having been thrown overboard by the Phoenician sailors, found himself swallowed up by the great fish<sup>35</sup> in whose belly he remained for three days and three nights. Whether he died or not during that time and was then resuscitated is incidental both to Jesus' use of the story as an analogy to his death, burial and resurrection and to Jonah's being a sign to the Ninevites.<sup>36</sup> The thrust of Jesus' remarks was that he, like Jonah, would be confined for three days and three nights. A far clearer prediction of his actual death is in John 2:19 where our Lord says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." That he meant to speak of his death and resurrection is indicated in v 21 where John says that "he spoke of the temple of his body" and that "when . . . he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he spoke this" (2:22). In addition, Jonah technically could not have been resurrected in the NT theological sense since true resurrection is predicated on that of Jesus who is the "first fruits of them that are asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). Jonah, then, even if he died in the fish, was only revived and lived to die again. Nor is the question of his living or dying important to the Ninevites as a sign, because their myth had nothing to do with a dying-rising figure of any kind. The experience of being swallowed and transported by the sea monster is all that is at issue.

Having been cast on the land,<sup>37</sup> Jonah made his way to Nineveh to undertake

<sup>34</sup>We are not, of course, suggesting that the Jonah story is mythical, nor would we even go so far as such evangelical scholars as Leslie Allen who brand it as parabolic. He argues that "there may well be a historical nucleus behind the story," but "it is best to confine the definition of the literary form of the book to that of a parable with certain allegorical features" (NICOT, 179, 181). This form-critical analysis of the book is, in our view, too imprecise, for it allows the interpreter to decide for himself what is and what is not historical in it. For Jesus likewise to have used an OT parable as an analogue (to say nothing of type) to his death and resurrection opens up the possibility of other such reinterpretations of OT historical events such as the fall of man and the exodus. This connection between the Oannes myth and Jonah has been suggested by many others since at least 1837, but scholars such as Bewer have ridiculed the possibility on the grounds that Yahweh would hardly use pagan gods to create faith in himself. But this response shows insensitivity to the Biblical writers' use of polemic and illustration, a device seen in Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28, and many other places.

<sup>35</sup>Hebrew *dāg gādōl*. The fish is not otherwise defined in the OT but is certainly to be distinguished from the *tannīm* or *tannīn* (sea monsters) and *liwyātān* ("Leviathan") often mentioned in polemical texts showing the sovereignty of God over nature and the cosmos. "Yam" and "Rahab" are other designations of the great dragon or monster with whom Yahweh did (and does) battle, especially in primeval times (cf. Job 26:12, 13; Ps 74:13-17; Job 3:8; Ps 89:9-10; Isa 51:9; 27:1). For discussion of such polemic in reference to Canaanite and Babylonian myth see B. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974) 1-17. The Greek word used in Matthew, *kētos*, means "any sea-monster or huge fish" (LSJ, s. v. "*kētos*," 949-950).

<sup>36</sup>Evidence for Jonah's death is usually centered in his statement that he cried from "the belly of Sheol" (Jonah 2:2, Hebrew 2:3). Sheol, however, frequently has a hyperbolic meaning in passages where death itself is clearly not intended. Cf. Ps 30:4; 86:13; 88:4, where the psalmist has in mind a catastrophic condition short of actual death. Similarly Jonah's praise that he had been brought up from the pit (Jonah 2:6, Hebrew 2:7) expresses his deliverance from certain death. This is evident from the preceding couplet: "I descended to the bottoms of the mountains; / the netherworld's bars (closed) upon me forever." Since in fact Jonah came forth from the fish within hours after this prayer, he speaks only of the imminency of death here and elsewhere.

<sup>37</sup>There is no way of knowing where this occurred. Since, however, it was Yahweh's intention to set Jonah on his way to Nineveh as expeditiously as possible one might look for a disembarkation on the upper

his mission. Whether he went alone or not it is unlikely that the story of his marvelous transportation and deliverance failed to become known and even to precede him.<sup>38</sup> In any event, the confinement in the stomach of the fish with its attendant and obvious deleterious effects would surely mark Jonah physically and could not fail to make him the object of utmost curiosity.<sup>39</sup> And of course one cannot rule out the possibility of divinely appointed witnesses who not only saw the regurgitation but bore testimony to it in Nineveh and all along the way.<sup>40</sup> But these speculations in the final analysis are unnecessary so long as we recognize that in some manner Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, his association with the fish being its most plausible source.

The sign to which Jesus made reference must have been a major factor in the response of the city of Nineveh to the preaching of Jonah, for the acceptance of his message was apparently immediate and universal. The people, the king, and even the animals were clothed in sackcloth to demonstrate the sincerity of the city's repentance.<sup>41</sup> Whether the king was Ashur-dan III (as we have suggested above) or not there is no basis in light of the sparse documentation that does exist to deny the historical integrity of the Jonah story and the reality of the sign that brought city-wide repentance to Nineveh.

Since the Lord Jesus, according to both Matthew and Luke, spoke of Jonah as constituting in himself a sign to ancient Nineveh, a sign so persuasive that the population from king to peasant repented, something in Jonah's experience must be found to provide adequate explanation for his effectiveness. In Matthew attention is drawn to Jonah's having been in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, but since Luke specifies that Jonah was a sign to Nineveh that experience in the fish must have been communicated to the Assyrian capital and

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Mediterranean coast, perhaps near the mouth of the Orontes river. For travel routes of this period cf. Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *Atlas*, 81. The distance from Alalakh to Nineveh, for example, was about 375 miles.

<sup>38</sup>Jewish tradition relates that when the passengers of Jonah's ship saw him in Nineveh and heard how he had been saved, they renounced idolatry and took their families to Jerusalem to worship the one God. See J. Gaer, *The Lore of the Old Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951) 272.

<sup>39</sup>For examples of men surviving similar episodes cf. C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1, 398; E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 1, 384-386.

<sup>40</sup>See Gaer, *Lore*, 272.

<sup>41</sup>Whether the repentance was tantamount to conversion has been debated. Some scholars advance the view that there may only have been the recognition that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was a deity who commanded respect and worship and even a place *inter alia* in the Assyrian pantheon, an attitude that apparently characterized both Nebuchadnezzar II (Dan 3:28-30) and Cyrus (2 Chr 36:22-23 = Ezra 1:1-4). The apparently clear statement that "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way" must, it is said, be held in tension with the lack of documentary evidence from Assyrian sources that a mass conversion from paganism to Yahweh occurred. It is in the nature of much ancient Near Eastern historiography, however, that such negative (to their mind) events in their history would be expunged from the record of later historians. The exodus is a classic example from the standpoint of its omission in at least any extant Egyptian documents. Jesus' own analysis of the event seems decisive, for he states that the Ninevites "repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Matt 12:41; cf. Luke 11:32). His whole point—that the scribes and Pharisees should repent even more readily since he is greater than Jonah—is lost if the Ninevites did not genuinely repent.

have become to the Ninevites a sign that Jonah was a divine messenger. Such a sign would be particularly convincing to a people whose aetiology taught them that their city had been founded by a fish-god. The spectacular and timely arrival of Jonah among them created a curiosity and receptivity to his message that would have been possible in no other way. When the truth of the message of Yahweh was then proclaimed, the response was the repentance and faith recounted in the sacred text. Jesus, basing his own appeal for repentance on this account, argues *a fortiori* that if the pagan Ninevites repented at the preaching of the foreigner Jonah so much more ought his own generation to repent, "for a greater than Jonah is here." Since the Jewish traditions of Jesus' time knew of the connections established in this paper, his own use of them in reference to his resurrection is not at all surprising.