On Floods and the Fall of Nineveh: A Note on the Origins of a Spurious Tradition

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The association between the fall of Nineveh and overwhelming flood waters is a well-established one in both critical and pre-critical traditions regarding the fall of the city. This association, which has only recently been cast into doubt, is the consequence of several apparent references to the contribution of the surrounding rivers to the fall of Nineveh, in the Greek account of Diodorus Siculus (in the Bibliotheca historia, at this point largely based on the work of Ctesias) and in biblical Nahum. In a recent article Pinker has examined these and other related accounts, concluding that the claim that Nineveh was brought low as a result of its water sources should be abandoned.1

It is not the aim of the present enquiry to question the accuracy of Pinker's conclusions. It will, however, suggest that the idea that Nineveh fell as a result of flooding is not as inexplicable as the geographical and meteorological obstacles to the idea at first suggest. Indeed, it is quite comprehensible once an awareness of the common language used to describe the destruction wrought during military campaigns in the ancient Near East is brought to bear on the language of these texts. I will first examine Nahum, which has generally constituted the focus of biblical scholarship on this subject, particularly the language of flood in Nah 1:8 and the language of the gates of the rivers in Nah 2:7, before turning briefly to the classical material.

Pinker rightly notes with regard to Nah 1:8 that the simile "like a flood" is regularly used in the Assyrian royal inscriptions' descriptions of the king's conquest of various cities. This type of language appears in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.2

* Offered to Hans Barstad in gratitude for his quiet but steady support to a young scholar.


2 Among many such references see Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria (RINAP 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 39 9; 47 2; 51 2; Andreas Fuchs, Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1994), Ann. 373; W.R. Mayer, “Sargons Feldzug gegen
Pinker concludes that “the poet of the theophany in Nahum used with respect to God a simile that was frequently used to describe the magnificent achievements of the great Assyrian kings.” He denies that the language in Nahum has anything particularly to do with Nineveh’s own fall, although he concedes that the use of this language, which he understands as particularly Assyrian, may relate to the rest of the book’s focus on that city and on Assyria.

Research on ancient Near Eastern conceptions and depictions of military activities, however, suggests that this language need not be understood as deriving solely from the Assyrian subject, while also developing our understanding of Nahum’s use of this particular terminology. To address the latter first: the background to the Assyrian language of royal destruction as like that wrought by a flood is to be found in the divine epic *Enuma elish*, in which Marduk (alternatively Assur and Ištar) battles chaos, manifest as the goddess Tiamat. In the process he employs conventional weaponry as well as the forces of nature: flood, wind and storm. As a reward for his victory, Marduk is crowned king of the gods.

Language evoking this divine battle is used by the Assyrian kings in order to articulate the purpose of their own military endeavours; like the royal god, they are battling chaotic forces which threaten the order and security of the universe. Thus Sargon’s annals speak in terms of flood (*abūbu*), fog (*imbaru*),...