

Notes on Jonah

2023 Edition
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Introduction

BACKGROUND

Jonah is the fifth of the Minor Prophets in our English Bibles. The Minor Prophets are called "The Book of the Twelve" in the Hebrew Bible. Jonah is unique among the Latter Prophets (in Hebrew: Isaiah through Malachi) in that it is almost completely narrative, similar to the histories of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17—19; 2 Kings 2:1—13:21). The exceptional section of this book, of course, is Jonah's psalm in 2:2-9 (cf. Hab. 3).

"... the peculiarity of the Book of Jonah is not the presence of narrative, but the apparent absence of all prophetic discourse."¹

As with his two predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, Jonah also ministered in and to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as in Phoenicia and Aram. Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet on record whom God sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance.² Nahum's later ministry to Nineveh consisted of announcing certain overthrow, although, had the Ninevites repented again, God might have relented again.

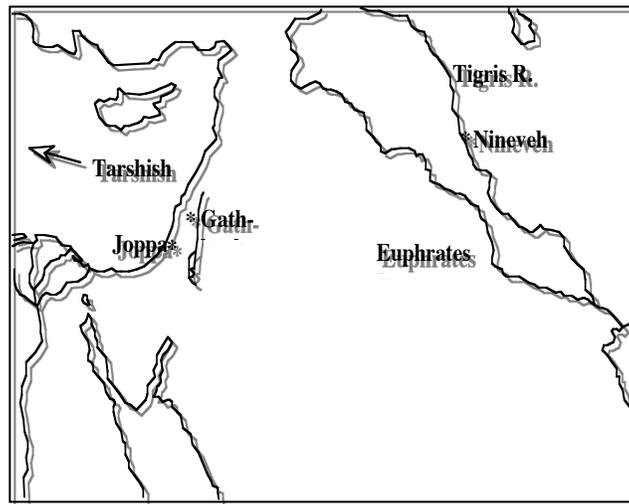
Jonah was Israel's "foreign missionary," in that he went with a message from God to a foreign people, whereas Jonah's fellow Israelite prophet, Hosea, was Israel's "home missionary." However, Jonah did not have a missionary's proper attitude, a missionary's message of hope, or a missionary's objective of bringing his audience into a personal relationship

¹George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets Commonly Called the Minor*, 2:493.

²For comparison with Jeremiah, who also preached repentance, see Gary Yates, "The 'Weeping Prophet' and 'Pouting Prophet' in Dialogue: Intertextual Connections between Jeremiah and Jonah," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:2 (2016):223-39.

with Yahweh.¹ The books of Jonah and Hosea reveal important characteristics about God: Hosea, God's loyal love to Israel, and Jonah, His compassion for all people, specifically Gentiles.

Jonah's hometown was Gath-hepher in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25; cf. Josh. 19:13). It stood north of Nazareth in the tribal territory of Zebulun. Jonah prophesied in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Israel's King Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.; 2 Kings 14:23-25). Second Kings 14:25 records that Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam II would restore Israel to her former boundaries, which that king did.



It is very probable that God sent Jonah to Nineveh, which was at this time a very significant city of the great Assyrian Empire, during the years when that nation was relatively weak. Nineveh was not yet the capital of Assyria, nor was Assyria yet a world power that threatened Israel. Following the death of King Adad-nirari III in 783 B.C., Assyria was not strong again until Tiglath-pileser III seized the throne in 745 B.C. During this 37-year period, Assyria had difficulty resisting its neighbors to the north, the Urartu mountain tribes, who allied with their neighbors, the people of Mannai and Madai. These invaders pushed the northern border of Assyria south, to within 100 miles of Nineveh. This vulnerable condition evidently made the king and residents of Nineveh receptive to Jonah's prophetic message of imminent doom.

¹John H. Walton, "Jonah," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, revised ed., p. 458.

Donald Wiseman argued for a more specific time within this period for Jonah's visit to Nineveh, namely, during the reign of Assur-dan III (772-755 B.C.).¹

Nineveh became one of the capitals of Assyria during the reign of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), and it became Assyria's sole capital during the reign of his son, Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.).² This city stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. It had walls 100 feet high and 50 feet thick, and the main one, punctuated by 15 gates, was over seven and one-half miles long.³ The total population was probably about 600,000, including the people who lived in the suburbs outside the city walls (cf. 4:11). The residents were idolaters and worshipped Asur and Ishtar, the chief male and female deities, as did almost all the Assyrians.

Assyria was a threat to Israel's security (cf. Hos. 11:5; Amos 5:27). This is one reason that Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. He feared the people might repent and that God would refrain from punishing Israel's enemy (4:2).

DATE AND WRITER

Many critical scholars date this prophecy in the postexilic period of Israel's history, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, or later.⁴ They base their opinion on linguistic features of the book and legendary descriptions, specifically: the size, population, importance, and king of Nineveh, plus late customs and audience.⁵ Critics also point to the differences in style between Jonah and Hosea, another northern prophet. Many conservative scholars believe that these arguments do not outweigh the evidence for a pre-exilic date that many features of the book and the traditional Jewish commentaries present.

¹Donald J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979):29-51.

²Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 772.

³See *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, s.v. "Nineveh," by T. G. Pinches, 4:2147-51; *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Nineveh," by Elmer B. Smick, 2:1208-10; and *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Nineveh," by D. J. Wiseman, pp. 888-90.

⁴E.g., Smith, 2:496-98.

⁵For refutation of these objections, see T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah," in *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, pp. 52-63.

If the book records events that really happened, the record of them must have come from Jonah himself. However, the book nowhere claims that Jonah was its writer. It seems to argue against this possibility by relating the story in the third person rather than in the first. Therefore, some unidentified writer appears to have put the book in its final form. However, Jonah could have been describing himself in the third person. Daniel did this in the Book of Daniel, which most conservatives believe Daniel wrote. The compilers of the Old Testament canon probably placed this book in the Book of the Twelve (our Minor Prophets) because they believed that Jonah wrote it.¹ The title, however, honors the chief character in the narrative as much as its traditional writer.

One conservative scholar suggested that what we have is a version of the story that someone wrote for the nation of Judah. The writer supposedly did this to teach Judah's people the lessons that God earlier taught His prophet, the Ninevites, and the residents of Israel.² Such a message would have been appropriate when the weakened Southern Kingdom faced a threat from another formidable power to its north, namely, Babylonia. However, the arguments for the writer being Jonah are quite convincing.³

Douglas Stuart argued that the writer was not Jonah, because the story is so consistently critical of Jonah, at least more so than any other Bible book is critical of its writer.⁴ This argument seems weak to me. Inspired writers of Scripture were frankly self-critical (e.g., Moses, Samuel, David, et al.), compared to their contemporaries, who omitted their flaws and tried to make themselves look as good as possible.

The events recorded in the book probably covered only a few months, or years, at the most. Jonah lived during Jeroboam II's reign over the Northern Kingdom of Israel (793-753 B.C.; cf. 2 Kings 14:25). Probably a date of composition somewhere in the neighborhood of 780 B.C. would not be far from the exact date of writing.

¹See C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:380.

²H. L. Ellison, "Jonah," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 362.

³See especially Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 308-9.

⁴Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 432.

"From the death of Elisha to the prophesying of Amos nearly forty years must have elapsed, during which the only recorded prophetic voice is Jonah's."¹

HISTORICITY

Since the rise of critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, many writers and teachers now believe that the events recorded in this book were not historical.² They interpret this book as an allegory or as a parable.³

The allegorical interpretation views the book as "a complete allegory in which each feature represents an element in the historical and religious experience of the Israelites."⁴ This interpretation may have arisen because the name Jonah means "dove," and the Jews had long regarded the dove as a symbol of their nation (cf. Ps. 74:19; Hos. 11:11). Jonah indisputably brought peace to violent Nineveh, like a dove symbolizes peace. Those who adopt this interpretation see the book as teaching Israel's mission and failure in being God's "missionary" agent to the Gentiles. Jonah's flight to Tarshish represents Israel's failure before the Exile, and the great fish symbolizes Babylon. The disgorging of Jonah stands for Israel's second chance following her restoration to the land.

The parabolic interpretation also regards the book as not historical.⁵ However, its advocates view it as simply a moral story designed to teach a spiritual lesson. Essentially, the lesson is that God's people should not be narrow and introverted, but outreaching and missionary in their love and concern for those outside their number who are facing God's judgment. The difference in these two interpretations is the amount of detail that its advocates press. The parabolic interpretation usually argues for one primary lesson in the story, whereas the allegorical interpretation finds

¹H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 55. Cf. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 805.

²For discussion and refutation see Archer, pp. 309-15; Stuart, pp. 440-42; and Alexander, pp. 69-77.

³See Smith, 2:498-500, 507.

⁴R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 911.

⁵See the discussion in Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 444-45.

meaning in its many details. George Adam Smith, who held the parabolic view, wrote the following:

"The purpose of the parable, and it is patent from first to last, is to illustrate the mission of prophecy to the Gentiles, God's care for them, and their susceptibility to His word. More correctly, it is to enforce all this truth upon a prejudiced and thrice-reluctant mind. Whose was this reluctant mind? In Israel after the Exile [when Smith dated the writing of the book] there were many different feelings with regard to the future and the great obstacle which heathendom interposed between Israel and the future."¹

"According to this theory, then, Jonah's disappearance in the sea and the great fish, and his subsequent ejection upon dry land, symbolize the Exile of Israel and their restoration to Palestine."²

Many commentators who deny the historicity of the book regard its literary tone as parody or satire.³

Jewish and Christian interpreters believed that the Book of Jonah was historical until the rise of critical scholarship.⁴ Jesus Christ referred to Jonah as a historical person and to his experience as real (Matt. 12:38-42; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Jonah is the only Old Testament character with whom Jesus Christ compared Himself directly.⁵ Jesus did refer to other prophets, however, namely, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah—besides quoting and alluding to many others.

"If the three days' confinement of Jonah in the belly of the fish really had the typical significance which Christ attributes to it ... it can neither be a myth or dream, nor a parable, nor merely a visionary occurrence experienced by the prophet; but must

¹Smith, 2:501. Paragraph division omitted.

²Ibid., 2:503.

³See Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, pp. pp. 177-81; Alexander, pp. 69-77; Walton, pp. 458-63, for further discussion.

⁴See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9:10:2.

⁵For several comparisons and contrasts see Frank E. Gaebelein, *Four Minor Prophets: Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai*, pp. 122-24.

have had as much objective reality as the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ."¹

J. Vernon McGee argued that Jonah died and God raised him back to life, on the basis of Jesus' words about him (Matt. 12:39-40).² Most conservative expositors believe that Jesus' prediction does not require that interpretation.

It is unlikely that the writer would have given us the name of Jonah's father if he was not a real person. Furthermore, the narrator presented Jonah as a real person, not a mythical or fictitious figure.³

The main argument against the book being historical is Jonah's surviving three days and nights in the fish's belly (1:17). However, various writers have documented many similar miraculous deliverances.⁴ Since such a survival is physically possible, we should not dismiss the historical view, especially since Jesus endorsed Jonah's "resurrection."⁵

Some interpreters, including myself, who hold to the historicity of the events, also believe that the book contains symbolic and typical teaching.

"Whereas other prophets proclaimed in words the position of the Gentiles with regard to Israel in the nearer and more remote future, and predicted not only the surrender of Israel to the power of the Gentiles, but also the future conversion of the heathen to the living God, and their reception into the kingdom of God, the prophet Jonah was entrusted with the commission to proclaim the position of Israel in relation to the Gentile world in a symbolico-typical manner, and to exhibit both figuratively and typically not only the susceptibility of the heathen for divine grace, but also the conduct of Israel with

¹Keil, 1:388.

²J. Vernon McGee, *Jonah: Dead or Alive?* pp. 21-27; and idem, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:749-53.

³For additional evidence see Frank S. Page, "Jonah," in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, pp. 217-19.

⁴See Harrison, pp. 907-8; A. J. Wilson, "Sign of the Prophet Jonah and Its Modern Confirmations," *Princeton Theological Review* 25 (October 1927):630-42; George F. Howe, "Jonah and the Great Fish," *Biblical Research Monthly*, January 1973, pp. 6-8; McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:751-52; idem, *Jonah: Dead ...*, pp.18-20.

⁵See Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, pp. 120-21, for additional refutation of non-historical views.

regard to the design of God to show favour to the Gentiles, and the consequences of their conduct."¹

"Jonah's character and God's dealing with him foreshadow the subsequent history of the nation of Israel: outside the land, a trouble to the Gentiles, yet witnessing to them; cast out, but miraculously preserved; in future deepest distress calling upon the LORD as Savior, finding deliverance and then becoming missionaries to the Gentiles (Zech. 8:7-23). But chiefly Jonah typifies Christ as the Sent-One, raised from the dead, and carrying salvation to the Gentiles."²

What difference does it make if Jonah was not historical but fictional? The main effect is that, if Jonah was not a real person, then the force of Jesus' appeal to his experience would have been considerably weakened. If Jonah had not spent three days and three nights in a fish's belly, would Jesus' death have had to be literal? Perhaps Jesus was only talking about a spiritual or legendary experience similar to dying. Jesus based His sign of the prophet Jonah on the historicity of Jonah and his experience in the fish, which Jesus' contemporaries took literally.

"... if the book is really a narrative of actual fact it brings to us one of the most striking revelations of God, and one of the most priceless messages of Divine comfort ever given; whereas, if it be merely fictional, it contains no authentic significance at all. Moreover, this question as to whether it is really historical or not involves both the integrity of the Scriptures as a whole, and the word of the Lord Jesus Himself ..."³

¹Keil, 1:384.

²*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 941.

³J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 4:147. See also Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 301-2.

GENRE

The book is probably a sensational didactic prophetic historical narrative in its literary style.¹

PURPOSE

The book is a revelation to God's people of His sovereign power and loving concern for all of His creatures, even cattle (4:11). This revelation came first to Jonah personally, and then through him to the Jews. It was not primarily a revelation to the Ninevites. The Ninevites' responsibility was simply to repent and humble themselves. This revelation should have moved the Israelites to respond like the Assyrians did, namely, with repentance and humility. They faced similar threats: first from the Assyrians, and then from the Babylonians. Jonah's lack of concern for the Ninevites contrasts with God's concern for them that was to be the pattern for His people.

"The main purpose of the book is to teach Israelites that God loves other nations than their own; or, in fact, to teach us that he loves other nations than our own. In service of this purpose, Jonah stands for most Israelites—or most of us—as he represents the typical attitude people tend to have toward nations they have no reason to love themselves."²

"Jonah hopes all along that somehow God won't turn out to be consistent with his own well-known character (4:2). But God is consistent throughout, in contrast to Jonah's hypocritical inconsistency. What happens to Nineveh and to Jonah happens precisely because of what God is like. The audience of the book is thus invited implicitly to revise their understanding of what God is like, if they have indeed shared Jonah's selfish views."³

"... Nineveh's sparing served as the example that even though doom had been pronounced, repentance could bring mercy,

¹Stuart, pp. 435-38; Alexander, pp. 69-77. For further discussion of genre, see Ernst R. Wendland, "Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah (Part 1)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:2 (June 1996):191-206.

²Stuart, p. 479. Cf. Dyer, p. 773.

³Stuart, p. 434.

and judgment could be postponed [for Israel]. Aspects of this message include the concept that small steps in the right direction motivate (though they do not earn) God's compassion. After all, a smaller step than the one taken by the Ninevites could hardly be imagined, yet God's response was overwhelmingly merciful."¹

"Its [the book's] purpose is to illustrate God's grace to the heathen in face of His people's refusal to fulfil [sic] their mission to them."²

"God's grace was extended to the most hostile and aggressive of Israel's Gentile neighbors—the Assyrians. Surprisingly, they were even more responsive to God's messenger than was Israel, all to the chagrin of Jonah."³

"The concern of a number of OT prophetic narratives is to trace the process whereby a divine oracle was fulfilled. This book, on the contrary, breaks the pattern surprisingly by showing how and why a divine oracle, concerning the destruction of Nineveh, was not fulfilled."⁴

THEOLOGY

"The author of the book of Jonah strikes the high-water mark of Old Testament theology. In large heartedness, in love of mankind, and in the appreciation of the character of God, this little book stands preëminent [sic] as the noblest, broadest, and most Christian of all Old Testament literature."⁵

¹Walton, p. 457.

²Smith, 2:514.

³Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 200.

⁴Allen, p. 175.

⁵George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, p. 89.

"The overriding theme of the book is the sovereign God's grace toward sinners, illustrated in His decision to withhold His judgment from the guilty but repentant Ninevites."¹

"The Book of Jonah is one of the most relevant books for the present time."²

CANONICITY

The earliest extra-biblical reference to this book is in Ecclesiasticus 49:10. There, Ben Sira, who lived no later than 190 B.C., referred to "the twelve prophets," namely, the writers of the Minor Prophets, which includes Jonah. The Jewish rabbis never challenged the canonicity of this book.

OUTLINE

- I. The disobedience of the prophet chs. 1—2
 - A. Jonah's attempt to flee from God 1:1-3
 - B. Jonah's lack of compassion 1:4-6
 - C. Jonah's failure to fear his sovereign God 1:7-10
 - D. The sailors' compassion and fear of God 1:11-16
 - E. Jonah's deliverance by God 1:17—2:1
 - F. Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving 2:2-9
 - G. Jonah's deliverance from the fish 2:10

- II. The obedience of the prophet chs. 3—4
 - A. Jonah's proclamation to the Ninevites 3:1-4
 - B. The Ninevites' repentance 3:5-10
 - C. Jonah's displeasure at God's mercy 4:1-4
 - D. God's rebuke of Jonah for his attitude 4:5-9
 - E. God's compassion for those under His judgment 4:10-11

¹Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 432. See also Alexander, pp. 81-91.

²R. T. Kendall, *Jonah: An Exposition*, p. 11.

The following outline points out some of the parallels in the story nicely.¹

- I. A Hebrew sinner saved (1:1—2:10 [11])
 - A. Jonah's disobedience (1:1-3)
 - B. Jonah's punishment; heathen homage (1:4-16)
 - C. Jonah's rescue (1:17—2:10 [2:1-11])
 - 1. God's grace (1:17 [2:1])
 - 2. Jonah's praise (2:1-9 [2-10])
 - 3. God's last word (2:10 [11])

- II. Heathen sinners saved (3:1—4:11)
 - A. Jonah's obedience (3:1-4)
 - B. Nineveh's repentance (3:5-9)
 - C. Jonah's rebuke (3:10—4:11)
 - 1. God's grace (3:10)
 - 2. Jonah's plaint (4:1-3)
 - 3. God's last word (4:4-11)

MESSAGE

The Book of Jonah does not contain the record of a prophet's message as much as the record of a prophet's experience. That feature makes Jonah distinctive among the prophetic books. This prophet's experiences are what we need to look at to learn the message of this book. That is also true of the Former Prophets books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. They, too, teach by recording selected experiences more than prophetic oracles (divine pronouncements).

There are many incidental features of this story, such as the ship, the storm, the fish, the gourd, the worm, the hot wind, and even Nineveh. They are important parts of the revelation, but they do not give us the message of the book. It is the major characters of the story that do that. The major characters are God and Jonah.

¹Allen, p. 200. The verse numbers in brackets are those in the Hebrew text. See also Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook of the Prophets*, pp. 408-9, for a similar outline.

God's dealings with Jonah are even more important than His dealings with the Ninevites, from the standpoint of the book's revelation. These dealings reveal God's attitude and activity toward the nations, and toward His own people—for the nations' sake. We have here a revelation of Yahweh and a revelation of the responsibility of Yahweh's representatives.

One of the characteristics that marked the Israelites was their exclusivity. During the reign of Jeroboam II, when Jonah ministered, Israel was expanding geographically, and she was forming alliances with her neighbor nations. However at the same time, she was more exclusive religiously than she ever had been. The Israelites believed that their privileged relationship with God needed guarding, so that the Gentiles would not take it from her, as they had taken so many other things.

But the Israelites also projected their hostile attitude toward the Gentiles onto Yahweh. They thought of Him as hostile to their enemies too. Jonah epitomized that attitude. God gave His people this book to teach them that His attitude toward those outside the covenants and promises was quite different from theirs, and theirs should be different too.

The major revelation of Yahweh in this book comes through in His dealings with Nineveh and in His dealings with Jonah. Note, first, what this book reveals about the LORD (Yahweh) from His dealings with Nineveh.

Rather than having a superior, exclusive attitude toward the Ninevites, God's attitude was compassion. We can see this attitude at the beginning of the book, when God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. We see it again in God's patient persistence, as He brings His prodigal prophet to repentance. We see it again when He sends Jonah there a second time. The clearest revelation of God's attitude toward Nineveh, however, comes through in the last two verses of the book (4:10-11).

Jonah was probably the first of the eighth-century writing prophets (ca. 780 B.C.). Other eighth-century prophets who ministered to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, beside Jonah, were Hosea (760 B.C.), who emphasized the *love* of God, and Amos (760 B.C.), who emphasized the *righteousness* of God. Isaiah (740 B.C.) stressed the *holiness* of God, and Micah (735 B.C.) the *leadership* of God to the residents of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Jonah reveals the *compassion* of God primarily. It is an important balancing revelation among these other prophetic messages.

The Hebrew verb *hus*, translated "had" or "have compassion," in 4:10 and 11, means "to spare by sheltering."¹ The idea is that of covering, and so shielding from danger. Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). Jesus expressed the same attitude toward Jerusalem that God did toward Nineveh. In Jesus' words we see God's attitude toward sinning cities: great groups of people. This is the attitude that has driven evangelists and missionaries throughout the ages. It is God's attitude of compassion.

All of God's activities in this book proceeded from this basic attitude. We might conclude that God sent Jonah to preach against Nineveh only because He was angry with it, because of its sin. Certainly it was under His judgment for its sins, but the last verse reveals the underlying motive of God: His compassion.

Seen in this light, the troublesome statement that God relented, in 3:10, becomes less problematic. The Hebrew word used here, *nacham*, carries the connotation of being relieved and comforted. We should hear God sighing in relief when we read this verse. When Nineveh repented, God saw that judgment would not be necessary, and this made Him very happy. When people turn from their sin, God turns from judging them.

Turning to what this book reveals about God's dealings with Jonah, we see two things:

First, God needs messengers. In one sense, God needs no one and nothing, because He is self-sufficient. However in another sense, He has chosen to send His messages through people. The New Testament expression of this truth is: "How are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). God has chosen to use human messengers to carry most of His messages to other humans, though God Himself spoke directly to some people in the past.

The second thing that we see, as we examine God's dealings with Jonah, is that because God needs messengers, He is persistent and patient with the messengers He selects. We see this in that God did not abandon Jonah when he boarded the ship to go to Tarshish. We see it in God preparing a

¹Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

fish to preserve and transport him back to dry land. We see it in God re-commissioning Jonah. We see it in His providing a gourd to shelter the prophet. We see it in God's patient teaching when Jonah was burning up with heat and anger. We see it in God's attempts to bring Jonah into sympathy with His merciful purpose. In all these instances, we see God lovingly persuading the prophet to share His fellowship by sharing His attitude.

What about the revelation of the responsibility of God's representatives in this book? Positively, that responsibility is to represent God. Jonah did not rebel against God and become angry with God because He failed to appreciate God. He knew God quite well, as 4:2 makes perfectly clear: "I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God ". God sends people to represent Him who know Him. Jonah rebelled and became angry because he hated the Ninevites. We should be able to appreciate this because all of us hate violence and cruelty in people when they direct their wrath against people who do not deserve it.

To represent God, His servants must be obedient. His orders must take priority over their desires. God's purposes must override our prejudices and our preferences. If this does not happen, then the messenger experiences estrangement from God. However, there must be shared attitudes, as well as obedient actions, for true fellowship to exist. Jonah was not an acceptable representative until his attitude mirrored God's attitude, even though he had conceded to do God's will.

Jonah gives us the negative example in his attitude toward Nineveh. Jesus gives us the positive one in His attitude toward Jerusalem. Think of all the teeming cities of the world, where cruelty and corruption reign, and then remember that God has compassion on their inhabitants. Do we have more concern for plants than for people? I enjoy gardening, but I am learning to put people before plants—and other projects. We will never have a missionary heart until we come into close fellowship with the God of compassion. When we not only know about Him, but walk with Him, then we will share His fellowship. When Jesus looked on Jerusalem, He wept over it.

This book teaches its readers how God feels about His people, as well as how He feels about the teeming masses who do not know Him. He needs us to take His message of compassion to the lost. God is always in need of messengers to do this. His Word must become incarnate before it becomes

impressive. That was true in Jesus' case, and it is true in ours. It is good to send Bibles all over the world, but God's primary method always has been to send preachers with His Word. When people receive the witness of someone whose life God has persuaded to trust and obey Him, the message of repentance becomes persuasive.

God still needs us, and He still sends us (Matt. 28:19-20). Every Christian man, woman, boy, and girl can identify with God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh. Why must we lift up our voices and cry against the Ninevehs of our day? Their wickedness has come up before the LORD, and it is damning them. God wants to save them. Judgment is forever God's "unusual task" (Isa. 28:21). What is usual for God is compassion, deliverance, and salvation. Therefore, we must announce God's judgment so that people have an opportunity to repent.

Notice that when Jonah was disobedient to God, there was still much about him that was commendable. This is often true of us in our disobedience, and it often encourages us in our disobedience. Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship waiting. Often when we disobey God we find that circumstances seem to accommodate us and cooperate with us. Jonah evidently paid his own fare. If he did, that was commendable responsibility.

Nevertheless, all these circumstances that Jonah could have viewed as indications that he was doing the right thing, clearly were not indicating that. After all, Jonah never reached Tarshish. God did not allow him to go that far. God gave him some freedom, but He eventually brought him up short. Likewise, God does not remind us at every turn that we are disobedient, but He will bring us to the point of acknowledging our disobedience eventually (cf. 1:7). He will not take His hand off of us.

The church's failure in evangelism and missions is not due primarily to our failure to know God and His compassion. We know Him. We have even experienced His compassion in our own lives. Our failure is due mainly to our dislike for those under God's judgment: our Ninevites. Perhaps we need to admit that we really do not want to see the world saved. The evidence of this is that we are much happier enjoying the spiritual comforts of being God's chosen people than we are reaching out to the lost. Some Christians hate the lost, just as Jonah did. Why do we not reach out to the "city" in which we live? Perhaps it is because we do not like the people who live there.

How can we overcome this problem? We will not overcome it by trying to love those whom we hate. That is humanly impossible. What we must do is what Jonah did. We must begin by simply obeying God, by doing what He has told us to do, namely, go to them with the message of deliverance. In other words, we should love our LORD even though we may not love the lost. When we obey Him, as Jonah did, God will begin to deal with our attitude toward those under His judgment (cf. John 21).

The Book of Jonah deals with the problem of exclusivism: the sin of concluding that if we have received God's compassion, it is for ourselves alone. What we need to do is begin obeying the commission that God has given us. Hopefully our obedience will arise out of love for Him, but it may arise out of our learning that disregarding that commission can result in much pain for us. In any case, we need to obey. Then God will begin to teach us love for the unlovely. That, too, may be a painful learning process, but God will be very tender with us as He teaches us, as He was with Jonah. We will also enter into true fellowship with our Savior, who wept over Jerusalem, because we will share His heart of compassion.

The message of Jonah then is that God will give us His heart of compassion for the lost as we execute the commission that He has given us.

Exposition

I. THE DISOBEDIENCE OF THE PROPHET CHS. 1—2

The first half of this prophecy records Jonah's attempt to flee from the LORD and His commission, when he found it personally distasteful, and the consequences of his rebellion.

A. JONAH'S ATTEMPT TO FLEE FROM GOD 1:1-3

The story opens with God commissioning His prophet and Jonah rebelling against His will.

1:1 The book and the first verse open with a conjunction (Heb. *waw*). Several versions leave this word untranslated because it makes no substantial difference in the story. Its presence in the Hebrew Bible may suggest that this book was part of a larger collection of stories. About 14 Old Testament books begin with this conjunction, and they obviously connect with the books that immediately precede them. However, what Jonah might have continued is unknown.

"These books remind us of God's 'continued story' of grace and mercy."¹

The expression "The word of the LORD came to" occurs over 100 times in the Old Testament.² The writer did not record how Jonah received the following message from the LORD. That is inconsequential here, though often in other prophetic books the method of revelation that God used is explained. Likewise, the time of this revelation is a mystery and unessential to the interpretation and application of this story. God's actions are the most important feature in this prophecy.

Jonah's name means "Dove."

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, "Jonah," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 378.

²Alexander, p. 97.

"We associate the dove with peace and purity; however, this positive meaning is not the only possible association. A 'dove' could also be a symbol of silliness (see Hos. 7:11), a description that sadly applies to this tragicomical prophet."¹

"Cf. Genesis 8:8, 9, where the dove in vain seeks rest after flying from Noah and the ark: so Jonah."²

We do not have any knowledge of Amittai ("Truthful"), other than that he was Jonah's father. The recording of the name of an important person's father was common in Jewish writings, and the presence of Amittai's name in the text argues for the historical reality of Jonah. In this book, Jonah is the only person named (beside this incidental mention of his father) and God. It's all about Jonah and God.

There are several unbiblical Jewish traditions about Jonah's origin.³ One held that he was the widow's son whom Elijah restored to life (1 Kings 17:17-24). Another held that he had some connection with the Jerusalem temple, even though he was from the north. Another credited him with a successful mission to Jerusalem similar to the one to Nineveh. None of these has any biblical support. They were apparently attempts to fit Jonah into other inspired stories and to glorify the prophet.

1:2 Nineveh was indeed a "great city." Its history stretching back as far as Nimrod, who built it—as well as Babel and several other cities in Mesopotamia (Gen. 10:8-12). Nineveh occupied about 1,800 acres, and stood on the east bank of the Tigris River across from the modern Iraqi city of Mosul.⁴ The word "great" occurs frequently in this book (1:2, 4, 12, 16, 17; 3:2; 4:1, 6, 11). Perhaps this was intended to impress the reader with the fact that this book deals with great issues.

¹ *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1493.

² Jamieson, et al., p. 806.

³ Ellison, "Jonah," p. 368.

⁴ For further description of its greatness, see my comments on 3:3 and 4:11.

Jonah was to "cry out against it" or "preach against it" (NIV), in the sense of informing its inhabitants that God had taken note of their wickedness.¹ He was not to identify their sins as much as announce that judgment was imminent.

"The substance of that *cry* is recorded afterward, but God told to Jonah now, what message he was to *cry* aloud to it. For Jonah relates afterward [4:2], how he expostulated [expressed strong disapproval] now with God, and that his expostulation was founded on this, that God was so merciful that He would not fulfill the judgment which He threatened."²

God apparently intended that Jonah's condition as an outsider would have made the Ninevites regard him as a divine messenger. The LORD did not send him to be merely a foreign critic of that culture.

Douglas Stuart translated this verse as follows: "Go to the important city, Nineveh, and speak to it, for their trouble concerns me."³ This translation seeks to clarify what Jonah understood that God was commanding him to do.

1:3 "Tarshish" was the name of a great-grandson of Noah through Noah's son Japheth and Japheth's son (or descendant) Javan (Gen. 10:1-4). From then on in the Old Testament, the name describes both the descendants of this man and the territory where they settled (cf. 1 Kings 10:22; 22:48; 1 Chron. 7:10). The territory was evidently a long distance from Israel and on the Atlantic coast of southwest Spain (cf. 4:2; Isa. 66:19).⁴ It also contained mineral deposits that its residents mined and exported to Tyre and probably other places (Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:12). Since the Hebrew word *tarshishu* means "smelting place" or "refinery," the Jews referred to several such places

¹NIV refers to *The Holy Bible: New International Version*.

²E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 1:396.

³Douglas K. Stuart, "'The Great City of Nineveh' (Jon. 1:2)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:684 (October-December 2014):387-400.

⁴See the map in Alexander, p. 49.

on the Mediterranean coast by this name.¹ Similarly, several towns along the coastlands of English-speaking nations today bear the name "Portland." Therefore it is probably impossible to locate the exact spot that Jonah proposed to visit.

The identification of Tarshish with Spain is very old, going back to Herodotus, the Greek historian, who referred to a Tartessus in Spain.² This site was about 2,500 miles west of Joppa. (Curiously, and inaccurately, Josephus believed that Jonah tried to flee to Tarsus in Cilicia.³) In any case, Jonah sought to flee by ship from Joppa, Israel's major seaport on the Mediterranean coast, and to go to some remote destination that lay in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

"Joppa's greatest export was God's compassion."⁴

In Jonah's day, the season for sailing the Mediterranean was from the end of May through the middle of September, but risktakers stretched this window by as much as two months at either end.⁵ So Jonah probably made his voyage sometime between the end of March and the middle of November.

Joppa stood about 35 miles southwest of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Nineveh lay about 550 miles northeast of Samaria.

"Jonah the believer is disgruntled with his calling. (Whoever thought a missionary would be disgruntled—except a fellow missionary!)"⁶

Why did Jonah leave Israel? He evidently concluded that if he ran away, God would select another prophet, rather than track him down and make him go to Nineveh. By going in the opposite direction from Nineveh—as far from Nineveh as was

¹ *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Tarshish," by J. A. Thompson, pp. 1239-40.

² *Ibid.*

³ Josephus, 9:10:2.

⁴ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 1068.

⁵ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 82.

⁶ Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets*, p. 543.

then possible—Jonah was trying to avoid having any part in the Ninevites' repentance (cf. 4:2). In short, he seems to have been trying to run away from the sovereign LORD's formal commission. The Hebrew phrase *millipne*, translated "from the presence of," refers to an official audience with a king (Gen. 41:46; 2 Kings 6:32; cf. Gen. 4:16; 2 Kings 5:27). A different phrase (*mippene*) would have indicated that Jonah was simply running away from the LORD.¹ This is the only instance in Scripture of a prophet disobeying God's call (cf. Amos 3:8 for the typical response), though others resisted it (e.g., Moses, Jeremiah).

"Jonah did not want God to spare Nineveh."²

Isaiah had previously prophesied that the Assyrians would invade Israel (Isa. 7:17—8:28), and Hosea, a contemporary of Jonah's, wrote the same thing (Hos. 9:3; 10:6; 11:5).

Jonah's motive may have included a desire to preserve his own reputation as a prophet.³ However, it was "the presence of the LORD" localized in the Promised Land—mentioned twice in this verse for emphasis—that Jonah sought to escape from more than anything (cf. v. 10; Gen. 4:16; Ps. 139:7, 9, 10). Specifically, it was God's influence over him. He probably knew that he could not remove himself from the literal presence of the omnipresent Yahweh.

"To be a prophet was not necessarily to be a great theologian. God chooses whom he will, whether trained professional specialist or not (cf. Amos 7:14-15)."⁴

There is a chiasm (a crossing structure) in this verse. It begins and ends with references to going to Tarshish from the LORD's presence. In the center is another reference to going to

¹Walton, p. 473.

²Baxter, 4:159. Italics omitted.

³Harry A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, p. 198.

⁴Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 466.

Tarshish. This structure stresses the fact that Jonah defiantly repudiated God's call.

"If he was going to be disobedient he was going to do the thing honestly. He paid his fare. But however determined we are to find our ship and pay our fare, we won't get away from God."¹

Perhaps we can appreciate how Jonah felt about his commission if we compare a similar, but hypothetical case. Suppose God called some Jew living during the Hitler regime to go to Berlin and prophesy publicly that God was going to destroy Nazi Germany unless the Germans repented. The possibility of the Germans repenting and God withholding judgment on them would have been totally repugnant to such a Jew, and he would have feared for his life. His racial patriotism would have conflicted with his fidelity to God—just as Jonah's did.²

"In this brief introduction to the book the reader learns three central things: (1) who Jonah was; (2) what Yahweh wanted him to do; (3) Jonah's response. Thus are introduced the main characters of the story, i.e., Jonah and God; and the situation around which the story revolves, i.e., Jonah's unwillingness to carry out a divine commission which he finds odious."³

Many servants of the LORD throughout history have mistakenly thought that they could get away from the LORD and escape the consequences of His actions by changing their location. This book teaches us that that is not possible (cf. Ps. 139:7-10).

Some Christians assume that, because circumstances are favorable, what they are doing must have God's approval. Jonah was able to buy a ticket to Tarshish and begin his journey. He could have concluded, as many Christians do, that this was a sign of God's blessing. It was not.

¹G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 189.

²Gaebelein, p. 72.

³Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 452.

"It's possible to be out of the will of God and still have circumstances appear to be working on your behalf."¹

"... you cannot always interpret the good circumstances as being God's will and the unfavorable circumstances as not being God's will."²

"The ready way is not always the right way."³

"An officer in an army may resign the commission of his president or king, but an ambassador of the Lord is on a different basis. His service is for life, and he may not repudiate it without the danger of incurring God's discipline."⁴

B. JONAH'S LACK OF COMPASSION 1:4-6

1:4 Jonah subjected himself to dangers, when he launched out on the sea, that Israel and the entire ancient Near East viewed as directly under divine control. The sea, to them, was the embodiment of the chaotic forces that humans could not control or tame (cf. Ps. 24:2; 33:7; 65:7; 74:13; 77:19; 89:9; 114:3, 5; Isa. 27:1; 51:10; 63:11; Jer. 5:22; 31:35; et al.). Jonah was desperate to get away from where he thought God might come after him (cf. Gen. 3:8). Nevertheless, God used the wind to bring the prodigal prophet to the place He wanted him to be (cf. Gen. 1:2).

"When one sets out to baffle God, there is bound to be a storm!"⁵

"It was gracious of God to seek out His disobedient servant and not to allow him to remain long in his sin."⁶

¹Wiersbe, pp. 378-79.

²McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:744.

³Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1142.

⁴Gaebelein, p. 74.

⁵Robinson, p. 71.

⁶Charles L. Feinberg, *Jonah, Micah, and Nahum*, p. 15.

"... God loved His poor, failing servant too well to permit him to prosper as he took his foolish and sinful course."¹

In the Hebrew text, the last part of this verse is literally: "the ship thought she would be broken in pieces"—a graphic personification.

1:5 The sailors were of mixed religious convictions. Some of them were probably Phoenicians, since Phoenicians were commonly seafaring traders. Phoenicia was a center of Baal worship in Jonah's day. The sailors' willingness to throw their cargo into the sea illustrates the extreme danger they faced (cf. Acts 27:18-20).

Jonah's ability to sleep under such conditions seems very unusual. The same Hebrew word (*radam*) describes Sisera's deep sleep, that his exhaustion produced (Judg. 4:21), and the deep sleep that God put Adam and Abram under (Gen. 2:21; 15:12). Perhaps Jonah was both exhausted and divinely assisted in sleeping.

"Perhaps his action shows more than anything indifference and an astonishing self-security."²

Jonah's condition does not seem to have a major bearing on the story; it is probably a detail. The events that follow could have happened if he had been wide-awake just as well.

What does seem unusual is Jonah's attitude of "careless self-security."³ He seems to have preferred death to facing God alive. Not only did he flee to Tarshish, but he also fled to the innermost part ("the stern") of the ship (cf. Amos 6:10).

"I once entertained the popular viewpoint that if a man gets out of the will of God and into sin, he

¹Ironside, p. 200.

²Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:3:161.

³Keil, 1:393.

will be tormented with a bad conscience and will simply be in misery. Is that true of Jonah?"¹

No, it evidently was not. Jonah was able to sleep during a storm.

1:6 It took a presumably pagan sea captain to remind Jonah of his duty. The words the captain used are the same as the ones God had used ("Get up!" cf. v. 2, Heb. *qum lek*). Jonah should have been praying, instead of sleeping, in view of the imminent danger that he and his companions faced (cf. Luke 22:39-46). The normal reaction to danger, even among pagans, is to seek divine intervention, but this is precisely what Jonah wanted to avoid. Jonah did not care if he died (v. 12).

"It is well known how often sin brings insensibility with it also. What a shame that the prophet of God had to be called to pray by a heathen."²

What the captain hoped Jonah's God would do, He did. He is the only true God, and He does show concern for people (cf. 4:2, 11). This demonstration of Yahweh's concern for people in danger is one of the great themes of this book. God showed compassion for the Ninevites and later for Jonah, but Jonah showed little compassion for the Ninevites, for these sailors, and even for himself.

Whereas the first pericope (section) of the story (vv. 1-3) illuminates the lack of compassion that characterized the prophet, this second one (vv. 4-6) reinforces it and implies, in contrast, that God is compassionate. Not only was Jonah fleeing from God's presence, but he was also displaying a character that was the opposite of God's. Such is often the case when God's people turn their backs on Him and run from His assignments.

¹McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:745.

²Feinberg, p. 16.

C. JONAH'S FAILURE TO FEAR HIS SOVEREIGN GOD 1:7-10

The sailors interrogated Jonah about his reasons for travelling on their ship, but it was his failure to live consistently with his convictions that amazed them.

1:7 It appears to have been common among the heathen to "cast lots" to determine who was responsible for some catastrophe (cf. John 19:24). Saul resorted to this when he could not get a direct response from the LORD (cf. 1 Sam. 14:36-42). Casting lots was a divinely prescribed method of learning God's will in Israel (e.g., Lev. 16:8-10; Num. 26:55-56; 33:54; 34:13; 36:2-3; Josh. 14:2; 15:1; 16:1; et al.). However, as practiced by pagans, it was a superstitious practice designed to produce favorable results. Many forms of gambling in our day are similar. In this case, God overruled and gave the sailors the correct answer to their request (cf. Prov. 16:33).

"... Jonah won the lottery—or lost it."¹

The sailors' statement is ironical. The Hebrew word *ra'a*, translated "catastrophe" here, is translated "wickedness" in verse 2. God had commissioned Jonah to denounce the moral "wickedness" of Ninevites, but he had become a source of "catastrophe" to the pagan sailors.

1:8 The sailors proceeded to interrogate Jonah when they believed they had identified the culprit responsible for their calamity. Had Jonah been involved in some situation that had brought down a curse from someone else that resulted in the storm? Possibly the reason for their trouble had some connection with Jonah's occupation or hometown. His national or ethnic origin might also prove to be the key they sought. Finding the reason for their trouble was what they wanted. They did not ignorantly assume that doing away with Jonah would solve their problem.

1:9 It should have been no surprise to the sailors that Jonah was "a Hebrew," since they had taken him on board at Joppa, a major port in Israel. "Hebrew" is the name by which the

¹Allen, p. 208.

Israelites' neighbors knew them (cf. 1 Sam. 4:6, 9; 14:11). Jonah probably identified himself as a Hebrew as a preamble to explaining that he worshipped Yahweh Elohim ("LORD God"), the heavenly God of the Hebrews. The Phoenicians also thought of Baal as a sky god (cf. 1 Kings 18:24).

It was the fact that this Hebrew God had made "the sea" on which they traveled, as well as "the dry land," that convinced the sailors that Jonah had done something very serious. It was obvious to them that Jonah's God was after him, and had sent the storm to put him in His hands. Ironically, what was so clear to these pagans was obscure to the runaway prophet. When God sovereignly selects someone for special service, that person cannot run and hide from Him. Jonah had not yet learned this lesson.

The title "the God of heaven" is common in the postexilic books (e.g., Ezra 1:2; 7:12; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 2:18-19, 37, 44; 5:21, 23). This fact has influenced some scholars to conclude that the Book of Jonah must also date from the same period. However, this title was a very old one in Israel's history (cf. Gen. 24:3, 7). Its use on this occasion was particularly appropriate since it expressed the supremacy of Yahweh to polytheistic pagans.

Jonah's confession is a central feature in the narrative. It is the center of a literary chiasmus that begins in verse 4 and extends through verse 16.¹

1:10 The sailors' exclamation (in the form of a rhetorical question, cf. Gen. 4:10) expressed their incredulity at Jonah's naiveté in trying to run away from the God who created the sea—by taking a sea voyage! Surely Jonah must have known, they thought, that Yahweh would make their journey perilous. Evidently Jonah had previously told them that he was "fleeing from ... the LORD" (cf. v. 3, where "from the presence of the LORD" occurs *twice*), but they did not then (in verse 3)

¹See Ernst R. Wendland, "Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah (Part 2)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:3 (September 1996):374-75, which also points out many other structural features of Jonah.

understand that the LORD was the Creator of the sea. Had the travel agency in Joppa known this, they probably would not have sold Jonah his ticket.

In the polytheistic ancient Near East, people conceived of a multitude of gods, each with authority over a particular area of life. A god of the mountains, for example, would have little power on the plains (cf. 1 Kings 20:23).

Before, the mariners had feared the storm, but now they feared the LORD, recognizing the Creator above the creation.¹

"This is the storyteller's ironic view of the person who thinks he can escape Yahweh. And yet this irony, with all its exaggeration, is slyly absurd rather than bitter."²

This pericope, like the previous two, builds to a climax that stresses Jonah's failure. He did not fear his God though, again ironically, the pagan sailors did. Jonah professed faith in a sovereign God, yet by trying to escape from the LORD he denied his belief in Yahweh's sovereignty. One cannot flee or hide from a sovereign God.

D. THE SAILORS' COMPASSION AND FEAR OF GOD 1:11-16

Rather than becoming God's instrument of salvation, Jonah became an object for destruction because he rebelled against God.

1:11 The sailors might have known what to do with Jonah, had he been a criminal guilty of some crime, or if he had accidentally transgressed a law of his God. However, he was guilty of being a servant of his God and directly disobeying the LORD's order to him. They had no idea what would placate the Creator of the sea in such a case, so they asked Jonah, since he knew his God.

1:12 Jonah's answer reveals the double-mindedness of the prophet. He could have asked the sailors to sail back to Joppa, if he

¹Gaebelein, p. 79.

²Hans W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 139.

really intended to obey the LORD and go to Nineveh. His repentance surely would have resulted in God withholding judgment from the sailors, just as the Ninevites' repentance later resulted in His withholding judgment from them.

Still, Jonah was not ready to obey God just yet. Nonetheless, his compassion and concern for the lives of the sailors led him to give them a plan designed to release them from God's punishment. It would also likely result in his death, which he regarded as preferable to obeying God. His heart was still as hard as ever toward the plight of the Ninevites, even though he acknowledged that he knew God was disciplining him.

"He pronounces this sentence, not by virtue of any prophetic inspiration, but as a believing Israelite who is well acquainted with the severity of the justice of the holy God, both from the law and from the history of his nation."¹

Why did Jonah not end his own life by jumping overboard? I suspect that he did not have the courage to do so. Obviously, it took considerable courage to advise the sailors to throw him into the sea where he must have expected to drown, but suicide takes even more courage.

"The piety of the seamen has evidently banished his nonchalant indifference and touched his conscience. By now he has realized how terrible is the sin that has provoked this terrible storm. The only way to appease the tempest of Yahweh's wrath is to abandon himself to it as just deserts for his sin. His willingness to die is an indication that he realizes his guilt before God."²

1:13 The sailors initially rejected Jonah's advice and compassionately chose to drop him off at the nearest landfall. Normally sailors would have avoided the shoreline in a storm, because it would prove dangerous.³ They strained every

¹Keil, 1:396.

²Allen, pp. 210-11.

³See Sasson, p. 142.

muscle for Jonah's sake, literally digging their oars into the water. They demonstrated more concern for one man than Jonah had for the thousands of men, women, and children in Nineveh. When reaching land became impossible due to the raging sea, they prayed to Yahweh, something that we have no record that the prophet had done.

- 1:14 The sailors also voiced their belief in God's sovereignty, which Jonah had denied by his behavior. They requested physical deliverance and forgiveness from guilt, since they anticipated that Jonah would die because of their act. They evidently believed that God's sovereignty was so strongly obvious that He might forgive them. Jonah's innocent death seemed inevitable to them, try as they did to avoid it. Still, they could not be sure that they were doing God's will, and feared that He might punish them for taking the life of His servant.

From the sailors' viewpoint, Jonah was "innocent" (Heb. *naqi*) of death, because he had not committed any of the crimes for which people suffered death at the hands of their fellowmen. Yet nothing less than death was what he deserved for sinning against God (Ezek. 18:4, 20; Rom. 6:23).

- 1:15-16 The immediate cessation of the storm proved to the sailors that Yahweh really did control the sea (cf. Matt. 8:26). Therefore they feared (respected and became afraid of) Him, "offered a sacrifice" to Him (when they reached shore?), and "made vows" (perhaps to venerate Him, cf. Ps. 116:17-18).

"The book of Jonah contains within its few pages one of the greatest concentrations of the supernatural in the Bible. Yet it is significant that the majority of them are based upon natural phenomena."¹

These mariners were almost certainly polytheists, so we should not conclude that they abandoned their worship of other gods and become exclusive worshipper of Yahweh necessarily—

¹Gaebelein, p. 83.

though some of them may have. The fact that the sailors made vows to God may point to their conversion.

"Anyone who comes in contact with the power of the Lord cannot help but be awed by him, but such awe does not necessarily produce a relationship with him."¹

Note that these pagan sailors feared God more than the prophet did (v. 9). By their actions they gave Him the respect He deserves, but Jonah did not.

"In this episode the sailors are a foil for Jonah. In contrast to Jonah, who preaches but does not pray, the sailors offer prayers to God. In contrast to Jonah, who says he fears God but acts in a way that is inconsistent with his claim, the sailors, who barely know Jonah's God, respond to him in genuine fear."²

"Through the defection of Jonah a ship's crew acknowledges the Creator's power, comes to the point of worshiping him, and acknowledges him as Lord. If this is the outcome of Jonah's disobedience, what will God bring to pass as the result of Jonah's obedience?"³

This story is full of irony.⁴ When someone knows God but chooses to disobey Him, that person begins to demonstrate even less compassion for others, less faith in God's sovereignty, and less fear of Him than pagans normally do.

"Above all, the story thus far extols the fact that sin does not pay and that, try as the sinner will to escape, he is God's marked man. The wages of sin are death."⁵

¹Walton, p. 473.

²Chisholm, *Handbook of ...*, p. 411.

³Baldwin, pp. 563-64.

⁴See Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*.

⁵Allen, p. 213.

disobey Him, that person begins to demonstrate even less compassion for others, less faith in God's sovereignty, and less fear of Him than pagans normally do.

"Above all, the story thus far extols the fact that sin does not pay and that, try as the sinner will to escape, he is God's marked man. The wages of sin are death."¹

E. JONAH'S DELIVERANCE BY GOD 1:17—2:1

For the second time in this story, God took the initiative to move His prophet to carry out His will (cf. v. 1). This time Jonah turned *to* the LORD.

1:17 The identity of the "great fish" remains a mystery, since the only record of what it was is this story, and that description is general. The Hebrew word *dag*, translated "fish," describes a variety of aquatic creatures. The text does not say that God created this fish out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), nor does what the fish did require such an explanation. There are many types of fish capable of swallowing a human being whole.² Two examples are the sperm whale and the whale shark. (Josephus called this great fish a whale.³)

Occasionally we hear of someone who has lived for several days in a fish or in some other large animal—and has emerged alive.⁴ In spite of this, Jonah's experience has been one of the favorite targets of unbelievers in the miraculous, who claim that this story is preposterous (cf. Matt. 12:39-40). Some Bible students have faulted some commentators for documenting instances of large fish swallowing people who have survived, as if such suggested explanations slight God's power. They do not.

"The numerous attempts made in the past to identify the sort of fish that could have kept Jonah

¹Allen, p. 213.

²See Wilson, pp. 631-32.

³Josephus, 9:10:2.

⁴See Harrison, pp. 907-8, Keil, 1:398; Robinson, p. 78; Pusey, 1:385-87; or Baxter, 4:152-54, for several such instances.

alive in it are misguided. How would even Jonah himself have known? Can we assume that he caught a glimpse of it as it turned back to sea after vomiting him out on shore (v 1 [1:10 in the Hebrew text])? How much could he have understood of what had happened to him when he was swallowed? These questions have no answer. To ask them is to ignore the way the story is told. What sorts of fish people can live inside is not an interest of the scripture."¹

Jonah's being swallowed by the fish was not an act of divine punishment but divine preservation. Significantly, God saved Jonah's life by using a fish, rather than a more conventional method, such as providing a piece of wood that he could cling to. Thus, this method of deliverance must have some special significance. The Jews were familiar with the mythical sea monster (Ugaritic *lotan*, Heb. *leviathan*), which symbolized both the uncontrollable chaos of the sea and the chaotic forces that only Yahweh could manage (cf. Ps. 74:13-14; 104:25-26).

The Hebrews did not believe that *leviathan* really existed, any more than we believe in Santa Claus. Yet the figure was familiar to them, and they knew what it represented. For Jonah to relate his experience of deliverance in this ancient Near Eastern cultural context would have impressed his hearers that a great God indeed had sent him to them. It is probably for this reason that God chose to save Jonah by using a great fish.

"In the Book of Jonah, it [the Hebrew word *manah*, translated "designated"] signifies 'to appoint' or 'to ordain,' and describes God's intervention in natural events to bring about His will. By *preparing* the fish [1:17], the plant [4:6], and the worm [4:7, and the wind 4:8], God made sure that Jonah's mission was not left to chance. God exercised sovereignty not only over the plant and animal world, but also over Jonah's life, using

¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 474.

animals as [large as a great fish and as] small as a worm to teach Jonah about His great mercy (see Jon. 4:6-8)."¹

Here God controlled what is humanly uncontrollable to spare Jonah's life. The God who is great enough to control the behavior of fish could control anything, and He used His power for a loving purpose. This is more remarkable since Jonah, as God's servant, had rebelled against his Master. God's method of deliverance therefore reveals both His great power and His gracious heart.

"Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God."²

"It is the greatness of Israel's God that is the burden of the book."³

Jonah was able to calculate how long he was in the fish only after he came out of it. Obviously he lost all track of time inside the fish.

Ancient Near Easterners viewed the trip to the underworld land of the dead as a three-day journey.⁴ Original readers of this story would have concluded that the fish gave Jonah a return trip from the land of the dead to which Jonah, by his own admission, had descended (2:2, 6).

The three-day time was also significant because Jonah's deliverance became a precursor of an even greater salvation that took three days and nights to accomplish (Matt. 12:40). God restored Jonah to life so he would be God's instrument in providing salvation to a large Gentile (and indirectly Jewish) population under God's judgment for their sins. I say "indirectly Jewish" because when the Ninevites' repented they did not attack Israel. God raised Jesus to life so that He would be God's

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 1499.

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 69.

³ Allen, p. 192.

⁴ George M. Landes, "The 'Three Days and Three Nights' Motif in Jonah 2:1," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 246-250.

instrument in providing salvation for an even larger population of Gentiles and Jews under God's judgment for their sins.

Ironside noted a parallel between Jonah's experience and that of Israel:

"Dispensationally, it is Israel who, because of their failure as God's witnesses in the earth, have been cast into the sea of the Gentiles, but who, despite all their vicissitudes, have been marvelously preserved by the Lord, and are yet to become His testimony-bearers to the whole world."¹

2:1 This is the first mention of Jonah praying (cf. 4:2). In both this verse and 4:2 the usual Hebrew verb *hitpallel*, "to pray," appears. In 1:5 and 3:8 the Hebrew verb *qara'*, "to call," occurs. Until now Jonah had been fleeing from God and hiding from Him. Now, in his great distress, he finally sought the LORD. Being willing to die by drowning was one thing (v. 1:12), but death by gradual digestion was something Jonah had not anticipated.

We do not know how long Jonah struggled in the sea before the fish swallowed him. Perhaps that terror also contributed to his repentance. Some interpreters believe that Jonah's repentance is a type of the repentance of the Jewish remnant that will occur prior to the beginning of Jesus Christ's 1,000-year rule on the earth.²

God often has to discipline His rebellious children severely before we turn back to Him.

F. JONAH'S PSALM OF THANKSGIVING 2:2-9

The following prayer is mainly thanksgiving for deliverance from drowning. It is not thanksgiving for deliverance from the fish or a prayer of confession, as we might expect. Jonah prayed it while he was in the fish. Jonah must

¹Ironside, p. 203.

²E.g., J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 2:560; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 328; and Feinberg, pp. 28-29.

have had some time to compose it. It is doubtful that he would have prayed it and then died immediately after being swallowed, which McGee's theory that Jonah died and was resurrected requires. J. Vernon McGee believed that Jonah died and God raised him back to life, on the basis of Jesus' words about him (Matt. 12:39-40).¹

Evidently Jonah concluded, after some time in the fish's stomach, that he would not die from drowning. Drowning was a particularly distasteful form of death for an ancient Near Easterner such as Jonah, who regarded the sea as a great enemy. To be buried with ones ancestors was preferable. Jonah's ability to thank God in the midst of his black torture chamber, which must have pitched him uncontrollably in every direction, shows that he had experienced a remarkable change in attitude (cf. 1:3, 12).

Jonah could have composed the core of this psalm, which contains his prayer, while he was inside the great fish. He must have done a lot of praying in the course of the three days and three nights that he was in the fish's stomach. He probably composed or polished the whole psalm sometime after he was safely back on dry land. It bears many similarities to other psalms in the Psalter. Clearly, Jonah knew the psalms well, and he could have spent much time reflecting on them during his three days in the fish. One wonders, however, how anyone could think very coherently inside a fish.

This chapter corresponds to chapter one in its contents:²

Ch. 1: The Sailors		Ch. 2: The Prophet	
1:4	Crisis on the sea	2:3-6a	Crisis in the sea
1:14	Prayer to Yahweh	2:2, 7	Prayer to Yahweh
1:15b	Deliverance from the storm	2:6b	Deliverance from drowning
1:16	Sacrifice and vows offered to God	2:9	Sacrifice and vows offered to God

¹McGee, *Jonah: Dead ...*, pp. 21-27; and idem, *Thru the ...*, 3:749-53.

²John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1467.

2:2 Jonah, as many others, called to the LORD out of a distressing situation asking for help, and the LORD responded to his cry with deliverance (cf. Ps. 3:4; 120:1). The second part of the verse is a parallel restatement of the first part. The prophet compared the fish's stomach to a burial chamber from which he could not escape. "Depth" is literally the "belly" of Sheol, the place of departed souls that the Hebrews conceived of as under the earth's surface. Jonah thought that he had gone to join the dead (cf. Ps. 18:4-5; 30:3). Jonah previously "went down" (Heb. *yarad*) to Joppa (1:3), then he "boarded" (lit. "went down") into the ship (1:3), and then he had "gone below" deck (1:5). Now he went down into "the depth of Sheol." Since he was bent on going "down," God brought him "down."

"When you turn your back on God, the only direction you can go is down."¹

2:3 Jonah saw God's disciplinary hand behind the sailors, who had only been His tools in throwing the prophet "into the deep," and the "heart of the seas" (cf. Ps. 88:6-7). He also acknowledged that the sea belonged to God ("*Your* breakers and billows," cf. 1:9). Evidently the waves overwhelmed him many times before the fish swallowed him (cf. Ps. 42:7).

2:4 This condition made Jonah believe that God had turned His back on him (cf. Lev. 21:7; Ps. 31:22). Nevertheless, he determined to seek God in prayer (cf. Ps. 5:7). Looking toward God's "holy temple" is a synonym for praying, the temple being the place of prayer in Israel.

"Jonah had willfully withdrawn from standing in God's presence [1:2]. Now God had taken him at his word, and, as it seemed, cast him out of it."²

"He felt he was cast out from the special regard and care which God exercises over His own. Now

¹Wiersbe, p. 381.

²Pusey, 1:409.

he realized how dire a thing it is to be apart from the presence of the Lord."¹

2:5 Jonah sensed his hopelessness as he continued his downward plunge into "the deep." He seemed to be in death's grip rather than God's. Seaweeds (Heb. *soph*, reeds) bound his head as the water encased his body (cf. Ps. 69:1-2).

2:6 The prophet "descended" in the sea to the base of the mountains, their very foundations. There he felt caged as a prisoner, unable to escape. However, even though human deliverance was hopeless, Yahweh, Jonah's strong God, lifted him up out of Sheol's pit (cf. Ps. 49:15; 56:13; 103:4).

"Jonah's 'downward' journey from Jerusalem *down* to Joppa (1:3a) *down* into the ship (1:3b) *down* into the cargo hold (1:5) and ultimately *down* into the bottom of the sea, pictured as down to the very gates of the netherworld (2:7), does not end until he turns back to God who brings him 'up' from the brink of death (2:6-70)."²

2:7 As Jonah was feeling that his life was ebbing away, his thoughts turned to Yahweh (cf. Ps. 107:5-6; 142:3, 5-7). Even though he felt far from God, his prayer reached the LORD in His heavenly dwelling place.

"As in 1:6, prayer is presented as the key to the salvation of the one who would otherwise have perished."³

2:8 Jonah proceeded to philosophize a bit. Everyone who makes an idol his or her god abandons the source of his or her "faithfulness" (Heb. *hesed*) by doing so. The source of faithfulness is Yahweh. This is true of pagans, but the prophet himself had done the same thing. The "worthless idols" (lit.

¹Feinberg, p. 25.

²The NET2 Bible note on 1:3. The NET2 Bible refers to The NET2 (New English Translation) Bible, 2019 ed.

³Allen, p. 218. Cf. Heb. 4:16.

empty vanities) in view are things that one puts in God's rightful place in his or her life (cf. Ps. 31:6; 1 John 5:21).

2:9 Jonah's desperate condition had brought him to his senses. He would return to the source of faithfulness and express his worship of Yahweh with a sacrifice. His sacrifice would have to be "thanksgiving" though, because he despaired of being able to offer an animal or vegetable offering. He also promised to "pay" his vow to God. This probably refers to his commitment to serve the LORD faithfully, from which he had departed, but to which he now returned (cf. Ps. 50:14; 69:30; 107:22).

The testimony that "salvation comes from Yahweh" was the expression of Jonah's thanksgiving that he promised God. The last declaration in this psalm is one of the great summary statements about salvation in the Bible. Salvation, either physical or spiritual, ultimately comes from Yahweh and only from Him, not from idols or people, including oneself (cf. Ps. 3:8; 37:39). It is in His power, and only He can give it. This statement also implies recognition of the fact that God has the right to save whom He will.

"Ironically, however, it is this very same fact which fills Jonah with intense anger in the final chapter of the book."¹

The Hebrew word for salvation is *yeshua*, here used in its intensive form. The Hebrew name Joshua means "Yahweh is salvation." The Greek name Jesus is the translation of Joshua. Thus we can see a close connection between what Jonah declared ("salvation is of the LORD") and what all Scripture declares, namely, that salvation is through Jesus Christ.

The end of this psalm shows Jonah doing what the sailors had done earlier, namely, offering a sacrifice and making vows (1:16).

"Jonah deserved death, not deliverance. And yet Yahweh graciously delivered him by special intervention so that Jonah could not but recognize the greatness of Yahweh's

¹Alexander, p. 118.

compassion, praise him for it, and recognize his reliance on Yahweh alone (c. 2 Cor 1:9, 10)."¹

"The narrator by his inclusion of the psalm immediately after ch. 1 slyly intends his audience to draw a parallel between Jonah's experience and that of the seamen. Both faced a similar crisis, peril from the sea; both cried to Yahweh, acknowledging his sovereignty. Both were physically saved; both offered worship. Ironically Jonah is at last brought to the point the Gentile seamen have already reached. In his supreme devotion he is still only following in the wake of the heathen crew. He who failed to pray, leaving it to the pagan sailors, eventually catches up with their spirit of supplication and submission."²

Many interpreters of this chapter believe that the prophet repented and returned to the LORD in his heart. Having experienced the precious gift of God's salvation in his own life, Jonah was now more favorable to announcing His salvation to the Ninevites. He now appreciated the condition of the heathen as he had not done before.

"Perhaps the most remarkable note about the prayer is its note of triumph. While it is distinctly asserted that he prayed out of the fish's belly, and while all his quotations indicate the darkness and horror into which he had come, taken as a whole it is an expression of absolute confidence in God and in His deliverance."³

Other interpreters believe that Jonah did not repent but only learned that it is fruitless to try to escape one's divine commission.⁴ Thus his statements are self-righteous hypocrisy.

"Upon examination of the psalm, I do not find a single line that suggests Jonah has recognized the error of his ways and is

¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 479.

²Allen, p. 219.

³G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 385.

⁴E.g., James S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation*, pp. 213-46.

anxious to pack his bags and head for Nineveh. In fact, he sees his destination as the temple."¹

One writer outlined Jonah's prayer as follows: The prophet prayed for God's help (vv. 1-2), accepted God's discipline (v. 3), trusted God's promises (vv. 4-7), and yielded to God's will (vv. 8-9).²

George Adam Smith believed that this psalm was not the prayer of an individual but of the nation of Israel as a whole.³ The personal references in the prayer lead me to believe that Jonah did indeed pray it.

G. JONAH'S DELIVERANCE FROM THE FISH 2:10

Again the writer glorified Yahweh by attributing control of this formidable sea creature to Him (cf. 1:17). The first and the second chapters both close on this note. The Hebrew text says, "The LORD spoke to the fish" (cf. 1:1). Unlike Jonah, the fish obeyed God and "vomited" the prodigal prophet "onto the dry land."

"I cannot resist making this corny statement: It just goes to show that you can't keep a good man down!"⁴

Jonah had spoken to the LORD in confession (vv. 1-9), and now God responded by speaking to the fish in deliverance. Having gained a preview of Sheol (v. 2), Jonah was now prepared to go to the Ninevites—whose destiny was Sheol.

"After the amphibious landing described in Jonah 2:10, Jonah never stopped running until he got to Nineveh."⁵

"This miracle has also a symbolical meaning for Israel. It shows that if the carnal nation, with its ungodly mind, should turn to the Lord even in the last extremity, it will be raised up again by a divine miracle from destruction to newness of life."⁶

¹Walton, p. 477.

²Wiersbe, pp. 380-82.

³Smith, 2:527.

⁴McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:755.

⁵Swindoll, p. 1070.

⁶Keil, 1:385.

"When Israel turns to the Lord, when the veil is removed from the heart, when they cry out in truth to the Lord from the midst of their distresses, the Lord will restore them not only to their own land but also to the commission of witnessing to the Lord [cf. Rev. 7:1-8]."¹

We do not know where on the coast Jonah landed. Unfortunately, several interpreters have made applications based only on their speculations.

II. THE OBEDIENCE OF THE PROPHET CHS. 3—4

The second half of this book records Jonah's obedience to the LORD following his initial disobedience (chs. 1—2). However, he was not completely obedient in his attitudes even though he was in his actions.

A. JONAH'S PROCLAMATION TO THE NINEVITES 3:1-4

God gave Jonah a second chance to obey Him, as He has many of His servants (e.g., Peter, John Mark, et al.).

3:1 The writer did not clarify exactly when this second commission came to Jonah. It may have been immediately after Jonah reached dry land, or it may have been sometime later. The writer's point seems to be *that* God gave the prophet a second commission, not *when* it came to him (cf. 1:1-2).

God does not always give His servants a second chance to obey Him after they refused to do so initially. Often He simply uses others to accomplish His purposes instead. Perhaps that is what Jonah hoped that God would do relative to his commission. In Jonah's case, God sovereignly chose to use Jonah for this mission—just as He had sovereignly sent the storm and the fish to do His will. The sovereignty of God is a strong revelation in this book.

Nineveh was about 550 miles northeast of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It would have taken Jonah a little less than a month to make this journey if he had ridden

¹Feinberg, p. 38.

a camel or donkey, or a little more than a month if he had walked.¹

3:2 Another evidence of God's sovereignty is the LORD's instruction to "proclaim" the precise message that He would give Jonah. Those who speak forth a message from God (i.e., prophets) must communicate the LORD's words, not their own ideas.

"The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can't keep you and the power of God can't use you."²

Nineveh was a "great" (Heb. *gadol*) city in several respects. It was a leading city of one of the most powerful nations in the world at that time. It was also a large city (cf. v. 3, 4:11).³

"The point is that Nineveh was a city God was concerned for, one that was by no means insignificant to him."⁴

"The ancient city is [now] represented by two large mounds known as Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus, the latter being so named because it is the site of the reputed tomb of the prophet Jonah."⁵

3:3 Having learned that he must fulfill the LORD's commission or suffer the most unpleasant consequences, Jonah this time obeyed and traveled east—to Nineveh—rather than west (cf. 1:3). For all he knew, he might end up impaled on a pole or skinned alive, which is how the Assyrians often dealt with their enemies.⁶ Nevertheless, such a fate was preferable to suffering divine discipline again. On the other hand, Jonah might reasonably have expected a positive reception, since the residents would have seen him as a diviner who came with a

¹Walton, p. 178.

²Wiersbe, p. 383.

³See McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:758-59.

⁴Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 487.

⁵Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 211.

⁶See Baxter, 4:160-61, for descriptions of the Assyrians' brutality to conquered people.

message from their god(s) (cf. Joseph, Ahab's prophets, Daniel).

The writer's description that Nineveh "was" a great city has led some interpreters to conclude that it was not great when this book was written. Some of them take this as evidence for a late date of writing, even during the postexilic period. However, it seems more likely that the writer was simply describing Nineveh as it was when God sent Jonah to it. Probably "was" implies that Nineveh had already become a great city when Jonah visited it. The Hebrew syntax favors this view. Roland de Vaux estimated that Israel's largest city, Samaria, had a population of about 30,000 at this time.¹ Nineveh was at least four times larger (4:11). Jack Sasson argued that what is meant is that the city was "great" in God's scheme of things.²

The meaning of "a three days' walk" remains somewhat obscure. The Hebrew phrase is literally "a distance of three days," which does not solve the problem. It may mean that it took three days to walk through the city from one extremity to the opposite one, but the extent of Nineveh's ruins argues against this interpretation. It may also mean that it took three days to walk around the circumference of the city, though this seems unlikely (cf. v. 4). Whether the size refers to the area enclosed by the major eight-mile wall, which seems improbable, or includes the outlying suburbs, is also unclear. Another interpretation is that it would take three days for Jonah to accomplish his mission in Nineveh.³

Apparently, at that time, "Nineveh" referred to: (1) the city itself, and (2) a complex of four cities including the city in question.⁴ Probably the "three days walk" describes the time it took to visit the city and its outlying suburbs.⁵ In any case,

¹Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p. 66.

²Sasson, pp. 229-31.

³Walton, p. 478.

⁴See Keil, 1:390; T. D. Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985):57-58; and Hannah, p. 1468.

⁵Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 487-88; *The Nelson ...*, p. 1498. Cf. Robinson, p. 80.

the description clearly points to Nineveh's geographical size as being large and requiring several days for Jonah's message to reach everyone (cf. 4:11).

Another explanation is that the literal meaning of the phrase, namely, "a distance of three days," describes the protocol involved in visiting an important city such as Nineveh. It was customary in the ancient Near East for an emissary from another city-state to take three days for an official visit. He would spend the first day meeting and enjoying the hospitality of his host, the second day discussing the primary purpose of his visit, and the third saying his farewells.¹

If Jonah was this type of emissary, then he likely presented himself as a divine representative to Nineveh's king and other government officials, as well as to the people. This explanation suggests that Jonah's preaching may have started with the king, and then proceeded to the people, rather than the other way around. This view may account better for the king's repentance, and his decree to all the people to repent (Heb. *sub*; vv. 6-9), compared to the traditional view.

3:4 The traditional view holds that after Jonah arrived at the edge of the city, he proceeded into it and began announcing his message publicly during his first day there.² Alternatively, he may have done his first day's preaching to the king and perhaps also to some of the people. The essence of his proclamation was that Nineveh would be overthrown in only "40 days." Periods of testing in Scripture were often 40 days long (cf. Gen. 7:17; Exod. 24:18; 1 Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2). The Septuagint has "three" instead of "40," but there is no justification for changing the Hebrew text.³

Note that Jonah's message was an announcement of impending doom, not a call to repent and believe in the God of Israel. Jeremiah 18:7-8 explains that prophecies of impending judgment assumed that those under judgment would not

¹Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," p. 38. See also Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 487-88.

²Ellison, "Jonah," p. 381; Keil, 1:405.

³The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in the third century B.C.

repent. If they repented, they might avoid the judgment (cf. Joel 2:12-14). Physical deliverance rather than spiritual salvation was what the people of Nineveh would have wanted. As noted in the introduction to this exposition above, hostile tribes to Nineveh's north threatened the city at this time.

The same Hebrew word (*haphak*, "overthrown," destroyed) describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:25. Possibly Jonah expected God to destroy Nineveh as He had overthrown Sodom and Gomorrah. However, this Hebrew word also means changed, allowing for the possibility that Jonah was announcing that in 40 days Nineveh would repent.¹

Jonah's message, in Hebrew, is only five words long. The basic simplicity of Jonah's message contrasts with the greatness of Nineveh. The Word of the LORD is able to change even a complex and sophisticated urban population.

B. THE NINEVITES' REPENTANCE 3:5-10

Jonah's proclamation moved the Ninevites to humble themselves and seek divine mercy.

"Although Nineveh was not overturned, it did experience a turn around."²

3:5 The people "believed in God" and repented (evidenced by their fasting and wearing sackcloth)—apparently after only one day of preaching (v. 4)—because of the message from God that Jonah had brought to them.³ Fasting and wearing "sackcloth" involved self-affliction, which demonstrated an attitude of humility in the ancient Near East (cf. 2 Sam. 3:31, 35; 1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1-2; Isa. 15:3; 58:5; Dan. 9:3; Joel 1:13-14).

Sackcloth was what the poor and the slaves customarily wore. Thus, wearing it depicted that the entire population viewed themselves as needy (of God's mercy in this case) and as slaves (of God in this case). This attitude and these actions

¹See Joseph Parle, *Did God Change His Mind?*

²Alexander, p. 121.

³See Steven J. Lawson, "The Power of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Jonah 3:1-10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:631 (July-September 2001):331-46.

marked all levels of the city's population (i.e., the chronologically old and young, and the socially high and low). The Ninevites did not want to suffer and perish any more than the sailors did (cf. 1:6, 14).

Some commentators believed that two plagues, a severe flood and a famine, had ravaged Nineveh in 765 and 759 B.C., plus a total eclipse of the sun on June 15, 763, and that these phenomena prepared the Ninevites for Jonah's message.¹ The Ninevites probably viewed these phenomena as indications of divine displeasure, which was a common reaction in the ancient Near East.² Assyria was also experiencing reverses and a temporary decline in her political fortunes at this time.³ However, this providential "pre-evangelism" is not the concern of the text. It attributes the Ninevites' repentance to Jonah's preaching.

Some commentators have credited the repentance of the Ninevites, at least partially, to Jonah's previous experience in the great fish's stomach. They base this on Jesus' statement that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32). Jonah was a sign in a twofold sense: His three days and three nights in the fish foreshadowed Jesus' three days and three nights in the grave (Matt. 12:40), and his ministry as a visiting prophet delivering an announcement of impending doom to an evil people under God's judgment previewed Jesus' ministry (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:30, 32).

These same commentators note that the Ninevites worshipped Dagon, which was part man and part fish.⁴ They have also pointed out that the Assyrian fish goddess, Nosh, was the chief deity in Nineveh. Some of them have argued that Jonah came to the city as one sent by Nosh to proclaim the true God.

¹Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," p. 44; and Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 490-91. Cf. Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, pp. 326-27; and A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria*, pp. 169-74.

²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 494.

³See Baxter, 4:173.

⁴E.g., Feinberg, p. 33.

However, the text of Jonah attributes the repentance of the Ninevites primarily to the message that God had given Jonah to proclaim. Whatever the Ninevites may have known about Jonah's encounter with the fish—the text says nothing about their awareness of it—the writer gave the credit to the word (spoken message) of the LORD, not to Jonah's personal background.

One writer saw this text as support for the historic evangelical doctrine of exclusivism in salvation—the teaching that faith in the true God alone saves—and used it to argue against religious inclusivism (pluralism).¹

"God delights to do the impossible, and never more so than in turning men to Himself. Instead, then, of denying on the grounds of its 'human' impossibility the repentance that swept over Nineveh, let us see it as an evidence of divine power. For this, not the episode of the sea monster, is the greatest miracle in the book."²

3:6 Verse 5 could be a general record of the response of the Ninevites, and verses 6-9 a more detailed account of what happened. Even "the king" responded by repenting. "The king of Nineveh" would probably have been the king of Assyria, since Nineveh was a leading city of that empire. Similarly, King Ahab of Israel was called "the king of Samaria" (1 Kings 21:1), King Ahaziah of Israel was called "the king of Samaria" (2 Kings 1:3), and King Ben-hadad of Aram was called "the king of Damascus" (2 Chron. 24:23).

In any event, the writer described this man as "the king of Nineveh." The explanation of this description may be that the focus of Jonah's prophecy was specifically Nineveh (v. 4), not the whole Assyrian Empire. His name, though of interest to us, was unnecessary to the writer.

¹Wayne G. Strickland, "Isaiah, Jonah, and Religious Pluralism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 (January-March 1996):31-32.

²Gaebelein, p. 103.

Who was this king? He was probably one of the Assyrian kings who ruled during or near the regency of Jeroboam II in Israel (793-753 B.C.).¹

ASSYRIAN KINGS CONTEMPORARY WITH JEROBOAM II	
Adad-nirari III	811-783 B.C.
Shalmaneser IV	783-772 B.C.
Ashur-dan III	772-754 B.C.
Ashur-nirari V	754-746 B.C.

Of these perhaps Ashur-dan III is the most likely possibility.²

"... the first half of the eighth century is one of the most poorly documented periods of Assyrian history."³

"There is something affecting in the picture of this Oriental monarch so swiftly casting aside such gorgeous robes and taking the place of the penitent. He had the virtue of not holding back in his approach to God."⁴

"It must be remembered that an Assyrian king, as a syncretist, would hardly wish automatically to deny the validity of any god or any prophet. And does not an outsider often command far more respect than those with whom one regularly deals—even in the case of prophets and other clergy (cf. Melchizedek and Abraham, Gen 14:17-24; Moses and Pharaoh, Exod 5—14; Balaam and

¹See *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1463.

²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 491-97.

³Alexander, p. 123.

⁴Gaebelein, p. 106.

Balak, Num 22—24; the Levite from Bethlehem and the Danites, Judg 17—18; etc.)?"¹

3:7 This verse further describes how seriously the king and his nobles regarded their situation and to what extent they went to encourage citywide contrition. They did not regard their animals as needing to humble themselves but viewed them as expressing the spirit of their owners.

"It is not enough to fast for sin, but we must fast from sin."²

3:8 Clearly the Ninevites connected the impending judgment with their own conduct. They felt that by abandoning their wickedness they could obtain some mercy from God. The Hebrew word translated "violence" (*hamas*) refers to the overbearing attitude and conduct of someone who has attained power over others and misuses it (cf. Gen. 16:5). Assyrian soldiers were physically violent (Nah. 3:1, 3-4; cf. 2 Kings 18:33-35), but so were the Chaldeans (Hab. 1:9; 2:8, 17) and others who, because of conquest, could dominate the conquered. Discrimination against minorities because they are less powerful manifests this sin. We must not forget the violence of our own times and society.

"*Violence*, the arbitrary infringements of human rights, is a term that occurs in the OT prophets especially in connection with cities: urban conglomeration encourages scrambling over others, like caterpillars in a jar."³

This reference to violence recalls Genesis 6:11 and 13. God had previously destroyed the world in Noah's day because it was so violent. Now Jonah became the bearer of a message of judgment on another violent civilization.

¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 491.

²Henry, p. 1146.

³Allen, p. 225.

Decorating horses and other animals has long been a popular practice. In the funeral cortège of President John F. Kennedy a rider-less horse added a poignant touch to the procession.

"By putting sackcloth on the animals as well as on themselves the Ninevites symbolized the unity of man and nature in the humbling and petition."¹

3:9 The Ninevites lived in the ancient Near East, and ancient Near Easterners viewed all of life as under the sovereign control of divine authority: the gods.² Even though they were polytheists and pagans, they believed in some deity of justice who demanded justice of humankind. They also believed that their actions affected their god's actions. This worldview is essentially correct as far as it goes—excluding it polytheism. We should probably not understand the Ninevites' repentance as issuing in conversion to Jewish monotheism. It seems unlikely that all the Ninevites became Gentile followers of Yahweh (cf. 1:16).

"The Ninevites then assumed that one of their gods—it is ultimately immaterial which one they may have thought it to be, or if they found it necessary to make such an identification—was planning to compound their recent troubles by bringing disaster to the city."³

God turning and relenting (Heb. *niham*) would result from His compassion, which the Ninevites counted on when they repented.

"The word **repent** [AV], when used of God, does not denote sorrow for sin. It points rather to a decision on God's part to change his method of dealing with his creatures."⁴

¹G. Herbert Livingston, "Jonah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 848.

²Keil, 1:107.

³Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 494.

⁴Livingston, p. 848. AV refers to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*.

"Though generalities must always be used with caution, we may say that never again has the world seen anything quite like the result of Jonah's preaching in Nineveh."¹

It is amazing that God brought the whole city to faith (in what Jonah said) and repentance through the preaching of a man who did not love the people to whom he preached. Ultimately salvation is of the LORD (2:9). It is not dependent on the attitudes and actions of His servants, though our attitudes and actions affect our condition as we carry out the will of God.

"The book is a challenge to all to hear God's appeal to be like the sailors and the Ninevites in their submissiveness to Yahweh."²

3:10 God noted the genuineness of the Ninevites' repentance in their actions. These fruits of repentance moved Him to withhold the judgment that He would have sent on them had they persisted in their wicked ways. Repentance is essentially a change in one's thinking. Change in one's behavior indicates that repentance has taken place, but behavioral change is the fruit of repentance and is not all there is to repentance (cf. Matt. 3:7-10).

Nineveh finally experienced overthrow in 612 B.C., about 150 years later.

"We may know the character of God only from what he does and the words he uses to explain his actions. When he does not do what he said he would, we as finite men can say only that he has changed his mind or repented, even though we should recognize, as Jonah did (4:2), that he had intended or desired this all along."³

¹Gaebelein, p. 95.

²Allen, p. 189. Cf. 1:6, 14.

³Ellison, "Jonah," pp. 383-84. Cf. Feinberg, p. 37. See also Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113;

"That God should choose to make his own actions contingent—at least in part—upon human actions is no limitation of his sovereignty. Having first decided to place the option of obedience and disobedience before nations, his holding them responsible for their actions automatically involves a sort of contingency. He promises blessing if they repent, punishment if not (cf. Jer 18:7-10). But this hardly makes God dependent on the nations; it rather makes them dependent on him, as is the point of the lesson at the potter's house in Jer 18:1-11, and the point of the mourning decree in Jonah 3:5-9. God holds all the right, all the power, and all the authority."¹

"Helpful also is the analogy of the thermometer. Is it changeable or unchangeable? The superficial observer says it is changeable, for the mercury certainly moves in the tube. But just as certainly it is unchangeable, for it acts according to fixed law and invariably responds precisely to the temperature."²

Notice that in this section of verses (vv. 5-10), the name "God" (Heb. *Elohim*, the Strong One) appears exclusively. However, the name "LORD" (Heb. *Yahweh*, the covenant keeping God) occurs frequently, both earlier and later in the story. Jonah did not present God, and the Ninevites did not fear God, as the covenant-keeping God of Israel, but as the universal Supreme Being. Likewise, God did not deal with the Ninevites as He dealt with His covenant people Israel, but as He deals with all people generally. Thus the story teaches that God will be merciful to anyone, His elect and His non-elect, who live submissively to natural divine law (cf. Gen. (9:5-6).

If such a remarkable turnaround really did occur in Nineveh, why is there no other historical record of it?

and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99.

¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 496.

²Gaebelein, p. 111.

"First of all, the extant records are comparatively few. There are large segments of undocumented history. Second, there was a serious, pronounced bias in recording history that gave only the most favorable of impressions."¹

C. JONAH'S DISPLEASURE AT GOD'S MERCY 4:1-4

The reader might assume that the LORD's deliverance of the Ninevites from imminent doom is the climax of this story. This is not the case. The most important lesson of the book deals with God's people, and specifically God's human instruments, not humanity in general.

"Though Jonah hardly comes across as a hero anywhere in the book, he appears especially selfish, petty, temperamental, and even downright foolish in chap. 4."²

4:1 The Ninevites' repentance and God's withholding judgment from them "displeased Jonah" and made him "angry." He wanted to see this potential enemy of Israel destroyed.

"Jonah finds that the time-fuse does not work on the prophetic bomb he planted in Nineveh."³

In other words, he hoped that the Ninevites would not respond to his call for repentance and that God's judgment would follow.

This is the first clue, after Jonah's initial repentance and trip to Nineveh, that his heart was still not completely right with God. One can do the will of God without doing it with the right attitude, and that is the point of the remainder of the book. The repentance and good deeds of the Ninevites pleased God, but they displeased His representative. They made God happy, but they made Jonah unhappy.

A literal translation of "it greatly displeased Jonah" is: "It was evil to Jonah with great evil." Until now "evil" (Heb. *ra'ah*) described the Ninevites, but now it describes the prophet.

¹Page, p. 265.

²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 502.

³Allen, p. 227.

Jonah now became "evil" in God's eyes, and in need of punishment just as the Ninevites had been (cf. Rom. 2:1). But God showed Jonah the same compassion that He had shown the Ninevites.

"The word but points up the contrast between God's compassion (3:10) and Jonah's displeasure, and between God's turning *from* His anger (3:9-10) and Jonah's turning *to* anger."¹

Jonah here reminds us of the elder brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and of the unmerciful servant in His parable about that person (Matt. 18:23-34). Contrast the Apostle Paul's attitude in Romans 9:1-3.

"... this was perhaps the only revival where the evangelist needed follow-up more than the converts."²

Why did Jonah become so angry? Who was he to complain? He had only recently been very happy that God had saved him from destruction (cf. Matt. 18:23-35). It was not primarily because his announced judgment failed to materialize and so raised questions about his authenticity as a true prophet (cf. Deut. 18:21-22).

"What a strange sort of man was Jonah, to dread the success of his ministry!"³

Almost all prophecies of impending doom in the Bible assume that those being judged will remain unmoved. Even so, in principle, divine punishment is avoidable provided people repent (cf. Jer. 3:22; 18:8; 26:2-6; Ezek. 18:21-22, 30-32; 33:10-15).⁴ Jonah undoubtedly became angry because he wanted God to judge the Ninevites and thereby remove a military threat to the nation of Israel. If he was aware of Hosea

¹Hannah, p. 1470.

²Swindoll, p. 1071.

³Henry, p. 1146.

⁴Pentecost, p. 180.

and Amos' prophecies, he would have known that Assyria would invade and defeat Israel (Hos. 11:5; Amos 5:27).

"Countless numbers of modern-day believers miss much of the joy of being involved in God's wonderful work because of self-centeredness."¹

4:2 To his credit, Jonah told God why he was angry (cf. 2:1; Job); he did not murmur or complain about God. Many believers try to hide their true feelings from God when they think God will not approve of those feelings. Even though the prophet had been rebellious, and still did not share God's compassion, he had a personal relationship with God.

Contrast this prayer with the one in chapter 2. This one is negative and defensive; the former one is positive and praiseful. This one focuses on Jonah, but the former one on God. This one contains no fewer than nine references to "I" or "my" in the Hebrew text.

"The heart of every problem is the problem of the heart, and that's where Jonah's problems were to be found."²

Jonah's motive in fleeing to Tarshish now becomes crystal clear: He was afraid that the Ninevites would repent and that God would be merciful to this ancient enemy of God's people. By opposing the Israelites, their enemies were also opposing Yahweh. This is why a godly man such as Jonah hated the Assyrians so much, and why the psalmists spoke so strongly against Israel's enemies.

"Some dismiss biblical references to God 'relenting' from judgment as anthropomorphic, arguing that an unchangeable God would never change his mind once he has announced his intentions. But both Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13 list God's capacity to 'change his mind' as one of his

¹Page, p. 276.

²Wiersbe, p. 385.

fundamental attributes, one that derives from his compassion and demonstrates his love."¹

Jonah's description of God goes back to Exodus 34:6-7, which is a very ancient revelation of God's character (cf. Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nah. 1:3). "Gracious" (from the Heb. *hen*, grace) expresses God's attitude toward those who have no claim on Him, because they are outside any covenant relationship with Him.² Compassion, one of the themes of this story, is a trait that Jonah recognized in God but did not share with Him as he should have. Merciful (Heb. *hesed*) refers to God's loyal love to those who are in covenant relationship with Him.

The prophet therefore was criticizing God for good qualities that he recognized in God! Jonah wished God were *not so good!*

"It was not simply the case that Jonah could not bring himself to appreciate Nineveh. Rather, to a shocking extent, he could not stand God!"³

"Jonah sees the deferment of judgment on Nineveh as a weakness on God's part and disapproves strongly of sharing the Lord's compassion with the unlovely."⁴

"He was reluctant to go [to Nineveh] because he knew God so well."⁵

Even the best of people, people such as Jonah, wish calamity on the wicked, but God does not (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9).

4:3 Jonah felt so angry that he asked God to take his life (cf. 1:12; 4:8, 9). Elijah had previously made the same request (1 Kings 19:4), but we must be careful not to read Elijah's reasons into Jonah's request. Both prophets obviously became extremely

¹Chisholm, *Handbook of ...*, p. 414. See also Exodus 32:14; and 34:6-7.

²Ellison, "Jonah," p. 385.

³Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 503.

⁴Baldwin, pp. 584-85.

⁵Morgan, *The Unfolding ...*, p. 188.

discouraged. Both evidently felt that what God had done through their ministries was different from what they wanted to see happen. Elijah had wanted to see a complete national revival, but Jonah had wanted to see complete national destruction.

The sinfulness of people discouraged Elijah, whereas the goodness of God depressed Jonah. How could Jonah return to Israel and announce that God was not going to judge the nation that had been such an enemy of the Israelites for so long? God had to teach Elijah to view things from His perspective, and He proceeded to teach Jonah the same thing.

4:4 God did not rebuke Jonah, nor did He ask what right he had to criticize Him. Rather, He suggested that Jonah might not be viewing the situation correctly. God also confronted Job tenderly by asking him questions (cf. vv. 9, 11; Job 38—39). The Jerusalem Bible translation: "Are you right to be angry?" captures the intent of the Hebrew text. Jonah had condemned God for not being angry (v. 2), but now God challenged Jonah for being angry. Jonah was feeling the frustration of not understanding God's actions in the light of His character, which many others have felt (e.g., Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, et al.).

When God's servants become angry because God is as He is, the LORD deals with them compassionately.

D. GOD'S REBUKE OF JONAH FOR HIS ATTITUDE 4:5-9

The LORD proceeded to teach Jonah His ways and to confront him with his attitude problem.

"The object lesson is the key to the interpretation of the book."¹

"... even the smallest of responses by the most wicked and naïve people imaginable motivates God's compassion; how

¹Walton, p. 487.

much more will informed responses by God's chosen people motivate God's compassion in their behalf?"¹

4:5 We might have expected Jonah to leave what so angered him quickly, as Elijah had fled from Israel and sought refuge far from it to the south. Why did Jonah construct a shelter and sit down to watch what would happen to Nineveh? The same Hebrew word for "shelter" (*sukka*) describes the leafy structures that the Israelites made for themselves for the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40-42; Neh. 8:14-18; cf. Mark 9:5). Did Jonah think that judgment might fall anyway, or was he waiting for God to clarify His actions?

Perhaps Jonah hoped that the Ninevites' repentance would evaporate quickly, and that God would then call him to pronounce the judgment that he so wanted to see. He did not know if the Ninevites' repentance would be sufficient to postpone God's judgment (cf. Gen. 18:22-33). Jonah evidently took up residence somewhere on the slopes of the mountains that rise to the east of Nineveh, in order to gain a good view of whatever might happen. Perhaps he expected to witness another spectacular judgment such as befell Sodom and Gomorrah. His shelter proved to be a classroom for the prophet similar to what the town dump had been for Job.

4:6 God continued to demonstrate compassion for Jonah by providing him with a shading plant that relieved the "discomfort" (Heb. *ra'ah*) of the blistering Mesopotamian sun. This is the only time that we read that Jonah was "overjoyed," and it was because he was physically comfortable. His anger grew out of his personal discomfort resulting from God's mercy on the Ninevites.

The Hebrew word *ra'ah*, translated "discomfort" here, is the same word translated "wickedness" where it describes the Ninevites' evil (1:2; cf. 3:8), and "displeased" where it describes Jonah's displeasure over God's decision to spare the

¹Ibid.

city (v. 1). Jonah's attitudes were as evil in God's sight as the Ninevites' actions.

"The reach of God's mercy to the undeserving is a theme that continued to elude Jonah even as he experienced it."¹

It is impossible to identify the exact "plant" that God provided, any more than we can identify the exact "fish" that swallowed Jonah, and it is inconsequential.² Some commentators speculate that it was probably the castor bean plant, which in Mesopotamia grows rapidly to 12 feet tall and has large leaves. W. M. Thomson insisted that it was a gourd:

"... Orientals never dream of training a castor-oil plant over a booth, or planting it for a shade, and they would have but small respect for any one who did."³

Notice also the shift in the name of God in this verse. This is one of the rare appearances of the compound name "LORD God" in Scripture (cf. Gen. 2; 3; et al.). Its use here may help make a transition. God dealt with Jonah as He deals with all humanity in what follows.

4:7 The stress on God's sovereignty continues. God had provided (Heb. *manah*, to appoint, provide, or prepare) a storm, a fish, a plant, and now a worm in order to fulfill His purpose. A different Hebrew word occurred in 1:4 describing the storm. He would next provide a wind (v. 8). Clearly God was manipulating Jonah's circumstances to teach him something. He used large things such as the fish, and small things like the worm. There may be some significance in the chiasmic arrangement of the things that God provided—beginning and ending with natural forces, then animals, with a vegetable (that made Jonah happy) in the middle.

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 1499.

² See Sasson, pp. 291-92.

³ W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 1:97.

4:8 The "scorching east wind" that God provided was the dreaded sirocco. The following description of it helps us appreciate why it had such a depressing effect on Jonah:

"During the period of a sirocco the temperature rises steeply, sometimes even climbing during the night, and it remains high, about 16-22° F. above the average ... at times every scrap of moisture seems to have been extracted from the air, so that one has the curious feeling that one's skin has been drawn much tighter than usual. Sirocco days are peculiarly trying to the temper and tend to make even the mildest people irritable and fretful and to snap at one another for apparently no reason at all."¹

Why did Jonah not move into the city and live there? Apparently he wanted nothing to do with the Ninevites whom he despised so much. He probably still did not know if God would spare Nineveh or destroy it catastrophically. Earlier he had wished to die because, as God's servant, he was not happy with God's will. Now he longed for death because he was unhappy with his circumstances. Divine discipline had brought him to the place where even the loss of a plant affected him so deeply that he longed to die.

"The shoe Jonah wanted Nineveh to wear was on his foot now, and it pinched."²

4:9 God's question here was very similar to His question in verse 4. Was Jonah right—"have a good reason" or justification—"to be angry" about the plant, God asked? Jonah's reply was a strong superlative.³ He felt that strong anger was proper. Evidently Jonah believed that God was not even treating him with the compassion that He normally showed all people, much less His chosen servants.

¹Dennis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, pp. 67-68.

²Allen, p. 233.

³D. Winton Thomas, "Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953):220.

"... it is amazing how slow one can be to own how ill he is doing when he has become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."¹

"The double question in 4:4 and 4:9 ... is unmistakably the key to the book's central message. The climax of the story comes here—not with the repentance of the Ninevites in chap. 3 or at any other point—when God challenges Jonah to recognize how wrong he has been in his bitter nationalism, and how right God has been to show compassion toward the plight of the Assyrians in Nineveh."²

"Jonah feels that he knows best how God works, and he even disregards God's attempts to lead him out of his misconceived presuppositions. Our job is to follow, not to understand, the directions of God as he guides our lives and ministries."³

"When afflicting providences deprive us of our relations, possessions, and enjoyments, we must bear it patiently, must not be angry at God, must not be angry *for the gourd*. It is comparatively but a small loss, the loss of a shadow. That which should especially silence our discontent is that though our gourd be gone our God is not gone."⁴

In this pericope, God was setting the stage for the lesson that He would explain to His prophet shortly.

¹Ironside, p. 217.

²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 435.

³Walton, p. 490.

⁴Henry, p. 1147.

E. GOD'S COMPASSION FOR THOSE UNDER HIS JUDGMENT 4:10-11

The story now reaches its climax. God revealed to Jonah how out of harmony with His own heart the prophet, though obedient, was. He contrasted Jonah's attitude with His own.

"In these last verses the great missionary lesson of the book is sharply drawn: Are the souls of men not worth as much as a gourd? Like Jonah, God's people today are often more concerned about the material benefits so freely bestowed upon us by God than about the destiny of a lost world."¹

4:10 "Compassion" (Heb. *hus*, "concern" NIV, TNIV, CEV, "sorry for" NEB, "pity" AV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV, "upset" NET2, "cared about" HCSB) is the key attitude.² Jonah had become completely indifferent to the fate of the Ninevites. He knew His God well (4:2). Nevertheless, his appreciation for God's love for Israel had evidently so pervaded his life that it crowded out any compassion for these people who lacked knowledge of, and relationship with, Yahweh. Furthermore, Jonah had announced that Israel's borders would expand under King Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25).

To reveal Jonah's lack of compassion to himself, God dealt with him as any ordinary person. He exposed him to the pleasures and discomforts that everyone faces, and He made him see that his theology made him no more compassionate than anyone else. It should have. Knowledge of the sovereign, compassionate God whom He feared should have made Jonah more submissive to God's will, more compassionate toward other people, and more respectful of God.

4:11 God had invested much work in Nineveh and had been responsible for its growth. This is why it was legitimate at the

¹ *The New Scofield ...*, p. 942.

² TNIV refers to *The Holy Bible: Today's International Version*, CEV refers to *The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version*, NEB refers to *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*, NKJV refers to *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, RV refers to *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*, NRSV refers to *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, ESV refers to *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, and HCSB refers to *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

most elementary level for God to feel compassion for its people. Jonah's compassion extended only to a plant but not to people.

"The gourd thou hadst pity on was but one; but the inhabitants of Nineveh, whom I have pity on, are numerous.' ... The gourd which Jonah was concerned for was none of his own; which he made not to grow; but the persons in Nineveh whom God had compassion on were all the *work of his own hands*, he made them, and his they were ... The gourd which Jonah had pity on was of a sudden growth, and therefore of less value; ... but Nineveh is an ancient city, of many ages standing and therefore cannot be so easily given up. ... The gourd which Jonah had pity on perished in a night, it withered, and there was an end of it. But the precious souls in Nineveh that God had pity on are immortal."¹

"It is the choice between gourds or souls."²

"God says to Jonah, 'Jonah, a gourd is nothing.' My friend, I hate to say this, but a pussycat is nothing, a little dog is nothing, but a human being has a soul that is either going to heaven or hell. And God didn't ask you to *love* the lost before you go to them. He said, 'I love the lost, and I want you to go to them.' That is what He is saying to Jonah: 'Jonah, I love the Ninevites.'"³

God's compassion extended not only to plants but even more to people. The "120,000 people"—that God cited as the special objects of His compassion—were probably the entire populace that did not know how to escape their troubles. The expression "do not know the difference between their right

¹Henry, p. 1147.

²J. H. Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, p. 97.

³McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:766.

and their left" is idiomatic, meaning: lacking in knowledge and innocent in that sense (cf. 2 Sam. 19:35; Isa. 7:15-16).¹

"Not to be able to distinguish between the right hand and the left is a sign of mental infancy."²

It would be unusual if this referred only to infants.

"Their inability to discern 'their right hand from their left' must refer to their moral ignorance. Though responsible for their evil deeds and subject to divine judgment (see 1:2), the Ninevites did not have the advantage of special divine revelation concerning the moral will of God. Morally and ethically speaking they were like children."³

We normally have compassion for those with whom we can identify most closely, but God also has compassion on people who are helpless. Spiritually they are those who do not know God, those who are "lost."

"God is saying to a great many people today, 'I want you to go and take the Word of God to those who are lost.' And they say, 'But I don't love them.' God says, 'I never asked you to love them; I asked you to *go*.' I cannot find anywhere that God ever asked Jonah to go because he loved the Ninevites. He said, 'Jonah, I want you to go because I love them. I love Ninevites. I want to save Ninevites. And I want you to take the message to them.'"⁴

People naturally go to one of two extremes in their attitude toward animals. We either look down on them and treat them inhumanely, feeling superior, or we elevate them to the level of persons and grant them rights that they do not possess.

¹Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 507.

²Keil, 1:416.

³Chisholm, *Handbook on ...*, p. 416. Cf. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," pp. 39-40.

⁴McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:766.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals tries to guard us from the first attitude. The "animal rights movement" tends to promote the second attitude. God has compassion on animals as creatures living below the level of humans that need His grace. This should be our attitude to them too (cf. Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8:6-8).

The reference to "animals" concludes the book, and is the final climax of God's lesson to the prophet, and through him to God's people in Israel and in the church. If God has compassion for animals, and He does, how much more should we feel compassion for human beings made in God's image, who are under His judgment because of their sins (cf. 3:8)! We must never let our concern for the welfare of God's people keep us from reaching out with the message of hope to those who oppose us.¹

"It is possible of course, that the animals are mentioned because animals are *ipso facto* innocent and also lack intellectual prowess. Thereby Jonah and the audience would understand that the Ninevites, likewise, are innocent and stupid. But a more likely reason for the mention of animals is that they constitute the middle point in the worth scale upon which the argument of Yahweh is based. That is, the people of Nineveh are of enormous worth. They are human beings (*'dm*), and they are the citizens of the most important city of their day. The animals (*bhmh*) in turn are of less worth, but still significant in the economy of any nation or city. ... The gourd, on the other hand, is of minor worth. ... Jonah has furiously argued for the worth of a one-day-old plant (v 9b). He can have no good argument, then, against the worth of Nineveh, with all its people and animals."²

¹See J. Ronald Blue, *Evangelism and Missions*, pp. 47-55.

²Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 508.

"God's question captures the very intention of the book. The issue is that of grace—grace and mercy. Just as Jonah's provision was the shade of the vine he did not deserve, the Ninevites' provision was a deliverance they did not deserve based upon a repentance they did not fully understand."¹

The book closes without giving us Jonah's response, but that is not the point of the book. Its point is the answer to the LORD's question in verse 11 that every reader must give. Yes, God should have compassion on the hopeless Ninevites, and we should have compassion on people like them too (cf. Luke 15:25-32; Matt. 20:1-16). Only two books in the Bible end with questions, and they both have to do with Nineveh. Jonah ends with a question about God's pity for Nineveh, and Nahum ends with a question about God's punishment of Nineveh.²

"Every hearer/reader may have some Jonah in him or her. All need to reflect on the questions God asks, including the final, specific, 'Should I not spare Nineveh?' (4:11). Anyone who replies 'Why is that such an important question?' has not understood the message. Anyone who replies 'No!' has not believed it."³

"It is not only the unbelievers in the Ninevehs of today who need to repent; it is also we who are modern Jonahs. For no one begins to understand this profound and searching little book unless he discovers the Jonah in himself and then repentantly lays hold upon the boundless grace of God."⁴

"... the tenderness in the heart of God is manifested not only in His compassion for

¹Page, p. 286.

²Wiersbe, p. 386.

³Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 435.

⁴Gaebelein, pp. 126-27.

repenting sinners, but also in His patience with repining saints."¹

"As so often, the effect of this OT book is to lay a foundation upon which the NT can build. 'God so loved the world' is its basic affirmation, which the NT is to conclude with the message of the gift of his Son."²

"Throughout the story the figure of Jonah is a foil to the divine hero, a Watson to Yahweh's Holmes, a Gehazi to Yahweh's Elisha. The greatness and the goodness of God are enhanced against the background of Jonah's meanness and malevolence. Look out at the world, pleads the author, at God's world. See it through God's eyes. And let your new vision overcome your natural bitterness, your hardness of soul. Let the divine compassion flood your own hearts."³

Does this book constitute a call to foreign missionary service? It records God's call of one of His prophets to this type of ministry. However, we must remember that this was a rare ministry in the Old Testament period. Typically, Israel was to be a light to the nations by providing a model theocracy in the Promised Land that would attract the Gentiles to her. They would come to Israel for the knowledge of God that they would take back home with them (e.g., Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Kings 10; Isa. 42:6; Acts 8:26-40).

In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), Jesus changed the basic missionary method by which people are to learn of God. Now God's people are to go into all the world and herald the gospel to everyone, rather than waiting for them to come to us for it. The Book of Jonah shows an Old Testament prophet doing reluctantly what Christians are now to do enthusiastically.

"Both Paul and Jonah were missionaries to the Gentiles, both were cast into the sea, both were witnesses to the sailors on board the boat, and both were used to deliver those sailors

¹Anonymous quotation in Baxter, 4:178.

²Allen, p. 194.

³Ibid.

from death. There are other striking comparisons, which a careful study would reveal [including a trip to and ministry in the leading city of the day]."¹

It was not God's plan that all Old Testament prophets, much less all Israelites, were to do what Jonah did. Nevertheless they were to have a heart of compassion, for those outside the covenant community, and to show them mercy, as this book clarifies (cf. Boaz in the Book of Ruth). Christian missionaries can use the Book of Jonah, therefore, but they should do so by stressing its true message, not by making Jonah's call the main point.

"This book is the greatest missionary book in the Old Testament, if not in the whole Bible. It is written to reveal the heart of a servant of God whose heart was not touched with the passion of God in missions. Does it strike home ...? Are we more interested in our own comfort than the need of multitudes of lost souls ... dying in darkness without the knowledge of their Messiah and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ? Are we more content to remain with the 'gourds,' the comforts of home and at home, than to see the message of Christ go out to the ends of the earth to both Jew and Gentile?"²

¹McGee, *Thru the ...*, 3:740.

²Feinberg, p. 48.

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