Sefer Yonah and Ninevah

Archeological slides of artifacts from Ninevah and text

David B Levy
227 West 60th St.
LCW

Slide presentation for Professor Boylan class 2012
The library of Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE.) at Ninevah, the city to which Yonah flees, and the city to whose destruction in 612 BCE is celebrated by the prophet Nahum was excavated by Austen Layard in 1849. Tablets were grouped together by series (iskaru) and by subseries (pirsu), arranged by numbers, indexed at the rims. Finding Lists were often inscribed on the wall near the door. Also from Ninevah were great mosaics uncovered including a picture of winged lions.

See: Libraries and Archives in Ancient Near East at:
The Epic of Gilgamesh (ca. 2700 BCE) was found at Ninevah. Tablet eleven below tells of a flood story. The manner in which birds are released from the boat to survive the flood has been noted as parallel to those let out by Noah. The clay tablet below was found in Ashurbanipal’s library (7th c. BCE) in Ninevah. Harry M., Understanding the Bible Through History and Archaeology, KTAV: NY, 1972, 38.

A portion of a series of clay tablets which tell the epic story of King Gilgamesh of Sumer (ca. 2700 B.C.E.). This tablet tells of Utnapishtim boarding the boat, the coming of the storm flood, the landing on Mt. Nisir, the first sacrifice to the gods after the flood, the apotheosis of Utnapishtim, and the divine regret for sending the flood in the first place. The story of Gilgamesh then continues. From Ashurbanipal’s library, seventh cent. B.C.E., Nineveh. Clay 137 by 130 MM.

Below is a hand-copy, transliteration, and word-for-word translation of lines 127-131 of Tablet XI of the Epic.

```
127 $z$ur-ru  $u$u-ru a mu-ša-a ti
6 days and 6 nights

128 il-lak ša ṣa-ra a bu-bu me-hu u i-ṣap pan-ur
blows the wind; the flood, the south-storm sweeps the land.

129 si-bu-š $u$ $u$-mu-na kaš-ši-di $u$ $u$ abu-bu qab-ša
the 7th day, when it came, . . . the flood, the battle

130 sa-ša i-ma $u$-šu which he had fought

131 kima ha-a-al-ti like, an army;

i-nu-ša a-ša $a$ $u$ ka-ši-ra $u$-ši $u$-ma im-hul-ša a bu-bu ik-ša
grew quiet the sea, and was still the storm, the flood ceased.
```
Bas relief from the palace of King Sennacherib of Assyria (704-681) at Ninevah from Harry M., Understanding the Bible Through History and Archaeology, KTAV: NY, 1972, 126
Victory stele from King Sennacherib of Ninevah in Assyria (704-681) who is receiving a report on the battle of Lachish. Harry M., Understanding the Bible Through History and Archaeology, KTAV: NY, 1972, 188
Themes of Sefer Yonah

(1) Atonement (Kaparah) vs. Repentance (teshuvah)
(2) Universalism vs. Particularism
(3) Prophecy: Realization vs. Compliance
(4) Compassion: Justice vs. Mercy
(5) Die Gattung: Prophetic Calling
(6) Birth metaphors
(7) Creation vs. destruction
(8) Repeated command and its fulfillment eventually
Dating the Book of Jonah

(1) Yonah ben Amittai was active during the reign of Jeroboam son of Joash (Jeroboam II), King of Israel (2 Kings 14:25).

(2) Obadiah was placed before Yonah because it was attributed to Obadiah, Ahav’s major domo (I Kgs 18:3, see Sanhedrin 39a), his prophecy of destruction of Edom referred to the defeat of Edom by King Amaziah of Judah (2 Kgs. 14:7); seder Olam Rabbah 20), who was contemporary with Jeroboam’s father Joash

(3) Micah began his prophetic career during the reign of Jotham, Amaziah’s grandson and Nahum was dated to the reign of Manasseh, Jotham’s great grandson (seder Olam Rabbah 20).

(1) Micah prophesied the fall of Assyria (5:4-5) and Nahum the destruction of Ninevah (2:4-3:19). Thus the placement of these two books after Jonah expresses the view that Assyria returned to its evil ways after its short lived repentance in time of Jonah
In Midrashic Lore

(1) Rabbi Jonathan said the holy one blessed be He stipulated with the sea that it would split before Israel.... Rabbi Jeremiah son of Eleazar said The Holy one blessed be He made such a condition not only for the sea but with everything that was created during the 6 days of creation... I commanded the ravens to feed Elijah and the fish to spit out Yonah on dry land (yabasha) [Gen Rabbah 5,5 and M. Avot 5,5]
(1) Ibn Caspi in 2 pirushim on Rambam’s Moreh HaNevukhim does nto interpet Maimonides remark on Yonah to mean that the dag Gadol literally swallowed Yonah but is a mushal. Profiat Duran writes, “This alludes to Balaam’s ass and Jonah’s fish, which cannot be understood literally and were entirely prophetic visions with symbolic value.” Shemtov ibn Shemtov also held this. Don Isaac Abravanel however disagreed with both in his pirush on the Moreh HaNevukhim and offered proofs that Maimonides intention was not to deny the literal meaning of the Dag Gadol swallowing Yonah.
GRA interprets Jonah as allegory of soul

- Allegory for the sojourn of the neshamah in olam ha-zeh. Hashem sent Yonah to rectify the moral condition of Nineveh but instead of fulfilling G-d’s will, Yonah tried to escape by boarding a ship for Tarshish. Similarly the neshamah is sent to rectify the world through Torah study and mitzvos, but instead of fulfilling its mission, it allows itself to be deceived by the body’s physical impulses and gashmius. The body’s ability to deceive the neshamah is alluded to in the name Yonah for the verbal form of Yonah is related to the noun “Honaah” (deception) see Rashi Vayikra 25:17

The GRA continued

• Just as Jonah initially failed to carry out his mission and consequently endangered his life, so too the neshamah initially fails in its mission to rectify the world and consequently brings grat harm upon itself in the process (zohar II, 199b). And although Jonah was granted a second chance to complete his mission, he was very distressed by what he perceived as his bad fortune. The same is true of the neshamah—when the neshamah fails in its mission, it is reincarnated and given another opportunity to fulfill its mission but like Jonah it is greatly disturbed by the necessity of reincarnation.

Gra on daleth aleph: and it displeased Jonah greatly and it grieved him

The verse alludes to the physical hardships experienced by the reincarnated neshamah of someone who had sinned in a previous life. As Hazal say, “Longevity, children and parnasah do not depend on merit but mazal (Moed Katan 28a)- the reincarnated neshamah of a person who sinned in his previous life is destined to feel deprivation in these three areas even if he is completely righteous in his present life. This was Hazal’s intention when they said that Moses asked Hashem: Master of the universe! Why do some righteous individuals enjoy a good life, while other righteous individuals suffer?” G-d answered Moshe, “Moses a righteous individual who enjoys a good life is a righteous individual born to a righteous individual, while a righteous individual who suffers is a righteous individual who was born of a wicked individual” (Berachos 7a). In other words a righteous person who was righteous in a previous life will enjoy a good life, whereas a righteous person who was wicked in a previous life will suffer throughout his next gilgul.

Hazal on Gilgullim

• “The twenty eight days of the moon include 14 days when the moon is waxing, and 14 days the moon is waning. He who is born during the days when the moon is waxing will have children, a long life, prosperity, a livelihood, joy and peace. But he who is born when the moon is incomplete will be lacking in all these things- he will be poor, he will lack sustenance, and he will not have children or a long life. He who is born in the middle will be average. What determines whether one is born in the beginning, middle, or end? His gilgul determines it that which occurred before he came into this world

Gra on “it grieved him”

- Jonah represents the soul of a righteous man who behaved wickedly in a previous lifetime and consequently had to undergo the anguish of gilgulim. He greatly envied the people of Nineveh for meriting “two tables” (Tikunei Zohar 117b) and enjoyable life in this world and a protection in olam habah. They lived enjoyable lives in olam hazeh because they were not reincarnated souls, and they merited to a portion in olam ha-bah because they were swift to repent in fear of Hashem. Rebbe felt the same way when he learned of the eternal reward of R. Elliezer son of Durdaya earned a single moment thorough teshuva. At this time, Rebbe cried out and declared ‘some people acquire their portion in olam ha-bah in a single moment! (Avodah Zarah 17a) In other words some people repent for their same sins in time and avoid the need to be reincarnated while others do not repent in time and as a result must suffer the agony of another incarnation before finally enjoying their eternal reward in olam habah. This is the intention of Hazal’s statement, “a kav of carobs is sufficient for Chanina ben Dosa” (Berachos 17b) Since the carob tree first gives forth fruit seventy years after it has taken root, the one who plants it will not live long enough to enjoy its fruits in olam hazeh. Likewise a righteous individuals who failed to repent for their sins and were reincarnated will not get to enjoy the reward of their righteous deeds in olam ha-zeh. Instead like the planter of the carob tree, they will have to wait to reap their reward until after their death

Structure of Yonah;

**Part I**
- (1) The injunction and its violation (1:1-3)
- (2) In the storm-tossed ship; the sailors obedience and Jonah’s rebellion (1:4-6)
- (3) In the belly of the big fish; submission (2:1-II)

**Part II.**
- (1) The repeated injunction and its fulfillment (3:1-3a)
- (2a) In Nineveh, the doomed; the sinners’ repentence
- (2b) In Nineveh, the forgiven. Jonah’s second rebellion (4:1-5)
- (3) East of Nineveh: acquiescence (4:6-11)

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999,xxv
Concentric Structure of Yonah

A. Jonah however arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the L-rd

B. He went down to Joppa

C. And found a ship

D. Going to Tarshish

C. He paid the fare

B and went down into it

A. To go with the others to Tarshish, away from the presence of the L-rd

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvii
Structure of the Shipboard Scene

(1:4-16)

A. Storm inspires fear
B. Vain prayer
C. Vain efforts
D. Jonah pays no attention
E. Jonah is summoned for help
F. Discovery of “the culprit”
G. Questions to determine nature of the crime
   G. Reproving question
   F. Flashback: the crime is already known to them
      E. Jonah is summoned for help
      D. Jonah takes responsibility
      C. Vain efforts
      B. Genuine prayer
A. The end of the tempest leads to the fear of the L-rd
   B. Conclusion: expressions of thanks

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvii
Leitmotifs of parallelism

1:4-5
• But the L-rd CAST a great wind upon the sea, and a great storm came upon the sea…. The sailors were AFRAID and cried out, each to his own god

1:15-16
• And they lifted Jonah and CAST him into the sea, and the sea stopped raging. The men FEARED the L-rd greatly

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvi
Leitmotifs of Parallelism

2:1
• The L-rd appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah

2:11
• The L-rd commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on the dry land (yabasha, term in Bereitshit during Creation), metaphor is that of birthing

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvi
Leitmotifs of parallism

3:1-2a
• The word of the L-rd came to Jonah. Arise and go to Nineveh

3:3a
• Jonah arose and went to Nineveh in accordance with the word of the L-rd

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvi
Leitmotifs of parallism;

1:2
• Arise and go to Ninevah that great city

4:11
• And should I not care about Nineveh that great city

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxvii
Repeated Command and its fulfillment;

- **Chapter 1**
  - A. The word of the L-rd came to Jonah son of Amittai
  - B. Arise and go to Ninevah that great city and cry out against it for their wickedness HAS COME BEFORE ME
  - C. Jonah, however arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the L-rd. He went down to Joppa and found ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with the others to Tarshish, away from the presence of the L-rd

- **Chapter 3**
  - A. The word of the L-rd came to Jonah A SECOND TIME
  - B. Arise and go to Nineveah that great city and cry out to it the message that I tell you
  - C. Jonah arose and went to Nineveh in accordance wit the word of the L-rd

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The Structure of the Jonah Story (1:2-3:10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The storm inspires fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vain prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vain efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah pays no attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah is summoned to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery of the culprit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions to determine the nature of his crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah's self-identification as one who fears the Lord magnifies their own fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproving question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashback: the crime is already known to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah is summoned to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah takes responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vain efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The end of the tempest leads to the fear of the Lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: expressions of thanks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999
Inter textual allusions to other biblical sections

(1) The command and its violation (in Gan Eden, Adam and Eve)
(2) Jonah and Moses: Flight and Protest vs. Intervention and Advocacy
(3) Jonah and Jeremiah: Influence without contrast
(4) Echoes of Joel in the words of the King of Nineveh
(5) Iyov, concludes with the rebels submission to G-d Whereas Iyov acknowledges Gd’s righteousness (I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes (42:6), Jonah’s submission is tacit. Humble silence, mute language, see Psalm 65:2 “TO YOU SILENCE IS PRAISE”
(6) Creation in Bereshit

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxxvi
Aramaic phrases

(1) Give us thought (1:6) yit’ashet from Aramaic root sht (dan 6:4)
(2) Will become calm (1:11) yishtoq also in Ps. 107:30, Prov. 26:20 instead of yaharish
(3) Raging (1:15) Za’po from noun za’af meaning storm found in Aramaic of Dead Sea Scrolls derivative in Ps. 11:6 zil’afot (scorching)
(4) Appointed (2:1) va-yeman from root m-n-h with the sense of appoint and in the pi’el in Iyov vs. hifqid
(5) A walk (3:3) mahalakh vs. older derekh (gen. 30:36)
(6) By decree of (3:7) mi-ta’am is Aramaism of te’em in Dan 3:10
(7) Myriad (4:11) ribbo

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999, xxxix
Symbolism of their right hand from their left

(1) Between good and evil

(2) Israel put right hand on Ephraim head though he was the younger and left on Manasseh’s head

(3) Rashi, Samuel ben Meir, Ibn Ezra, Redak teich phrase to mean children i.e. Ninevites who lack ethical understanding on ethico-religious plane

see Uriel Simon, JPS Commentary: Philadelphia, 1999
Symbolism of phrase “and many beasts”

Koheleth’s question ‘what is the difference between human beings and beasts?” i.e. Humans have the potential for coming close to Hashem via ethical virtue, intellectual virtue, and spiritual virtue (man vs. animal also a theme in Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s Tanya
Themes with Haggim

(1) Repentance on Yom Kippur

(2) The gourd (kikaiyon) represents the sukkah that gives shade and is a frail structure that so easily can be taken away by the powers of Nature controlled by Hashem. GRA holds that kikayon represents worldly prosperity.

(3) With Simchat Torah we begin again the start of Bereishit, and the themes of Creation and tohu vavohu (the storm in Yonah) and birthing metaphors have parallels.
View of the mound of Kuyunjik one of 2 mounds which was once were the city of Ninevah, capital of the Assyrian Empire from Harry M., Understanding the Bible Through History and Archaeology, KTAV: NY, 1972, 196