How Big Was Nineveh?
Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size
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This article examines the incongruity between most modern translations of Jonah 3:3 and ancient textual and archaeological evidence concerning the size of Nineveh. Every modern solution intended to reconcile a literal rendering of the description in Jonah 3:3 with ancient evidence fails. However, reading Jonah 3:3 as a figure of speech perfectly conveys the author’s intention of representing Nineveh as a very large city.

Key Words: Jonah 3:3, Nineveh, Babylon, literal, figurative, idiom, hermeneutics, Herodotus, Sennacherib, journey, prophet

On the face of it, “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” (Jonah 3:3b, KJV) is quite an innocuous statement. It seems like a straightforward description of size measured by means of an average day’s walk. Many modern translations render this phrase in a similar manner:

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth (ESV).
Now Nineveh was an extremely large city, a three days’ walk (HCSV).
Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk (NASB).
Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days (NIV).
Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey across (NJB).

Author’s note: I dedicate this article to Professor Edwin Yamauchi and John Charles Halton III—two individuals who combine a sharp mind with a tender heart. May this young scholar follow in your footsteps. Furthermore, I extend my deep appreciation to them both for their insights in an earlier draft of this essay.

Nineveh was an enormously large city a three days’ walk across (NJPSV).
[A] city so large that it took three days to see it all (NLT).
Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across (NRSV).
Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it (TNIV).

However, once one begins to ponder the relation of the d...

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