

Notes on Jonah

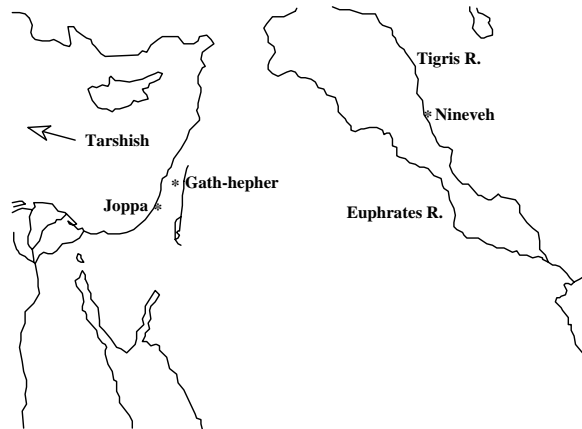
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Introduction

BACKGROUND

Jonah is the fifth of the Minor Prophets (the Book of the Twelve) in our English Bibles. It is unique among the Latter Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi) in that it is almost completely narrative similar to the histories of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17—19; 2 Kings 2:4-6).¹ The exceptional section, of course, is Jonah's psalm in 2:2-9. Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet on record whom God sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance.² He was Israel's foreign missionary whereas Hosea was Israel's home missionary. Both of these prophets revealed 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 Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.; 2 Kings 14:25). Second Kings 14:25 records that Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam II would restore Israel to her former boundaries, which the king did.



It is very probable that God sent Jonah to Nineveh, the capital of the great Assyrian Empire, during the years when that nation was relatively weak. Following the death of King Adad-nirari III in 783 B.C. the nation was not strong again until Tiglath-pileser III seized the throne in 745 B.C.³ 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 less than 100 miles of Nineveh. This vulnerable condition evidently made the king and residents of Nineveh receptive to Jonah's prophetic message to them.

¹As these two predecessors, Jonah also ministered in and to Israel as well as in Phoenicia and Aram.

²Nahum's later ministry to Nineveh consisted of announcing certain overthrow.

³Donald J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979):29-51, argued for a more specific time within this period, namely, during the reign of Assur-dan III (772-755 B.C.).

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, 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.⁴ 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 Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. He feared the people might repent and that God would refrain from punishing Israel's enemy.

DATE AND WRITER

Most critical scholars date this prophecy in the postexilic period during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. They base their opinion on the past tense in 3:3, the size of Nineveh according to that verse, and 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.

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. The compilers of the Old Testament canon probably placed this book among the minor prophets because they believed that Jonah wrote it.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷

The events recorded in the book probably covered only a few months or years at the most. Jonah lived during Jeroboam II's reign (793-753 B.C.). Probably a date of composition somewhere in the neighborhood of 780 B.C. would not be far from the truth.

⁴See *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 1957 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by A. H. Sayce; *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, 1975 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by Elmer B. Smick; and *New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by D. J. Wiseman.

⁵C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:380.

⁶H. L. Ellison, "Jonah," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 362.

⁷See especially Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 308-9. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 432, argued that the writer was not Jonah because the story is so consistently critical of Jonah, more so than any other Bible book is critical of its writer. This argument seems weak to me.

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.⁸ They interpret this book as an allegory or as a parable.

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."⁹ This interpretation may have arisen because "Jonah" means "dove," and the Jews had long regarded the dove as a symbol of their nation (cf. Ps. 74:19; Hos. 11:11).¹⁰ 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. However, it 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 argues for one primary lesson in the story whereas the allegorical interpretation finds meaning in its details too.

Jewish and Christian interpreters believed that the Book of Jonah was historical until the rise of critical scholarship. 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).¹¹

"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 have had as much objective reality as the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ."¹²

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.

⁸Archer has a good discussion and refutation of these arguments on pages 309-15. See also Stuart, pp. 440-42.

⁹R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 911.

¹⁰Indisputably as a dove Jonah brought peace to this violent city.

¹¹Jonah is the only Old Testament character with whom Jesus Christ compared Himself directly. For several comparisons and contrasts see Frank E. Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets*, pp. 122-24. Jesus did refer to other prophets, however, namely, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah, beside quoting and alluding to many others.

¹²Keil, 1:388. J. Vernon McGee, *Jonah: Dead or Alive?* pp. 21-27, argued that Jonah died and God raised him back to life on the basis of Jesus' words about him (Matt. 12:39-40). Most expositors believe that Jesus' prediction does not require that interpretation.

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.¹³ Since such a survival is physically possible, we should not dismiss the historical view, especially since Jesus endorsed Jonah's "resurrection."

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 regard to the design of God to show favour to the Gentiles, and the consequences of their conduct."¹⁴

GENRE

The book is probably a sensational didactic prophetic historical narrative in its literary genre.¹⁵

"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."¹⁶

Many commentators who deny the historicity of the book regard it as a parable with certain allegorical features and its literary tone as parody or satire.¹⁷

PURPOSE

The book is a revelation to God's people of His sovereign power and loving care for all His creatures, even cattle. This revelation came first to Jonah personally and then through him to the Jews. It was not a revelation to the Ninevites. Their responsibility was simply

¹³See 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.

¹⁴Keil, 1:384.

¹⁵Stuart, pp. 435-38. 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.

¹⁶Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, p. 175.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 177-81.

to repent and humble themselves. This revelation should have moved the Israelites to respond as 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."¹⁸

"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."¹⁹

CANONICITY

The earliest extrabiblical reference to this book is in Ecclesiasticus 49:10. There Ben Sira, who lived not later than 190 B.C., referred to "the twelve prophets," namely, the writers of the Minor Prophets books, 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

¹⁸Stuart, p. 479.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 434.

- D. God's rebuke of Jonah for his attitude 4:5-9
- E. God's compassion for those under His judgment 4:10-11

The following outline points out some of the parallels in the story nicely.²⁰

- 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)

²⁰Allen, p. 200. The verse numbers in brackets are those in the Hebrew text.

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 effort.

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 verse open with a conjunction (Heb. *wa*, Eng. "Now"). 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. The books of Judges, 1 Samuel, and Ruth begin the same way and obviously connect with the books that immediately precede them. However what Jonah might have continued is unknown.

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 appears. 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.

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.

There were several unbiblical Jewish traditions about Jonah's origin.²¹ 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.

²¹Ellison, p. 368.

1:2 Nineveh was indeed a great city whose history stretched back as far as Nimrod who built it as well as Babel and several other cities in Mesopotamia (Gen. 10:11-12).²²

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

1:3 Tarshish was the name of a great-grandson of Noah through Noah's son Japheth and Japheth's son 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 Mediterranean coast (cf. 4:2; Isa. 46:19). 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, several such places on the Mediterranean coast bore this name.²³ Therefore it is 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.²⁴ In any case, Jonah sought to flee by ship from Joppa on Israel's Mediterranean coast and to go to some remote destination that lay in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Joppa stood about 35 miles southwest of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom.

Why did Jonah leave Israel? He evidently concluded that if he ran away God would select another prophet rather than tracking him down and making him go to Nineveh. By going in the opposite direction from Nineveh Jonah seems to have been trying to get as far away from the judgment he thought the Lord would bring on that city as possible. In short, he seems to have been trying to run away from the Lord's calling and to preserve his own safety at the same time. This is the only instance in Scripture of a prophet disobeying God's call (cf. Amos 3:8, the typical response).

However it was "the presence of the Lord" localized in the Promised Land, mentioned twice in this verse for emphasis, that Jonah sought to

²²For further description of its greatness, see my comments on 3:3 and 4:11. The word "great" occurs frequently in this book (1:2, 4, 12, 16, 17; 3:2; 4:1, 6, 11).

²³*New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Tarshish," by J. A. Thompson. Similarly several towns along the coastlands of English-speaking nations today bear the name "Portland."

²⁴*Ibid.* This site is about 2500 miles west of Joppa.

escape more than anything. Specifically it was God's influence over him. He probably knew that he could not remove himself from the literal presence of the omnipresent God.

"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)."²⁵

There is a chiasm 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 Tarshish. This structure stresses the fact that Jonah defiantly repudiated God's call.

Perhaps we can appreciate how Jonah felt about his commission if we compare a similar 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. His racial patriotism would have conflicted with his fidelity to God just as Jonah's did.²⁶

"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."²⁷

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, 9).

"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."²⁸

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

1:4 Jonah subjected himself to dangers that Israel and the entire ancient Near East viewed as directly under divine control when he launched out on the sea. The sea to them was the embodiment of the chaotic forces that

²⁵Stuart, p. 466.

²⁶Gaebelein, p. 72.

²⁷Stuart, p. 452.

²⁸Gaebelein, p. 74.

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).

"It was gracious of God to seek out His disobedient servant and not to allow him to remain long in his sin."²⁹

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 obviously of mixed religious conviction. Some of them were probably Phoenicians since Phoenicians were commonly seafaring traders. Phoenicia was a center of Baal worship then. Their 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. His 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 his attitude of "careless self-security."³⁰ 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 of the ship (cf. Amos 6:10).

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 (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.

"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."³¹

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

²⁹Charles L. Feinberg, *Jonah, Micah, and Nahum*, p. 15.

³⁰Keil, 1:393.

³¹Feinberg, p. 16.

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, or even for himself.

Whereas the first pericope 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 antithetical to God's. Such is often the case when God's people turn their backs on Him and run from His assignments.

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. 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."³²

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 Hebrew port. "Hebrew" is the name by which the 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, 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 God made the sea on which they travelled 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

³²Allen, p. 208.

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. 2:8). 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 16.³³

1:10 The sailors' exclamation (rather than question, cf. Gen. 4:10) expressed their incredulity at Jonah's naïveté 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, but they did not then understand that the Lord was the creator of the sea. Had they known this they probably would not have sold him passage. We need to remember that 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 authority 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.³⁴

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 God'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 against persons or if he had accidentally transgressed a law of his God. However, he was guilty of being a servant

³³See Ernst R. Wendland, "Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah (Part 2)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:3 (September 1996):374-75. This article also points out many other structural features of Jonah.

³⁴Gaebelein, p. 79.

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 doublemindedness of the prophet. He could have told them to sail back to Joppa if he 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 resulted in His withholding judgment from them. Still Jonah was not ready to obey God yet. Nonetheless his compassion for the sailors led him to give them a plan designed to release them from God's punishment. It would also 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."³⁵

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."³⁶

1:13 The sailors initially rejected Jonah's advice and compassionately chose to drop him off at the nearest landfall. They strained every 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

³⁵Keil, 1:396.

³⁶Allen, pp. 210-11.

forgiveness from guilt since they anticipated that Jonah would die because of their act. They believed that God's sovereignty was so strongly obvious that He might forgive them. Jonah's innocent death seemed inevitable to them try has 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 their 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. Notwithstanding nothing less than death was what he deserved for sinning against God (Ezek. 18:4, 20).

1:15-16 The immediate cessation of the storm proved to the sailors that Yahweh really did control the sea. Therefore they feared (respected) Him, offered a sacrifice to Him (probably 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."³⁷

These mariners were almost certainly polytheists, so we should not conclude that they abandoned their worship of other gods and "got saved" necessarily. However their spiritual salvation is a possibility. The fact that they made vows to God may point to their conversion.

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.

This story is full of irony. 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."³⁸

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

For the second time in this incident 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 in this story, and that description is general. The text does

³⁷Gaebelein, p. 83.

³⁸Allen, p. 213.

not say that God created this fish out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) nor does what the fish did require such an explanation. We know of many types of fish capable of swallowing a human being whole.³⁹ Occasionally today we hear of someone who has lived for several days in a fish or in some other large animal and has emerged alive.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding 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).

"The numerous attempts made in the past to identify the sort of fish that could have kept Jonah 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 [10])? 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."⁴¹

Significantly God saved Jonah's life by using a fish rather than in 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*) that symbolized both the uncontrollable chaos of the sea and the chaotic forces that only Yahweh could manage (cf. Ps. 74:13-14; 104:26). 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 his cultural ancient Near Eastern context would have impressed his hearers that a great God had sent him to them. It is probably for this reason that God chose to save Jonah by using a great fish.

Here God controlled the traditionally uncontrollable to spare Jonah's life. The God who is great enough to control it 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."⁴²

³⁹Two examples are the sperm whale and the whale shark.

⁴⁰See Harrison, pp. 907-8, or Keil, 1:398, for several such instances. Some Bible students have faulted some commentators for documenting instances of large fish swallowing people who have survived, as if such suggestions slight God's power. They do not necessarily.

⁴¹Stuart, p. 474.

⁴²G. Campbell Morgan, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 69.

"It is the greatness of Israel's God that is the burden of the book."⁴³

Jonah was able to calculate how long he was in the fish after he came out of it. Obviously he lost all track of time inside the fish. The time was 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. He raised Jesus to life so He would be God's instrument in providing salvation for an even larger population of Gentiles and Jews under God's judgment for their sins.

2:1 This is the first mention of Jonah praying. Until now he 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 contributed to his repentance.⁴⁴

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. Jonah prayed it while he was in the fish. Evidently he 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. Jonah's ability to thank God in the midst of his black torture chamber, which pitched him uncontrollably in every direction, shows that he had experienced a remarkable change in attitude (cf. 1:3, 12).

Jonah could have composed this psalm, which contains his prayer, while he was inside the great fish. He may have composed or polished it 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.⁴⁵

⁴³Allen, p. 192.

⁴⁴Some interpreters believe that Jonah's repentance is a type of the repentance of the Jewish remnant that will occur prior to the beginning of the Millennium (e.g., J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 328; Feinberg, pp. 28-29).

⁴⁵John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1467.

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

- 2:2 Jonah, as many others, called to the Lord out of a distressing situation asking for help, and the Lord responded to his entreaty 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).
- 2:3 Jonah saw God's disciplinary hand behind the sailors who had only been His tools in casting the prophet into the sea (cf. Ps. 88:6-7). He also acknowledged that the sea belonged to God (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. 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.
- "He felt he was cast out from the special regard and care which God exercises over His own. Now he realized how dire a thing it is to be apart from the presence of the Lord."⁴⁶
- 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. *suph*, 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 bottoms 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).

⁴⁶Feinberg, p. 25.

2:7 As Jonah was feeling that his life was ebbing away, his thoughts turned to Yahweh (cf. Ps. 107:5; 142:3). 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."⁴⁷

2:8 Jonah proceeded to philosophize a bit. Everyone who makes an idol his or her god abandons the source of his or her loyal love (Heb. *hesed*) by doing so. The source of loyal love is Yahweh. This is true of pagans, but the prophet himself had done the same thing. The idols (lit. 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 loyal love and express his worship of Yahweh with a sacrifice. His sacrifice would have to be thanksgiving though since 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 is 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 a recognition of the fact that God has the right to save whom He will.

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 compassion, praise him for it, and recognize his reliance on Yahweh alone (c. 2 Cor 1:9, 10)."⁴⁸

"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

⁴⁷Allen, p. 218. Cf. Heb. 4:16.

⁴⁸Stuart, p. 479.

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."⁴⁹

Thus 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.

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 dry land. 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.

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.

"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."⁵⁰

"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]."⁵¹

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

⁴⁹Allen, p. 219.

⁵⁰Keil, 1:385.

⁵¹Feinberg, p. 38.

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. God does not always give His servants a second chance to obey Him when they refuse to do so initially. Often He simply uses others to accomplish His purposes. 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.

3:2 Another evidence of God's sovereignty is the Lord's instruction to proclaim the 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.

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

"The point is that Nineveh was a city God was concerned for, one that was by no means insignificant to him."⁵²

3:3 Having learned that he must fulfill the Lord's commission or suffer the most unpleasant consequences, Jonah this time obeyed and travelled east to Nineveh rather than west (cf. 1:3).

The writer's description that Nineveh "was" a great city has led some interpreters to conclude that it was not great when the 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

⁵²Stuart, p. 487.

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.⁵³ Nineveh was at least four times larger (4:11).

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. 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.⁵⁴ Regardless, 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 visit 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.⁵⁵ If Jonah was such an emissary, he went 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 (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 during his first day there.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ The Septuagint has three instead of 40, but there is no justification for the change in the Hebrew text.

⁵³Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, p. 66.

⁵⁴Apparently at this time "Nineveh" referred to (1) the city and (2) a complex of four cities including the city in question. See Keil, 1:390; or Hannah, p. 1468.

⁵⁵Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," p. 38. See also Stuart, pp. 487-88.

⁵⁶Ellison, p. 381; Keil, 1:405.

⁵⁷Periods of testing in Scripture were often 40 days long (cf. Gen. 7:17; Exod. 24:18; 1 Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2).

Note that Jonah's message was an announcement of impending doom, not a call to believe in the God of Israel.⁵⁸ Physical deliverance rather than spiritual salvation was what the people of Nineveh would have wanted.

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.

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.

3:5 The people repented, apparently after only one day of preaching (v. 4), because of the message from God that Jonah had brought to them.⁵⁹ Fasting and wearing sackcloth were signs of self-affliction that reflected an attitude of humility in the ancient Near East (cf. 2 Sam. 3:31, 35; Isa. 58:5; Dan. 9:3). 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 slaves (of God in this case). This attitude and these actions marked all levels of the city's population (i.e., the chronologically old and young, and the socially high and low).

Some commentators believed that two plagues, a severe flood, and 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.⁶⁰ The Ninevites probably viewed these phenomena as indications of divine displeasure, a common reaction in the ancient Near East.⁶¹ However this providential "pre-evangelism" is not the concern of the text. It attributes the Ninevites' repentance to Jonah's preaching.

Some commentators have attributed 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

⁵⁸Jeremiah 18:7-8 explains that prophecies of impending judgment assumed that those under judgment would not repent. If they repented, they might avoid the judgment (cf. Joel 2:12-14).

⁵⁹See 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.

⁶⁰Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," p. 44; Stuart, pp. 490-91.

⁶¹Stuart, p. 494.

(Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32).⁶² They note that the Ninevites worshipped Dagon, which was part man and part fish.⁶³ 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. 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 of the Lord, not to Jonah's personal background.⁶⁴

"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."⁶⁵

3:6 Even the king responded by repenting.⁶⁶ The king of Nineveh would probably have been the king of Assyria since Nineveh was the capital of the empire.⁶⁷ However the writer described this man as the king of Nineveh. The explanation 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.

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.).

⁶²Jonah was a sign in a two-fold sense. His three days and nights in the fish foreshadowed Jesus' three days and nights in the grave (Matt. 12:40), and his ministry as a visiting prophet delivering a call for repentance to an evil people under God's judgment previewed Jesus' ministry (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:30, 32).

⁶³E.g., Feinberg, p. 33.

⁶⁴Wayne G. Strickland, "Isaiah, Jonah, and Religious Pluralism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 (January-March 1996):31-32, saw this text as support for the historic evangelical doctrine of exclusivism in salvation and used it to argue against religious inclusivism (pluralism).

⁶⁵Gaebelein, p. 103.

⁶⁶Verse 5 could be a general record of the response of the Ninevites and verses 6-9 a more detailed account of what happened.

⁶⁷Similarly King Ahab of Israel is the "king of Samaria" (1 Kings 21:1), King Ahaziah of Israel is the "king of Samaria" (2 Kings 1:3), and King Ben-hadad of Aram is the "king of Damascus" (2 Chron. 24:23).

Assyrian Kings Contemporary with Jeroboam II⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

"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."⁷⁰

"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 Balak, Num 22—24; the Levite from Bethlehem and the Danites, Judg 17—18; etc.)?"⁷¹

- 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.
- 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 others. Discrimination against minorities because they are less powerful manifests this sin. We must not forget the violence of our own times and society.

⁶⁸Names and dates are from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1463.

⁶⁹Stuart, pp. 491-97.

⁷⁰Gaebelein, p. 106.

⁷¹Stuart, p. 491.

"*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."⁷²

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.

Decorating horses and other animals has long been a popular practice. In the funeral of President Kennedy a riderless horse added a poignant touch to the procession.

3:9 The Ninevites lived in the ancient Near East that viewed all of life as under the sovereign control of divine authority, the gods.⁷³ Even though they were polytheists and pagans they believed in a god of justice who demanded justice of humankind. They also believed that their actions affected their god's actions. This world view is essentially correct as far as it goes. We should probably not understand their repentance as issuing in conversion to Jewish monotheism. It seems unlikely that all the Ninevites became Gentile proselytes to Judaism (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."⁷⁴

God's turning and relenting would result from His compassion, which the Ninevites counted on when they repented.

"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."⁷⁵

"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."⁷⁶

⁷²Allen, p. 225.

⁷³Keil, 1:107.

⁷⁴Stuart, p. 494.

⁷⁵Gaebelein, p. 95.

⁷⁶Allen, p. 189.

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.⁷⁷ 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."⁷⁸

"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."⁷⁹

"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."⁸⁰

Notice that in this section of verses (vv. 5-10) the name "God" (Heb. Elohim, the strong one) appears exclusively. Earlier and later in the story the name "Lord" (Heb. Yahweh, the covenant keeping God) occurs frequently. 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. His mercy was part of

⁷⁷Repentance 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 the same as repentance (cf. Matt. 3:7-10).

⁷⁸Ellison, 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; and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99.

⁷⁹Stuart, p. 496.

⁸⁰Gaebelein, p. 111.

the "common grace" that He bestows on all people who do right rather than a manifestation of "special grace." Thus the story teaches that God will be merciful to anyone, His elect and His non-elect, who live submissively to natural divine law.

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 the story. This is not the case. The most important lesson of the book deals with God's people and specifically God's 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."⁸¹

4:1 The whole situation displeased Jonah and made him angry, the Ninevites' repentance and God's withholding judgment from them.

"Jonah finds that the time-fuse does not work on the prophetic bomb he planted in Nineveh."⁸²

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 focus 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 angry. A literal translation might be, "It was evil to Jonah with great evil." Until now evil (Heb. *ra'ah*) described the Ninevites, but now it marks the prophet. Consequently Jonah now became evil in God's eyes and in need of punishment as the Ninevites had (cf. Rom. 2:1), but God showed Jonah the same compassion 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."⁸³

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). Almost all prophecies of impending doom in

⁸¹Stuart, p. 502.

⁸²Allen, p. 227.

⁸³Hannah, p. 1470.

the Bible assume that those being judged will remain unmoved. Divine punishment is avoidable provided people repent (cf. Jer. 3:22; 18:8; 26:2-6; Ezek. 18:21-22, 30-32; 3:10-15).⁸⁴ 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 and Amos' prophecies, he would have known that Assyria would invade and defeat Israel (Hos. 11:5; Amos 5:27).

- 4:2 To his credit Jonah told God why he was angry (cf. 2:1; Job). (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 he had a deep and intimate relationship with God.

Jonah's motive in fleeing to Tarshish now becomes known. 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 her 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.

Jonah's description of God goes back to Exodus 34:6-7, a very ancient expression 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.⁸⁵ 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. Lovingkindness (Heb. *hesed*) refers to God's loyal love to those who are in covenant relationship with Him. The prophet was criticizing God for good qualities that he recognized in God. He wished God was 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!"⁸⁶

Even the best of people, people such as Jonah, wish calamity on the wicked, but God does not.

- 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 discouraged. Both evidently felt that what God had done through their ministries was different from what they

⁸⁴Pentecost, p. 180.

⁸⁵Ellison, p. 385.

⁸⁶Stuart, p. 503.

wanted to see happen. Elijah had wanted to see a complete national revival, but Jonah had wanted to see judgment on Israel's enemies. 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 godly 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 God. Rather, He suggested that Jonah might not be viewing the situation correctly. The Jerusalem Bible's translation, "Are you right to be angry?" captures the intent of the Hebrew text. Jonah was feeling the frustration of not understanding God's actions in the light of His character that many others have felt (e.g., Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, et al.). God dealt with this servant compassionately as usual.

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.

- 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?⁸⁷ Did he think that judgment might fall anyway, or was he waiting for God to clarify His actions? Perhaps he 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. Jonah did not know if the Ninevites' repentance would be sufficient to postpone God's judgment. He evidently took up residence somewhere on the slopes of the mountains that rise to the east of Nineveh 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 manifest compassion for Jonah by providing him with a shading plant that relieved the discomfort of the blistering Mesopotamian sun. This is the only time that we read that Jonah was happy, and it was because he was physically comfortable. His anger grew out of his personal

⁸⁷The same Hebrew word (*sukka*) for shelter 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).

discomfort resulting from God's mercy on the Ninevites. It is impossible to identify the exact plant that God provided, and it is inconsequential.⁸⁸

Notice the shift in the name of God again from Yahweh to Elohim 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 to fulfill His purpose.⁸⁹ He would provide a wind (v. 8). Clearly God was manipulating Jonah's circumstances to teach him something. He uses large things such as the fish and small things like the worm.⁹⁰
- 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."⁹¹

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.

⁸⁸Many commentators speculate that it was probably the castor bean plant, which in Mesopotamia grows rapidly to 12 feet tall and has large leaves.

⁸⁹A different Hebrew word occurs in 1:4 describing the storm.

⁹⁰There 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.

⁹¹Dennis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, pp. 67-68.

"The shoe Jonah wanted Nineveh to wear was on his foot now, and it pinched."⁹²

4:9 God's question here was very similar to His question in verse 4. Was Jonah right to be angry about the plant, God asked? Jonah's reply was a strong superlative.⁹³ 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.

"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."⁹⁴

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

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.

Compassion (Heb. *hus*, concern [NIV], be sorry for [NEB], pity [RSV, RV]) is the key attitude. 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. To reveal his lack of compassion to him God dealt with him as any ordinary person. He exposed him to the pleasures and discomforts that everyone faces and made him see that his theology made him no more compassionate than anyone else. It should have. Knowledge of a 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.

God had invested much work in Nineveh and had been responsible for its growth. This is why it was legitimate at the most elementary level for God to feel compassion for its people. Jonah's compassion extended only to a plant but not to people. God's compassion extended not only to plants but also to people. The 120,000 people that God cited as the

⁹²Allen, p. 233.

⁹³D. Winton Thomas, "Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953):220.

⁹⁴Stuart, p. 435.

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 and left hand" is idiomatic meaning lacking in knowledge and innocent in this sense (cf. 2 Sam. 19:35; Isa. 7:15-16).⁹⁵

"Not to be able to distinguish between the right hand and the left is a sign of mental infancy."⁹⁶

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."

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. 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.

"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 (*bhnh*) 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."⁹⁷

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,

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 507.

⁹⁶Keil, 1:416. It would be unusual if this referred only to chronological infants, however.

⁹⁷Stuart, p. 508.

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).

"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."⁹⁸

"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."⁹⁹

"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.

"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."¹⁰⁰

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 were to learn of God. Now we 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. It was not God's plan that all Old Testament prophets, much less all Israelites, were to do what he 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. 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.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 435.

⁹⁹Gaebelein, pp. 126-27.

¹⁰⁰Allen, p. 194.

"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, dear reader? Are we more interested in our own comfort than the need of multitudes of lost souls in Israel 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?"¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹Feinberg, p. 48.

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