

The prophet Jonah clearly knew the character of God. He knew that God was so merciful and so forgiving that He would save even an Assyrian who repented. Why then would Jonah go to such extremes to avoid bringing the message of the gospel to the Assyrians (Ninevah was the capital of Assyria)? Perhaps some visual illustrations will give some insight into Jonah's hatred of the Assyrian people. I took these pictures when I visited the British Museum last year (2004). The photo of the painting below shows an artist's rendering of the siege of Lachish by the Assyrians prior to their siege of Jerusalem described in Isaiah. Lachish was completely destroyed and its survivors taken captive to Ninevah. The photo of a mural recovered from ancient Ninevah gives further insight into the character of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a cruel people. Their national "sport" was skinning people alive. The mural captures this Assyrian game. Captives would be staked to the ground with a single "starter" slit in the skin around one of their wrists. Soldiers would then compete to skin their captive alive. The first soldier with a skinned captive was the winner. If the victim died during the ordeal the skinner was disqualified.

I hope this gives historical insight into the Assyrians and into why Jonah hated them so much that he would defy the Living God. The good news to this story is that if God can forgive the Assyrians when they repented then he will surely forgive us as well. I believe this provides greater richness to what the Lord was referring to in Luke 11:29-32 (and Matt 12:39-42). "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the son of Man be to this generation."

Your brother in the Lord,

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