

THE GREAT CITY [YONAH 1:2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and call out against it for their wickedness has come up before me (1,2).

Yonah was commanded to go to Nineveh for it has sinned grievously against the L-rd. Truly Nineveh was a great city from its very inception (Genesis 10, 11-12). A capital of the rising great imperial power of Assyria, it is well attested to in the Tanach for its inexorable might, its cruelty and its inhumane policy of exiling the populations of recalcitrant opponents and bothersome vassal states. It conquered and emptied out the Kingdom of Israel, the Jewish tribes of the trans-Jordan and most of Judea; Jerusalem alone was miraculously saved. An enemy, that's what it was, a feared and hated enemy of Israel. It is surprising then, that this essential background is avoided in our Book, not even that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. A very different characterization of this city arises from the words of another prophet: Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and rapine; the prey departeth not....

Because of the multitude of the harlotries of the well-favoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her harlotries, and families through her witchcrafts...

Behold, I am against thee, saith HaShem of hosts... (Nachum 3, 1-5) Why is this information deliberately withheld? Even more surprisingly, what was it about Nineveh that warranted reaching out to it with the call to repentance, with the message of forgiveness to its inhabitants. After all, human history does not lack for cities of great wickedness that neither deserved nor received a second chance. Witness the very different treatment accorded Babylonia by the prophet Ishaia, Ch. 13 and 14. This question is a very important one inasmuch as it guides our understanding of the entire book. Some have suggested that Ninevites were righthouse from time immemorial and only recently had turned to evil; they consequently deserved a chance that other cities, wicked to the core, did not get (Ibn Ezra). Others saw in it a reflection of G-d's working to purify this "staff of My wrath (Ishaia 10,5)", so that it become a worthy vessel for His judgment against Israel (Radak, Abarabanel).

We will approach this question by noting the significance of Nineveh being called "a great city". Now, undoubtedly it was a large city of unusually grand dimensions, containing within it some "more than 12 myriad (120000.00) persons (4,11)". "Nineveh was a great city unto the L-rd, a walk of 3 days (3,3)". The ruins of ancient Nineveh near Mosul, Iraq, are clearly visible in our day; its walls are 12 kilometers long and its maximal width is 5 kilometers; the extent of the settlement beyond the walls is likely to have been even greater. Yet, it seems that it is not the size alone that made Nineveh great for this

appellation appears even at the time that it had just been built and it was likely much smaller (Genesis 10, 11-12). . Whatever the reason, the fact remains that being a great city seems to be a integrally associated with it, sort of as New York City is known as the Great Apple - "Nineveh, the Great City". The suggestion that there is unique significance in Nineveh- the Great City as the setting for Yonah's message of repentance to the nations may explain the special use of the word "great (gadol)". It occurs 14 times in this short book (if you exclude 3,5 where it means mature rather than great). The frequent use of the word communicates an important point. The concept of the "key word" has become widely accepted as a guide to interpretation since it was enunciated some 80 years ago. In brief, it proposes that in Tanach "key words" are used and frequently repeated in a unit of meaning, often in complements of 7 or 14, to encode the interpretive "key" for the careful reader as well as to subliminally affect even a superficial reader. The "great city" is echoed by great wind, great cry, great fear and, of course, the great fish that swallowed Yonah. The latter is particularly interesting for the Semitic word Nineveh in itself, sounds something like " abode of the fish" (naveh nun, Daas Mikra n. 7) and the cuneiform symbol for Nineveh is in fact, a fish within a house. The overall effect of such foreshadowing and characterization is to draw our attention to the great and weighty matters with which this book deals - prophecy, repentance, rebellion and redemption. This key word cues us to the cosmic significance of events it recounts and helps shape our response to the message that it delivers.

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