"NINEVEH" IN THE BOOK OF TOBIT

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IN that model of an ancient "short story", the tale of Tobit and his son Tobias, the action shifts between two chief scenes, the great city Nineveh, on the river Tigris, and the Median capital Ecbatana, distant many days' journey to the East. The narrator is sure of his geography—far more so than we are. The main outlines are plain enough, but certain incidental features are obscure and perplexing, the more so, as the versions of the story which have survived show considerable variation, and all are more or less corrupt. The student is especially to be warned against the "received" text, represented by Codex B and its fellows, which has been the standard for centuries. The writer has never doubted, since first studying Tobit with a class, some thirty years ago, that the Greek text which approaches most nearly to the original form of the story is that found in Codex ℵ; the form contained in B representing an abridged recension in which the narrative, reproduced chiefly if not wholly from memory, can be shown to have been constantly "clipped".[1]

[1] Even the longer Greek version represents an abridged form of the story. The original form, certainly Semitic and presumably Aramaic, perished in all probability not long after it was first put forth. We may surmise that the work was preserved in a single Greek translation, as seems to have been the case with the extra-canonical O. T. books in general. At a later date it was taken up again into the Jewish popular literature and circulated in numerous Semitic forms, while among the Christians it also became popular in Greek and Latin versions. As usual in the transmission of literature of this class, reproduction from memory played its important part, and the ever-present tendency to abridge

The longer Greek version of the book, it may be added, is a translation from an Aramaic original, as there is sufficient evidence to show.

The main features of the journey undertaken by Tobias (and his dog) and Raphael were doubtless tolerably clear to the narrator of the story, but aside from the names of the two Median cities Ecbatana and Rages the only details which he gives us are in the neighborhood of the city, the home of Tobit, from which they set out and to which they eventually return. Leaving "Nineveh", they first cross the Tigris *to a city lying immediately opposite* (see below); then proceed for some hours along the river and not far from it, camping on its bank at the end of the first day and catching the fish which proved so valuable. They then leave the river (hence the episode of salting down a part of the fish as provision for the journey) and strike out across the country on their way to the interior of Media.

It is in the narrative of the return that we are given the most important item of information in regard to the location and immediate surroundings of Tobit's "Nineveh". I give here a translation of the passage 11 1–17 according to the text of Cod. ℵ, slightly emended.

> [1]When they drew near to *Kaserin*, which lies opposite Nineveh, Raphael said, [2]"You know how we left your father; [3]let us hasten on in advance of your wife, and make ready the house while they are still on the way". [4]So the two proceeded together, and Raphael said to him, "Take the gall of the fish in your hand". The dog[2] also came with them, following on behind.
>
> [5]Now Anna sat watching the road by which her son should

wrought even greater changes. One striking result of the "clipping" process is to be seen in the passage which is here translated. The sole reason for the introduction of Tobias' *dog* into the story was in order that at the end of the long journey he might rush ahead and by the joyful wagging of his tail announce to the watching mother the approach of the travellers—a truly charming touch, and one that adds not a little to the dramatic completeness of the scene. The episode is wanting, however, in our Greek.

[2] Reading κύων, of course, instead of κύριος.

come.[3] 8As she saw him approaching, she said to his father, "Your son is coming, and the man who went with him!" 7Now Raphael had said to Tobias, before he drew near to his father, "I know that his eyesight will be restored. 8Daub the gall of the fish upon his eyes, and the medicine will have an astringent action and the white film will peel off from his eyes, so that your father will look up and see the light". 9Anna ran[4] and fell upon the neck of her son and said to him, "I see you, my child, now let me die!" and she wept. 10Tobit arose, stumbling as he walked, and came out through the door of the court-yard. Tobias advanced to meet him, 11holding in his hand the gall of the fish, and spurting[5] it in his eyes he laid hold of him, saying, "Courage, father!" 12And the medicine took effect upon him, and stung,[6] 13and with his two hands he peeled off the films from the corners of his eyes. Falling upon his (son's) neck, 14he wept, saying, "I see you, my child, light of my eyes!" Then he said, "Blessed is God, and blessed is his great name, and blessed are all his holy angels. May his great name be over us, and blessed be all his angels forever. 15For he chastised me, yet now I see my son Tobias".

Thereupon Tobit[7] entered the house, rejoicing and praising

[3] The impossible words, καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς, at the end of vs. 4, were either derived by a copyist's carelessness from the end of vs. 5, or else result from a considerable lacuna in the parent ms. In any case, this is certainly the point where, in the original form of the tale, it was narrated how the dog served as advance messenger (see the note above). Jerome's Latin preserves the incident, but in the wrong place, namely in vs. 9: *Tunc praecucurrit canis, qui simul fuerat in via, et quasi nuncius adveniens, blandimento suae caudae gaudebat.*

[4] Reading Ἄννα ἔδραμεν instead of ἀνέδραμεν.

[5] The meaning "blow" for ἐνεφύσησεν is hardly appropriate here. The shorter Greek version has "sprinkle", the Syriac "squeeze", and the Vulgate "smear". The Old Latin follows our Greek literally, both here (*insufflavit*) and in 6 9 (where the clause is plainly a later insertion).

[6] This verse has been sadly misunderstood. The verb ἐτείνωσεν would be quite possible, signifying that the medicine "spread" or "increased in effect"; but the true reading is unquestionably ἐτείνατο, as both the parallels and well-known medical usage show.

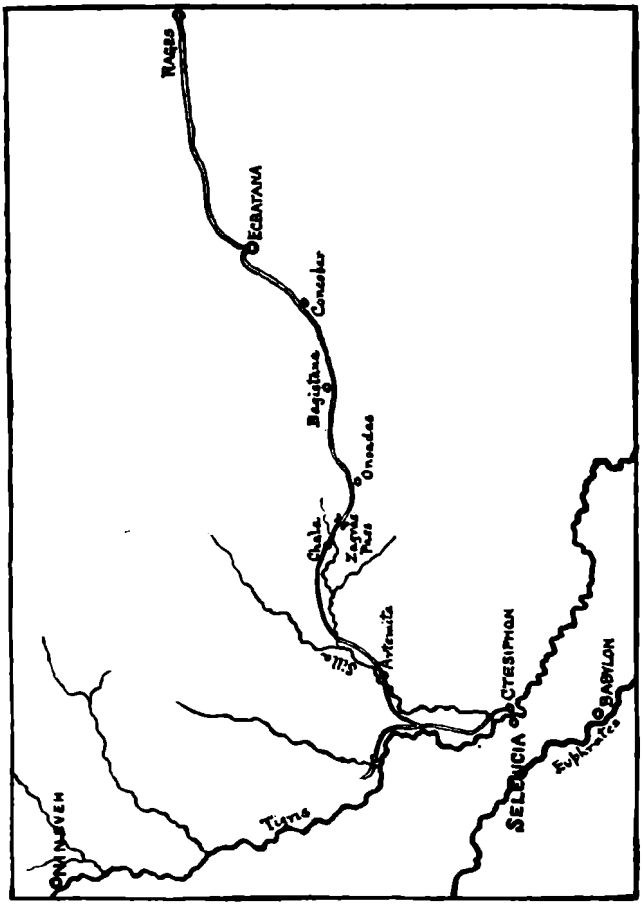
[7] The context and the phrase "with his whole body" show that the true reading is Τωβεῖθ, not Τωβίας.

God with his whole body; and Tobias made known to his father that his journey had been prospered: that he had brought the money, that he had taken to wife Sara the daughter of Raguel, and that she was near at hand, close to the gate of Nineveh. [16]So Tobit went out to meet his daughter-in-law, rejoicing and praising God, to the gate of Nineveh. And the Ninevites who saw him passing by on foot, in his full strength and with no one leading him, were amazed. [17]And Tobit confessed before them that God had had mercy on him and had opened his eyes. Then he drew near to Sara, the wife of his son Tobias, and blessed her, saying, etc.

The consistent representation of this section of the narrative is that the city lying opposite "Nineveh" was *immediately* opposite, just across the Tigris and close at hand. As to this there can be no question. The time that elapsed between the separation of Tobias and Raphael from the caravan and the reunion at the gate of the Assyrian capital was an interval to be measured in fractions of an hour. When the two hastening travellers arrive at their goal, they are only a little in advance of the main party. As soon as Tobias has greeted his father and mother, he tells them that the others are already at the entrance of the city (11 15). No reader can doubt, in all this, that the narrator has in mind actual cities with whose location he is familiar.

Now it must be observed that the site of the real Nineveh fails at the crucial points to agree with the plain statements of the Book of Tobit. There was no city just across the river, and other important details are equally at variance with the scene of our narrative, as will presently appear. The only example on the Tigris of two such adjoining cities is the pair Seleucia-Ctesiphon. As soon as the possibility is suggested that this site may have served as the principal scene of the story, several very striking facts come into view. At the time when the Book of Tobit was written, Seleucia was the capital of the kingdom known to the Jews as "Asshur". At that time also the twin cities, Seleucia and Ctesiphon, stood at the point where the great trade-route from Mesopotamia to Media crossed the Tigris. The relative location of the two cities, moreover, is precisely what our story requires.

The *name* of the city lying just across the river from "Nineveh" is given in our Greek as Κασερεύν; and in some other versions



Map showing the journey of Tobias.

of the book (Old Latin, Bodleian Aramaic, Vulgate, Syriac, Hebrew), doubtless all derived ultimately from the Greek text of which Cod. ℵ is now the best extant representative, more or

less corrupt forms of the same name (Kaserı, אקרים,[8] Charam, Charan, etc.) appear. This has hitherto been a complete enigma, but with the equation "Nineveh" = Seleucia to guide us the probability immediately appears that Κασερειν was originally Κασεφων (the confusion of ρ and φ in cursive script being a very easy matter), the transliteration of קסכין, still recognizable as Ctesiphon.

There is another portion of the narrative by which this hypothesis may be tested, namely the account of the beginning of the journey eastward. In the evening of the first day, Tobias and Raphael halt on the bank of the Tigris and pass the night there (6 2). This fact has given the commentators trouble, for a traveller from the true Nineveh to Ecbatana would not thus come to the Tigris after first setting out. An attempt is generally made to evade the difficulty by supposing that another river, called the "Tigris" by virtue of a loose usage, is intended. Reference to the accompanying map will show, however, that this detail also agrees perfectly with the supposition that Seleucia was the starting point. We are fortunate in having an amount of exact information from Isidore of Charax (of the time of the Emperor Augustus) in regard to the stations and distances along this great highway. I have made use of the edition and discussion of his "Parthian Stations" by Mr. Wilfred H. Schoff, published in 1914 by the Commercial Museum of Philadelphia.

It is evident that Tobias intends to make his journey by the usual trade-route. He hires Azariah (Raphael) as one who from experience is familiar with the way, and they travel in a caravan which includes a number of camels (9 2). The great trade-route described by Isidore of Charax was essentially the same at the time when the Book of Tobit was written, and long before, for its location was determined by the topographical features of the country. The traveller from Mesopotamia to Ecbatana and Rages by the natural road must go through the Zagros mountains by the pass of that name, and then proceed through a second gateway at Bagistana (Behistun). In order to reach the Zagros pass, his route must enter the valley of the Silla river (the

[8] Evidently from (εἰς) Ακερες, a corruption of (εἰς) Κασερεων.

modern Diala), which empties into the Tigris just above Ctesiphon. The usual route, as almost any map of ancient or modern roads will show, crosses the Silla near its mouth, then proceeds in a northerly direction to about the point where the Tigris and the Silla are only a short distance apart, and then branches; the traveller up the Tigris taking the western fork, while the one journeying eastward turns a little to the right and soon reaches the Silla at about the site of the city Artemita, mentioned by Isidore. *It was at or near the point where the road branches, close to the Tigris, that Tobit and Raphael passed their first night.* Isidore gives the distance from Seleucia to Artemita as fifteen schoeni, or caravan-hours. Our travellers would have covered something more than half of this distance in their first day, which is about what might have been expected of them. This feature also of the narrative, then, perfectly fits the hypothesis that the home of Tobit was Seleucia.

There is good evidence that for a considerable time the true site of Nineveh was not generally known. The words put by Lucian (of Samosata, on the Euphrates) in the mouth of Hermes, in his dialogue with Charon, should perhaps not be stressed, since they are uttered in a vein of exaggeration, but they are nevertheless significant. Hermes replies to Charon (§ 522): "As for Nineveh, my good ferryman, it perished long ago, and not even a trace of it is left; no one could say where it formerly stood". Historians and geographers have remarked with surprise that Xenophon, when he led his army northward along the Tigris, passed close to the site of the ancient capital without having any idea that he was doing so. It need not surprise us, however, that in the last centuries B. C. there should have been various conjectures, and no accepted tradition, as to the location.

As for the Jews, they of course had no special source of information, and were free to make their own conjectures. The theory that Seleucia was built on the site of the ancient capital was most natural. The Talmudic literature has preserved some interesting indications that this was the popular belief. In *Yoma* 10 a, a passage in which the geographical data are indeed somewhat obscure, there are certain express identifications which seem to give us what we are looking for. The Biblical passage

Gen. 10 10 ff. is being interpreted, the account of the first Babylonian cities, and of the founding thence of the primitive Assyrian settlements. The names of the latter are Asshur, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. For the site of the first of these, Rab Joseph is quoted: אשור זה סליק, *Asshur is Seleucia.* The next three seem to be located in the immediate neighborhood; whether Nineveh is thought of as a part of Seleucia or as immediately adjoining it, can only be inferred from the treatment of the two following names: Rehoboth-Ir is interpreted as פרת דמישן, and Calah as פרת דבורסיף, places on the Euphrates very near to Seleucia, as the name Borsippa shows. Resen is then identified with Ctesiphon, in spite of the contradictory statement that it lay "between Nineveh and Calah".[9] In *Kethuboth* 10b, where the passage Gen. 2 14 is under discussion, is quoted the same statement of Rab Joseph: אשור זו סליקיא, "Asshur is Seleucia".

It may seem fruitless to attempt to gain additional support for the theory from a conjecture as to where the author of the Book of Tobit lived and wrote. Geographical information was easily obtained, in those days of much travel, and the Jewish narrators had plenty of imagination. The characters, scenes, incidents, and religious and literary properties of the book are only such as might have been in the possession of a resident of any part of the then known world. It is noticeable, however, that a number of slight indications—no one of them significant when considered alone—point in the same direction. Students of the book have remarked upon the strikingly consistent way in which the writer places himself in the Diaspora (a vivid imagination could easily accomplish this, to be sure); the typical prayers uttered with the face turned toward Jerusalem; evidence of Magian influence, especially in the part played by the demon Asmodaeus, certainly a more familiar figure in Babylonia or Persia than in Palestine[10] or Egypt; the casual way in which the

[9] It is hardly likely that the *other* Calah (Chala), east of the Tigris, on the trade-route here described, was thought of in this case.

[10] It is worthy of remark that Asmodaeus and his kind do not appear at all in the Jerusalem Talmud. They are introduced in the Babylonian Talmud by the famous Babylonian authorities Rab of Sura and his contemporary Samuel of Nahardea, in the first half of the third century.

story of Achikar is introduced from time to time—certainly more familiar as a household tale in the East than in the West; the interference with the Jewish burial rites; the episode of the dog, not quite so likely in a Palestinian story as in one composed in an eastern land. To this is now added the evidence of familiarity with the trade-route from Babylonia eastward, and especially, of exact knowledge of the immediate neighborhood of Seleucia.

There is one incidental touch in the narrative which speaks strongly against the hypothesis, occasionally defended, that Egypt was the home of its author. In 8 3, when the demon is expelled, he flees "to the uttermost parts *of Egypt*". The natural supposition is that this destination signified to the writer the typical abode of demons and goblins, in a remote and unknown quarter of the earth. Egypt has traditionally been such a land in the folk-lore of Europe and Western Asia, but not, of course, in that of the land itself; and it is obviously as a mere bit of folk-lore that the words are casually thrown in. From a writer's indication of what is to him a far-distant region we can infer something, even if the inference is only negative, as to the region where he wrote. Thus, in the Arabic story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, published by Macdonald in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1910, when the narrator (p. 337, line 10 f.) contrasts the districts of Syria with "the uttermost parts of North Africa", Nöldeke very justly draws the inference (*Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 28, 251), supported by other evidence, that he is contrasting his own home with what he had been wont to regard as one of the ends of the earth.

The evidence before us certainly seems sufficient to show that the "Nineveh" of the Book of Tobit was Seleucia; and it may perhaps be added as a probable corollary, that the tale was written by one of the Jews of Babylonia. The citations from the Babylonian Talmud, above, show the great historical importance attached to Seleucia and Ctesiphon by the Jews of that region.