

# INTRODUCTION AND JONAH

By Ashby L. Camp

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## Introduction

### *I. The Prophet*

A. The kingdom of Israel divided in 931/930 B.C. following the death of Solomon. Israel was the northern kingdom; Judah was the southern kingdom. This division was ordained by God as punishment for Solomon's idolatry (1 Ki. 11:1-13).

B. 2 Kings 14:23-25 states (ESV): <sup>23</sup> *In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.* <sup>24</sup> *And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.* <sup>25</sup> *He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the*

*LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*

C. This is the only mention of Jonah in the OT outside the book that bears his name. We learn here that Jonah was a prophet from Gath-hepher, a small town in Galilee a few miles northeast of Nazareth. His father was Amittai, as also noted in Jonah 1:1, about whom nothing is known.

D. Jonah lived in the days of Israel's king Jeroboam II, who reigned from 793–753 B.C. At some unidentified time, Jonah had prophesied that the northern kingdom of Israel would extend its territory from the entrance of Lebo Hamath (to the north) to the Dead Sea (to the south), and this was accomplished during Jeroboam's reign.

## ***II. Date of Book***

A. The Book of Jonah does not identify an author or specify its historical setting. The book is *about* Jonah not necessarily *by* him, so God could have inspired its composition after Jonah had died.

B. If, despite the third-party perspective and the unflattering portrait of Jonah given in the book, one assumes that Jonah wrote it in the latter part of his life, the time of composition would be somewhere in the eighth century B.C. The latest it could have been written is around 200 B.C. because Ecclesiasticus (also known as *Sirach*), which was written around 180 B.C., mentions "the twelve prophets" (49:10), and the Book of Jonah is part of that group.

## ***III. Assyrian Situation***

A. Assyria's expansion under Shalmaneser III was temporarily checked in 853 B.C. in the battle of Qarqar by a coalition that included the city states of Damascus and Hamath and the nation of Israel.<sup>1</sup> In 841 B.C. Shalmaneser III made another assault on Damascus (Aram) and beyond and succeeded in taking tribute from Jehu, king of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

1. In 1846 Austen Henry Layard discovered in Calah (modern Nimrud) a four-sided pillar of black limestone that is 6 feet six inches high. It is known as the Black Obelisk<sup>3</sup> of Shalmaneser III because it commemorates through relief sculptures and inscriptions military campaigns during his reign.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 243.

<sup>2</sup> Bright, 254.

<sup>3</sup> An obelisk is a pillar of stone set up as a monument usually having four sides and tapering at the top.

2. Shalmaneser says that in the campaign in 841 B.C. he besieged Damascus, which was governed by Hazael, and received tribute from Jehu. Panels depict Israelites carrying various items of tribute and one shows Jehu, or more probably his ambassador, bowing before Shalmaneser. It is more probably Jehu's ambassador because his dress is not distinctive which is what one would expect for a king. The inscription identifies the supplicant as "Jehu, son of Omri" and says "I received from him silver, gold, a golden saplu-bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king, [and] wooden puruhtu."

B. For the next forty years or so, Assyria was preoccupied with other campaigns and with internal strife, which allowed Damascus to ascend in power. Around 802 B.C. the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III resumed the aggressive policy of Shalmaneser III and crushed Damascus (not seriously striking Israel), but he was unable to follow up his successes.<sup>4</sup>

C. The three succeeding Assyrian kings from 782-745 B.C. were ineffectual rulers. There was a famine in 765 that recurred in or lasted to 759, and in 763 B.C. there was a solar eclipse, which was understood as an ominous sign.<sup>5</sup> This all contributed to rebellions in various cities, which, along with the menace of the powerful kingdom of Urartu to the north, substantially weakened Assyria. In the words of John Bright, "By the mid-eighth century, indeed, Assyria seemed threatened with disintegration."<sup>6</sup>

## Text

### *1. Jonah Receives God's Grace (1:1 - 2:10)*

#### A. Jonah's disobedience (1:1-3)

**Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." <sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.**

1. Nineveh was an ancient and important city in Assyria, about 500 miles northeast of Palestine. Various kings had built palaces there through the centuries. Years later,

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<sup>4</sup> Bright, 254-256.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah" in Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:545.

<sup>6</sup> Bright, 256. See also,

during the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.), it became the capital and one of the architectural wonders of the world.

2. God was prepared to destroy the city because of its wickedness. He is the God of all the earth and holds all nations accountable not just nations of his covenant people.

a. Mankind knows intuitively from what God has revealed in creation that it is responsible to the Creator, and it has a basic moral sense from being made in the image and likeness of God, what Paul refers to in Rom. 2:14-15 as the law of the heart.

b. *The Living Bible* says in v. 2, "for your wickedness rises before me," and then it adds an explanatory statement: "it smells to highest heaven." Frank Page comments, "While all sin is abhorrent to God, in some instances a specific group of people had become so wicked that God issued a specialized call of localized judgment. So it was with Nineveh."<sup>7</sup>

3. But rather than simply destroy Nineveh, God commands Jonah to go there to announce its condemnation. And Jonah flatly disobeys. He boards a ship at Joppa heading to "Tarshish," which is usually identified with Tartessos in southwest Spain. In other words, he is intent on going 2,000 miles in the opposite direction! No reason is given at this point for the disobedience; Jonah simply is stamped as a rebel, a deserter. But we will see in 4:2 that what motivated him was that he could not stand the thought of being a source of divine warning to the despised Assyrians, which warning he feared would be their opportunity to receive divine mercy.

4. Jonah was trying to flee from "the presence" of God. As Jonah would know, this in one sense is impossible because God is omnipresent (e.g., Ps. 139:7-10; Jer. 23:24). But Jonah probably is seeking to flee the land of Israel as the place where he specially experienced God's presence in the revelation of his word to him. Perhaps Jonah hoped God would not reveal himself so personally outside of Israel or in such a far-off place. He may have thought (or hoped) that his fleeing would cause God to seek a more willing prophet to preach against Nineveh.

5. The disobedient tend to shun intimacy with God. They do not want to face God in their rebellion. Rather than longing for his nearness, they flee from it. When a Christian begins missing corporate worship times and generally avoiding Christians and quits praying and studying the Bible, it is a danger sign that they are in rebellion.

6. At this time, Joppa, a port city northwest of Jerusalem, was probably under control of the king of Ashkelon, a Philistine city.<sup>8</sup> The crew of the vessel was obviously non-Hebrew, people who did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Jonah 1:8-9).

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<sup>7</sup> Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 225.

<sup>8</sup> Anson F. Rainey, "Joppa" in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:1119.

## B. Jonah's punishment (1:4-16)

### 1. The storm at sea (1:4-6)

**<sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."**

a. The wrath of God is unleashed against the defiance of his prophet. This creature will not thumb his nose at God with impunity, no matter where he tries to go! God causes such a mighty storm that the ship is on the verge of tearing apart. This is the awesomeness of God's wrath. Sailors, the old salts who had seen everything, were scared stiff. They were throwing their cargo overboard, a move designed to improve the stability and maneuverability of the vessel (see Acts 27:18), and were all yelling to their gods, hoping that he or she or they would somehow intervene to help them.

b. OT scholars John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas write:

Patron deities were rarely cosmic deities, so the sailors would not have thought that their personal or family gods had sent the storm. In the polytheistic context of the ancient world, one could generally identify divine activity with confidence, but it was another matter altogether to discover which god was acting and why. The sailors call out to their gods in the hope that one of their patron deities might be able to exert some influence on whichever god has become disturbed enough to send the storm. The more contacts made the better, so the captain wakes Jonah so that he could also call upon his patron deity.<sup>9</sup>

c. God's judgment on sin is sure. If we are in rebellion to God, our storm is coming. We may have false hopes like Jonah, we may feel that somehow we are going to avoid judgment for our rebellion, but the storm is coming (see Mat. 7:24-27).

d. In contrast to everyone else on board, Jonah is not interested in calling on his God; he is sleeping during the crisis. Even the pagan captain rebukes the Lord's prophet for failing to seek his god's intervention. What an indictment of his spiritual condition!

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<sup>9</sup> John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 778.

## **2. Jonah identified as the cause (1:7-10)**

**<sup>7</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" <sup>9</sup> And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." <sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**

a. Jonah is revealed by lot to be responsible for the calamity. The lots were probably dice, their sides alternately light or dark. Two darks probably meant "No," two lights "Yes," and a light and a dark meant "Throw again."<sup>10</sup> God chose to cause the lots to work according to plan, as the sailors eliminated others on the ship until Jonah was left.

b. After Jonah is revealed by lot to be responsible for the calamity, the sailors bombard him with questions about the details. When they learn that the God from whom Jonah is fleeing is the LORD, they are even more afraid and are incredulous that Jonah has disobeyed him (not to mention that he had chosen their vessel as his means of flight). Another pagan rebuke.

## **3. Jonah submits to God's judgment (1:11-16)**

**<sup>11</sup> Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." <sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.**

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 459.

a. When they ask Jonah what to do to calm the sea, he advises them to throw him overboard. In doing so, he is acknowledging God's just claim on his life for sin, submitting to God's death sentence. In essence, he tells them to hand him over to God.

b. We cannot appreciate grace until we appreciate the justice of our condemnation. If I never accept that I deserve death, I will not see commutation of my sentence as mercy; I will simply see it as delayed justice. Ezekiel 18:4, 20 says, "The soul that sins will die"; Paul says in Rom. 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, . . ." Jonah felt this so concretely that he offered to be tossed overboard.

c. The sailors understandably fear playing a role in killing Jonah. They fear this might expose them to the vengeance of Jonah's God. They try to row back to land, but God had other plans. Seeing no other solution, the sailors pray that God not hold them accountable for Jonah's death. This is another indication of spiritual awareness.

d. They throw Jonah overboard and the sea immediately calms. Thus, Jonah's acceptance of God's claim on his life is the path for pagan deliverance. As a result, they fear God even more (add him to their pantheon), offer sacrifice to him, and make vows. (The latter possibly is to be understood as taking place later when they were back on land.)

### C. Jonah's Rescue (1:17 - 2:10)

**<sup>17</sup> And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. <sup>2:1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. <sup>3</sup> For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. <sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; [how shall I] again look upon your holy temple[?]' <sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head <sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. <sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. <sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. <sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" <sup>10</sup> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.**

1. God provides a large fish to swallow a penitent Jonah

a. Jonah being thrown overboard should be the end of the story. He stuck his tongue out at the Almighty, came to accept God's just punishment for his sin, surrendered to what he understood God demanded of him (his life), and in the process delivered the pagan sailors from destruction.

b. But in his prayer to God from inside the great sea creature, a prayer offered after three days of reflection, he recounts how his miraculous rescue came about. He declares that as he was about to drown, as his life was slipping away in the water, he "remembered" the Lord (and all that involves) and cried out to him, and the Lord answered him, meaning he snatched him from death by dispatching a living submarine to swallow him.

(1) He says in v. 2 that when he was in distress, when he was at death's door, when he was as good as in the belly of Sheol (the realm of the dead), he called and cried out to the Lord. What motivated his fervent appeal is explained in vv. 3-7. As he was in the heart of the seas, surrounded by the flood with waves and billows passing over him, he realized he was on the verge of being shut out forever from the presence of God (2:4b): "[how shall I] again look upon your holy temple[?]"

(a) The translation given of 2:4b understands the relevant Hebrew word as the interrogative "how" rather than an adverb meaning "yet" or "nevertheless." The question is whether the Masoretes made a mistake when they added the vowels to the original consonantal text in the 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most translations accept the MT on this point, but I follow the RSV, NRSV, NJB, and NAB (see also NET).

(b) The NET renders 2:4 as: "I thought I had been banished from your sight, that I would never again see your holy temple!" The accompanying note states:

The MT and the vast majority of ancient textual witnesses vocalize consonantal  $\text{ךָ}$  (*'kh*) as the adverb  $\text{כֵּן}$  (*'akh*) which functions as an emphatic asseverative "surely" (BDB 36 s.v.  $\text{כֵּן}$  1) or an adversative "yet, nevertheless" (BDB 36 s.v.  $\text{כֵּן}$  2; so *Tg.* Jonah 2:4: "However, I shall look again upon your holy temple"). These options understand the line as an expression of hopeful piety. As a positive statement, Jonah expresses hope that he will live to return to worship in Jerusalem. It may be a way of saying, "I will pray for help, even though I have been banished" (see v. 8; cf. Dan 6:10). The sole dissenter is the Greek recension of Theodotion which reads the interrogative  $\pi\omicron\varsigma$  (*pōs*, "how?") which reflects an alternate vocalization tradition of  $\text{כֵּן}$  (*'ekh*) – a defectively written form  $\text{כֵּיִן}$  (*'ekh*, "how?"; BDB 32 s.v.  $\text{כֵּיִן}$  1). This would be translated, "How shall I again look at your holy temple?" (cf. NRSV). Jonah laments that he will not be able to worship at the temple in Jerusalem again – this is a metonymical statement (effect for cause) that he feels certain that he is about to die. It continues the expression of Jonah's distress and separation from the Lord, begun in v. 2 and continued without relief in vv. 3-7a. The external evidence favors the MT; however, internal

evidence seems to favor the alternate vocalization tradition reflected in Theodotion for four reasons.<sup>11</sup>

(2) As the waters closed in over him to take his life (v. 5), as his life was ebbing away (v. 7), so much so that he was as good as in the realm of the dead ("the land whose bars closed upon me forever" and "the pit"), he prayed to God. This was no longer a stoic acceptance of his death sentence as justice; this was a plea for mercy from the depths of his soul. And you can be sure this was not a plea of reservation, not a plea in which limits or conditions were set. When he prayed to be spared, he was praying with a prostrate spirit, with a broken and contrite heart. He had fully and completely surrendered to God's claim on his life.

c. God is so magnificent in mercy that he miraculously rescues the sinner who deserves to die. He dispatched a great sea creature to swallow Jonah and preserve his life. God certainly could have spared Jonah by allowing him to breathe water or just moving him from the water to dry land, but he chose to rescue him in a way that would capture the human imagination, express his control over all creation, and serve as a type for the Lord's resurrection.

d. I have little patience for scoffers who insist it is not possible for a great sea creature to swallow a human and have him survive, as though that is beyond the capability of the omnipotent Creator. He spoke the cosmos into being and made all living things, the variety and complexity of which exceeds human imagination, and yet he was not up to keeping a man alive in a sea creature for three days.

## 2. Jonah praises the LORD for his deliverance

a. From inside the gigantic sea creature, Jonah sings the Lord's praise. Repentance brought forth mercy, and mercy, genuinely appreciated, brought forth praise (2:8-9).

b. We must truly recognize that our sin deserves death and then repent of it that we might receive the Lord's mercy. Then we too will be inspired to praise the Lord and to

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<sup>11</sup> The note continues:

First, the form of the psalm is a declarative praise in which Jonah begins with a summary praise (v. 2), continues by recounting his past plight (vv. 3–6a) and the LORD's intervention (vv. 6b–7), and concludes with a lesson (v. 8) and vow to praise (v. 9). So the statement with אֵל in v. 4 falls within the plight – not within a declaration of confidence. Second, while the poetic parallelism of v. 4 could be antithetical ("I have been banished from your sight, *yet* I will again look to your holy temple"), synonymous parallelism fits the context of the lament better ("I have been banished from your sight; Will I ever again see your holy temple?"). Third, אֵל is the more difficult vocalization because it is a defectively written form of (אֵל "how?") and therefore easily confused with אֵל ("surely" or "yet, nevertheless"). Fourth, nothing in the first half of the psalm reflects any inkling of confidence on the part of Jonah that he would be delivered from imminent death. In fact, Jonah states in v. 7 that he did not turn to God in prayer until some time later when he was on the very brink of death.

give our lives in his service. We will be like the sinful woman in Luke 7: we will love much because we will recognize the magnitude of our rescue.

3. God completes the rescue by returning the converted Jonah to this "world," to dry land where he can again become an instrument in God's service. Of course, the Lord Jesus cited this event as a simile for his coming resurrection. We read in Mat. 12:38-40: <sup>38</sup> *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."* <sup>39</sup> *But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."* <sup>40</sup> *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

## ***II. Jonah Resents God's Grace (3:1 - 4:11)***

### **A. Jonah's Obedience (3:1-4)**

**Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, [a three-day visit]. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"**

1. God in his mercy commands Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh to proclaim the message that he gives him. There is no place for Jonah's personal views in the matter; he is to deliver God's message. This time Jonah promptly gets up and goes to Nineveh in compliance with the word of the Lord.

2. Nothing is said about the journey to Nineveh. The distance from Jerusalem is about 550 miles. Going by camel or donkey caravan, it would have taken about a month to travel there from Israel. Going by foot would have taken even longer.

3. Nineveh is described as an "exceedingly great city" (lit. a "great-to-God city"). Though Nineveh undoubtedly was large for an ancient city – its population of 120,000 (4:11) being four times the estimated population of the ancient Israelite city of Samaria<sup>12</sup> – the emphasis here probably is on its importance or status rather than its size. Neither of the two Israelite cities designated in Scripture as "great" – Jerusalem (Jer. 22:8) and Gibeon (Josh. 10:2) – was large in size compared to other ancient Canaanite/Israelite cities.

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<sup>12</sup> H. L. Ellison, "Jonah" in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:380.

4. Nineveh further is described by the ambiguous phrase a "three-day visit" or a "three-day walk/journey." I think "visit" is more likely, so I modified the ESV accordingly.

a. If this means it took three days to walk across or around Nineveh and is not hyperbole, then "Nineveh" in this instance must refer to the triangular administrative district that included Nineveh proper along with other cities. The same Hebrew word is used for the two similar Assyrian words. It could not refer solely to the city of Nineveh, because Sennacherib (704 - 681 B.C.) bragged about enlarging the circumference of Nineveh from about 3 to 7+ miles, which description squares with archaeological excavations of the ancient city.

b. Rather than referring to the time it took to walk across or around Nineveh, it seems more likely that the reference to Nineveh as a "three-day-visit city" means that it was a major diplomatic center in which certain visiting protocols would need to be followed. Perhaps the phrase originated from a stereotypical visit involving a day of meetings with the city leaders, a day of business, and a day of farewell hospitality. Douglas Stuart comments: "[T]he narrator's point is that Nineveh was a 'three-day visit city,' a major diplomatic center of the ancient world, a city where a formal protocol was observed by official visitors, whose business could not be accomplished hastily, as if it were a small town."<sup>13</sup>

c. It is also possible that the phrase means the city was so large and spread out (by ancient standards) that it took at least three days of preaching to disseminate the message to the bulk of the populace (rather than three days to traverse).

5. Jonah ventures into the city and at the first opportunity announces its impending destruction. As the NIV puts the decree, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

a. Skeptics claim that Jonah would not have been understood by the Ninevites, but that is incorrect. As Page points out: "[I]f an Assyrian official could speak to the populace of Jerusalem in Hebrew in 701 B.C. (2 Kgs 18:26-28), there is no reason to doubt that a Hebrew prophet could speak to the populace of Nineveh in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the day, fifty years earlier."<sup>14</sup>

b. And even if one assumes that Jonah spoke only Hebrew and that no Ninevites spoke Hebrew, Jonah could have used an interpreter not mentioned by the author. Many preachers today employ translators when speaking to foreign audiences.

## B. Nineveh's Repentance (3:5-9)

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart, 488.

<sup>14</sup> Smith and Page, 258.

**<sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. <sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup> but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."**

1. The people of Nineveh believed the message Jonah brought from God; they believed that the God for whom Jonah spoke was soon going to destroy their city. They showed their fear and humility before the Lord by fasting and wearing sackcloth. The psychology of fasting is to say to the Lord, "I am already humble; you need not afflict me further." Sackcloth was the coarsest of cloth, often made from goat's hair. It was symbolically worn as a sign of grief and mourning. They are mourning the fate announced to them by Jonah.

2. When the word reaches the "king of Nineveh," he leaves his throne, takes off his royal robe, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes (another sign of grief and mourning; see, Isa. 58:5). Some have objected that the king of Assyria would not be referred to as the "king of Nineveh," but Ahab and Ahaziah, kings of Israel, are referred to in Scripture as "king of Samaria" (1 Ki. 21:1; 2 Ki. 1:3).

3. The king is so fearful, so convinced of Jonah's word, that he decrees that his people must even enforce the fast and wearing of sackcloth on their herds and flocks! (The ancient Persians had their animals participate in mourning rituals by shaving their manes, though this may be hyperbole on the king's part to stress how complete the repentance should be.)

4. The king goes beyond a ritual show of repentance and commands the people to cry out to God and to turn from their evil ways and their violence. He is hoping that somehow God may relent and spare his city.

5. This repentance is not as unbelievable as some people claim.

a. Historical circumstances may have inclined Nineveh to take Jonah seriously. Recall that, during the time of Jonah, Assyria was weakened by internal dissensions and menaced by the powerful kingdom of Urartu to the north, to the point that it seemed threatened with disintegration. There was a famine either lasting from 765 to 759 B.C. or recurring during that period. In 763 B.C. there occurred that "sign of the ill omen," an eclipse of the sun.

b. We know that the kings of Assyria took such omens seriously. They corresponded with their prophets about them and in some cases even abandoned the throne to a

substitute king until the danger would pass.<sup>15</sup> Various omen texts from Nineveh give predictions of what sorts of events may be expected to follow a solar eclipse, including: "the King will be deposed and killed and a worthless fellow seize the throne"; "the King will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine"; "a deity will strike the King and fire will consume the land"; "the city walls will be destroyed."<sup>16</sup>

c. Interestingly, the solar-eclipse omen texts mention not only the king but animals and the land as a whole in their specifications of those on whom the divine wrath indicated by the eclipse might fall. According to the omen texts, famine also could indicate divine displeasure. In addition, earthquakes were also understood by the Assyrians as evidence of divine wrath, and there is a report in the Assyrian records of an earthquake in the reign of Ashur-dan. It cannot be determined whether the record refers to Ashur-dan III (773 - 754 B.C.), but if it does, his repentance would be even more understandable. Stuart comments:

There is, of course, no way to identify with confidence the king mentioned in Jonah 3:6. On the other hand, a king such as Aššur-dān III, during whose reign an agonizing confluence of omens and disasters (eclipse, earthquake (?), famine, rioting) had occurred, whose capital (or at least common residence) may have been Nineveh, though this cannot be proved, and who was beset by international problems including continuing military failures against Urartu, was certainly the sort of king (among others) who might well have been predisposed to receive Jonah's message sincerely as a chance for respite from his troubles.<sup>17</sup>

d. In addition, their repentance was not a conversion to Judaism. They did not become Jewish proselytes with all that would entail. They simply believed that the all-powerful One, whatever his name, was about to bring destruction on them, and they responded in fear and humility in hope of averting the disaster.<sup>18</sup>

### C. God's Mercy (3:10)

**<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.**

1. God sees their repentance and in compassion chooses to spare the city. God's word of judgment is in fact a blessing. It is not to be avoided but embraced. If taken to heart, it provides one an opportunity to repent and so be saved.

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<sup>15</sup> Stuart, 492.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart, 491-492.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart, 492.

<sup>18</sup> Ellison, 382.

2. We need to remember this when our culture tells us that we should avoid telling the truth about God's judgment, the truth about the reality of hell, because "negative preaching" turns people off. I do not doubt that people do not *like* hearing about judgment, but they *need* to hear about it. People do not *like* hearing about cancer, but does that mean the doctors should not tell them they have it? That would be medical malpractice, and I think it is spiritual malpractice to fail to tell people their spiritual condition apart from Christ.

3. Here is an example of a conditional prophecy (see, Jer. 18:7-10). When he promises destruction, he is not bound to carry that out if a nation repents. Likewise, when he promises blessing, he is not obligated to carry that out if a nation turns to evil.

#### D. Jonah's anger (4:1-3)

**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. <sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."**

1. Jonah is angry that God spared Nineveh. In fact, that is why he ran away in the first place; he knew God's word of judgment was really a tool of grace. He did not want the Ninevites to be spared.

2. Jonah may have feared the sparing of Nineveh because he feared Assyria. After all, they had been quite menacing under Shalmaneser III, who took tribute from Jehu in 841 B.C., and Adad-nirari III, who around 802 B.C. resumed Shalmaneser's aggressive policies. Or he may, because of some personal feelings, simply have thought they were unworthy of being spared. Or maybe he wanted Nineveh destroyed so he could use that example in his effort to bring Israel to repentance. We are not told.

3. Whatever his reason, here is a rebel, who himself has been saved by marvelous grace, objecting to grace being given to others. It is similar to Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant in Mat. 18:23-35. There a servant who had been forgiven a vast debt by the king when he begged for mercy refused to forgive his fellow servant a small debt when he begged him for mercy. Unlike the parable, Jonah is not refusing to extend mercy to the Ninevites, but he has the same spirit in that he resents God granting them mercy.

4. There is a lesson here about the need for vigilance in our battle against the flesh, the battle to subjugate, indeed crucify, our own desires and perspectives on the altar of God's will.

a. Just a month or two earlier, Jonah had experienced a gracious and miraculous rescue by God from the jaws of death and was transformed by it. Though he had earlier refused God's command to preach to the people of Nineveh, from the belly of the great sea creature he praised God as the giver of salvation and promptly heeded his renewed call to go to Nineveh. But the sinful nature is tenacious. In a life of serving God, one can never drop one's guard, even in this age of the Spirit.

b. How many times have you been cut to the heart about some sin, renounced it, and committed yourself to being done with it, only to have it surface again and again? How many times have you acted selfishly, lost your temper, used foul language, or spoken harshly or rudely to your spouse or someone else? How many times have you allowed your mind to rest on impure things, vulgar or immoral things? We are in a spiritual war, and there is no room for complacency. Praise God that his mercy flows freely in our failure, but our desire and goal is to honor him with a Christlike life. And brothers and sisters, that requires us to be watchful, to be dead serious in the struggle. We will fail, but we must never become cavalier about it, treat it as something trivial.

5. Jonah has allowed his own fleshly, worldly perspective to regain control to the extent he would rather that God kill him – the very thing from which he had celebrated being delivered – than let him live to see the bestowal of mercy on the Assyrians. When we allow Sin replace God's vision in our lives, we can get so turned around that we prefer death to what he has in mind. "If your way means 'X, Y, or Z, then I'd rather not live.'" Maybe you have been there.

6. Though the Book of Jonah involves Nineveh, it indirectly carries a rebuke and an invitation to Israel and Judah to repent. If pagan Nineveh repents at the preaching of Jonah then why do God's covenant people not repent? And if Nineveh receives the blessings of God's mercy upon repentance, why would his covenant people not seek it?

7. Jesus applied this aspect of Jonah to the people of his day. He said in Mat. 12:41 (Lk. 11:32): *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

#### E. God's rebuke of Jonah (4:4-11)

**<sup>4</sup> And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" <sup>5</sup> Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. <sup>6</sup> Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>**

**When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." <sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"**

1. God gently challenges the propriety Jonah's anger, and then Jonah prepares a booth outside the city to see what would ultimately happen.

a. This "booth" would have been a crude shelter constructed primarily of interlaced tree branches. When they were fresh, they would provide adequate shade, but the leaves on the branches would quickly wither and fall off, leaving many holes for the scorching Assyrian sun.

b. Jonah may have been thinking (or hoping) that the Ninevites' repentance was not real or that they would revert to their old ways and that God would destroy them in the end. Maybe he thought he may have convinced God that he should carry out his original intent. Rather than examining himself as the Lord had wished, he examined the city to see if they were the ones who would change.

2. When the shade provided initially by the branches of the booth vanished, God provides a plant for Jonah's comfort, and the plant brings Jonah great joy. God then promptly uses a worm to destroy it. With the plant gone, God turns up the heat, and Jonah sorely misses the shade-giving plant. In fact, he is so miserable that he again says he wants to die. So you see the parallel: he is angry and wants to die over God *sparing* the Ninevites, and he is angry and wants to die over the shade-giving plant *not* being spared.

3. God uses Jonah's anger over the fact the plant, which Jonah had nothing to do with providing, was not spared to teach him how much more God is justified in caring about sparing Nineveh, tens of thousands of people whom he had created. As G. V. Smith has said:

God will (and does) act in justice against sin, but His great love for every person in the world causes Him to wait patiently, to give graciously, to forgive mercifully, and to accept compassionately even the most unworthy people in the world. To experience the grace of God and not be willing to tell others of His compassion is a tragedy all must avoid. Messengers of God neither limit the grace of God nor control its distribution, but they can prevent God's grace from having an effect on their own lives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets and Preachers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 97.

4. The description of the people as not able to distinguish between the left and the right may refer to their lack of religious discernment, their lack of moral and ethical maturity, or simply their pitiful condition. It certainly does not mean they are not morally responsible. Page states:

Possibly the best understanding of this text is to recognize that the Lord was referring to an entire city of morally and ethically naïve, though not morally innocent, individuals. The people of Nineveh had already shown sensitivity to their evil ways and so were not ignorant. In contrast to the prophet and people of Israel, however, the people of Nineveh were in a kindergarten stage of religious knowledge. The Lord ended the statement with the phrase "and many cattle as well." Here he attempted to impart to Jonah that even cattle are superior to plants and vines. His mercy is great for all his creation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Smith and Page, 283.