

# How Big Was Nineveh? Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size

CHARLES HALTON

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*This article examines the incongruity between most modern translations of Jonah 3:3 and ancient textual and archaeological evidence concerning the size of Nineveh. Every modern solution intended to reconcile a literal rendering of the description in Jonah 3:3 with ancient evidence fails. However, reading Jonah 3:3 as a figure of speech perfectly conveys the author's intention of representing Nineveh as a very large city.*

*Key Words: Jonah 3:3, Nineveh, Babylon, literal, figurative, idiom, hermeneutics, Herodotus, Sennacherib, journey, prophet*

On the face of it, “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” (Jonah 3:3b, KJV) is quite an innocuous statement. It seems like a straightforward description of size measured by means of an average day’s walk. Many modern translations render this phrase in a similar manner:

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth (ESV).<sup>1</sup>

Now Nineveh was an extremely large city, a three-day walk (HCSV).<sup>2</sup>

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk (NASB).<sup>3</sup>

Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days (NIV).

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey across (NJB).

*Author’s note:* I dedicate this article to Professor Edwin Yamauchi and John Charles Halton III—two individuals who combine a sharp mind with a tender heart. May this young scholar follow in your footsteps. Furthermore, I extend my deep appreciation to them both for their insights in an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Note for the first phrase: “Hebrew *a great city to God*.” Note for the second phrase: “Or *a visit was a three days’ journey*.”

2. Note for the second phrase: “Probably = the time required to cover the city on foot.”

3. Note for the first phrase: “Lit., *a great city to God*.”



EISENBRAUNS

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Nineveh was an enormously large city a three days' walk across (NJPSV).<sup>4</sup>

[A] city so large that it took three days to see it all (NLT).

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across (NRSV).

Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it (TNIV).

However, once one begins to ponder the relation of the description of Nineveh's size in Jonah 3:3 with current archaeological reconstructions that seem to contradict almost every modern translation of this clause, questions begin to arise (not to mention the questions arising from the phrase היתה עיר גדולה לאלהים, but this is a topic for another essay). While there are probably many responses one might have to this apparent discrepancy, they center upon one question: should we view Jonah 3:3b as a literal description of size or as a figure of speech? Our answer to this question will not only tell us much about this particular verse, but it will also help us better formulate our sensitivity when adjudicating interpretive options as we approach other biblical texts. To this end, we will first examine ancient textual and archaeological evidence concerning Nineveh's size; second, we will explore modern interpretations of Jonah 3:3; and finally, the results of this study will be applied more widely to the task of adjudicating ancient texts in general.

#### MODERN RECONSTRUCTIONS AND ANCIENT TEXTUAL WITNESSES

A figure commonly given for the length of a typical daily journey in the ancient world is 20 miles per day.<sup>5</sup> When this number is combined with the translation of Jonah 3:3 as "a three days' walk across" (NRSV), one might envision a city 60 miles in breadth. While Nineveh was certainly large, based on evidence from ancient texts and archaeological reconstructions, we can be sure that Nineveh was far smaller than this figure.

4. Note for the first phrase: "Lit., 'a large city of God.'"

5. Based on his own explorations, Trumbull estimated that a camel caravan could travel between 15 and 18 miles through the desert per day; H. Clay Trumbull, *Kadesh-Barnea: Its Importance and Probable Site* (Philadelphia: Wattles, 1895), 1895. Beitzel examined first- and second-millennium texts and determined that an average day's journey was between 17 and 23 miles; Barry Beitzel, "Travel and Communication (OT World)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (vol. 6; ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 646. Davies affirmed similar distances but stated that various circumstances could cause considerable variation in particular instances; Graham Davies, "The Significance of Deuteronomy 1:2 for the Location of Mount Horeb," *PEQ* 111 (1979): 87–101. See also Edwin M. Yamauchi, "On the Road with Paul," *Christian History* 14/3 (1995): 17.

*Modern Reconstructions*

The book of Jonah opens with the phrase, יהי דבר־יהוה אל־יונה בן־אמתי לאמר. An individual with the name Jonah ben Amittai from Gath-hepher is mentioned in 2 Kgs 14:25 as prophesying to Jeroboam II (790–750/496). Since the only occurrences of the names Jonah or Amittai are found in 2 Kgs 14:25 and Jonah 3:3, it is likely that the author of the book of Jonah had this individual in mind as the protagonist of his<sup>7</sup> composition. Some have questioned whether the book of Jonah has anything to do with the individual in 2 Kings other than borrowing his name.<sup>8</sup> While this is an interesting discussion in its own right, it is not at all relevant for the purposes of this investigation. What is relevant is that, since Jonah is the main character of this account, the author probably envisioned an eighth-century setting for this book. In any case, archaeological reconstructions indicate that at no time in the ancient period, including the eighth century, did Nineveh approach a size close to 60 miles in breadth.

Even though it was not 60 miles across, Nineveh was by all accounts an impressive city.<sup>9</sup> It was situated upon a tell near a natural crossing of the Tigris River, opposite the modern city of Mosul.<sup>10</sup> Scenes carved around 645–643 B.C. upon a wall of the North Palace in Nineveh depict the city surrounded by turreted walls topped with crenellations.<sup>11</sup> A likely place that one might have entered the city was through the East Gate, which is at the top of a stone-paved ramp.<sup>12</sup> A visitor would certainly have marveled over the two giant bulls flanking the gatehouse. Upon entering

6. Dates follow Gershon Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (ed. Baruch Halpern and Manfred H. E. Weippert; SHANE 9; Leiden: Brill, 1996), Appendix A.

7. Although there were a few female scribes in the ancient Near East, the vast majority of scribes were male; Brigitte Lion and Eleanor Robson, "Quelques Textes Scolaires Paléo-Babyloniens Rédigés par des Femmes," *JCS* 57 (2005): 37–54.

8. For instance, see Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction, Including the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and also the Works of Similar Type from Qumran: The History of the Formation of the Old Testament* (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 404–5.

9. This discussion is limited to the period before the sack of Nineveh in 612 B.C. at the hands of the Babylonians and Medes portrayed in the Babylonian Chronicle that states that Nineveh was "turned into a ruin heap"; Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (TCS 5; Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1975; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 94. The Elamites also may have participated in the destruction of Nineveh as seen in selective defacements of wall panels; Julian E. Reade, "Elam and Elamites in Assyrian Sculpture," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 9 (1976): 105. For a description of Nineveh in the Greco-Parthian period, see Julian E. Reade, "Greco-Parthian Nineveh," *Iraq* 60 (1998): 65–83. For a fascinating survey of the history of modern studies on the topography of Nineveh, see David Stronach, "Notes on the Topography of Nineveh," in *Neo-Assyrian Geography* (ed. Mario Liverani; Rome: La Sapienza, 1995).

10. For an excellent overview of Nineveh, see Julian E. Reade, "Ninive (Nineveh)," *RIA* 9 (2001): 388–433.

11. Julian E. Reade, "Assyrian Illustrations of Nineveh," *Iranica Antiqua* 33 (1998): fig. 4.

12. One can see an illustration of a gate in the southwest corner of the city upon a wall panel in Ashurbanipal's Southwest Palace; Austen H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (New York: Putnam, 1853), 231.

the city one would encounter wide streets, some with stone paving, gardens, parks, game-parks, canals, palaces, temples, and houses. This must have been a breathtaking experience, and the combination and grandeur of these features certainly distinguished Nineveh from almost every other ancient city.

In addition to its imposing architectural features, for its time, Nineveh was also extremely large. A. Leo Oppenheim ranks Nineveh as the second largest city of the ancient Near East:

The largest city was undoubtedly Babylon in the Chaldean period; its area covered 2,500 acres. Then follows Nineveh, with 1,850 acres, while Uruk [biblical Erech] was somewhat smaller, with 1,110 acres.<sup>13</sup>

As there are 640 acres per square mile, according to Oppenheim's estimate, Nineveh would cover an area of around three square miles. This corresponds to the assessment of the former director of excavation at Nineveh that the circumference of the city wall was around twelve kilometers.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, a survey by the University of California at Berkeley estimated that the city covered an area of 750 hectares.<sup>15</sup> At between three and four square miles, Nineveh was certainly a huge city, but archaeological evidence demonstrates that it was far smaller than 60 miles in diameter.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Ancient Textual Evidence*

One might be skeptical of modern estimates and therefore prefer ancient textual witnesses in order to discern the size of Nineveh. Since Nineveh and Babylon were the two grandest cities of the ancient Near East, authors occasionally compared the size of the two towns.<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, Strabo portrays Nineveh as larger than Babylon, "Now the city Ninus [Nineveh] was wiped out immediately after the overthrow of the Syrians. It was much greater (μειζων) than Babylon" (*Geography* 16.1.3).<sup>18</sup> He then goes on to describe the size of Babylon:

Babylon, too lies in a plain; and the circuit of its wall is three hundred and eighty-five stadia (approx. 44 miles). The thickness of its wall is thirty-two feet; the height thereof between the lowers is fifty cubits (approx. 75 ft.); that of the towers is sixty cubits (approx. 90 ft.); and

13. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: A Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (rev. ed. completed by Erica Reiner; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 140.

14. Tariq Madhloum, "Excavations at Nineveh: A Preliminary Report (1965-67)," *Sumer* 23 (1967): 77. Compare with a similar measurement already in Felix Jones, "Topography of Nineveh," *JRAS* 15 (1855): 324.

15. David Stronach and Stephen Lumsden, "UC Berkeley's Excavations at Nineveh," *BA* 55/4 (1992): 227.

16. For a detailed discussion of the precise size of Nineveh, see Martin Mulzer, "Die Länge der Stadtmauern und die Fläche des antiken Ninive," *BN* 118 (2003): 124-35.

17. For a description of Babylon, see Donald J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 43-78.

18. Horace Leonard Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* (LCL; London: Heinemann, 1923), 195.

the passage on top of the wall is such that four-horse chariots can easily pass one another. (*Geography* 16.1.5)<sup>19</sup>

Herodotus also records the size of Babylon, but Herodotus's dimensions are much larger than those of Strabo. Additionally, this account is idiomatic and stylized (for instance, note that the shape of the city was an exact square<sup>20</sup>) with the purpose of conveying a sense of grandeur at the size of the city:

When Cyrus had made all the mainland submit to him, he attacked the Assyrians. In Assyria there are many other great cities, but the most famous and the strongest was Babylon, where the royal dwelling had been established after the destruction of Ninus [Nineveh]. Babylon was a city such as I will now describe. It lies in a great plain, and is in shape a square, each side fifteen miles in length; thus sixty miles make the complete circuit of the city. Such is the size of the city of Babylon; and it was planned like no other city of which we know. Around it runs first a moat deep and wide and full of water, and then a wall eighty three feet thick and three hundred thirty three feet high. The royal measure is greater by three fingers' breadth than the common measure. (*The Histories* 1.78)<sup>21</sup>

The descriptions of Strabo and Herodotus differ with respect to their measurements of Babylon's walls. Strabo reports them as 44 miles in circumference, 32 feet thick, and 75 feet high, while Herodotus portrays the walls as 60 miles in circumference, 83 feet thick, and 330 feet high. The discrepancy is probably due to the fact that the authors did not know the exact dimensions of the city and therefore give a stylized account intended to convey the great size of Babylon.<sup>22</sup> Even putting aside the idiomatic nature of Herodotus's account, sides of 15 miles in length for the much bigger city of Babylon is still smaller than the 60 miles across that some translations represent for Nineveh.<sup>23</sup>

19. *Ibid.*, 197.

20. Some cities were almost perfectly rectangular in shape, such as Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Dur-Sharrukin, as these were master-planned cities. The inner cities of Babylon and Borsippa were also square in shape. However, Babylon was cut almost exactly in half by the Euphrates River, and to the eastern half was added a second wall that formed a giant triangle that measured 12.5 kilometers in circumference; Marc van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89. Possibly, Herodotus was referring to the original inner city when he described the shape as a perfect square, or, more likely, he was using a topos of a grand Mesopotamian city.

21. Translation from A. D. Godley, trans., *Herodotus* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920).

22. For an evaluation of the accuracy of Herodotus's description of Babylon, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Herodotus: Historian or Liar?" in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday* (ed. Gordon D. Young, Mark W. Chavalas, and Richard E. Averbeck; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1997), 604–5.

23. See *idem*, "Babylon," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World* (ed. Roland K. Harrison; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 44.

Diodorus gives an account of Nineveh that is similar in many respects to that of Herodotus's description of Babylon. However, Diodorus states that the city of Nineveh had no equal, while Herodotus stated that there was no city like Babylon:

[H]e [Ninus, the king of the Assyrians] founded on the Euphrates river a city of a rectangle. The longer sides of the city were each one hundred and fifty stades in length (approx. 17 miles), and the shorter ninety (approx. 10 miles). And so, since the total circuit comprised four hundred and eighty stades (approx. 55 miles), he was not disappointed in his hope, since a city its equal, in respect to either the length of its circuit or the magnificence of its walls, was never founded by any man after his time. For the wall had a height of one hundred feet and its width was sufficient for three chariots abreast to drive upon; and the sum total of its towers was one thousand five hundred, and their height was two hundred feet. (Diodorus 2.3)<sup>24</sup>

Again, Diodorus's measurements do not quite match those given by others. Yet more figures are given in Xenophon's account of Nineveh:

The foundation of its wall was made of polished stone full of shells, and was fifty feet in breadth and fifty in height. Upon this foundation was built a wall of brick, fifty feet in breadth and a hundred in height; and the circuit of the wall was six parasangs. (approx. 22 miles; *Anabasis* 3.4.10–11)<sup>25</sup>

Archaeological excavations have corroborated Xenophon's report concerning the thickness of the city walls. The walls consisted of an inner mud-brick wall built upon a stone foundation. The mud-brick wall was covered with a stone facade.<sup>26</sup> Archaeologists have discovered bricks with an average size of 37 × 37 × 12 cm that form walls with a thickness of around 15.8 m.<sup>27</sup> This corresponds to Sennacherib's description of the wall as 40 bricks thick.<sup>28</sup> However, explorations have not yet discovered shells involved in the building of Nineveh's wall, and Akkadian texts do not describe this feature. Possibly, Xenophon described the appearance of the polished facade of limestone in which shell-shaped impressions could appear, or this could be a metaphor referring to the color of the stone facade or just literary embellishment. Like Herodotus, his description of the circumference of the walls at six parasangs, equivalent to roughly 22 miles, does not correspond to archaeological evidence or Akkadian texts, but it is more sober than the descriptions of other Greek writers.

24. C. H. Oldfather, *Diodorus of Sicily* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 357.

25. Carleton Brownson, *Anabasis* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

26. Tariq Madhloum, "Nineveh: The 1968–1969 Campaign," *Sumer* 25 (1969): 45.

27. Idem, "Nineveh: The 1967–1968 Campaign," *Sumer* 24 (1968): 48.

28. Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 2; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 111 line 68.

In contrast to Greek sources, Akkadian texts are much more modest in their descriptions of Nineveh. Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076<sup>29</sup>) said that he repaired the walls of Nineveh that were dilapidated due to the neglect of former rulers. In so doing, he dug down to the bottom of the foundation pit, presumably removing the old stones and starting from scratch. Then, he installed a new foundation, on top of which he laid a mud-brick wall with a thickness of nine and one-half bricks. In order to strengthen the wall, he covered the lower bricks with earth and the exposed bricks he covered with limestone facing.<sup>30</sup>

Sennacherib (704–681) reported that in former days to his rule Nineveh only measured 9,300 cubits in circumference and that his new construction of a wall (he states that previous rulers had not built a wall) included an additional 12,515 cubits (*ammatu*) that encircled some of the cultivated lands that surrounded the city,<sup>31</sup> for a total of 21,815 great cubits (*rabîti*), which is approximately seven and one-half miles. Factual fudging aside (for example, Sennacherib claims that no previous rulers had built a wall around Nineveh), Sennacherib still describes a wall merely seven and one-half miles in circumference that surrounded *both* the city proper and outlining fields. Again, this is far short of the 60 miles that some modern translations might lead us to believe.

#### MODERN INTERPRETIVE RESPONSES

Modern interpreters have responded to the apparent incongruity between the description of Jonah 3:3 and ancient textual and archaeological evidence in two<sup>32</sup> ways: (1) creatively interpret Jonah 3:3 in a way that preserves the literal accuracy of this distance or (2) interpret this phrase as a figure of speech that conveys the great size of the city in an idiomatic manner.<sup>33</sup>

##### *Creatively Literal*

A theory popular in sermons states that the figure given in Jonah 3:3 refers to the time it would take for a person to walk around the circumference of

29. Dates of Assyrian kings follow J. A. Brinkman, "Appendix: Mesopotamian Chronology of the Historical Period," in *Ancient Mesopotamia: A Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (ed. A. Leo Oppenheim; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

30. Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC)* (RIMA 2; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 54 lines 54–62.

31. "12,515 ašar tamirti limiṭ āli" in Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, 111.

32. At first, Salters seems to opt for a third possibility—sidestep the matter altogether: "One can be too critical of this type of literature, and I do not wish to query the description of the size of the city of Nineveh (three days across); that is the kind of detail which may be characteristic of this type of story." However, later he warms to Wolff's interpretation of this phrase as a figure of speech intended to evoke an emotional response from the audience; R. B. Salters, *Jonah & Lamentations* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 29.

33. Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah* (AB 24b; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 231.

Nineveh.<sup>34</sup> One might be inclined to posit a link between this theory and Diodorus's account of Nineveh's wall as 55 miles in circumference. However, as we have seen, Diodorus's description does not agree with archaeological evidence or Akkadian texts.

The outstanding Assyriologist and biblical scholar, Donald J. Wiseman, is the most influential proponent of a creatively literal interpretation of Jonah 3:3. Although at one time Wiseman advocated the notion that the measure of three days could refer to the circumference of the city walls, he subsequently rejected it.<sup>35</sup> Wiseman supports this rejection for two reasons: (1) he states that he does "not know of any description of the size of an ancient city by the circuit of its walls," and (2) even at their great size, it would not take three days to complete a circuit of Nineveh's walls.<sup>36</sup> In place of this rejected suggestion, Wiseman posited two possible interpretations of Jonah 3:3.

His first suggestion is that the "three-day journey" could refer to the time needed to make a proper visit to the city. In this interpretation, one day would be set aside for arrival into the city, one day for "business and rest," and last, a departure day.<sup>37</sup> At first glance this is an attractive way to reconcile a "literal" reading of Jonah 3:3 with archaeological and ancient textual evidence. However, this suggestion is based on formal visits to a city in order to negotiate a treaty.<sup>38</sup> These situations have little to do with a lonely prophet delivering a message.

A close cousin of the city-visit interpretation is that of Martin Luther, who stated:

I understand these words to mean that Nineveh was so large that one needed three days to traverse all its streets, not chasing, but with a leisurely gait such as one usually adopts when strolling on a street.

34. For example, Steven J. Lawson, "The Power of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Jonah 3:1-10," *BSac* 158 (2001): 335. Simon notes that Abraham Ibn Ezra also held to this interpretation; Uriel Simon, *Jona: Ein jüdischer Kommentar* (SBS 157; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1994), 111. Craigie follows the circumference theory as well: "Rather it was to 'Greater Nineveh' that Jonah came, the suburban clusters and monotonous rows of drab houses in which dwelled the ordinary citizens of the city state. This larger area, as archaeological surveys have shown, spread out in a circle from the city proper, with a circumference of something like sixty miles (far greater than the modern city of Mosul, which adjoins the ancient site)"; Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 1:229. Craigie does not reference the particular archaeological survey(s) that he had in mind and I am not familiar with one that supports his contention.

35. For another proponent of Wiseman's earlier theory, see André Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 85-86; Donald J. Wiseman rejects his theory in "Jonah's Nineveh," *TynBul* 30 (1979): 37-38.

36. *Ibid.*, 37.

37. *Ibid.*, 38; cf. *idem*, "Nineveh," in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980): 2:1090. Also see Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:576; Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 483, 487-88; and M. R. Wilson, "Nineveh," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World* (ed. Roland K. Harrison; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 185.

38. Sasson, *Jonah*, 230.



... Such a walk does not imply a beeline course, but a walk hither and yon, here and there. However, everyone may adopt whatever view he will.<sup>39</sup>

James Bruckner formulated his own view closely following Luther: “[I]t required three days to proclaim the message in all the public squares. It would take three days to walk and preach in every neighborhood and to complete the proclamation to everyone in the city.”<sup>40</sup> Again, these explanations at first seem cogent, but they are rather arbitrary in their estimation of how long it would take to weave all over the city while preaching. Furthermore, as can be seen from Akkadian prophecies, if a prophet wanted to preach a message to a city, the prophet would appear before the *puhrum*, that is, the gathering of the elders in the city gate.<sup>41</sup> If a prophet was not invited before the *puhrum*, the prophet would go to another prominent public space such as the palace gates.<sup>42</sup> There is only one Akkadian text that states that a prophet delivered the same message at more than one location. In this text, the prophet delivered his message at two places: the palace gates and the residence of a foreign king that was granted asylum.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, because Akkadian prophets did not meander through cities while giving prophecies, it is unlikely that the author of Jonah wished to portray the protagonist of this story as making his way through every part of Nineveh over the course of three days.

Wiseman’s second proposal is that the reference to Nineveh in Jonah 3:3 referred not merely to the city of Nineveh but to the greater administrative district that he estimated to be a size roughly corresponding to a

39. As quoted in James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 78. See also C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 405.

40. James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (ed. Terry Muck; NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 90. See also Gleason L. Archer Jr., *Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 298–99; Herbert C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 75; Ray J. Lubeck, “Prophetic Sabotage: A Look at Jonah 3:2–4,” *TJ* 9 n.s. (1988): 42; idem., personal communication, September 4, 2007; Uriel Simon, *Jonah* (Mikra Leyisra’el; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 67–68 [Hebrew] = idem, *Jonah* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 28; and A. S. van der Woude, *Jona, Nahum* (POut; Nijkerk: Uitgeverij G. F. Caltenbach, 1978), 45.

41. A prophet of Mari gives a dramatic prophecy to the city elders by eating a raw lamb in front of their eyes, Jean-Marie Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1* (ARM 26/1; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988), 434–35. For a transcription, an English translation, and commentary, see Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (SBLWAW 12; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 38–39.

42. For a copy of the text, see Georges Dossin, *Archives royales de Mari X: La correspondance féminine* (TCL 31; Paris: Geuthner, 1967), pl. 6. For a transcription, English translation, and commentary, see Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 42–43.

43. For a copy of the text, see Dominique Charpin, *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2* (ed. Dominique Charpin, et al.; ARM 26/2; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988), 177–79. For a transcription, English translation, and commentary, see Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 73–74.

three-day walk.<sup>44</sup> This is quite a sophisticated argument on several levels. It is true that Mesopotamian cities often had suburbs that extended beyond the city walls, but the extent of the suburbs is difficult to quantify due to the dearth of material remains and the common focus in archaeological expeditions solely on the city center. Nevertheless, the suburbs did not extend miles beyond the city walls. Also, major cities often had a port and trading center that was located outside the city walls, but it was rarely more than a couple of hundred meters from the main city.<sup>45</sup>

Wiseman's second proposal rests not on the extent of the suburbs of Nineveh alone but on the various smaller cities in the vicinity. Wiseman states that Nineveh was the administrative center for several cities and, as such, *Nineveh* could refer to the entire region.<sup>46</sup> However, Wiseman admits that it is uncertain whether Nineveh was actually regarded as the administrative center of the region that he proposes.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Wiseman's supporting argument is that the Hebrew rendering of the Akkadian noun, Nineveh, would have obscured vital data with respect to the specific geographic referent. Determinatives, or signs that indicate the category to which a noun belongs, were often added at the beginning or end of an Akkadian word. For instance, the DINGIR sign would precede objects or persons with divine attributes, whereas NA<sub>4</sub> would precede objects made of stone. In the case of Nineveh, Wiseman states that, because Hebrew did not employ determinatives, two possible Akkadian constructions, <sup>URU</sup>*Ninua* or *Ninua*<sup>KI</sup>, would have been translated by the same Hebrew word, **נינה**.<sup>48</sup> The word <sup>URU</sup>*Ninua* would refer to the city of Nineveh, whereas *Ninua*<sup>KI</sup> would refer to the region. With this proposal, Wiseman shows his deep understanding of both the Bible and Assyriology; however, an examination of Akkadian texts reveals that this suggestion should not be favored.

In a description of Sennacherib's (704–681) improvements of Nineveh, a measure of the circumference of Nineveh's wall includes the construction *Ninua*<sup>KI</sup>, which Wiseman wants to read as the greater administrative district:

Nineveh (*Ninua*<sup>KI</sup>), whose site, in former days measured 9,300 cubits in circumference, (for which) the princes who lived before me had built neither wall nor outer wall; I added to its earlier site 12,515 (cu-

44. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," 38–39. See also idem, "Nineveh," 1090.

45. Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, 65.

46. Maier adopts this position and combines it with a view similar to Luther's that Jonah went around the region preaching in all the important plazas and streets; Gerhard Maier, *Der Prophet Jona* (Wuppertaler Studienbibel; Wuppertal, Germany: Brockhaus, 1976), 62.

47. See also R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament: With a Comprehensive Review of Old Testament Studies and a Special Supplement on the Apocrypha* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1977), 909.

48. He also adds that both of these determinatives could have been used at the same time; "Jonah's Nineveh," 39.

bits) of the cultivated land around the city. I made its total circumference 21,815 great cubits [approx. seven and one-half miles].<sup>49</sup>

This text specifically delineates *Ninua*<sup>K1</sup> as an area encircled by a wall about seven and one-half miles in circumference, far short of the 60-mile diameter that Wiseman envisions. When we combine this fact with Sennacherib's statement that his wall included not only the city center but also the outlining cultivated land, the attractiveness of Wiseman's theory diminishes.

### *Literally Figurative*

Another interpretive option for Jonah 3:3 is to understand it as a figure of speech. There are at least three reasons that support this interpretation.

First, the terminology employed in Jonah 3:3 has a very wide semantic range that resists precise delimitation. The word *מהלך*, most commonly translated as "walk" or "journey," occurs two times in the Old Testament outside Jonah 3:3–4. In Ezek 42:4, this term is used in a description of an interior passageway that is a distance of ten cubits. In this verse, *מהלך* is used as a synonym for *רך*, which is used in connection with a distance of 100 cubits. The other occurrence appears in Neh 2:6 when King Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah, "How long will your journey (*מהלכך*) be, and when will you return?" In this passage, *מהלכך* is used to describe a long but indeterminate journey. These passages indicate that *מהלך* was a general term for "a walk" and does not necessarily describe a specific distance.

In addition to the wide semantic range of *מהלך*, the number *three* is often used idiomatically within the Bible. *Three* is used as a measure of time or distance a remarkable number of times. Examples of these instances include: Joseph put his brothers in jail for three days (Gen 42:17); three days of darkness came over the land after Moses stretched his hands toward the sky (Exod 10:22–23); after crossing the Re(e)d Sea, the Israelites did not find water for three days (Exod 15:22); the Lord promised to send three years' worth of harvest in the sixth year of planting to provide for his people during the Sabbath year (Lev 25:21); Moses led the people on a three-day journey from the mountain of God (Num 10:33); the people traveled for three days in the wilderness of Ethan (Num 33:8; the next verse describes 12 springs and 70 palm trees in Elim); the death penalty can only be employed when there are "two or three witnesses" (Deut 17:6); and many additional examples abound. To be sure, some of these uses of *three* might indicate a precise and literal measure. However, many are probably expressions analogous to the English idiom "a couple days" or the German "ein paar Tage." These modern uses can indicate exactly two days, but they are also frequently used as figures of speech synonymous with "a few" or "einige."<sup>50</sup>

49. Adapted from Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, 111.

50. J. B. Bauer, "Drei Tage," *Bib* 39 (1958): 355.

Moberly discusses the use of “three days” in relation to an LXX reading that departs from the MT, in which Jonah states that the judgment of Nineveh will come in 40 days (Jonah 3:4b).<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, most of the commentators with whom Moberly interacts do not fully appreciate the insight of Bauer on the idiomatic uses of “three days” within the Bible. Bauer underscores the relative nature of idioms involving numbers. In order to illustrate this, he presents two sentences in which the same numerical idiom is used, but with very different connotations: (1) he flew around the world in a couple days; (2) he hanged from a cliff for a couple days.<sup>52</sup> Flying around the world in only two days (especially in 1958) is a very short time, and dangling from a cliff by one’s fingernails for two days is an eternity. Each use of a numerical idiom must be examined on its own. Generic formulas such as “three days represents a short time” and “40 days signifies an indefinite, long period of time”<sup>53</sup> might satisfactorily function as general guides, but these generalities will not hold true in every instance. In the case of Nineveh described as a city of a three-day journey, this use surely indicates a very long time.

Second, the Bible commonly describes long distances in terms of days.<sup>54</sup> For instance, Num 11:31 describes manna brought down around the camp up to a distance of a one-day walk (כִּדְרוֹךְ יוֹם). Jacob was a three-day walk (דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים) away from the rest of Laban’s flocks,<sup>55</sup> and Laban then pursued Jacob for a journey of seven days (דֶּרֶךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים).<sup>56</sup> In each of these examples, the author probably did not intend for the audience to interpret these distances with mathematical precision; instead, they are figures of speech that convey a sense of relative distance. In the case of the Jacob and Laban account, the distances of three- and seven-day walks are intended to convey the ideas that the two flocks were adequately separated to prevent their integration and that Laban vigorously pursued Jacob after Jacob’s head start.

Furthermore, expressions including “one day” (יוֹם אֶחָד) are often idiomatic. After Esau became angry at Jacob, Rebekah told Jacob to stay with Laban for “a while (יָמִים אַחֲרַיִם) until your brother’s anger subsides” (Gen 27:44).<sup>57</sup> This expression is also used to indicate a time in the indeterminate future: “David thought to himself, ‘One day (יוֹם אֶחָד) I will be swept aside by Saul’” (1 Sam 27:1). In Isa 47:9, יוֹם אֶחָד is in apposition to רִגַע “a

51. R. W. L. Moberly, “Preaching for a Response? Jonah’s Message to the Ninevites Reconsidered,” *VT* 53/2 (2003): 156–68.

52. I have altered his examples, which originally read: “Im Deutschen etwa ist es genau so: nehmen wir zwei Sätze: ‘in ein paar Tage um die Welt fliegen’ und ‘ein paar Tage in einer Felswand hängen’; im einen Fall ist die Spanne über Erwarten kurz, im anderen über Erwarten lang!” (Bauer, “Drei Tage,” 355).

53. Cf. Moberly, “Preaching for a Response?” 164–66.

54. For a discussion and terminology used to describe distances, see Roland de Vaux and John McHugh, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961), 196–99.

55. Gen 30:36.

56. Gen 31:23.

57. For similar uses, see Gen 29:20 and Dan 11:20.

moment, suddenly”: “Both of these will come upon you suddenly, in a day.” Because expressions that include *יום אחד* are used idiomatically, the first half of Jonah 3:4 can also be interpreted as a figure of speech: “Jonah had just entered the city a short ways (*מהלך יום אחד*), when he called out, ‘In forty days Nineveh will be overturned.’” In this verse, the phrase *מהלך יום אחד*, literally, “a one-day walk,” is used in relation to the first half of the clause, *ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר*, “Jonah began to enter the city.” Therefore, *מהלך יום אחד* should be translated not in isolation but relative to the first phrase. “A one-day walk” further describes the event of Jonah beginning to enter the city.

Third, Aristotle describes Babylon as a “city that has the circuit of a nation rather than of a city, for it is said that when Babylon was captured a considerable part of the city was not aware of it three days later” (*Politics* 3.1.12).<sup>58</sup> Aristotle’s description of Babylon corresponds quite well with the description of Nineveh in Jonah 3:3. Both of these descriptions were designed to produce sense of awe among the audience as the authors used a figure of speech to vividly describe the great size of these cities.<sup>59</sup>

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ENCOUNTERING BIBLICAL TEXTS

Because creative attempts to understand the “literal” distance described in Jonah 3:3 have proved unconvincing, some scholars have interpreted this phrase as a figure of speech.<sup>60</sup> We should note that a figure of speech is clearly distinguished from an “exaggeration.”<sup>61</sup> An author can intend

58. Translation from Aristotle, *Politics* (trans. Harris Rackham; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

59. David Marcus advocates a figurative interpretation of this phrase, but instead of describing the size of Nineveh, he believes it illustrates the distance Jonah traveled to Nineveh; David Marcus, “Nineveh’s ‘Three Days’ Walk’ (Jonah 3:3): Another Interpretation,” in *On the Way to Nineveh* (ed. Stephen L. Cook and S. C. Winter; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999). However, the phrase *מהלך שלשת ימים* is in apposition to *עיר גדולה לאלהים* and functions as a modifier of this phrase, thereby giving a further description of the city; cf. LXX η δε Νινευη ην πολυς μεγαλη τω θεω ωσει πορειας οδου ημερων τριων.

60. For example, Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined* (JSOTSup 236; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 132; J. Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 78; Sasson, *Jonah*, 230–31; John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 88; H. W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (trans. M. Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 148 = idem., *Dodekapropheten 3: Obadja und Jona* (BKAT 14/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 122–3. On one hand, Allen seems open to the theory that “Nineveh” referred to the region, but he admits problems with this interpretation and finally implies that the phrase is a figure of speech, ultimately describing the task of the prophet: “The narrator’s intention in recording the colossal dimensions of the city was to convey the magnitude of the prophet’s task and to enhance the sequel”; Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (NICOT; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 221–22.

61. Julius August Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 51; cf. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 107. Achtemeier describes this statement as “a distant recollection of Nineveh, hazy and exaggerated in its details”; Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:257.

for a figure of speech to be understood quite literally, that is, the author intends for the audience to receive the full force of the idiom's relative and emotive value. Furthermore, figures of speech in no way imply a distortion of facts, which underlies an "exaggeration." Therefore, in Jonah 3:3, if the author of Jonah used the expression "three-day walk" as a figure of speech, the author likely intended the audience to understand and emotionally sense the huge size of the city of Nineveh. This idea is in no way diminished with the use of an idiom. In fact, the emotive aspect of this expression might correspond even more closely to the impression of Nineveh's grandeur than relaying a mathematically correct measurement of the city walls. Therefore, we should leave room in our interpretive grid for *literally figurative* interpretations of ancient texts.

This is especially true when there is no compelling reason to not understand a phrase as literally figurative. In the case of Jonah 3:3, by understanding this distance as a figure of speech, we compromise no theological doctrine, and the story line of Jonah remains intact. Furthermore, the emotional impact of the account is possibly more accurate to the author's intention. Even though attempts to creatively integrate a "literal" reading with archaeological and ancient textual evidence often have promising potential, in situations such as Jonah 3:3 they are not worth the great effort and contrived situations.

Of the translations quoted at the beginning of this essay, several translations explicitly adopt one of the creatively literal interpretations. The ESV ("three days' journey in breadth"), NJB ("three days' journey across"), NJPSV ("three days' walk across"), and NRSV ("a three days' walk across") adopt the view that this phrase represents the length of the diameter of Nineveh. On the other hand, the NIV ("a visit required three days") adopts Wiseman's "formal visit" interpretation. The TNIV ("it took three days to go through it") might resemble either Luther's approach or the diameter interpretation, whereas the NLT ("a city so large that it took three days to see it all") seems to incorporate a flavor of tourism. At first glance, it appears that the HCSB avoids these pitfalls, but a footnote ("Probably = the time required to cover the city on foot") reveals that they did not. Only two translations convey the figure of speech in a form that avoids the pitfalls of the creatively literal interpretations: KJV ("three days' journey") and NASB ("a three days' walk"). Ironically, these versions are the most self-consciously "literal" of the selected translations with respect to their translation philosophy, yet they preserve the figure of speech. The reason why the idiom is preserved is that the translators let the figure of speech stand intact.

As well as leaving open a literally figurative option in our interpretive grid, translators should also maintain the possibility of leaving figures of speech intact. Many idioms transcend time and culture and are not in need of creative rephrasing into the target language. For instance, there is a say-

ing in Texas, “He has a smile a mile wide and an inch deep.”<sup>62</sup> Originally, this idiom was taken from an observation of a shallow West Texas riverbed. Shortly after a rain, the riverbed was filled with a wide watercourse that was shallow enough to wade all the way across. A few days after the rain stopped, the once wide river turned into a trickle. There are two points to consider with regard to this Texan expression. None of the people who use this idiom are bothered by the fact that the river was not actually a mile wide and the depth of the water was a bit more than an inch—the expression gets the point across well enough. Furthermore, one could understand the gist of this figure of speech even without the back story of the riverbed. Some idioms convey content and emotion regardless of time or culture. Just like a shallow river perfectly captures a superficial smile, “a three-day walk” perfectly captures the great size of the ancient city of Nineveh.

62. I would like to thank my father, John Charles Halton III, the best lay biblical scholar I have ever met, for this example and for his many other keen insights into this topic.