

# Jonah

God's Compassion on Gentiles					
Disobeys Missionary Mandate			Obeys Missionary Mandate		
Chapters 1–2			Chapters 3–4		
God's Mercy on Jonah			God's Mercy on Nineveh		
The Great Sea			The Great City		
Commissioning 1:1-2	Disobedience 1:3	Consequences 1:4–2:10	Recommissioning 3:1-2	Obedience 3:3-4	Consequences 3:5–4:10
“Go!”	“No!”	“So Row!” “Lo!”	“Go!”	“Yo!”	“Whoa!” “Oh No!”
Jonah's * Perversity Chapter 1		Jonah's Prayer Chapter 2	Jonah's Preaching Chapter 3		Jonah's Pouting Chapter 4
Jonah Wants to Die		Jonah Wants to Live	Jonah Wants to Live		Jonah Wants to Die
c. 760 BC					

**Key Word:** Compassion

**Key Verse:** "[Jonah] prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' (4:2).

**Summary Statement:**

Jonah's disobedient indifference towards Nineveh symbolizes Israel's same sin and depicts God's sovereignty and compassion over Gentiles to remind Israel of its missionary purpose.

**Application:**

Responding to God's heart means catching His heart for the lost.

\* This row taken from Eugene Merrill, *A Historical Survey of the OT*, 271

# Jonah

## Introduction

- I. **Title** The name Jonah (יֹנָתָן *yonah*) means "dove" (BDB 401d; 402a). This same dove metaphor symbolizes Israel in the Old Testament (cf. Hosea 7:11; 11:11; Psalm 74:19) since the experience of Jonah the prophet (dove) represents the entire nation of Israel (also a dove).

## II. Authorship

- A. External Evidence: The only verse outside the book of Jonah itself that mentions the prophet is 2 Kings 14:25. It states that Jonah had correctly prophesied that during the reign of Jeroboam II Israel's borders would once again expand from Hamath in the north to the Sea of Arabah (Dead Sea) in the south. It also reveals Gath Hopher, a small town three miles north of Nazareth, as Jonah's hometown.
- B. Internal Evidence: The book nowhere states that Jonah is the author, and some have supposed that he could not have penned the writing since he is referred to in the third person (1:3, 5, 9, 12; 2:1; 3:4; 4:1, 5, 8-9). This argument ignores the fact that third person autobiographies were common in ancient times and practiced by Moses for entire books in which he is included (e.g., Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and by Daniel and Isaiah in portions of their prophecies (e.g., Isa. 37:21; 38:1; 39:3-5; Dan. 1:1-7:1). As the book contains little about the admirable qualities of the prophet, Jonah must be commended for recording such a faithful autobiographical work!

## III. Circumstances

- A. Date: Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25; 782-753 BC), making him a contemporary of Amos. Critics claim that the work comes from the fifth to third centuries (see "Characteristics" section below, point D), but this assumes an anonymous author writing of a fictional Jonah. This is unacceptable as Christ Himself supported the historical accuracy of the book (cf. Matt. 12:39-41). He probably wrote during the end of Jeroboam's reign (ca. 760 BC) when Jonah's popularity was high from his fulfilled prophecy about Israel's expansion (2 Kings 14:25).
- B. Recipients: Jonah recorded his autobiographical account for the benefit of the self-sufficient northern kingdom, of which he was part. However, this message for Israel had strong implications for the southern kingdom and the present time as well.
- C. Occasion: The time of Jeroboam II saw great expansion to reclaim former borders (see "External Evidence" above) since Assyria, the ruling power, was in temporary decline due to internal dissension. These factors resulted in a narrow, nationalistic focus in Israel, which enjoyed its prosperity. Unfortunately, Jewish nationalism contributed to its religious decline and blinded God's covenant people from seeing beyond their own borders to other peoples who needed to know the God of Israel. The least of those whom Israel cared about was the ruthless Assyrians, whose cruelty had become legendary. Through Jonah, the people of God learned that God remained the God of the nations as well as of Israel. Inclusion of the Gentiles in God's program was not a new concept to Israel at this time (cf. Gen. 9:27; 12:3; Lev. 19:33-34; 1 Sam. 2:10; Isa. 2:2; Joel 2:28-32), but the shortsightedness of the nation nevertheless needed a sharper focus on God's compassion for all.

## IV. Characteristics

- A. All prophetic writings record what God said through the *words* of a prophet, but Jonah is unique in that it records what God intended to communicate through the *experiences* of a prophet. The story of what happens to Jonah is the message of the book itself (LaSor, 347),

and this remains the only narrative prophetic writing. However, God has the first (1:1-2) and the last word (4:11), and Jonah is not the principal person in the book—God is.

- B. Jonah is the only prophet in Scripture who attempted to run from God. In fact, the book is unique among writings in Scripture in that of all people and things in the book—the storm, the lots, the sailors, the fish, the Ninevites, the plant, the worm, and the east wind—only Jonah himself failed to obey God.
- C. Jonah is the only entire biblical book emphasizing Israel's response to the Gentile nations.
- D. The historicity of Jonah has been denied by many scholars who have difficulty: (1) swallowing a story about one actually living for three days in a great fish (1:17), (2) believing that Nineveh was so large it had 120,000 inhabitants (4:11), and (3) supposing that all of Nineveh really repented (3:5f.). Two such skeptics both posit a postexilic date of 400 to 200 BC rather than the ninth century BC as is argued above under “Date”:



"For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, and smelling like fish! ... And what story have I got to swallow this time?"

"The story of the willful prophet is one of the best known and most misunderstood in the Old Testament: an occasion for jest to the mocker, a cause of bewilderment to the literalist believer but a reason for joy to the critic.... What an exaggerated idea of the greatness of Nineveh the author had!.... And what a wonderful result followed his preaching! The greatest prophets in Israel had not been able to accomplish anything like it.... We are in wonderland! Surely this is not the record of actual historical events, nor was it ever intended as such. It is a sin against the author to treat as literal prose what he intended as poetry" (Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jonah*, ICC, 3-4).

"Its [the city of Nineveh] colossal size in 3:3 reflects the exaggerated tradition echoed by the fourth-century Ctesias rather than literal fact" (Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT, 186).

What can be said in response to these doubts?

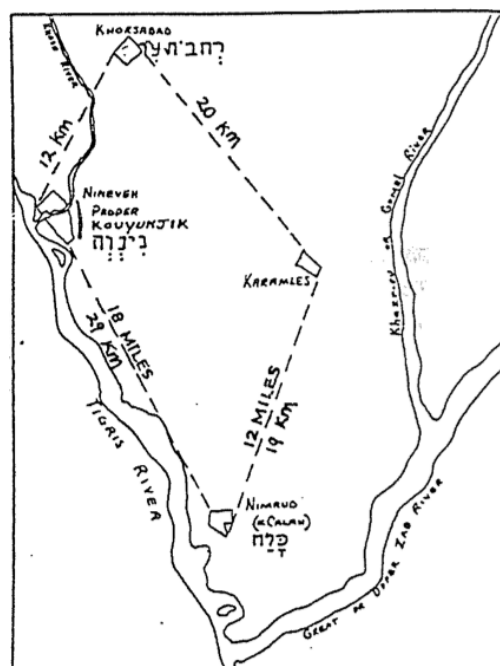
1. There have been several documented accounts of people who have been actually swallowed by large fish or whales and lived.
  - a. Sperm whales have swallowed 15-foot sharks (Frank T. Bullen, *Cruise of the Chachalot Round the World after Sperm Whales*. London, Smith, 1898).
  - b. "Others have written that whale sharks (the *Rhineodon Typicus*) have swallowed men who were later found alive in the sharks' stomachs" (John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1463).
  - c. Two accounts (one in 1758 and the other in 1771) have documented that a man was swallowed by a whale and vomited up shortly after with only minor injuries. See 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): 6-8.
  - d. "One of the most striking instances comes from Francis Fox, *Sixty Three Years of Engineering* (pp. 298-300), who reports that this incident was carefully investigated by two scientists (one of whom was M. DeParville, the scientific editor of the *Journal Des Debats* in Paris). In February 1891, the whaling ship *Star of the East* was in the

vicinity of the Falkland Islands, and the lookout sighted a large sperm whale three miles away. Two boats were lowered, and in a short time, one of the harpooners was enabled to spear the creature. The second boat also attacked the whale, but was then upset by the lash of its tail, so that its crew fell into the sea. One of them was drowned, but the other, James Bartley, simply disappeared without a trace. After the whale was killed, the crew set to work with axes and spades, removing the blubber. They worked all day and part of the night. The next day, they attached some tackle to the stomach, which was hoisted on deck. The sailors were startled by something in it which gave spasmodic signs of life, and inside was found the missing sailor, doubled up and unconscious. He was laid on the deck and treated to a bath of seawater, which soon revived him. At the end of the third week, he had entirely recovered from the shock and resumed his duties . . . His face, neck, and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment. Bartley affirms that he probably would have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not through lack of air" (Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 302).

Unfortunately, despite the wide circulation of this story, it is false as: (a) James Bartley never sailed on this ship, (b) the *Star of the East* was not a whaler (c) whaling near the Falkland Islands did not begin until 1909, and (d) the captain's wife denied that a man was ever thrown overboard on her husband's ship (Edward B. Davis, "A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalist Fish Stories," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 43 [December 1991]: 224-37).

2. That it took three days to walk around Nineveh (3:3) with such a large population is also questioned. Hannah, an evangelical (*BKC*, 1:1463), cites the critics' argument: "True, the circumference of Nineveh's inner wall, according to archeologists, was less than eight miles. So the diameter of the city, less than two miles, was hardly a three-day journey. (One day's journey in the open territory was usually about 15-20 miles.)" However, this can also be explained in one of two ways:
  - a. "The great city of Nineveh" (1:2; 3:2; cf. 4:11) almost surely included three other towns in the vicinity as well. Four cities (Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen) are mentioned in Genesis 10:11-12 as "the great city" and are called Kouyunjik, Khorsbad, Nimroud, and Karamles today. This can be observed on the following map by Austin Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2:40.

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- b. If one remains unconvinced about the four-city theory, then he can also realize that since Jonah stopped along the way as he preached through the city (3:3-4), it is not unreasonable that such a trip would take three days.
3. The historicity of Jonah's experience is supported by other factors:
  - a. Jesus Himself confirmed the fact that Nineveh did indeed repent as the Book of Jonah records (Matt. 12:40-41). Those who deny that such was possible contend with the Lord, who affirmed the validity that Jonah was indeed a historical figure.
  - b. That Jonah served as a type of Christ also supports its historicity, as "if the antitype was historical, then the type must also have been historical" (Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 302).
  - c. Known cities are mentioned in the book, including Nineveh (1:2; 3:2-4, 6-7; 4:11), Tarshish (1:3; 4:2), and Joppa (1:3).
  - d. Jonah is viewed as a historical figure from Gath Hepher (2 Kings 14:25) who lived during the reign of another historical figure, Jeroboam II.
  - e. Considering Jonah as nonliteral (a parable, allegory, or fiction) places its literary form out of character in comparison with the other prophetic books, which all record literal, historical prophets.

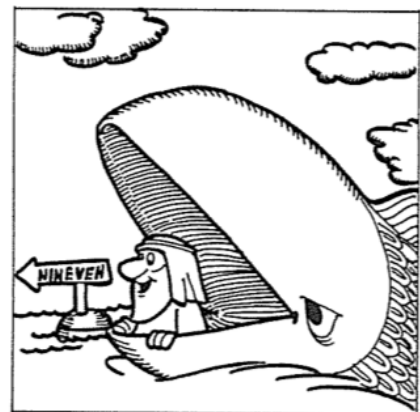
## Argument

The actions of Jonah depicted the actions of the entire nation of Israel. As Jonah disobeyed God in his lack of concern for the nations (chs. 1–2), so had Israel. Further, as Jonah brought the message of God to Nineveh and learned that God's compassion extends towards Gentiles (chs. 3–4), so must Israel. Throughout the book, God demonstrates His sovereign means of accomplishing His purposes to remind Israel of its missionary purpose among the nations.

## Synthesis

God's compassion for Gentiles

1–2	Disobeys missionary mandate
1:1–2	Commissioning
1:3	Disobedience
1:4–2:10	Consequences
1:4–16	Storm–judgment
1:17–2:10	Fish–deliverance
3–4	Obeys missionary mandate
3:1–2	Recommissioning
3:3–4	Obedience
3:5–4:10	Consequences
3:5–10	Nineveh spared
4	Jonah angry



## Outline

### Summary Statement for the Book

**Jonah's disobedient indifference towards Nineveh symbolizes Israel's same sin and depicts God's sovereignty and compassion over Gentiles to remind Israel of its missionary purpose.**

**I. Jonah's disobedience to God's call to preach to Nineveh and deliverance by a fish depict Israel neglecting its missionary call and God's compassion towards them (Chs. 1–2).**

- A. God commissions Jonah to preach against Nineveh, illustrating His missionary mandate for Israel to share His compassionate love with the nations (1:1-2).
- B. Jonah disobeys God's commission as a picture of the failure of the nation to carry out its missionary mandate (1:3).
- C. The consequences of Jonah's disobedience reveal both the difficulties Israel faces for spurning God's call and God's compassion towards His wayward people (1:4–2:10).
  - 1. The great storm is God's sovereign way to discipline Jonah for rejecting His call and pictures the difficulties Israel undergoes for spurning His call (1:4-16).
    - a) God sends Jonah a great storm as His sovereign discipline for rejecting His call to show Israel's trials for rejecting its missionary call (1:4-5a).
    - b) Jonah complacently sleeps through the travail until awakened to illustrate Israel's apathy towards God's call and its consequences (1:5b-6).
    - c) The sailors correctly blame Jonah for divine wrath to rebuke Israel, whose Gentile neighbors saw divine discipline on the apathetic nation (1:7-9).
    - d) God spares the sailors' lives when they throw Jonah overboard to picture His mercy on Gentiles despite the unfaithfulness of His people (1:10-16).

**Parallels Between Jonah 1 and Jonah 2<sup>1</sup>**

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

- 2. The fish shows God's sovereign and merciful deliverance of Jonah to show the thankful response that indifferent Israel should have for His mercy (1:17–2:10).
  - a) God provides a great fish as a mercy to deliver Jonah to picture His mercy on Israel, even in its indifference to its missionary mandate (1:17).
  - b) Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving for being delivered by the fish instructs Israel to thank God for His mercy in sparing the disobedient nation (2:1-9).
  - c) The fish vomits Jonah to show how God sovereignly uses even nature to motivate His people to fulfill their missionary mandate (2:10).

<sup>1</sup> John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1467.

**II. Jonah's obedience to God's second commission and Nineveh's belief demonstrate God's compassion received by faith, prompting Israel to share His love (Chs. 3–4).**

- A. God commissions Jonah again to preach against Nineveh as an illustration of His second opportunity for Israel to share His compassionate love with the nations (3:1-2).
- B. Jonah obeys God's commission as a picture of the need for the nation to carry out its missionary mandate (3:3-4).
- C. The results of Jonah's obedience reveal God's great compassion on all peoples who trust Him so that Israel would share the undeserved mercy of God to all (3:5–4:10).
  - 1. God spares Nineveh from destruction due to the repentance of the people and the king, demonstrating God's compassion on all who trust Him (3:5-10).
    - a) The *people's repentance* in their belief, fasting, and sackcloth reminds Israel that Gentiles can turn to God if they will be His instrument (3:5).
    - b) The *king's repentance* goes beyond the people by fasting from drink and including animals to show the extent feasible when Israel obeys its call (3:6-9).
    - c) The *repentance of God* in response to the obvious belief of Nineveh shows to Israel His great compassion upon all peoples who trust Him (3:10).
  - 2. Jonah is angry about God's compassion for Nineveh, but God shows His mercy so Israel will share His compassion with the nations (Ch. 4).
    - a) Jonah's anger over God delivering Nineveh symbolizes how Israel knows God's compassion and should extend it to Gentiles (4:1-5).
    - b) God's answer with a vine reaffirms His sovereign and undeserved actions to Jonah, showing Israel how all nations can receive it by faith (4:6-10).

**Events Leading to Nineveh's Repentance in 758 BC**

Pagan peoples see bad omens in political and natural phenomena (e.g., plagues, eclipses). These calamities, along with recent worship of only one God, would have made the city of Nineveh very receptive to Jonah's message of judgment!

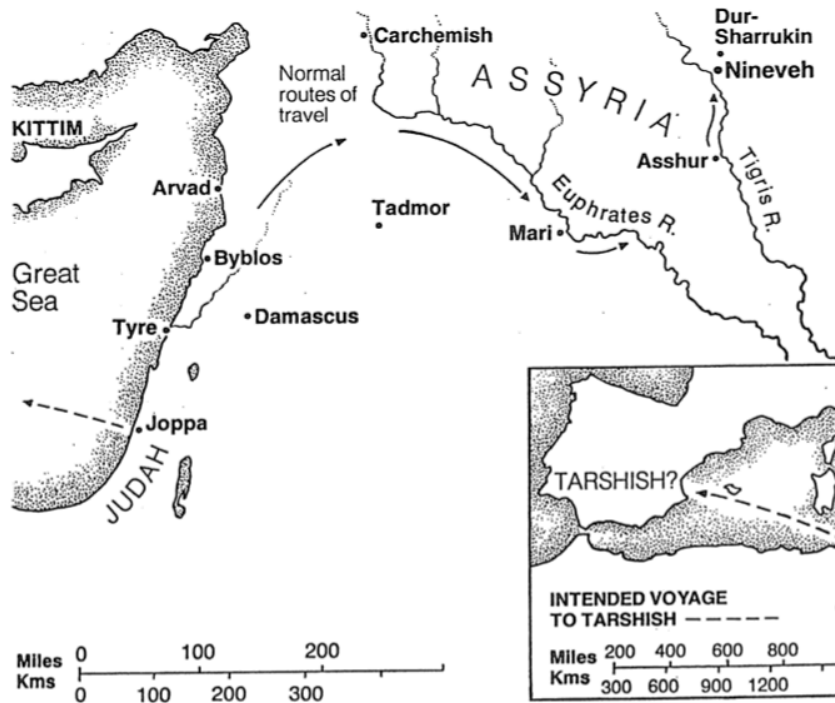
**BC Event in Assyria**

787	Monotheistic worship of Nabu started
765	Plague throughout Assyria
763	Revolt in the city of Asshur
763	Eclipse of the sun
762	Revolt in the city of Asshur
761	Revolt in the city of Arrapha
760	Revolt in the city of Arrapha
759	Another plague
758	"Peace in the land" (repentance under Jonah?)

## Geography of Jonah's Flight

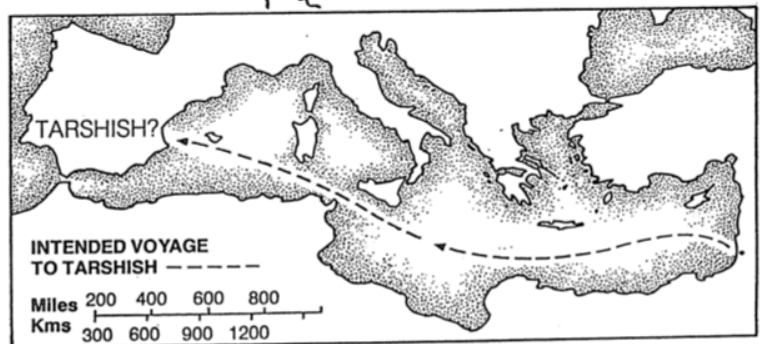
*The Bible Visual Resource Book, 151*

### The Book of Jonah



Nineveh and Tarshish represented opposite ends of the Levantine commercial sphere in ancient times.

The story of Jonah extends to the boundaries of OT geographic knowledge and provides a rare glimpse of seafaring life in the Iron Age. Inscriptions and pottery from Spain demonstrate that Phoenician trade linked the far distant ends of the Mediterranean, perhaps as early as the 12th century B.C.





## Kings and Geography of Assyria

### Kings of Assyria in the Middle and New Assyrian Kingdoms

Ashur-uballiṣ I	1365-1330	Shamshi-Adad V	824-811
Enlil-nirāri	1329-1320	Adad-nirāri III	811-783
Arik-dēn-ili	1319-1308	Shalmaneser IV	783-772
Adad-nirāri I	1307-1275	Ashur-dan III	772-754
Shalmaneser I	1274-1245	(Jonah preached to the Ninevites in this king's reign.)	
Tukulti-Ninurta I	1244-1208	Ashur-nirāri V	754-746
Ashur-nādin-apli	1207-1204	Tiglath-Pileser III (Pul)	745-727
Ashur-nirāri III	1203-1198	(This king attacked Israel and Aram.)	
Enlil-kudurri-uṣur	1197-1193	Shalmaneser V	727-722
Ninurta-apil-Ekur	1192-1180	(This king besieged Samaria for three years, 725-722 and destroyed it in 722.)	
Ashur-dan I	1179-1134	Sargon II	722-705
Ashur-rēsha-ishi	1133-1116	(This king engaged in mopping-up operations in Samaria in 721 after Shalmaneser V died in 722.)	
Tiglath-Pileser I	1115-1077	Sennacherib	705-681
Ashared-apil-Ekur	1076-1075	Esarhaddon	681-669
Ashur-bēl-kala	1074-1057	Ashurbanipal	669-626
Eriba-Adad II	1056-1055	(Nahum wrote of the fall of Nineveh in the reign of this king.)	
Shamshi-Adad IV	1054-1051	Ashur-etil-ilāni	626-623
Ashurnasirpal I	1050-1032	Sin-shar-ishkun	623-612
Shalmaneser II	1031-1020	Ashur-uballiṣ II	612-609
Ashur-nirāri IV	1019-1014		
Ashur-rabi II	1013-973		
Ashur-rēsha-ishi II	972-968		
Tiglath-Pileser II	967-935		
Ashur-dan II	935-912		
Adad-nirāri II	912-889		
Tukulti-Ninurta II	889-884		
Ashurnasirpal II	883-859		
Shalmaneser III	859-824		

New  
Dynasty

Strong  
Kings

(This king attacked Israel and received tribute from Jehu, king of Israel.)

Bible Knowledge Commentary, 1:1463

weaker  
kings -  
Period of  
decline

758 BC Jonah



Bible Knowledge Commentary, 1:1465

## Literary Parallels in the Book of Jonah

Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Literary Genre of Luke-Acts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 71-72

As an illustration of this tendency in the literature of Israel and Judaism we may focus upon the book of Jonah because here in the Near East we find patterns that are very close to those discerned in Luke-Acts. Building upon the work of a number of other scholars,<sup>50</sup> George M. Landes points out that one of the most remarkable features of the book of Jonah is the construction of the narrative into two parts, each roughly parallel to the other.<sup>51</sup>

1:17	The focus shifts to Jonah.	4:1-11	The focus shifts to Jonah.
2:10	Jonah is spared.	4:1	Jonah is angry because Nineveh is spared.
2:1	Jonah prays.	4:2a	Jonah prays.
2:2-6a	He refers back to his distressing situation in the deep.	4:2a	He refers back to his distressing situation in Palestine.
2:6b-7	He asserts God's merciful deliverance.	4:2b	He asserts the mercy of God that leads to deliverance.
2:8	He draws an insight from this deliverance: idolators forsake the one who loves them.	4:2a	He draws an inference from the thought that God may save Nineveh: he must flee to Tarshish.
2:9	Jonah's response to Yahweh: worship with sacrifices and vows.	4:3	Jonah's response to Yahweh: a plea for death.
2:10	Yahweh's response to Jonah: he acts so that the prophet may respond favorably to the divine mission, still to be accomplished.	4:4-11	Yahweh's response to Jonah: he acts so that the prophet may respond favorably to the divine mission, already accomplished.

Moreover, Landes points out that chs. 1 and 2 exhibit several parallel motifs.

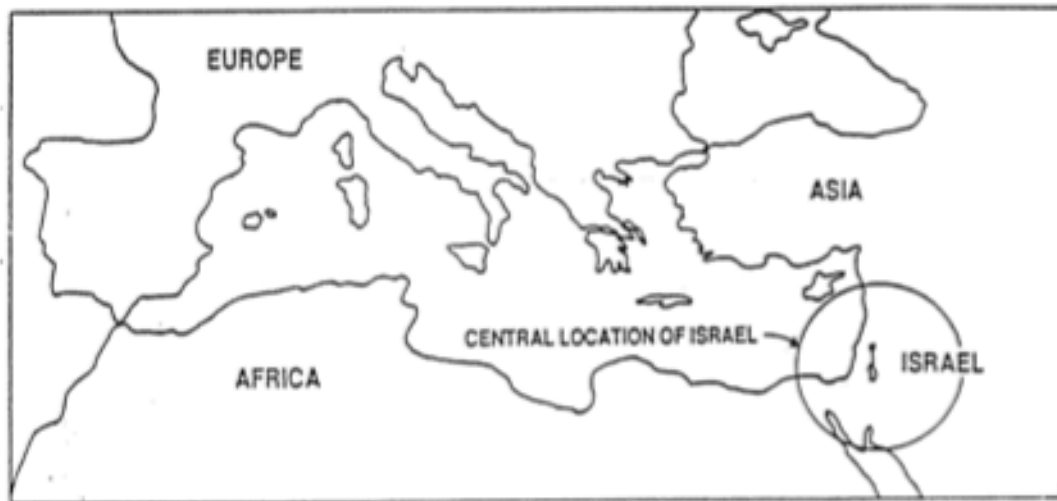
1:4	Crisis situation: threatened by destruction by a storm.	2:3	(cf. 1:15) Crisis: threatened drowning in the sea.
1:14	The sailor's response to the crisis: prayer, ultimately to Yahweh.	2:2	Jonah's response to the crisis: prayer to Yahweh.
1:15b	Yahweh's reaction to the sailor's prayer: deliverance from the storm.	1:17; 2:6b	Yahweh's reaction to Jonah's prayer: deliverance from death in the sea.

In addition to Landes' study, R. Pesch<sup>52</sup> has recently shown that the first chapter of Jonah is arranged in a balanced fashion with an inverted order, as may be seen in the following scheme:

- A- vss. 4, 5a The sailors are afraid: the sea rages.
- B- vs. 5a, b The sailors cried to their gods.
- C- vss. 5b, c, 6a Attempts to save the ship.
- D- vs. 6a, b Jonah is exhorted to help.
- E- vs. 7a The sailors ask the cause of their plight.
- F- vs. 7b The lot fell upon Jonah.
- G- vs. 8 Jonah is asked to explain.
- H- vss. 9, 10a I fear Yahweh, the creator.
- G- vs. 10a, b Jonah is asked to explain.
- F- vs. 10c They knew Jonah was fleeing from Yahweh.
- E- vs. 11 The sailors ask Jonah the remedy to their plight.
- D- vs. 12 Jonah gives instructions that will help.
- C- vs. 13 Attempts to save the ship are in vain.
- B- vs. 14 The sailors cry to Yahweh.
- A- vss. 15, 16a The sea ceased from its raging: the sailors feared Yahweh.

## Israel's Privileges & Responsibilities

Jonathan Lewis, ed., *World Mission: Part One* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1987)



## Repetition of Key Words in Jonah (1 of 4)

Fretheim, Norman  
The Message of Jonah. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977.

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34:1-17). These prophecies tended to exalt the place of Israel in God's future at the expense of all the other nations of the world. The author of Jonah thus condemns a religio-national pride in some of his contemporaries.

This interpretation fails to recognize a number of matters, however. The complete absence of any reference to prophecy in the book (see Chapter II above) should make one hesitant in saying that a fundamentally prophetic conflict is being addressed. Moreover, such an understanding assumes a reasonably secure people, confident that all will be well with their future (see Amos 5:18-20). But we have seen (Chapter II above) that the book reveals an audience *lacking* in self-confidence, quite uncertain about what God has in store for them. The book thus addresses those for whom such optimistic prophecies had seemingly *failed*. Also, we have seen (Chapter I above) that there is no radical Israel/heathen dichotomy in the book.

Finally, this perspective fails to see that the interpretation of Jonah's prophecy in 2 Kings 14 is a highly positive one. There is, moreover, no comparable evidence that his prophetic work in the time of Jeroboam was given a negative assessment. It is thus probable that the author uses the figure of Jonah in the positive sense represented in 2 Kings 14:24-27. The highly compassionate activity of God toward Israel (14:26) and his refusal to blot out Israel's name (14:27) in spite of Israel's persistent sinfulness (14:24) indicates clearly that God has had a *more than just* pity for Israel in the past. If God had dealt with Israel as she had deserved to be dealt with, she would have perished long ago (see Isaiah 48:9).<sup>3</sup>

The author's use of Jonah as the focal point for his message to his people would thus have served to recall this picture of God's gracious dealings with Israel in the past. The point for his audience would thus have been clear: If God has been more than just with Israel in the past, Israel (Jonah) should be able to understand God's dealings with the Ninevites more clearly than she has. God relates himself to people in ways that go beyond any

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simple system of justice. And he expects Israel to do the same. Sharpening this reason for choosing the figure of Jonah is the fact that Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom, Israel. Israel was destroyed by Assyria, whose capital was Nineveh, less than fifty years after Jonah's prophetic career (in 721 B.C.). Now, from the perspective of a later generation, it was seen that Jonah, who had announced the greatness of Israel's future under Jeroboam II, was called upon to offer a future to the very country that was later to put an end to Israel. As we have seen, how can God be just, if he offers life to the wicked Ninevites, when he had destroyed Israel (which was certainly no more wicked)? Was not God being inconsistent?

These factors would seem to be sufficient reason for the choice of Jonah (and possibly, a story about Jonah) to speak to a generation like the one we have described (see above, Chapter II).

Finally, it has been suggested that the meaning of the Hebrew names Jonah and Amittai may have been important for the author.<sup>4</sup> Amittai means "truthfulness" or "faithfulness." An ironic point may be intended. Jonah as the son of truth abandons his faithfulness again and again.

Jonah means "dove," a metaphor sometimes used for Israel in the Old Testament (see Hosea 7:11, 11:11; Psalm 74:19). Thus Jonah = dove = Israel. This may have been a way for the author to make more transparent the fact that Jonah represents Israel as a whole and is not simply to be considered an isolated individual (see above, Chapter II).

### Repetition of Key Words

Now we must look at other words which are repeated in the book.

1. Great. This is the most repeated word in the book (fourteen times). It occurs only twenty-eight times in the other eleven minor prophets. As we will see, the use of the extraordinary serves the author's use of irony well (see Chapter IV). Great is used six

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## Repetition of Key Words in Jonah (2 of 4)

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times of Nineveh or the Ninevites (1:2, 3:2, 3, 5, 7, 4:11). The word is used to specify the great area and population of the city (3:3 even intensifies it, "an *exceedingly* great city" or, literally, "great even for God") and the extent of the response to Jonah's message. This great city is evil (1:2). Yet, even though great, Jonah hardly begins his work (3:2-3) and the city wholeheartedly responds to his message, including even the greatest (3:5, 7). Finally, the city in its greatness is stated as the object of God's pity (4:11).

The point made seems to be clear. It is no small hamlet that has responded to Jonah's message. In spite of the prophet's reluctance a great metropolis has been converted. How surprising, and how in contrast to Israel's own response! Yet, what a responsibility God's people have in the face of such potential.

But, however important the human factor is in bringing the message, such results are possible finally only because of the greatness of God's activity. Four times the word is used to refer to the means God uses to carry out his purposes (1:4a, 4b, 12, 17): wind, storm and fish. In addition to Nineveh such action had brought about a great response on the part of the sailors (1:10, 16).

But unlike both the sailors and Nineveh, Jonah's response in the face of this work of God is great anger (4:1). A response of great joy is possible for Jonah only when he himself experiences deliverance (4:6). God's goal for Jonah was to broaden that great joy so that it would be his response, not simply to the deliverance of the wicked Ninevites, but to all of God's actions on behalf of his creatures, no matter how unjust they may appear in the light of ordinary human considerations.

[2. Evil.] This word (noun and verb) occurs ten times in the course of the narrative (1:2, 7, 8, 3:8, 10a, 10b, 4:1a, 1b, 2, 6). It is used in two closely related senses. On the one hand it refers to the wickedness of people, the Ninevites (1:2, 3:8, 10) and Jonah (4:6). On the other hand, it refers to the judgment which is (is

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A WORD 45

not) visited upon human sinfulness by God (4:2), on Jonah and the sailors (1:7, 8) and on Nineveh (3:10).

Evil is here seen as a continuum (as in the Old Testament generally) whereby human wickedness sets into motion a chain reaction that leads *inevitably* to the judgment (like a pebble thrown into the water, whose ripples finally reach the shore), *unless* God intervenes. God can choose to break into this continuum (4:2) and not allow the judgment to take place. This is what he does for both Jonah and the Ninevites. (It is to be noted that the wickedness of the sailors is never mentioned. They suffer the evil of the storm because of *Jonah's* wickedness.) In the case of Jonah, his disobedience led to the evil of the storm, which God stopped before it achieved its destructive ends. In the case of the Ninevites, their wickedness led to the announcement of judgment, which God stopped because of their repentance.

In spite of Jonah's own deliverance, it is because of the latter intervention of God that *Jonah reacts so violently* in 4:1, literally translated, "And it was evil to Jonah, a great evil." This is the only time in the entire book that the word "great" is attached to evil. Given our discussion above, this means that the author is giving special attention to Jonah's reaction to God's repentance of evil. Jonah is here placing *God's* action under judgment! God's repenting of evil, his *saving* action, is seen by Jonah to be a great evil. This is an astounding judgment: Salvation is evil! Jonah has set himself up as judge over God. He is placing God's actions toward Nineveh under condemnation.

Now the final use of "evil" in the book (4:6) comes into focus. God comes to Jonah in order to save him from his evil (see below, Chapter IX). God's actions toward Jonah now become directed toward the deliverance of Jonah in the same way in which they were earlier directed toward the deliverance of Nineveh. Jonah is now where Nineveh was, only his wickedness is related to his judgment of God's actions. God in his gracious way seeks to move Jonah to repentance with a graciousness that goes beyond justice. Hopefully Jonah can see this and draw the

## Repetition of Key Words in Jonah (3 of 4)

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proper conclusions regarding God's deliverance of the (now) Jonah-like Ninevites.

It is the evil in Nineveh and Jonah that prompts much of God's activity in the book. This divine activity is highlighted by the repetition of three words:

**3. Hurl.** In 1:4 God hurls a wind upon the sea. This action of God sets into motion all of the events of the first chapter, stressed by the repetition of the word "hurl." The sailors throw the cargo of the ship into the sea in order to appease the one who caused the storm (1:5) and finally Jonah (1:15), after Jonah himself suggests this measure in a sacrificial move (1:12). (For the significance of sacrifice in 1:12, see below, Chapter VI).

**4. Appoint.** God appoints a fish (1:17), a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7) and a wind (4:8). The degree to which God makes use of elements of the natural order to carry out his purposes is made strikingly clear here. They are used both as instruments of judgment (worm, wind) and of salvation (fish, plant).

And yet the book makes quite clear that such hurling and appointing on God's part is insufficient for the ultimate salvific purposes he has in mind for his creatures. He needs human beings to interpret the meaning of such natural occurrences (as in the case of the sailors) or to verbalize the meaning of such natural occurrences himself (as in the case of Jonah).

**5. Call.** This word occurs nine times in the book (including the related noun, "message," in 3:2). It is used primarily in two different senses. Four times it has reference to the proclamation of God's word to Nineveh (1:2, 3:2, 4). God's action thus takes both verbal and nonverbal forms. Four times it is used of the human cry to God in time of distress: Jonah (1:6, 2:2), the sailors (1:14) and the Ninevites (3:8). (It is also used once for the proclamation of a fast in 3:5, a response to the call of God.) All of the participants in the story, Jonah as well as the heathen, are placed on the same level of need before God in the time of distress. The call to God makes the difference between life and

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF A WORD 47

death—for one and all. There is no difference among them in their need for deliverance from the hand of God.

This word, which has reference both to God's action and human response, provides a point of transition to words repeated to stress the human response to the activity of God. Some are positive and some are negative.

**6. Fear.** This word (verb/noun) occurs six times in the first chapter with some differences in meaning. The sailors react in fright to the storm (1:5). Then, in reaction to Jonah's confession that he fears the Lord (1:9), the sailors respond in "great fear" (1:10). Finally, after the stilling of the storm, the sailors fear the Lord with a great fear (1:16). In the last two instances both the verb and the noun are used together to intensify the reaction of the sailors. The sequence of events, triggered by God's action and furthered by Jonah's action in verses 9 and 12, leads the sailors from simple fright, to awe at the awareness of being in the presence of such a great God, to trust in the Lord. The movement is striking: from fear, to great fear, to great fear of the Lord.

**7. Turn, repent.** While "fear" is the word governing the rhythm of divine action and human response in Chapter 1, "turn, repent" translate a Hebrew word which is used five times to describe much the same rhythm in Chapter 3. The Ninevites turn from their wicked way (3:8) in the hope that God may change his mind and turn from his anger (3:9). When God sees that the Ninevites have turned (repented), he repents or relents (3:10). God's repentance is a sovereign, free response to the repentance of the people. In 4:2 Jonah confesses that this is indeed a characteristic of his God, a characteristic with which he is not altogether happy. It is the indiscriminate exercise of this repenting activity of God which occasions his conflict with God (see Chapter I).

**8. Go down.** While Jonah's response to the Word of God should have been an "arising" to go (1:2-3, 3:2-3, cf. 1:6), he chooses to flee initially, which leads to a progressive "descent." He goes down to Joppa (1:3), goes down to (on board) the ship (1:3), goes down into the innermost parts of the ship (1:5), and

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## Repetition of Key Words in Jonah (4 of 4)

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finally descends to the very realm of death, Sheol (2:6). Down, down, down . . . the inevitable path of one who seeks to move in disobedient directions from the Word of God. This is clearly intended to depict a movement toward death (see Psalm 88:4-6; Proverbs 5:5).

**9. Anger.** While flight and descent are descriptive of Jonah's response in Chapters 1 and 2, anger characterizes his response to God's action in Chapter 4. One word for "anger" occurs four times with reference to Jonah (4:1, 4, 9a, 9b) and another word occurs twice with reference to God (3:9, 4:2). Jonah's anger is a response to God's slowness to anger (4:2), the turning away of his wrath (3:9). For Jonah in 4:4, God was not angry when he should have been angry. Jonah in his anger believes himself to be responding rightly to the situation. He decides that he will be what God should have been. He will be just if God will not be. This is a judgment on Jonah's part of God's non-anger.

Then in 4:9 Jonah is angry, not because God turned away his wrath, but because God *exercised* his wrath and visited destruction upon Jonah through the removal of the plant and its shade. Again Jonah by his angry response challenges the rightness of God's action. Only this time it relates to God's judgment rather than his deliverance. The issue here shifts to a sphere broader than the deliverance of Nineveh; it now includes God's actions toward Jonah (Israel). And Jonah's anger to the point of death is expressed so sharply here because he believes he perceives injustice in God's ways of dealing with him as over against Nineveh. The one he delivers, the other he judges. In the face of such unfairness, anger is the only appropriate response.

**10. Perish, die.** The human reactions we have seen are fundamentally related to the question of life and death. This issue is particularly focused in the use of these two words. "Perish" occurs four times (1:6, 14, 3:9, 4:10) while "die" (verb/noun) occurs four times (4:3, 8b, 8c, 9). It is also a prominent theme in the psalm in Chapter 2.

The captain (1:6), the sailors (1:14) and the king of Nineveh

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A WORD 49

(3:9) all pray for life in the face of the threat of death. When, however, the Ninevites are spared from death, Jonah expresses the wish to die (4:3). On the other hand, when Jonah's own plant is *not* spared (4:10), he expresses the wish to die even more strenuously (4:8f.).

The issue at stake for Jonah is thus the question of life and death. God and he disagree as to who should live and who should die. God has the unjust continuing to live and the just experiencing death. If this is the way things are to be, then life is absurd. Death is much to be preferred to life with a God such as this. Or, in the remarkably parallel words of Socrates, "If the rulers of the universe do not prefer the just man to the unjust, it is better to die than to live."

**11. Pity.** This verb is used twice, in 4:10-11. When used of human beings, it has reference to the actions of a ruler (1 Samuel 24:11; Psalm 72:13; Jeremiah 21:7), or a representative thereof in instances of war (Deuteronomy 7:16; Isaiah 13:18) or administration of justice (Deuteronomy 13:9, 19:13, 21, 25:12). Thus there is a sovereign decision or action in view when this verb is used. It characterizes a movement from a superior to those who are subordinate in some way. It relates to superiors who are (are not) moved to pity toward those who are within their jurisdiction. Clearly implicit throughout the usage of this term is the right of the sovereign (or his representative) to have pity or not have pity as he sees fit in specific circumstances of life.

This verb thus does not have reference to some fixed attribute of God such as, e.g., love. An abstract statement about God's compassion for his creatures cannot be inferred from these final verses in Jonah. There is, in fact, frequent reference to God's refusal to exercise pity (see Jeremiah 13:14, 21:7; Ezekiel 5:11, 7:4, 9). God does not always act in a pitying fashion. The basic idea of the verb is much less that of a subjective "compassion" than of an objective "sparing," though the two ideas might be brought together to give the sense in 4:11: may God not be "moved to spare" Nineveh.

## Naughty Ninevites

Elliott E. Johnson, "Nahum," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1493-1494

In 731 B.C. Ahaz, king of Judah (732-715), became a vassal of Tiglath-Pileser III, and Assyria invaded Damascus in the Syro-Ephraimite war. Shalmaneser V (727-722) besieged Samaria and defeated it in 722 B.C., thus defeating the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:3-6; 18:9-10). Twenty-one years later (in 701), Sennacherib (705-681) invaded Judah and destroyed 46 Judean towns and cities. After encircling Jerusalem, 185,000 of Sennacherib's soldiers were killed overnight and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh (2 Kings 18:17-18; 19:32-36; Isa. 37:36). Esarhaddon (681-669) regarded Judah as a vassal kingdom, for he wrote in a building inscription, "I summoned the kings of the Hittite land [Aram] and [those] across the sea, Ba'lu, king of Tyre, Manasseh, king of Judah . . ." (Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926-7, 2:265).

In 669 B.C. Ashurbanipal succeeded his father Esarhaddon as king of Assyria. He may have been the king who released Manasseh king of Judah (2 Chron. 33:10-13). Ashurbanipal defeated Thebes in Egypt in 663 and brought treasures to Nineveh from Thebes, Babylon, and Susa. He established an extensive library at Nineveh.

The city of Nineveh fell to the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians in August 612 B.C.

Nineveh was situated on the west bank of the Tigris River (see the map "The Assyrian Empire," near Jonah 1:1). Sennacherib fortified the city's defensive wall whose glory, he said, "overthrows the enemy." On the population of Nineveh, see "Authenticity and Historicity" in the *Introduction* to Jonah and comments on Jonah 4:11. Jonah called Nineveh "a great city" (Jonah 1:2; 3:2-4; 4:11).

The city's ruins are still evident today. The city was easily overtaken when the Khosr River, which flowed through it, overflowed its banks (see Nahum 1:8; 2:6, 8).

Nineveh was the capital of one of the cruelest, vilest, most powerful, and most idolatrous empires in the world. For example, writing of one of his conquests, Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) boasted, "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty moun-

tain I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. . . .

The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire" (Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1:148). Regarding one captured leader, he wrote, "I flayed [him], his skin I spread upon the wall of the city . . ." (ibid., 1:146). He also wrote of mutilating the bodies of live captives and stacking their corpses in piles.

Shalmaneser II (859-824) boasted of his cruelties after one of his campaigns: "A pyramid of heads I reared in front of his city. Their youths and their maidens I burnt up in the flames" (ibid., 1:213). Sennacherib (705-681) wrote of his enemies, "I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives [as one cuts] a string. Like the many waters of a storm I made [the contents of] their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. . . . Their hands I cut off" (ibid., 2:127).

Ashurbanipal (669-626) described his treatment of a captured leader in these words: "I pierced his chin with my keen hand dagger. Through his jaw . . . I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him and made him occupy . . . a kennel" (ibid., 2:319). In his campaign against Egypt, Ashurbanipal also boasted that his officials hung Egyptian corpses "on stakes [and] stripped off their skins and covered the city wall(s) with them" (ibid., 2:295).

No wonder Nahum called Nineveh "the city of blood" (3:1), a city noted for its "cruelty"! (3:19)

Ashurbanipal was egotistic: "I [am] Ashurbanipal, the great [king], the mighty king, king of the universe, king of Assyria. . . . The great gods . . . magnified my name; they made my rule powerful" (ibid., 2:323-4). Esarhaddon was even more boastful. "I am powerful, I am all powerful, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honored, I am magnified, I am without equal among all kings, the chosen one of Asshur, Nabu, and Marduk" (ibid., 2:226).

Gross idolatry was practiced in Nineveh and throughout the Assyrian Empire. The religion of Assyria was Babylonian in origin but in Assyria the national god was Assur, whose high priest and representative was the king.

80 years  
before Jonah

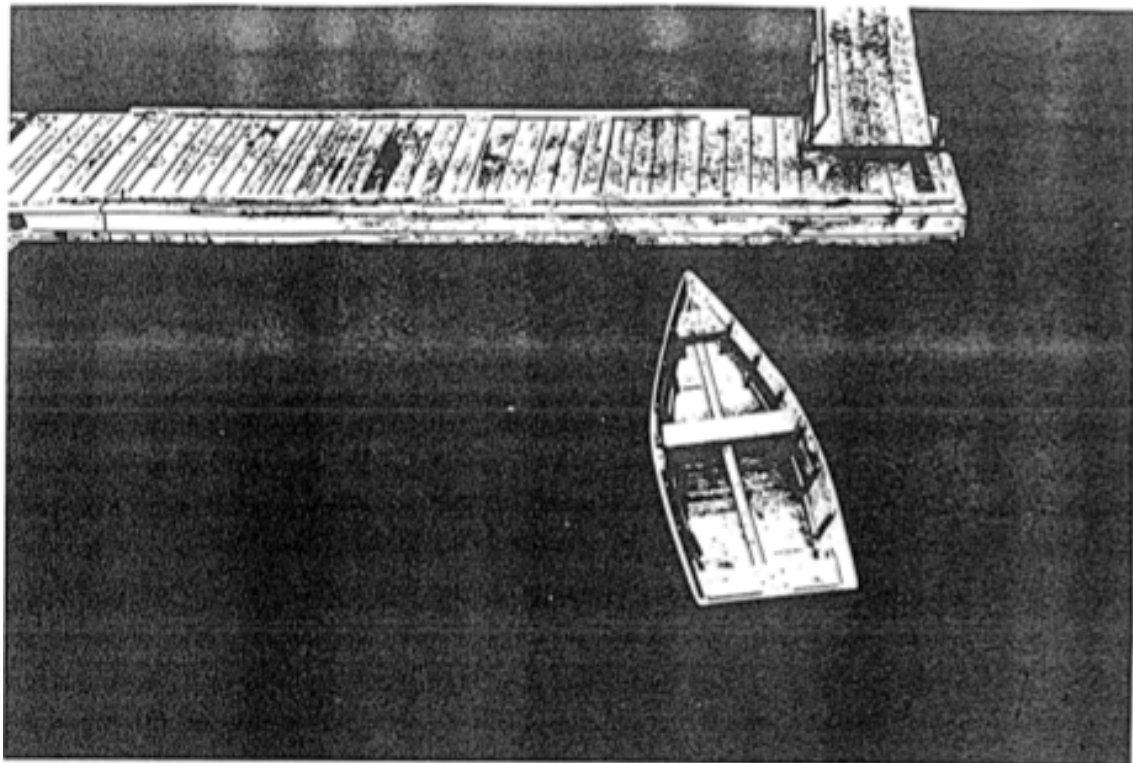
100 years  
after Jonah

80 years  
after Jonah

100 years  
before Jonah



## The Lifesaving Station



### THE LIFESAVING STATION

by Theodore Wedel

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time, money and effort to support its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick; some of them had black skin, some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

*How do you react to this parable?  
Where is the defective thinking in the club?*

# Lessons from Jonah

1. Don't run away from God's will for your life (1:3).
2. There's a personal cost to disobeying God (1:3-17).
3. God uses difficulties to help us see our stubbornness (1:3-17).
4. Other people also suffer from our rebellion (1:4-5).
5. Sometimes unbelievers have more insight and pray than do believers (1:6, 14, 16).
6. Even in His discipline, God provides deliverance (1:17).
7. God—not chance—controls all creation (1:4, 15; 4:6, 7).
8. Sometimes it's when the dark is darkest that we see the light (2:1).
9. Beware of the downward spiral of sin—see "down" progression (1:2a, 2b, 5; 2:6).
10. Near death experiences can be life changing (2:7).
11. Reciting God's Word we have memorized can help us get back on track (2:2-9).
12. God is the God of the second chance (3:1).
13. Don't let a previous failure set a negative pattern for you (3:3).
14. You never know if people will repent until you tell them God's Word (3:3-10).
15. Don't underestimate the spiritual potential of even the highest rulers (3:6-9).
16. God has always prepared people for his message more than we know (3:5).
17. Even the worst of people can genuinely repent and be forgiven (3:5, 10).
18. God always prefers our repentance instead of our judgment (3:10).
19. We sometimes prefer others' judgment instead of their repentance (4:1-2).
20. Watch out when you enjoy proclaiming God's wrath more than His love (4:2).
21. God often doesn't answer suicide requests and other stupid prayers (4:3, 9, 10).
22. God has compassion even on those rebelling against Him (4:6, 11).
23. God sends little tests to show us big lessons (4:7).
24. Sometimes God speaks most clearly through questions (4:4, 9, 11).
25. We too often care more about things than we do people (4:10).
26. God always cares more about people than he does things (4:11).

DALLAS SEMINARY FACULTY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS

# Does God Change His Mind?

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.



**D**oes God change His mind? Many would answer, "Are you kidding? God doesn't change!" Some theologians would agree, "The omnipotent, sovereign God decrees all things and does not change His mind. He is omniscient and immutable."

The Bible seems to support their answer. In Numbers 23:19 we read, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind." First Samuel 15:29 affirms, "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." Psalm 110:4 says, "The

LORD has sworn and will not change his mind."

Perhaps the issue is not as cut-and-dried as it may appear. Other passages assert that God typically *does* change His mind (Jer. 18:5–10; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2), describe Him doing so (Exod. 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:10), or at least assume that He might (Jer. 26:3; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9). Though the NIV uses "relent" in each of these verses, the underlying Hebrew verb is the same one translated "change his mind" in Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, and Psalm 110:4. The Hebrew verb carries the same meaning in both sets of texts.

How do we resolve this apparent con-

tradiction? Some theologians argue that the biblical references to God changing His mind are "anthropomorphic"—they picture God as if He were a man. Even though God does not really change His mind, these texts describe Him doing so, because from the human perspective that is what appears to be happening. This proposed solution arbitrarily elevates one set of texts over another and fails to take seriously Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2, which identify God's willingness to change His mind as one of His fundamental attributes, closely associating it with His grace, compassion, patience, and love.

To arrive at a solution, it is important to look first at how divine promises and

## Does God Change His Mind?

warnings work. When God announces His intention to reward or punish, the announcement may be unconditional or conditional. On the one hand, God sometimes issues a decree or commits Himself by oath to a particular course of action (Gen. 22:16–18; Ps. 89:3–4, 33–37). Such statements are unconditional. God announces what He will do and He will not deviate from His announced intention. The oath gives the statement a binding quality.

On the other hand, God's promises and warnings are often conditional. He may not follow through on a warning or promise, depending on how the recipient of the message responds. For example, in Jeremiah 26:4–6 God declares, "If you do not listen to me and follow my law...and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets...then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth."

Sometimes God's promises and warnings are not clearly marked as unconditional or conditional. This explains why the recipient of a divine warning sometimes does what is appropriate and then says, "Who knows? He may turn and have pity" (lit., "change his mind," Joel 2:14; see also Jon. 3:9). One must wait and see how God responds in order to know if the divine announcement is conditional or unconditional.

Sometimes the divine warning turns out to be conditional. For example, when the people of Nineveh repented (Jon. 3:7–9), God changed His mind about the judgment He had threatened (v. 10), though the warning contained no stated condition and sounded very certain (v. 4). On other occasions the divine warning turns out to be unconditional, as David discovered when he prayed that his infant son might be spared (2 Sam. 12:14,

22–23). When Nathan announced that the child would die (v. 14), David repented, for he thought to himself, "Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live" (v. 22). When the boy died, David realized that Nathan's announcement had been an unconditional decree (v. 23).

Understanding the distinction between God's unconditional and conditional announcements is the key to answering the question, "Does God change His mind?" If God issues a decree or makes an oath, then He will not change His mind or deviate from what He has announced. But if He merely announces His intention conditionally (whether explicitly or implicitly), then the response of the recipient may very well move Him to deviate from a stated course of action.

In those passages that affirm God will not change His mind, an unconditional divine decree is in view. In Numbers 23:19, the prophet Balaam informed King Balak that God's blessing of Israel, made in accordance with his unconditional promise to Abraham, was unalterable (Num. 23:20–24). In 1 Samuel 15:29 the declaration that God will not change His mind marks the announcement of Saul's demise as unconditional. In Psalm 110:4 the Lord refers specifically to the unconditional solemn oath He made to David. These statements should not be applied too generally; they refer specifically to decrees and not to every statement of

intention God might make.

In those texts where God does change His mind, conditional divine announcements are in view. While God warned that He intended to judge those who had violated His standards, He had not decreed their demise. When Moses and Amos interceded for sinful Israel, God changed His mind and decided not to judge His people (Exod. 32:12–14; Amos 7:1–6). When the Ninevites repented, God changed His mind and did not judge them as He had threatened (Jon. 3:4–10). This willingness to change His mind is an aspect of divine mercy, which He typically extends toward sinners (Jer. 18:5–10; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2).

When we say that God changes His mind, are we denying His immutability, which affirms that God's essential being and nature do not change? No. God is

sovereign, but our sovereign God is also personal and often enters into give-and-take relationships with people. While the human mind cannot fully understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, the Bible teaches that God some-

*Understanding the distinction between God's unconditional and conditional announcements is the key to answering the question.*

times announces His intentions and then subordinates His actions to the human response. When God announces His intentions conditionally, He allows people to help determine the outcome by how they respond to His word. ■

In each issue of *Kindred Spirit*, the Dallas Seminary faculty will address your questions. If you have a question or a comment, please write or send e-mail to us at [ks@ds.edu](mailto:ks@ds.edu). We'd like to hear from you.