

Jonah's Vine

BY J. MARK TERRY

JONAH HAD AN ATTITUDE PROBLEM. If ever a preacher had a bad attitude, that preacher was Jonah. Jonah prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 14:25); however, when God commanded him to go and preach in Nineveh, Jonah refused to go. Not only did he refuse to go, but he traveled in the opposite direction as fast as he could. Why did Jonah react so negatively? His reason becomes clearer if you read Jonah 4:2. Jonah knew about the Lord's grace and mercy, and he was concerned that God would forgive the people of Nineveh. That was the last thing Jonah wanted.

Nineveh, a great city built on the Tigris River, served as the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians had oppressed the nation of Israel for many years. The Assyrian army had invaded Israel several times and forced the Israelites to pay heavy tribute. The Assyrians were known throughout the region for their cruelty, so it is no wonder that Jonah rejected God's command. He hoped to see Nineveh destroyed, not delivered.¹

After Jonah's experience with the great fish, he reluctantly went to Nineveh and preached to the people. Surprisingly, the people listened to Jonah and repented of their sins. Because they repented, God did not destroy the city (Jonah 3:10). Now, you might think any prophet would be thrilled that a whole city had responded to his message, but Jonah was not delighted. In fact, he was angry with God (4:1). What he expected had come true: God had again demonstrated His mercy by sparing Nineveh. Jonah felt like a traitor to his nation. He was so upset that he asked God to take his life (4:3). God refused to kill Jonah; instead, He

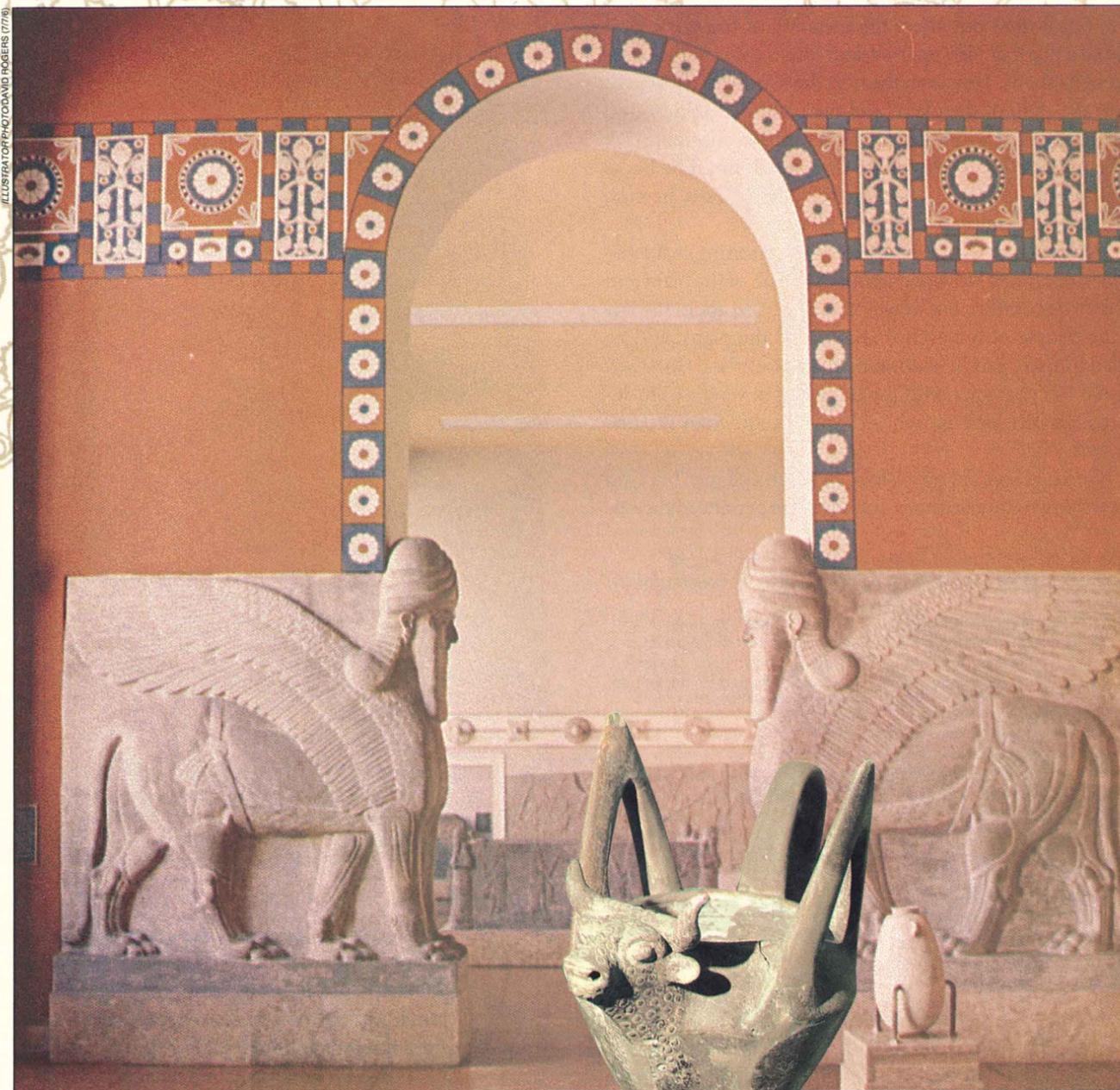


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asked Jonah if his anger was justified (4:4). Jonah did not answer God's question. He responded by leaving Nineveh and building a hut, probably of leafy branches, outside the eastern wall of the city. There he waited, hoping again that God would change His mind and destroy the city.

God wanted to teach Jonah a lesson about compassion and mercy, so He used a plant as an object lesson. Many commentators have offered opinions as to the type plant God caused to grow. The exact meaning of the Hebrew word *qiqayon* is difficult to ascertain because the word is only used once in the Hebrew Old Testament. The word has been translated in different ways over the years. The Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) used the Greek word for *gourd*. The *King James Version* translators used "gourd" also. When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he decided to identify the plant as the castor oil plant (*ricinus*). When Jerome's change became known in Oea, a city in North Africa, a riot broke out. Their reaction shows how seriously people took Bible translation in that time. Jerome's change also upset Augustine of Hippo.²

Modern versions of the Bible have rendered the Hebrew word in various ways. The *Revised Standard Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, and the *New King James Version* use the word "plant," and the RSV and NASB have a note suggesting that it was a castor oil plant. The *New English Bible* translates it as "climbing gourd," while the *New International Version* uses the word "vine." Which is correct? That is a difficult question to answer. There is no way to know at this time exactly what the Hebrew word means.



One can make a good case for either plant or vine. Castor oil plants grow very quickly in the Middle East, and they grow to a height that would shade a small hut with their broad leaves. It is also plausible that a gourd vine grew up the side of Jonah's hut and provided shade. This might have been especially important as the leaves on the branches he had cut for his hut withered in the hot sunlight. Either way, Jonah was grateful for the additional shade. Daytime temperatures in Mesopotamia are often over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, so shade was important indeed.³

The exact translation of *qiqayon* is an intriguing ques-

Upper left: Model of an Assyrian boat. Above: Human-headed winged bulls from Nineveh with reconstructed arched gate built from original tile, also found at Nimrud.

Left: An unusual Assyrian pitcher with the head of a bull for a spout.

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Lesson Reference:
LWS: Jonah 4:1-11

tion, but it does not affect the meaning of the story. God caused a plant or vine to grow, and Jonah enjoyed the comfort of its shade. However, the next day God sent a worm to chew the stem of the plant, and the plant died. Then God sent a hot desert wind, and Jonah became so miserable that he wanted to die. At this point God asked him if he had a right to be angry about the withered plant. “I do,” he said, ‘I am angry enough to die’” (4:9, NIV).

At that point God pressed home the meaning of the object lesson. Jonah was upset about the death of the plant and his own discomfort, but he was not concerned about the fate of the people of Nineveh. Jonah pitied the plant, and he pitied himself, but he did not pity the Ninevites. God contrasted His character with Jonah’s when in verse 11 He declared His pity for Nineveh, a city with more than 120,000 persons.

God had seen the great sin of Nineveh’s people, but God was willing to forgive them. Jonah had experienced the op-

Right: An 8th century inscribed stele of Bel-Harran-Bel-Usur, the Chamberlain of the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser III, worshipping divine emblems.

Below: A limestone pedestal for a cult symbol dating from 1244-1208 B.C. in the middle Assyrian period. On the upper part of the pedestal the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I is praying. The lower part shows the transportation of wood for the temple.

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pression of the Assyrians, therefore he was unwilling to forgive. He hoped for their destruction, not their repentance and deliverance. In this case, Jonah wanted God to demonstrate His justice, not His grace and mercy. God used this experience to teach Jonah that one must never underestimate God’s loving kindness toward repentant sinners.

¹D. J. Wiseman, “Assyria,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 334.

²T. Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 128. See also Frank Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah in The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 282.

³H. L. Ellison, *Jonah in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1985), 387.

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