

11-2011

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Recommended Citation

Gane, Constance E., "Alkosh" (2011). *Lake Union Herald*. 368.
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Alkosh

BY CONSTANCE CLARK GANE

Heading northeast from the ancient city of Nineveh, the warm spring sun beat down on our faces as we headed up into the Alkosh or Baathera Mountains, hilly flanks of the Zagros mountains.¹ The words of the prophet rang in our ears: “Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, Who announces peace!” (Nahum 1:15 NASB)

To the west is the Kaly Behendoaya Valley through which a sparkling stream runs. In this dramatic place, were these the mountains where the feet of the prophet, Nahum, walked in the mid-600s B.C.? Was this where he stood and encouraged his people saying, “The LORD is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble, And He knows those who take refuge in Him”? (Nahum 1:7 NASB)

Nahum, whose Hebrew name means “comforts,” is only mentioned once in the entire Bible, in Nahum 1:1. His entire book prophesies divine judgment on Nineveh, the capital city of the cruel and oppressive Assyrian Empire. We do not really know where Nahum lived and died. No definitive identification of the locality denoted by the designation “Elkoshite” can be made. Several different traditions claim a connection to the prophet, and place the prophet’s burial site in Iraq or Israel.² A group of Jews in Iraq believed his tomb was there at the village of Alkosh.

Far from our own home and lonely for our family of believers, we approached the village of Alkosh³ with a sense of intense emotion. At the time I was a U.C. Berkeley graduate student specializing in Mesopotamian archaeology and was in Iraq for four months with the Berkeley team excavating at the ancient site of Nineveh. My husband, Roy, came with me to protect my person and enjoyed an induction into the rigors of archaeology. The two of us were the only Christians, not to mention Seventh-day Adventists, on the team of eleven. Living in close quarters, working to exhaustion in the burning heat, and from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday keeping the Sabbath hours sacred while the rest of the team excavated, resulted in painful tensions that do not need enumeration. We were different and we were isolated. For this reason we felt a deep kinship with the lonely prophet, Nahum, who was far from his home, far from his people, far from his beloved temple.

We entered the mountain village where stone buildings were clustered against the sides of the hills. As we came closer, we were shocked to see the rubble, the destruction, the chaos of a broken village. It was immediately evident that this small village had been caught in the middle of a long struggle. Homes were blown apart—some were still partially inhabitable, others

completely destroyed. Seeking an explanation, we turned to our Adventist friends who brought us to this place.

We moved on, entering the narrow streets, weaving our way around the debris. Children played in the streets, looking up in shocked surprise as we passed by. Dogs barked, donkeys brayed and people moved about in a comfortable way of life as usual. Courtyards with lush, green grapevine-covered arbors stood amidst the broken homes creating a peaceful shade. Pomegranate trees were in bloom, their brilliant reddish-orange blossoms in stark contrast to the limestone buildings and azure blue sky.

Our friends led us to the center of town. I cannot express the emotions that swept over all of us as we stood there and looked at the synagogue. It, too, had not escaped the mortar shells. Here, in this place, on this mountainside—in the Zagros mountains overlooking the plains of Assyria where the impregnable capital cities of Ashur, Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh had once stood, proud and magnificent in their glory, wonder and splendor—a prophet was believed to have lived and preached, comforted his people and died.

Inside, we silently waited while our sunburnt eyes grew accustomed to the dark shadows of the synagogue. Gradually, the brilliantly cloth-covered tomb of Nahum, which stood out in the middle of the large room, came in focus. The crimson red and green of the covering belied neglect. Someone had lovingly sewn the cloth and placed it here. But who? There were no Jews still living here. To preserve its sanctity, the tomb was surrounded by an iron fence. The area had been swept as clean as possible under the circumstances. As we stood before the tomb, a jolly Chaldean woman entered through the broken door. She swept her hand across the room and then brought it to her ample bosom to indicate she was caring for the place. Her eyes danced as she explained this in Aramaic. Roy strained to understand the Aramaic. Yes, he could, bits and pieces here and there. Of course, she couldn’t understand his classical Aramaic, but we all understood the sanctity of this place and the love with which this woman and her husband still cared for this broken house of worship.

She was a Chaldean, a Christian, as are all Chaldeans. Alkosh

is one of many Chaldean villages in this part of Iraq. These Christians trace their heritage back to the descendants of the ancient Babylonians.⁴ In the biblical text the Chaldeans are referred to in Hebrew as *Kásdim* כַּשְׁדִּים, with the most famous Chaldean in the biblical text being Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 B.C.), king of Babylon (see Jeremiah 32:38). While Nebuchadnezzar’s own language would have been Babylonian, the language which was used in court and was the *lingua franca*⁵ of the ancient Near East from the eighth century B.C. into the Roman period was Aramaic. Several portions of the Bible are written in Aramaic.⁶ It is the modern version of this ancient language that is still spoken by the Chaldean Christians today.

Inside the synagogue, the broken rays of sunlight streaming through gaps in the fallen roof fell across the arched chambers and onto the rubble and swept floor. To our amazement, Hebrew texts of scripture carved in square blocks of stone set into the plastered walls were still intact. Instinctively, Roy and I hid our excitement and the fact that we could read the Hebrew texts. One slip and the results could have been disastrous under the prevailing regime. The *paroket*⁷ still hung, limply and somewhat torn, across the ark⁸ where the Torah would have been kept. In my mind, I could see the rabbi gently removing the Torah from its place and opening its sacred pages to the Sabbath scripture. I could hear the chanting of the text and the hearty response of the congregation. A brass lamp still hanging from the ceiling would have flickered its warm glow across the shadows of the service. An offering box was in place for collecting the gifts of the worshippers.

Tiny rooms and others not so small were built into the stone walls surrounding the large courtyard connected to the synagogue. Some still had their doors hanging on rusty hinges, others no longer had any door at all. Did people once live here? Were these workrooms or classrooms? Ancient knarled trees bent over the grounds and the stone wall. These must have once sheltered children as they played in the sunshine during social gatherings or while the adults prayed. As we stood there a bleating flock of sheep moved across the courtyard searching for stray wisps of grass. We were told that the small, free-standing building set off to the side in the courtyard was the tomb of Sarah, the sister of the prophet, Nahum.

Who were the Jews who had lived here and worshiped here? When did they come and why did they leave? Were they descendants of the Jews brought here by the great Assyrian kings, Tiglath-Pileser III or Sargon II, who took Samaria in the 700s B.C.? Were they Jews who had traveled by foot over the Fertile Crescent with Daniel and his friends when the mighty Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, took them from Jerusalem in 604 B.C.? Tradition has it that the first Jews were brought by

the Assyrians and resettled in this region during the era of mass-deportations.

From both the Sacred Scriptures and from non-biblical sources, we know that for centuries the Jews in Mesopotamia lived among the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Continuing on into the Common Era, Arab Muslims, Chaldean Christians, Assyrian Christians, Jews, Kurds and the Yazidi, as well as other ethnic and religious groups, have lived together in Iraq. However, between the years 1950 and 1952 some 120,000 to 130,000 Iraqi Jews made *Aliya*⁹ to Israel. By the late 1990s, only about 60 Jews remained in Baghdad. So, when did the Jews of Alkosh leave? I do not know; but if we understood the villagers correctly, they said the Jews left sometime between the late 1940s and the early 1950s. When they did, they left behind a community of Chaldean Christians who still respect their synagogue and the tomb of the great prophet, Nahum.

As it came time to leave, we lingered—not wanting this experience to end. So much history took place in this small mountain village, sacred history and secular history. “The LORD is slow in anger, and great in power” had been preached in this place (Nahum 1:3 NASB). For millennia, there had been those who listened and carried on the tradition of an ancient people far from their homeland.

Personally, I will never again read the book of Nahum without a certain tightening of the chest as I think of Nahum, the lonely Alkoshite, preaching from that mountainous village of Alkosh. The details of biblical narratives have always fascinated me, but there was much I did not fully appreciate until I spent time where events actually took place. When you pick up a piece of pottery at a biblical site that dates to the time of a prophet, or a bead or two once worn around a young girl’s neck, or stumble over a stone inscribed with “Sennacherib, king of Assyria, I rebuilt the walls of Nineveh,” something happens to your ability to conceptualize the events of the Bible.

One does not need to travel to the biblical lands in order to know God, yet in many ways the narratives in the sacred text become three-dimensional when you get your hands in the dirt of an excavation and uncover portions of history directly related to a specific account. The Institute of Archaeology at Andrews University directs excavations on a regular basis in the country of Jordan. These scientific research projects have made a significant impact not only on biblical scholarship, but also on the personal level of spirituality for many students and volunteers.

However, not everyone can travel. What a privilege that we have the Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum on our campus at Andrews University. It houses one of the largest cuneiform tablet collections in the U.S., as well as numerous artifacts directly related to the Bible. Beautiful exhibits created by

faculty and students provide a visual context for biblical finds. It makes a difference when a child can see a brick stamped with the name of Nebuchadnezzar, peer at a female goddess like the one Rachel stole from her father, Laban, or feel the rough fabric of a goat-hair tent—the type in which Abraham would have lived. And not surprisingly, it makes a difference for adults as well. The Horn Lectureship Series is another opportunity to ride on the shirttails of those conducting research in the Middle East. A number of lectures are given each year on our campus. Archaeology and the results of the painstaking efforts of countless individuals have provided you, the reader, with an explosion of detail, historical background and in-depth information that most take for granted.

I consider it a sacred privilege to work in the dust of antiquity. Far from being irrelevant, it brings flesh and blood and personality to the historical events of the Bible. That moment in 1989, on the mountainside of Nahum's Alkosh, the prophet's oracle against the ancient city of Nineveh burned into my consciousness as I realized that back at Nineveh, under my trowel, I was uncovering the very historical event prophesied by Nahum. For, you see, we were excavating the battle scene of Nineveh's final destruction of 612 B.C. The prophet saw that historical moment and exclaimed: "All who hear about you [Nineveh] Will clap their hands over you, For on whom has not your evil passed continually?" (Nahum 3:19 NASB)

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1. The following experience took place in the spring of 1989.
2. Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 428–431 A.D., associated a "tomb of Nahum" with Alkosh in Iraq. However, in his prologue to his commentary on Nahum, Jerome (340–420 A.D.) mentions that Nahum was from the village of Elcesi (identified as el-Qauze, west of Tibnin) in Galilee. Another suggested location is Capernaum (*Kaper Nahum*, "Village of Nahum") supported by A.W. Knobel and F. Hitzig. Finally, a Judean Elkesi ("yonder"), located south of Eleutheropolis or Bet Guvrin, is a tradition recorded by Pseudo-Epiphanius (*De Vitis Prophetarum*). *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 12 MIN-O, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, p. 793–795.
3. Variants of the name Alkosh are Al-kosh, Elkosh, Elqosh, El-Qosh and El-Qush.
4. There are more than a million Chaldean Christians in the world. Most of them still live in Iraq.
5. The official international language of the empire.
6. Genesis 31:17 (2 words); Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4b–7:28; and Jeremiah 10:11.
7. The Hebrew word, *paroket*, refers to the veil behind which stands the Ark of the Covenant in the Sanctuary. In the modern era it refers to the veil that shields the Torah Scroll from public view in the Synagogue.
8. The small cupboard in the wall of a synagogue that houses the sacred writings is called an "ark."
9. *Aliya* (Hebrew) means "to ascend" or "go up" and is the term used to describe the transition of a Jew moving from outside of Israel to the land of Israel. One always "goes up" to Jerusalem or Israel.

All photos by Constance Clark Gane. Photo descriptions (page 16, clockwise from left): 1. Brass hanging lamp; 2. Offering box; 3. Cupboard with Hebrew inscription above



The Institute of Archaeology

SIEGFRIED H. HORN
MUSEUM

LOCATION

The Institute of Archaeology and Siegfried H. Horn Museum are located at 9047 U.S. 31 in Berrien Springs, Michigan, just south of the Andrews University campus. The museum



houses more than 8,500 ancient Near-Eastern artifacts, including coins, pottery, sculptures, tools, weapons, figurines, jewelry, seals and glass vessels. Housed also are more than 3,000 ancient cuneiform tablets from Sumerian through Neo-Babylonian times.

The Siegfried H. Horn Museum is open to public exhibit only on Saturday from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. when the University is in session and by appointment during the week (closed for most University holidays). For information and appointments, please call 269-471-6180 or email horncurator@andrews.edu.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

For information on upcoming excavations and the possibility of joining the team for a season, please call 269-471-3273 or email hornmuseum@andrews.edu.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL LECTURES

Archaeological lectures are announced in the *Andrews Agenda* (www.andrews.edu/agenda), local papers and on radio stations as well as posted on Siegfried H. Horn Museum websites: <http://hamlectureseries.wordpress.com> and <http://siegfriedhornmuseum.wordpress.com>.