

THE BOOK OF NAHUM IN THE LIGHT OF ASSYRIOLOGY.

BY H. W. MENGEDOHT.

AMONG the various books of the Bible which can be elucidated by the help of Egyptian or Assyrian monuments, there is one which is especially associated with Nineveh, that is the short prophecy of Nahum; and it is of interest to see what light the monuments recovered from Assyrian and Babylonian mounds throw upon the date and authenticity of that work. The book is a very remarkable one and has greatly exercised the minds of the critics of both the higher and lower schools of criticism, but the flood of light from the monuments which has been shed upon it, has done much to remove scholarly suspicions.

The first chapter, to be sure, stands apart from the succeeding portion—the chapters ii and iii, which especially relate to Nineveh—and many still hold the opinion that it is the work of a later hand, the existence of an acrostic psalm in chap. i. 2-9 being considered to indicate a post-Exilic date. The discovery, however, of a number of acrostic psalms in the clay tablets from the Royal Library of Nineveh of a date coinciding with that of Nahum, makes it more than possible that this peculiar form of writing was especially employed as being in the Assyrian style.

The next point on which we have important monumental evidence is that of the date when the prophecy was uttered. This date is clearly indicated by the writer. He refers in chap. iii. 8-9 to an important event in Assyrian history, the capture of Thebes by Assurbanipal.

He says:

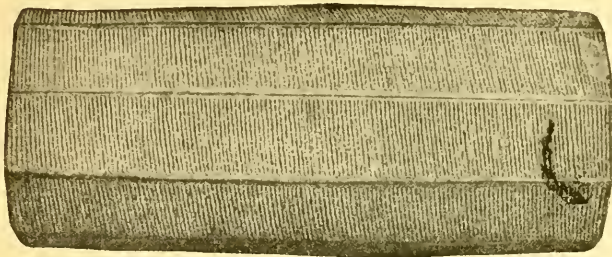
“Art thou better than populous No,¹ that was situate among the rivers, that had the waters round about it, whose rampart was the sea, and her wall was from the sea?”

“Ethiopia and Egypt were her strength, and it was infinite. Put and Lubim were thy helpers.”

Here the writer displays a great knowledge of the history of Egypt and Assyria in the seventh century B. C. Thebes was captured by Assurbanipal in 664-663 and, as he tells us in his great

¹ No-Amon, i. e., Thebes, the city of Amen-Ra.

ten-sided cylinder inscription, an immense spoil was carried away to Nineveh. The prophecy then must have been uttered after this important event, and the accuracy of the writer in speaking of

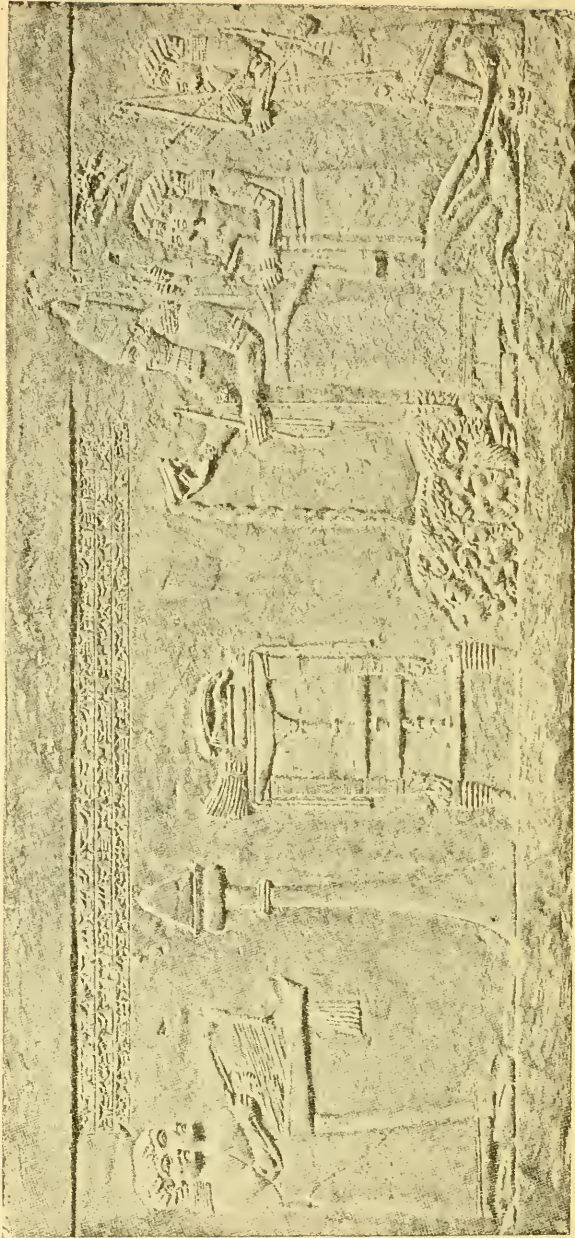


ASSURBANIPAL'S TEN-SIDED CLAY PRISM.
(From Fr. Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible*, Chicago, 1906.)

Ethiopians as well as Egyptians ruling in Thebes, is confirmed by the fact that at the time an Ethiopian king was actually on the throne of Egypt, a king whose Ethiopian name was Tanut-Amon, and who was entirely defeated by the Assyrians.

The directness with which the writer refers to, and practically describes, the destruction of Nineveh, would show that the limit of his horizon must be the capture and burning of the city by the Medes. The date of this important event can be fixed with great accuracy. In 1895, there was discovered at Babylon by Dr. Scheil a black basalt column inscribed with a long inscription of Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, who ruled 555-538 B. C.

The inscription is the coronation proclamation of the king and gives a summary of the events which led to his being appointed by the god Merodach to rule the kingdom. In this important text the king describes how the god Merodach called upon the aid of the Medes against the Assyrians to avenge the terrible and sacrilegious destruction of Babylon and the carrying away of the statue of Marduk to Assyria by Sennacherib. The king also gives the date of the destruction of the great temple of the moon-god at Kharran, which he rebuilt in 553 B. C., saying that the Medes destroyed the temple fifty-four years before, that is, in 607 B. C. As this was the same invasion which terminated in the fall of Nineveh, the date of that event may with certainty be fixed as 606 B. C. This was also the year when the Assyrio-Babylonian general Nabopolassar seized the throne of Babylon and proclaimed the new Babylonian empire. The date of Nahum, then, must be about 628-624 B. C., near the



ASSURBANIPAL POURING OUT A LIBATION OVER FOUR DEAD LIONS.*

(British Museum, reproduced by permission of the Trustees.)

* Translation of the three-line Assyrian inscription over the libation scene: "I am Assur-bani-pal, king of nations, king of Assyria, whom Ashur and Belit have given strength, [who] slew four lions. The mighty bow of Ishtar, lady of battle, over them I held, I poured a libation out over them."

end of the reign or shortly after the death of Assurbanipal, a period of great luxury and splendor in Nineveh, when the nation was waxing idle from the wealth of world-wide conquest and when it most certainly best fits the description of the prophet as being full of silver and gold and an unlimited store of treasure.

The splendor of Nineveh in the age of Nahum is graphically presented by Sennacherib in an inscription on a six-sided cylinder now in the British Museum, in which he describes his building, or rather rebuilding, of certain portions of Nineveh. He says:

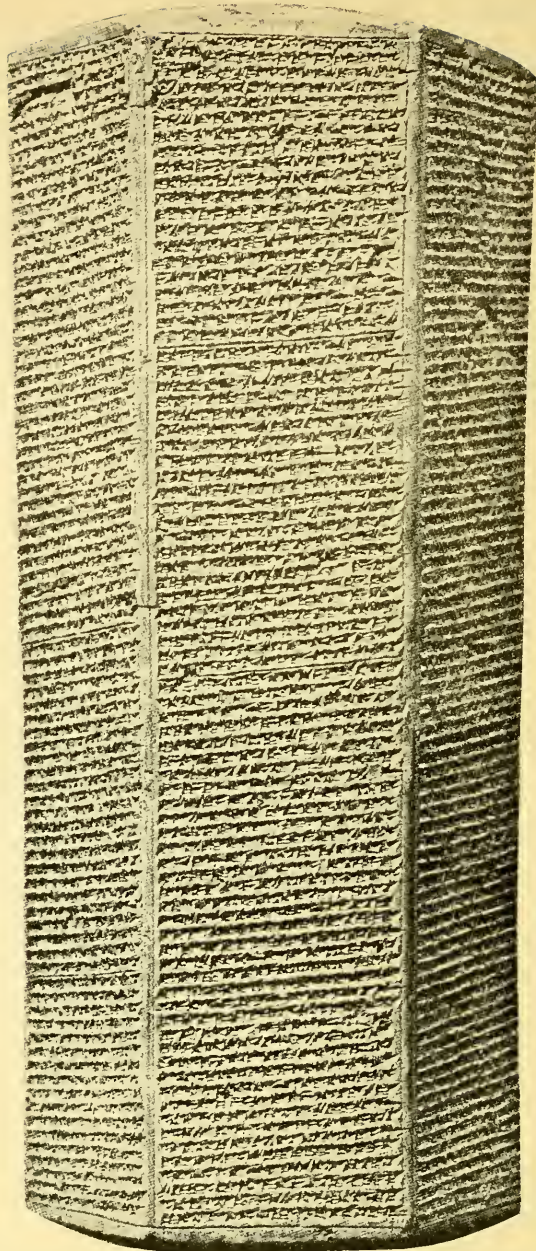
“Nineveh, the exalted town, the city beloved of Ishtar,
Wherein are all the shrines of the gods and goddesses,
The everlasting foundation, the eternal establishment,
Of which the design was in ancient times [like] the design of heaven
and thus fashioned,
Whose structure shone brightly,
The beautiful place, the dwelling of the oracle,
Wherein are all works of art, all shrines and treasures.”

It is to be noted that the king calls the city “the city beloved of Ishtar,” the Assyrian Venus, the Ashtaroth of the Phœnicians, and we shall see that it is against this goddess that the prophet directs his most vehement remarks, for he regards her as the personification of the city itself.

One remarkable feature of the light here thrown on the Book of Nahum, is that it reveals the extraordinary knowledge the prophet had of the history and topography of the Assyrian capital.

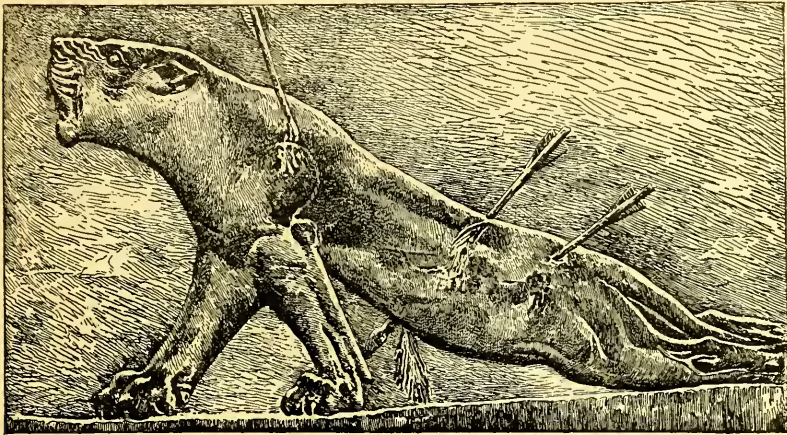
In chap. ii. 8 we read: “But Nineveh is of old like a pool of water.” This statement gains further meaning when we find that the name of Nineveh, “the city of Nina,” contains the name of the old Sumerian or Babylonian goddess of the fish-ponds and marshes, and the Assyrian city of Nineveh was probably a colony founded in ancient times from some Babylonian city or district in which the fish-goddess Nina was worshiped. Another interesting point in this connection has been made by the discovery of a number of tablets from Telloh, the ancient Lagash on the Shatt-el-Hai in southern Babylonia, and we learn from these that it was customary to offer fish to this goddess in the temples. It is this association of Nineveh with the fish that also led to the well-known story of Jonah when on his mission to Nineveh, though that work cannot boast of the wealth of support from the monuments which is obtainable for the Book of Nahum.

Not only is the prophet acquainted with the origin of Nineveh



SENNACHERIB'S SIX-SIDED CLAY PRISM.
(British Museum, reproduced by permission of the Trustees.)

but he is familiar with the patron deity of the city, the goddess Ishtar, and he denounces the goddess and her cult in no measured terms. He calls her by a name which has long been a puzzle to critics, "Huzzab," which, however, we are now able to explain with the assistance of the Assyrian inscriptions. This word is the equivalent of the Assyrian *esibu*, meaning "abandoned" or "divorced." Again the prophet waxes bitter in the following passage, chap. iii. 4: "Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavored harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts," etc. This passage finds a complete explanation from a tablet in the British Museum



THE DYING LIONESS OF NINEVEH.

(From Fr. Delitzsch, *op. cit.*)

which formed part of the great Babylonian epic, the story of Gilgamesh or Nimrod. The goddess Ishtar, jealous of the victorious hero Gilgamesh, desires to marry him, saying "Thou shalt be my husband and I will be thy wife." But the hero is afraid of her and refuses, and then taunts her with the fatal outcome of her former notorious amours:

"On Tammuz (Adonis), the spouse of thy youth,
 Thou didst lay affliction each year.
 Thou didst love the Allahu-bird,
 Thou didst smite him and break his wing.
 He stands in the forest and cries 'Oh my wing.'
 Thou didst love a lion perfect in strength,
 Seven times didst thou dig snares for him.
 Thou didst love a horse, glorious in war,
 Bridle, spur, and whip didst thou lay upon him.

Thou didst gallop him for seven *kasbu*,²
 Trouble and sweat didst thou force him to bear,
 On his mother Silili thou didst lay affliction.
 Thou didst love Tabulu the shepherd,
 Who did continually pour out libations for thee
 And each day slaughtered kids for thee.
 But thou didst smite him and change him into a leopard
 So that his own shepherd-boy hunted him
 And his own dogs tore him in pieces," etc.

We have here a character study of the goddess which quite bears out the denunciations of the prophet. It also bears a striking resemblance to the Greek Circe, while the last episode recalls the Greek legend of Actæon being torn to pieces by his own dogs.

In another fragment of the epic we have a passage exactly parallel to the simile of Nahum in chap. ii. 7: "Her handmaids shall lead her as with the voice of doves, tabering upon their breasts." In a description of the destruction of Erech, the sacred city of Ishtar, we read:

"The asses tread down their young,
 Cows turn from their calves,
 Maidens mourn like doves."

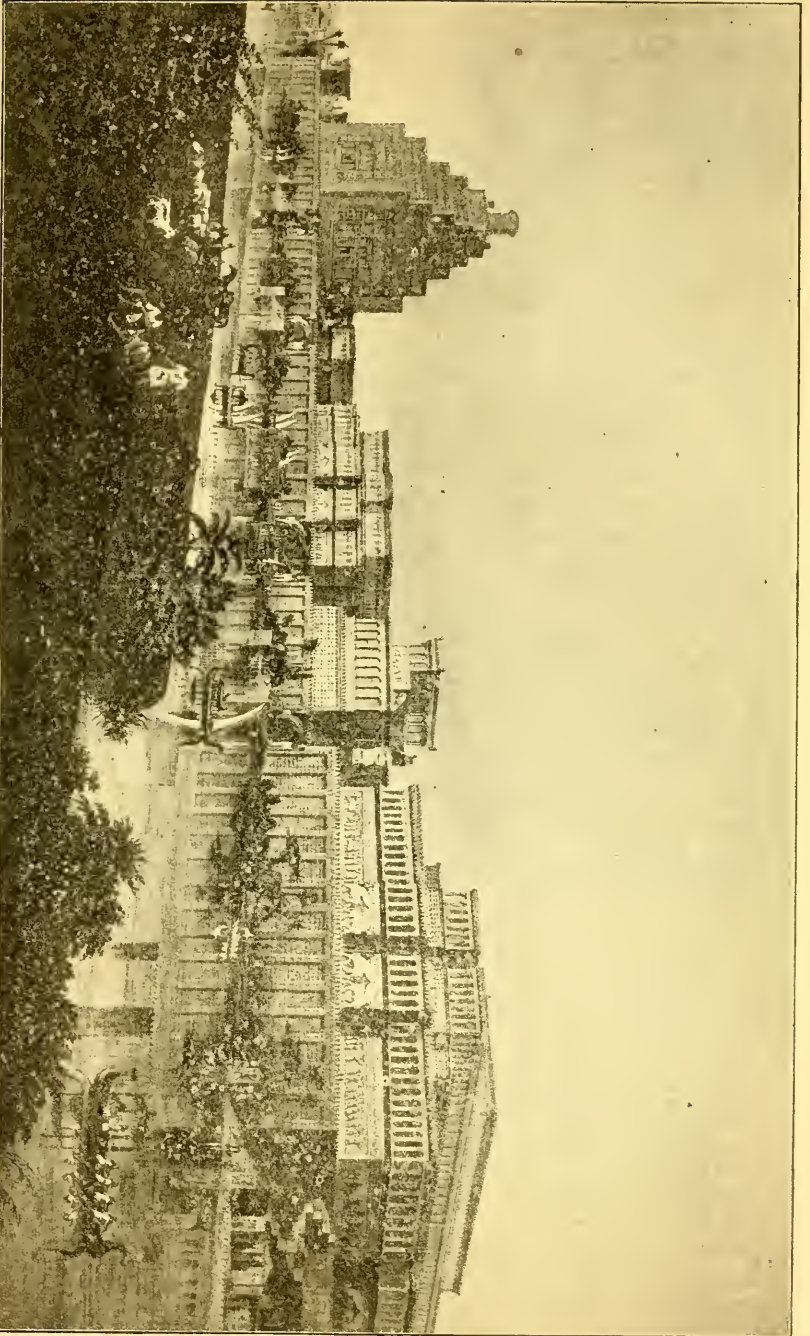
The simile applies to the two female attendants of Ishtar, Kharimat and Samkhat, the personifications of pleasure and lust.

Again, in the same chapter, verse 11: "Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feedingplace of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion, walked, and the lion's whelp, and none made them afraid." This has reference to the royal park which Sennacherib laid out and which Assurbanipal enlarged, and in which the latter is represented hunting lions in the famous basreliefs now in the British Museum. This park lay between the palace and the north gate of Nineveh and was called Melulte, a word which can only be translated by "paradise."

The writer of the book evidently knew the city well when he refers to the streets and broad ways. Sennacherib tells us he laid out wide streets and Esarhaddon says in his inscriptions that, on his return from the capture of Sidon, he marched his Phœnician captives through the squares and broad places (*eributi*) in triumph.

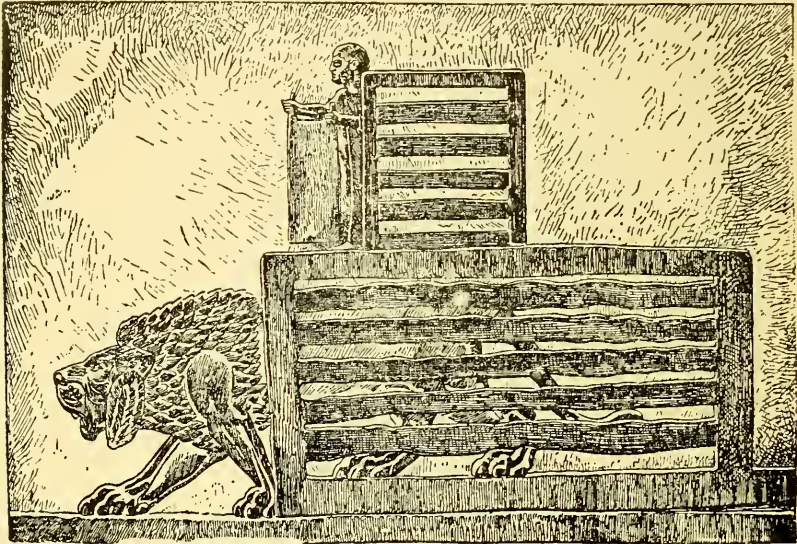
The destruction of Nineveh appears to have been in a great measure brought about by the diversion of the river Khosr, for as Nahum says, chap. ii. 6, "The gates of the rivers shall be opened, and the palace shall be dissolved." These words find a curious

² About 49 miles.



THE PALACES OF NIMRUD.* Imaginative restoration. (From a sketch by James Ferguson. Layard.)
* Assurbanipal resided here at least for a time. The river shown is the one referred to by Nahum (s. v. chap. ii. 6.)

parallel in one of Sennacherib's cylinders describing the destruction of an old palace which had been built long before his time. The passage reads: "The river Tibiltu," a violent stream which since ancient days⁴ had come right up to the palace, and during the time of flood had caused havoc to its substructure and had destroyed the foundations thereof, of that river Tibiltu I diverted the course." The Medes, no doubt, when they besieged the city, diverted the river Khosr and caused the palace quarter to be flooded. The story of the destruction of the old palace above referred to may have



CAGED LION SET FREE FOR THE CHASE.

(From Fr. Delitzsch, *op. cit.*)

been known to Nahum and he used it as a simile for the coming destruction.

There is no need to pursue this subject further, sufficient striking examples have been cited to show how accurate even in minute details the prophet is and how fully his statements are borne out by the monuments. Thus the value of Assyriology as an aid to Biblical study has again been attested.

³ The reading of this name is doubtful.

⁴ In Assyrian *yumi sukuti*, lit., "days long distant."