

ASSYRIAN NOBLES AND THE BOOK OF JONAH

By Paul J. N. Lawrence

The book of Jonah is commonly believed to be a post-exilic composition, with modern scholarship tending to favour a fifth or fourth century B.C. date.¹ A number of scholars, however, have challenged this position,² believing that the reference to the prophet Jonah in the narrative of 2 Kings 14:25 gives good ground for placing the prophet and his 'prophecy'³ immediately before or during the reign of the Israelite king, Jeroboam II (782/1-753).

We hope to show that this latter view is consistent with two phrases in chapter three.

(a) the king is called 'king of Nineveh' in Jonah 3:6, not the usual OT and Assyrian title 'king of Assyria'.

(b) Jonah 3:7 reads **וּגְדֹלֵי רֹאשׁ הַמְּלָכִים**, 'by the decree⁴ of the king and his nobles'.

1. E.g., L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 188; J. A. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1976) 359. J. A. Bewer (*Jonah* [Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1912] 13) proposes a date between 400 and 200.
2. E.g., G. C. Aalders, *The Problem of the Book of Jonah* (London: Tyndale, 1948); E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1960²) 261-265; and D. J. Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', *TB* 30 (1979) 29-51. This present article is designed to present evidence additional to that considered by Wiseman.
3. The term 'prophecy' is used with hesitation to describe the book of Jonah. Only three of the book's forty-eight verses record the Lord's message to the inhabitants of Nineveh.
4. The word **טַעַם** 'decree' is commonly considered an Aramaism and therefore evidence of a late date. It should be noted that although the word with this meaning occurs only in Imperial Aramaic (*i.e.* that of the Persian period), an Akkadian cognate *têmu* was already used with this meaning in the Old Babylonian period (see S. A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic and the Development of the Aramaic Dialects*, Yale University Ph.D. thesis [1970] 88). Two alternative possibilities therefore exist. Either the Hebrew **טַעַם** was a direct borrowing from the Akkadian *têmu*, or, as seems more likely, it was an indirect

Some scholars have taken these two phrases as evidence for a late date. L. C. Allen, for example, writes

The reference to the "king of Nineveh" instead of to "king of Assyria" betrays a remoteness from historical actuality.⁵

And

The linking of king and nobles in the decree of 3:7 is a characteristic Persian trait rather than Assyrian.⁶

The purpose of this note is to show that the situation of Assyria in the early eighth century can, in fact, provide an historical framework for the two phrases under discussion.

Mention of the prophet Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 occurs in a section dealing with the reign of Jeroboam II (782/1-753 B.C.).

He [Jeroboam II] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher. (NIV)

Jeroboam II's reign is noted for its political stability and economic prosperity. It was the rich Israelites of this reign whom Amos castigated (*e.g.* Am. 6:4-6). The victories of Jeroboam over Aram that brought about this prosperity are therefore to be placed early in his reign. Jonah's prophecy predicting this success was thus made either immediately before or early in the

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borrowing made through the medium of Aramaic (even though it must be admitted that there is no actual attestation of this word in Aramaic before the Persian Period). It may be that the victories of Jeroboam II over Aram resulted in the adoption not only of Aramaic loanwords but also of Aramaic words themselves derived from Akkadian such as **טעם**.

5. Allen, *Jonah* 186.

6. *Ibid.*

reign of Jeroboam II. On this view Jonah's predictions were probably made between 800 and 770. It is not known when Jonah's mission to Nineveh took place, but, as we hope to show, it is possible to assign it to the same period.

The Assyrian kings of this period are Adad-nirāri III (810-783) and Shalmaneser IV (782-772). No Royal Annals survive for the reign of Adad-nirari III; instead, a number of display inscriptions such as stelae and slabs survive, several of which are of provincial origin.⁷ Interestingly, Adad-nirari III is also known to have issued a number of royal decrees.⁸ Only one royal inscription can definitely be assigned to Shalmaneser IV.⁹

However, a number of inscriptions, many of provincial origin, erected by powerful provincial governors, provide much valuable and additional evidence. It is to an examination of the data derived from these monuments that we now turn. Three provincial governors are outstanding in the period under discussion.

(a) *Bēl-tarši-iluma*

The Assyrian Eponym Chronicle lists a certain Bēl-tarši-iluma, the governor of Calah, as holding the eponymous office of *limmu* in 797 during the reign of Adad-nirāri III.¹⁰ He erected two identical statues of the god Nabû at Calah (Nimrud),¹¹ on which Bēl-tarši-iluma

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7. W. Schramm, *Einleitung in die Assyrischen Königs-inschriften 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 111-119; A. K. Grayson, *CAH 3/1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982²) 271.
 8. For discussion of the term 'decree' see n.4 above. Some of these decrees are published in J. N. Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) nos. 1, 3, 4 and 6. The clearest example is one published by R. C. Thompson and M. E. Mallowan, 'The British Museum Excavations at Nineveh', *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 20 (1933) 113-115 and re-edited by Postgate, *Grants* 115-117.
 9. Schramm, *Einleitung* 2.120.
 10. A. Ungnad, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 2 (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1938) 422 Eponymen.
 11. D. D. Luckenhill, *ARAB 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1926) §745. This inscription has the dedication 'For the life of Adad-nirāri [III], king of Assyria, his lord, and for the life of Sammuṛāmat, the queen, his mistress'. For a discussion of the supposed co-regency of Sammuṛāmat, the Classical Semiramis, see W. Schramm, 'War Semiramis assyrische Regentin?' *Historia* 21 (1972) 513-521.

says that he was the governor of Calah and a number of other provinces - Hamēdi, Sirgana, Temēni and Yalūna. All these territories were placed by E. Forrer¹² between an area north of the Upper Zab and the Lower Zab. A more recent placement of Hamēdi around Tell Hamīdi on the river Jaghjagha, the easternmost tributary of the Khabur, has been proposed.¹³

Bēl-tarši-iluma's seal names him as a *ša rēši*, 'eunuch'.¹⁴ Documents mentioning Bēl-tarši-iluma range from the eponymy of Nergal-ilaya, presumably his second in 808,¹⁵ the eponymy of Mannuki-Ashur, 793¹⁶. So it can be safely said that he flourished between 808 and 793.

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12. E. Forrer, *Die Provinzeinteilung des Assyrisches Reiches* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921) 34-35 and map facing p. 5.
 13. J. N. Postgate, 'Hamēdi', *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 4 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1972-5) 71.
 14. The equation of *ša rēši* with 'eunuch' is held by some, e.g. I. M. Diakonoff, *Studies in honor of Benno Landsberger. Assyriological Studies* 16 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) 349; J. E. Reade, 'The Neo Assyrian court and army - evidence from the sculptures', *Iraq* 34 (1972) 07-108; J. N. Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1973) 10; S. Parpola, review of J. V. Kinnier-Wilson, *The Nimrud Wine Lists*, *JSS* 21 (1976) 171 and review of W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 74 (1979) 34. The equation is, however, denied by others, e.g. W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972) 974a; A. L. Oppenheim, 'A note on *ša rēši*', *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973) 325-334; P. Garelli, 'Remarques sur l'administration de l'empire Assyrien', *RA* 68 (1974) 133-136.
 15. Ungnad, *Reallexikon* 2.420; Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* 177.
 16. Ungnad, *Reallexikon* 2.422; Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* 121.

(b) *Nergal-eresh*

The Assyrian Eponym Chronicle also lists a certain Nergal-eresh,¹⁷ the governor of Raṣappa (a province in the Jebel Sinjar area, a mountainous tract of land due west of Assyria), as holding the eponymous office of *limmu* twice, first in 803 under Adad-nirdri III and later in 775 under Shalmaneser IV.¹⁸ Two of the most important inscriptions commissioned by Nergal-eresh are the Saba'a¹⁹ and the partially defaced Rimah stelae²⁰ from the Jebel Sinjar area.²¹

Toponyms mentioned in these two stelae show the extent of the domains under Nergal-eresh's control. They range from Azalla (Rimah 18) in the north west,²² to Apqu (Saba'a 23) in the north east²³ and from Sirqu (Saba'a 24) in the south west to Suhi (Saba'a 25) in the south east. His domains thus stretched westwards from Assyria to the Khabur basin and southwards to the far side of the Euphrates.

Nergal-eresh is known to have played an important part in three military campaigns:

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17. The name is sometimes read Palil-eresh. For further discussion, see H. Tadmor, 'The historical inscriptions of Adad-nerari III', *Iraq* 35 (1973) 147 n.32.
 18. Ungnad, *Reallexikon* 2.422.
 19. Tadmor, 'Historical Inscriptions' 144-145; Luckenbill, *ARAB* 1 §§733737.
 20. S. Page, 'A stela of Adad-nirari III and Nergal-eresh from Tell al Rimah', *Iraq* 30 (1968) 141-142.
 21. Two other fragmentary texts of Nergal-eresh exist: a fragmentary statue from Bara in the Jebel Sinjar (P. Hulin, 'An inscription on a statue from the Sinjar hills', *Sumer* 26 [1970] 130); and a fragmentary stele from Sheikh Hammad (ancient Dur Katlimmu) on the river Khabur (A. R. Millard and H. Tadmor, 'Adad-nirari III in Syria', *Iraq* 35 [1973] 58).
 22. For the location of Azalla, see A. R. Millard, 'Ezekiel 27.19 and the wine trade of Damascus', *JSS* 7 (1962) 202; K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Topographie Nordmesopotamiens* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1980) 128 n.453.
 23. Modern Tell Abil Mārīya (see K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen* 12).

(i) A campaign to Hatti and Amurru (Saba'a 11-18^a, Rimah 4-6^a), probably the Arpad campaign recorded by the Eponym Chronicle for 805.²⁴

(ii) A campaign to Damascus, the Mediterranean Sea at Arvad and the Lebanon mountains (Saba'a 18^b-20, Rimah 6^b-12^a), probably the Manvaate campaign recorded by the Eponym Chronicle for 796.²⁵

(iii) Tribute gathering in the northern land of Na'iri (Rimah 12b).²⁶

No pictorial representations of Nergal-eresh are known. On both the Saba'a and Rimah stelae the Assyrian king Adad-nirāri III is depicted.

Nergal-eresh was thus a governor with extensive domains, who played an important part in three military campaigns and flourished for a considerable period from at least 805 to 775.

24. Ungnad, *Realexikon* 2.429.

25. *Ibid.* We follow the basic division of the text proposed by Schramm, 'Semiramis' 515-516. However, mention of Joash, king of Israel (798-782/1), precludes Schramm's assignment of the second campaign to the year 802. We prefer 796 for the second campaign, as argued by A. R. Millard, 'Adad-nirari III, Aram and Arpad', *PEQ* 105 (1973) 162-163. It should also be noted that Schramm's scheme cuts right across the source document boundaries proposed by Tadmor, 'Historical inscriptions' 142-143.

26. Nergal-eresh may have been the one who delivered Israel from the power of Aram during the reign of Jehoahaz (814/3 - 798, 2 Ki. 13:5), since he is known to have campaigned in Syria in 805. W. H. Hallo ('From Qarqar to Carchemish. Assyria and Israel in the light of new discoveries', *BA* 23 [1960] 42) proposed Adad-nirāri III for this role. However it is possible that Nergal-eresh led the campaign. The principle of a general's military deed being accredited to the king is explored further by P. J. N. Lawrence, *Agents and Masters in Ancient Near Eastern History Writing* (unpublished Liverpool University Ph.D, 1985). J. D. Hawkins (*CAH* 3/1 [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982] 404) suggests that another general, Shamshi-ilu, was the one who delivered Israel from the Aramaeans, but this is less likely as Shamshi-ilu is not attested until 796.

(c) *Shamshi-ilu*

In the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle we also find listed a certain Shamshi-ilu, the *turtānu*,²⁷ as holding the eponymous office of *limmu* under three successive kings. In 780 under Shalmaneser IV, in 770 under Ashur-dan III and in 752 under Ashur-nirāri V.²⁸ Furthermore, his tenure of the office of *turtānu* is attested even earlier, since he is recorded as settling a boundary dispute in conjunction with the Assyrian king Adad-nirāri III.²⁹ Shamshi-ilu is not the eponymous *turtānu* for 808, and so it is assumed that he became *turtānu* only after 808.³⁰ If the settlement of the boundary in question is assumed to have followed the Manṣuāte campaign of 796,³¹ then this date provides the earliest attestation of Shamshi-ilu.

Shamshi-ilu commissioned two virtually identical inscriptions on two stone lions at the north-east gate of the Syrian city of Til Barsip.³² His name and titles were effaced in antiquity, but can still be read.³³ The inscriptions on these lions have the form of an Assyrian royal inscription, without any mention of an Assyrian king. These inscriptions list Shamshi-ilu's area of authority as 'Hatti, Gutē and the whole of Namri' (line 9). His area of authority was the northern part of Syria³⁴ and part of the Zagros mountains,³⁵ His domains thus comprised an extensive area to both the west and the east of Assyria. A fragmentary inscription from Ashur³⁶ is perhaps to be assigned to Shamshi-ilu.³⁷

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27. The *turtānu* was the commander-in-chief (A. L. Oppenheim, 'Tartan', *IDB* 4 [Nashville, 1962] 519).
 28. Ungnad, *Reallexikon*, 2.422, 424.
 29. Unpublished Antakya stele (see Hawkins, *CAH* 3/1)400; also Grayson *CAH* 3/1, 272).
 30. Hawkins, *CAH* H3/1, 404.
 31. Ungnad, *Reallexikon* 2.429; Hawkins, *CAH* 3/1, 400.
 32. F. Thureau-Dangin, 'L'inscription des lions de Til-Barsip', *RA* 27 (1930) 15-19.
 33. *Ibid.* 11-12.
 34. J. D. Hawkins, 'Hatti', *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 4 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1972-5) 152.
 35. Thureau-Dangin, 'L'inscription' 21.
 36. O. Schroeder, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur Historischen Inhalts* 2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922; reprint, Osnabrück: Zeller, 1970) 8 no.26; Luckenbill, *ARAB* 1 §56. Note its misplaced position in this latter work.
 37. Schramm, *Einleitung* 2.121.

It records the construction of a city on the bank of the Tigris on the side of mount Ebih, the western end of the Jebel Hamrin.

Lines 11^b-13^a of the Til Barsip lion inscriptions tell of an invasion by Argishtish, king of Urartu, of the land of Gutē, which must be dated before the latter's death in 764.³⁸ Shamshi-ilu's subsequent victory may also be recorded on a text bought by C. F. Lehmann Haupt in Mosul and supposed to have come from Dehōk.³⁹ This text may relate the same victory as that recorded on the Til Barsip lions, though it could possibly refer to a separate occasion.⁴⁰

Shamshi-ilu's inscription on the Til Barsip lions also makes allusion to campaigns against the Musku of Anatolia (line 10), the Utu'u and other mid-Tigris tribes (10-11), and the mountains of the setting sun (9). The last reference may be paralleled by a statement in the as yet unpublished Pazarcik stele that Shamshi-ilu led a campaign to Damascus and received the tribute of a certain Khadianu.⁴¹ This may be identical with the 773 Assyrian campaign to Damascus listed in the Eponym Chronicle. The Pazarcik stele also records that on his return Shamshi-ilu confirmed the boundary, established in the reign of Adad-nirāri III, with the Anatolian state of Kummuh.⁴²

The Antakya and Pazarcik stelae depict Shamshi-ilu without a beard.⁴³ Other sculptures (*i.e.* a rock relief from Karabur,⁴⁴ and the principal figure of the group of sculptures from the Til Barsip gate at Arslan Tash⁴⁵) may

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38. R. D. Barnett, *CAH* 3/1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982²) 348.
39. C. F. Lehmann Haupt, *Materialien zur älteren Geschichte Armeniens und Mesopotamiens* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1907) 45, 47.
40. Thureau-Dangin, 'L' inscription' 12.
41. Grayson, *CAH* 3/1, 277; also Hawkins, *CAH* 3/1, 405.
42. Grayson, *CAH* 3/1, 277.
43. I owe this reference to pictures of the Antakya and Pazarcik stelae supplied by Mr. J. D. Hawkins.
44. Picture: O. A. Tasyürek, 'Some New Assyrian Rock-reliefs in Turkey', *AS* 25 (1975) 177 Fig. 10.
45. Picture: F. Thureau-Dangin, *Arslan Tash Atlas* (Paris: Geuthner, 1931) plate 7.

also show the beardless Shamshi-ilu. The fact that two definite representations of Shamshi-ilu and two other possible representations show him without a beard strongly suggests that he was a eunuch.⁴⁶ If Shamshi-ilu had been capable of growing a beard, why did he shave it off when the king of Assyria, his nominal superior or even rival, is always shown bearded?

In their recent work A. Lemaire and J.-M. Durand⁴⁷ equate Shamshi-ilu with Bar Ga'yah, king of Ktk, of the Sefire stelae. If this is true, then it would show an even greater measure of influence for Shamshi-ilu, as it would have been he who completed the treaty with Mati'el of Arpad, now recorded on the Sefire stelae. We believe, however, that Shamshi-ilu's clear depiction as a eunuch probably invalidates this equation.⁴⁸

It seems appropriate, therefore, to suggest that Shamshi-ilu was a eunuch governor with extensive domains that comprised two distinct halves, who conducted his own campaigns and who flourished for a considerable period from at least 796 to 752.

46. F. Thureau-Dangin (*Til Barsip Texte* [Paris: Geuthner, 1936] 158) considered that a bearded figure on a sculptured plaque from Til Barsip represented Shamshi-ilu. Picture: F. Thureau-Dangin, *Til Barsip Album* (Paris: Geuthner, 1936) plate 15.2.

47. A. Lemaire and J.-M. Durand, *Les inscriptions Araméennes de Sfiré et l'Assyrie de Shamshi-ilu* (Geneva and Paris: Droz, 1984).

48. It should be noted that although Adad-it'i, governor of Guzān, c.850-c.825, is also called king of Guzān on the Aramaic version of the Akkadian/Aramaic bilingual statue inscription from Tell Fekheriyeh, opposite Guzān (*cf.* Akk 8 with Aram 6) he is also shown bearded., Text in A. Abou Assaf, P. Bordreuil and A. R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekheriyeh et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Paris: Chirat, 1982)13, 23. Plates in *ibid.*, nos. 1, 2, 4 and 5.

Conclusion

In summary, Bēl-tarṣi-iluma, Nergal-eresh and Shamshi-ilu flourished from at least 808 to 793, 805 to 775 and 796 to 752 respectively. They were thus partially contemporary. They each had extensive domains. Bēl-tarṣi-iluma governed much of Assyria, excepting Nineveh and Ashur. Nergal-eresh's domains spread westwards from Assyria to the Khabur basin. Here they probably fronted the western half of Shamshi-ilu's domains, 'the land of Hatti'. If the construction of a city at mount Ebiḥ refers to a project undertaken by Shamshi-ilu, then his eastern domains may have fronted those of Bēl-tarṣi-iluma.

Whatever the precise limits of their individual domains, it is clear that the 'combined domains of these three nobles flanked Assyria. Bēl-tarṣi-iluma had jurisdiction over part of Assyria itself. The exact extent of the power of these three nobles is also difficult to assess. B. Landsberger⁴⁹ proposed that Shamshi-ilu was the virtual ruler of Assyria until 752. J. D. Hawkins claims that 'he was effectively Assyrian king of the West'.⁵⁰

The emergence of these powerful provincial governors, who acted as virtual monarchs in their own domains although generally professing allegiance to the Assyrian crown, must have been a major factor in the relative impotence of the Assyrian monarchy during the early eighth century.⁵¹

It should be noted that Calah was the normal residence of the Assyrian kings during this period. Adad-nirāri III (810-783), however, is known to have built at Nineveh, completing the palace of Shamshi-Adad V

49. B. Landsberger, *Sam'al Studien zur Entdeckung der Ruinen Seitte Karatepe* (Ankara: Türkische Historische Gesellschaft, 1948) 66 n.168.

50. Hawkins, *CAH* 3/1, 405; also A. K. Grayson, *CAH* 3/1, 278.

51. Grayson, *CAH* 3/1, 273.

(823-811).⁵² No buildings of Shalmaneser IV (782-772) are attested at Nineveh. But it is not unlikely that these kings resided in Nineveh, as the book of Jonah maintains, at least for a short period.

To return to Jonah 3:6-7. Three points should be noted.

- (a) The king is called 'king of Nineveh'.
- (b) The king issues a proclamation in Nineveh.
- (c) The decree is the decree of the king and his nobles.

These three observations agree with what we have observed of the historical situation of Assyria in the early eighth century. (a) The king of Assyria may have been the king of Assyria only in name. His effective control over large parts of his kingdom may have been surrendered to powerful provincial governors; he may have been effective king of Nineveh, but of little more; hence his title in the book of Jonah. (b) It was the king who is specified as having repented and having made the proclamation in Nineveh. (c) The decree is issued as the decree of the king and his nobles. In his decree he had to acknowledge the power and influence of such nobles as Bēl-tarṣi-iluma, Nergal-eresh and Shamshi-ilu.

52. R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, 'The Site of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal at Nineveh, Excavated 1929-30 on behalf of the British Museum', *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 18 (1931) 100; Grayson, *CAH* 3/1, 272 n. 222. In a royal decree from Nineveh (Thompson and Mallowan, 'Excavations' 113-115; Postgate, *Grants* 115-117) Adad-nirāri III bestows the southern province of Handānu upon Nergal-eresh. This decree need not necessarily invalidate our contention concerning the relative impotence of the Assyrian monarchy. The decree is dated to the eponymy of Bēl-tarṣi-iluma (797) and so it may be the case that the decline in the authority of the Assyrian king only began to take significant effect after that date.

We can find no certain natural or military event which might have confirmed Jonah's prophecy of the imminent overthrow of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4)⁵³, but perhaps it was the very power of the Assyrian nobles and the weakness of the central Assyrian monarchy that gave his words a realism and an urgency about them.

We can therefore conclude that the reference to the 'king of Nineveh' and to 'the king and his nobles' in Jonah 3:6-7 is consonant with an eighth-century date for the mission and book of Jonah.

53. The Urartian invasion is a possibility, but Argishtish, king of Urartu, continued to reign beyond the period under discussion until 764. The solar eclipse of 15th June 763 (Ungnad, *Reallexikon* 2.430; M. Kudlek and E. M. Mickler, *Solar and Lunar Eclipses of the Ancient Near East* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1971] 39, note that the B.C. years in their publication are one less than the actual year) may have occasioned a *šar puhi*, a substitute king, and this in turn may have undermined confidence in the state. See further Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh' 47.