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REḤŌVŌT 'îR

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Source: *Revue Biblique* (1946-), Vol. 90, No. 1 (JANVIER 1983), pp. 94-96

Published by: Peeters Publishers

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44088629>

Accessed: 29-03-2019 03:20 UTC

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## REḤŌVŌT 'ĪR

“Reḥōvōt 'īr” is listed among the city founded by Asshur, a descendant of Nimrod (*Gen.* 10:11-12): *min-hā'āreṣ hāhw' [hahī'] yāṣā' 'aššūr wayyiven 'et-nīnewēh we'et-reḥōvōt 'īr we'et-kālah we'et-resen bēyn nīnewēh ūbēyn kālah hw' [hī'] hā'īr haggēdōlāh.*

Discussions regarding details in these verses are readily obtainable by consulting the commentaries and dictionaries.<sup>1</sup> Here I wish to offer a suggestion regarding the mention of *reḥōvōt 'īr*. A clue for proceeding is afforded by the mention of *hw' [hī'] hā'īr haggēdōlāh* in v. 12. As punctuated, the expression is set apart from previous vocabulary in that it follows a word with an *'atnāh*. A disjunctive accent under *hw'* separates the pronoun from *'īr haggēdōlāh*. *Hw'* functions here in its capacity as a demonstrative referring to an item just mentioned.<sup>2</sup> It, therefore, refers not to *resen* but, as has been sometimes noted, to *kālah*. That the writer chose to localize *resen*, a town which has, so far, eluded all attempts at convincing identification—it may have been the product of imagination—between Nineveh and Calah, not only underscores his readiness to pinpoint what may not have been a readily known geographical entity but highlights the importance he assigned to Nineveh and Calah.<sup>3</sup>

This fits well with our present knowledge regarding Assyria. During the period equivalent to the Hebrew monarchies, four strongholds were prominent: Asshur, Nineveh, Kalḥa [Nimrud], and, briefly, Dūr-Šarrukin.<sup>4</sup> Three of these are mentioned in our

<sup>1</sup> Bibliography & discussion, most recently by E. LIPÍŃSKI, *Nimrod et Assur*, *RB*, 73 (1966), pp. 77-93.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, edited and enlarged by E. KAUTZCH; 2<sup>d</sup> edition by A. E. COWLEY (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 442 (§ 136a).

<sup>3</sup> I do not find it plausible that the Hebrew writer was referring to an item from Assyrian irrigation technology. See Lipiński for details, pp. 85-86 (*Akkadian risnu*), who, inadvertently, finds excellent reasons for rejecting the postulate.

<sup>4</sup> Consult the dictionaries, s.v. for details.

passage, but no amount of philological presdigitation would permit equating Dūr-Šarrukin with *reḥōbōt 'ir*.<sup>5</sup> Now if at its *second* mention, *kālah* is provided with the attribute, the “great city”—an attribute which in Jonah and Judith is assigned to Nineveh, it may be worth the effort to see whether a similar attribute—, is allocated to the *first* mention of Nineveh.

The root *rḥb* permits the construction of the adjective *rāḥāv*, ‘wide, broad’ as well as the noun *reḥōv*, “broad, open space, plaza.”<sup>6</sup> The last is well attested in the O.T. *Reḥōvōt (hā)'ir/qiryāh* as well as *reḥōv(ōt)*+geographical name are well known; indeed, the substantive occurs also as place names. A well dug by Isaac (*Gen. 26:22*) even provides us with an etymology *as understood by the Hebrew*. When Isaac labels this well *reḥōvōt* he states: ‘*ki 'attāh hirḥīv YHWH lānū ūfārīnā vā'āreš*’ “This last time, God has allowed us larger space in which to increase in the land.” *Reḥōvōt*, therefore, is regarded as place which features ample space<sup>7</sup>.

The most widely espoused contemporary explanation regarding *reḥōvōt 'ir* of *Gen. 10:11* is that it ought to refer not to a specific city in Assyria, but to an expression equivalent to cuneiform *rebētu*, with a meaning similar to *reḥōv*

Since *reḥōbhōth* means “open space” and ‘*ir* means “city,” the term has been compared with the cognate Assyrian *rēbīt ali*, “open spaces in a city, square, “unbuilt area”; and specifically with *rēbīt Ninua*, by which the Assyrians designated unbuilt areas on the periphery of Nineveh. It is conceivable that instead of Rehoboth-Ir, “the city ‘Open Spaces,’” the text of *Gen. 10:11* originally read “the open spaces of the city” and referred to peripheral sections of the city of Nineveh, which is mentioned immediately before<sup>8</sup>.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Speiser and Lipiński with the former regarding *we'el* as a “serial accusative,” while the latter thinks it to bear the nuance “(together) with.”<sup>9</sup> But two difficulties arise. 1. It is not clear exactly what would Asshur’s accomplishment be if, in addition to building Nineveh and Calah, he is said to build “open spaces.” Surely these open spaces are the result of *leaving*

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, cf. Dossin’s cryptonymic analyses for *reḥōvōt 'ir* and *resen* have not faced well in scholarly circles, *Le site de Rehobot-'Ir et de Resen, Le Muséon*, 47 (1934), pp. 107, 121.

<sup>6</sup> *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by F. BROWN, S. R. DRIVER, and C. A. BRIGGS. 2<sup>d</sup> Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 932.

<sup>7</sup> *Reḥōvōt hannāhār*, birthplace of Sha’ul the Edomite (*Gen. 36:37*), can be understood as “Wide Spaces at the River.”

<sup>8</sup> Thorkild JACOBSEN in *IDB*, IV, 31.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. SPEISER, *Genesis* (AB, 1), p. 68; LIPIŃSKI, *op. cit.*

*areas unbuilt*. 2. Perhaps responding to such difficulties in interpreting the Assyrian evidence, the *CAD*, as well as some Assyriologists, have preferred to read *talbit Ninuah* for such passages as *rēbit Ninua*—i.e. to read the cuneiform sign *ri/re* (in *ri-bit*), in another of its values, *tal*, deriving the term which obtain, *talbitum*, from a verb *lawû/labû/lamû*, “to encircle, surround,” and thus establishing that the Assyrian kings were proud of constructing not “open spaces” but “outskirts, districts, surroundings.”<sup>10</sup>

Because of such difficulties, philological and interpretational, I propose that *reḥōvōt 'ir* of *Gen. 10:11* be analysed as a superlative in which (a noun functioning as) an adjective in the plural construct is bound to a noun in the (collective) singular<sup>11</sup>. The meaning literally, “broadest among individual cities”, would then be “broadest city” which as *Jonah (3:3, 4:11)* implies, was one of the Hebrew’s characterization of Nineveh. As such, the expression would balance the characterization applied to Calah and would, additionally, offer a nice inclusion for the 2 verses. The addition of *we'et*, which may not be as easily dismissed as had Speiser and Lipiński, is a problem; it may be attributable to an editor eager to follow the pattern of the previous verse wherein three geographical names are followed by a fourth placed in a specific context<sup>12</sup>.

I could, therefore, translate *Gen. 10:11-12*:

From that land [i.e. Shinar] Asshur went forth and built Nineveh, the broadest city, Calah and Resen (between Nineveh and Calah; the last being the great city).

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<sup>10</sup> See *CAD L*, p. 69; *D*, p. 144b; *A/1*, 381b; J. N. POSTGATE, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees*, [St. Pohl, Series Maior, 1], 1969, p. 65. I owe this reference to Avigdor Hurowitz.

<sup>11</sup> *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, p. 428 (§ 132c. 2). Especially instructive is the example in *Is. 29:19* where *'evyōnēy 'ādām* parallels *'anāwtm*.

<sup>12</sup> Note the chapter devoted to “Lists”, in Yair ZAKOVITCH’s *For Three and for Four: The Pattern of the Numerical Sequence Three-Four in the Bible*, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 467-495.