

Jonah 3:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Analysis

For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. The king's response exemplifies leadership in repentance. The Hebrew vayyigga hadavar el-meleh Nineveh vayyaqom mikkis'o vayya'aver addarto me'alav vayekhas saq vayyeshev al-ha'ephēr (בְּעֵת הַזֶּה אֶל-מֶלֶךְ נְינֵה קָם מִקְסָאוֹ וַיַּעֲבֹר) describes deliberate self-humbling.

"He arose from his throne" (vayyaqom mikkis'o) indicates abandoning royal authority and privilege. "Laid his robe from him" (vayya'aver addarto me'alav) means removing royal garments symbolizing power and status. The word addereth (אֲדֹרֶת) means a splendid or majestic robe—clothing identifying him as sovereign. Removing it acknowledges that before God, earthly authority means nothing.

"Covered him with sackcloth" (vayekhas saq)—the king adopts the same penitential garment as the lowliest citizen. "Sat in ashes" (vayyeshev al-ha'ephēr) intensifies the image. Ashes symbolized mortality, grief, and humiliation (Job 42:6, Esther 4:1, Lamentations 3:16). Sitting in ashes was extreme mourning—the king publicly identifies with the condemned city's guilt and impending destruction.

This royal humility contrasts sharply with Assyrian kings' typical self-presentation. Assyrian inscriptions boast of conquests, divine favor, and absolute power. Reliefs depict kings as larger-than-life warrior-gods. Yet here, Nineveh's king strips away

all pretense, acknowledging ultimate accountability before the Hebrew God. His example anticipates Jesus's teaching: "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister" (Matthew 20:26).

Historical Context

Assyrian kingship was considered semi-divine, with kings claiming to rule by mandate from Ashur and other gods. Royal ideology emphasized absolute authority, military prowess, and divine endorsement. For such a king to publicly humble himself before a foreign deity was unprecedented. While Assyrian historical records don't specifically mention this repentance (which isn't surprising — empires rarely document humiliations), the biblical account rings true to what we know of ancient royal protocol. Kings would lead religious responses during national crises, consulting omens and performing rituals to appease angry gods. The difference here is genuine repentance, not merely ritualistic appeasement.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the king's self-humbling model leadership in repentance rather than expecting others to bear responsibility?
2. What does removing royal garments and sitting in ashes teach about human status before God?
3. How should Christian leaders today embody this same humble accountability before God and others?

Interlinear Text

מִכְסָא	וְ	יְמִינָה	נִבְנָה	לְרֹא	אֶל	בְּדָבָר	וְעַ
came	For word	H413	unto the king	of Nineveh	and he arose	from his throne	
H5060	H1697		H4428	H5210	H6965		H3678
and he laid	his robe	H5921	from him and covered	him with sackcloth	and sat		
H5674	H155		H3680	H8242			H3427
עַל	בָּאָפָר:						
H5921	in ashes	H665					

Additional Cross-References

Job 2:8 (Parallel theme): And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes.

Daniel 9:3 (Parallel theme): And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:

Jeremiah 6:26 (Parallel theme): O daughter of my people, gird thee with sackcloth, and wallow thyself in ashes: make thee mourning, as for an only son, most bitter lamentation: for the spoiler shall suddenly come upon us.

Matthew 11:21 (Parallel theme): Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

Luke 10:13 (Parallel theme): Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.