

Introduction to Jonah

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The charts in this paper, and many of the comments, are adapted from The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary, by Terence E. Fretheim (Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1977). Except as noted, Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (with italicized words they have added). As usual in the Old Testament, LORD represents God's covenant name Yahweh.

General Comments

Jonah ministered in the eighth century before Christ. He was one of several prophets the LORD raised up a few years before He began to destroy His earthly kingdom over Israel. That kingdom was the subject of the entire Old Testament. It began at the Exodus (Exod. 19:4–6; Ps. 114:1–2). It remained united during the periods of Joshua, the Judges, and the first three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. David extended it and finally brought peace; Solomon built the LORD's glorious temple. But then it broke into two parts: the Northern Kingdom and Judah. (a) The Northern Kingdom consisted of ten tribes and was called Israel or, later, Samaria. It was ruled by several dynasties, beginning with that of Jeroboam I (931–910 B.C.). By instituting worship at Bethel and Dan, Jeroboam quickly turned the ten tribes to idolatry. (b) The Southern Kingdom was called Judah. It continued to be ruled by David's descendants and generally to worship the LORD at His temple in Jerusalem.

When the LORD's people persisted in evil, He began raising up prophets to announce the end of His kingdom. The end would come in stages. The prophets Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Hosea (all of whom Jonah probably heard) predicted the first stage: The Northern Kingdom would be destroyed by the idolatrous and cruel Assyrians, whose chief city was Nineveh.¹ The Assyrians began to destroy Israel after the death of King Jeroboam II in 753 B.C. and completed it in 722 B.C.

However, Israel's destruction seemed quite unlikely while Jeroboam II was ruling. At that time Israel's enemies seemed weak, and Jeroboam led Israel in a triumphant period of expansion. According to 2 Kings 14:25–27, Jonah had predicted these “good times.”² Yet, he likely knew the LORD's message through the other prophets, that the “good times” would be short.

At some time before the fall of Israel, the events of the Book of Jonah took place. That fall, however, was not its theme and was not even mentioned. Neither was its theme the story of a great fish swallowing Jonah and vomiting him out. Neither was it the more amazing story of

¹ Assyria and Nineveh were based about 500 miles east of Israel in the northern part of Mesopotamia (“between the rivers”). This was the land between the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Much of modern Iraq is in Mesopotamia. Nineveh was on the Tigris River about 200 miles north of modern Baghdad. To the south of Assyria—and sometimes considered one with it—was Babylon. Both countries were full of idolatry, but Assyria was especially notorious for cruelty.

² The 2 Kings passage informs us that he was born in Gath-hepher near Nazareth (in the Northern Kingdom).

Jonah's preaching to a great city that responded by repenting.³ Instead, the theme was the sovereignty of God, His right and ability to do—particularly, to show mercy—as He sees fit.

To teach this, the book tells a strange tale about Jonah, whom we see in four scenes:

- In a ship in a great storm at sea (ch. 1)
- In a great fish (ch. 2)
- In the great city of Nineveh (ch. 3)
- In a booth outside that city (ch. 4)

In the book Jonah began by fleeing from the LORD. When the LORD first told him to go preach to Nineveh (eastward, 1:1-3), he fled toward Tarshish (westward on the Mediterranean sea, probably in Spain). No doubt he was elated that the LORD was about to punish that great pagan city. Assyrians had a long history of violence and cruelty. Jonah would rather die than preach to people who so deserved judgment. Yet, Jonah was not a bigot, who hated all pagans. In fact, he insisted that the pagan sailors of chapter 1 save themselves by throwing him into the sea (1:12). When they did so, the LORD spared him in a great fish (1:17) so that he would preach to even worse pagans. Back on land Jonah finally went and preached to Nineveh, with astounding results. With a simple message he got all the Ninevites to repent (ch. 3), a conclusion he bitterly resented (ch. 4).

In other words, Jonah was a misguided patriot, eager for the LORD to judge Israel's cruel enemy. He thought it was wrong for God to extend His grace to people so thoroughly bad as the Ninevites. But through Jonah the LORD illustrated his own sovereignty, His right to do what He wills. This was the theme of the book.

In developing this theme, the book uses many literary techniques. One of the most fascinating is the chiasmus, as in 1:3. Notice how A (at the beginning of the verse) corresponds to A¹ (at the end), B to B¹, and C to C¹.

JONAH 1:3, SHOWING ITS CHIASTIC STRUCTURE				
A	Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.			
B		So he went down to Joppa,		
C			found a ship	
D				which was going to Tarshish;
C ¹			paid the fare	
B ¹		and went down into it		
A ¹	to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.			

³ The fish is mentioned in only three verses. And Jonah's prophetic message of doom was not fulfilled and was not even mentioned in chapter 4.

In chapter 1 Jonah is in the ship. As you can see on the next two pages, most of that chapter (vv. 4–16) is a chiasmus. Again notice, as in 1:3, how A (vv. 4–5a) corresponds to A¹ (vv. 15-16), B to B¹, and C to C¹.

JONAH 1:4–16, SHOWING ITS CHIASTIC STRUCTURE			
<p>A. Narrative Framework, 4–5a</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God hurls a wind; the storm starts, 4. 2. Sailors fear, cry to gods, sacrifice, 5a. 	<p>4 The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.</p> <p>5a Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god; and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.</p>		
<p>B. Narrative/Request, 5b–6</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jonah sleeps deeply in the storm, 5b. 2. Captain: Pray (to not perish), 6a. 3. Captain: God’s sovereign freedom, 6b. 		<p>5b But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.</p> <p>6 So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps <i>your</i> god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”</p>	
<p>C. Dialog, 7-9</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sailors speak: Who is to blame? 7a. 2. Report: Jonah is revealed by lot, 7b. 3. Sailors request information from Jonah, 8. 4. Jonah responds: I fear..., 9. 			<p>7 Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity <i>has struck</i> us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.</p> <p>8 Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account <i>has</i> this calamity <i>struck</i> us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”</p> <p>9 He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”</p>

<p>C¹ Dialog, 10-12</p> <p>1 Sailors speak: What have you done? 10a.</p> <p>2. Report: Jonah’s wrong revealed, 10b.</p> <p>3. Sailors request information from Jonah, 11.</p> <p>4 Jonah responds: I know..., 12.</p>			<p>10 Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.</p> <p>11 ¶ So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?”—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.</p> <p>12 He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you; for I know that on account of me this great storm <i>has come</i> upon you.”</p>
<p>B¹ Narrative/Request, 13–14</p> <p>1. Sailors strive to bring ship to land, 13.</p> <p>2. Sailors pray to Jonah’s God, to not perish, 14a.</p> <p>3. Sailors profess the LORD’s sovereign freedom, 14b.</p>		<p>13 However the men rowed <i>desperately</i> to return to land, but they could not, for the sea was becoming <i>even</i> stormier against them.</p> <p>14 Then they called on the LORD and said, “We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as you have pleased.”</p>	
<p>A¹ Narrative Framework, 15–16</p> <p>1. Sailors hurl Jonah; storm stops, 15.</p> <p>2. Sailors fear, speak their vows, sacrifice to the LORD, 16.</p>	<p>15 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.</p> <p>16 Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.</p>		

Fact or fiction? Consider the following three arguments—with rebuttals—that this book is fictional. (1) It records several miraculous events, such as: The sailors’ lot fell on Jonah; the storm

stopped when he was thrown overboard; a great fish was ready to swallow him; he didn't die but was vomited on shore; Nineveh was converted; the LORD prepared a special plant, a special worm, and a special wind. But these events, though unusual were not arbitrary; each was essential to the message. (2) There is no other historical record of the repentance of Nineveh; instead, it continued to be violent and cruel. But revival, even when profound, is often short-lived. And historians are loath to record their own countries' humiliations. (3) A fictional story can convey important spiritual lessons and be treated as fact. The Lord Jesus' parables show this; we often refer to the prodigal son. But there can be no doubt that Jonah himself, and wicked Nineveh, were historical. Furthermore, the Jews and the Church Fathers considered this book factual. Above all, so did Jesus: "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matt. 12:41). Baxter comments,

Will anyone dare to maintain that the Son of God was here teaching (as one has well put it) that "imaginary persons who at the imaginary preaching of an imaginary prophet repented in imagination, shall rise up in that day and condemn the *actual* impenitence of those, his *actual* hearers, that the fictitious characters of a parable shall be arraigned at the same bar with the living men of that generation?" To maintain this is monstrous!⁴

Comments on Selected Verses

Chapter 1

Verse 2 "Nineveh the great city" (see also 3:2, 3) is the first of several "great" things featured in this book. Notice some examples: the "great wind" and "great storm" in 1:4, 12; the sailors' "great fear" (1:16, Hebrew); the "great fish" the LORD appointed (1:17). References to such great items underline the LORD's concerns and abilities.

Verse 6 "Perhaps *your* god will be concerned" reflects the theme of God's sovereignty. (So does the similar thought in v. 14.) Notice, however (here and v. 12), that apparently Jonah would not pray.

Verse 9 "I fear the LORD God of heaven." Although he had not planned to give it, Jonah's testimony plus the LORD's action later resulted in the conversion of these sailors.

Verse 12 "On account of me this great storm has come." It was now apparent that Jonah was the culprit. Yet, he not only refused to pray—but insisted that they throw him overboard. Why did he not kill himself? Perhaps because that would admit to the LORD that he was wrong. Instead, forcing the sailors to kill him would show the LORD how He should deal with sinners. He would give the LORD an example of justice!

Verses 13–14 "The men rowed *desperately*...They called on the LORD..." These pagans showed compassion for Jonah, but he showed none for the Ninevites.

⁴ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, IV (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, LTD, London, 1952), 150.

Verse 16 “The men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice.” As usual in this book, the pagans responded to the LORD better than His prophet did. Such irony emphasizes the prophet’s disobedience and the LORD’s mercy.

Chapter 2

Verse 1 “Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish.” The prayer is recorded in vv. 2–9. Jonah began it as he faced death from drowning and completed it from inside the fish.

Verse 2 “I called out of my distress...He answered...
I cried for help... You heard...”

Notice the parallelism in these first two lines. This is a key feature in Hebrew poetry, which continues throughout Jonah’s prayer. In fact, when forced to pray in anguish, Jonah used words he no doubt memorized as a child, mostly from Psalms:

2a Ps. 18:6; 120:1 4a Ps. 31:22 6b Ps. 30:3 9a Ps. 50:14, 23
3b Ps. 42:7 5b Ps. 69:1–2 7b Ps. 18:6 9c Ps. 3:8

“From the depth of Sheol” (and “from the pit” in v. 6) is also poetic and does not mean he had died (see Ps. 30:3). He came only “to the point of death” (v. 5, Hebrew *ad nephesh*, literally, to the soul).

Verse 4 “I will look again toward Your holy temple.” Did Jonah refer to the LORD’s temple in heaven (as in Ps. 11:4; 18:6; Micah 1:2; Hab. 2:20) or the earthly temple in Jerusalem? Since the prayer did reach the LORD in His temple (v. 7), it probably means heaven.

Verse 8 “Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness.” “Their faithfulness” means the LORD’s covenant love for them. The same noun (*hesed*), translated “lovingkindness” in 4:2, is a key feature in this book. Ironically, Jonah himself had been willing to forsake that love by fleeing.

Verse 9 “Salvation is from the LORD.” This may be the best statement of the book’s theme. No one else but the LORD has the right or ability to bring salvation.

Chapter 3

Notice how this chapter is similar to Joel 2:1–19.

Structure of Joel 2:1–19 and Jonah 3		
	Joel 2:1–19	Jonah 3
Threat of Severe Judgment	2:1–11	3:1–4
Call to Repentance (all are expected to participate)	2:12–17	3:5–9
Upon Their Response, God Repented about Judging	2:18–19	3:10

Verses 1–2a “The word of the LORD came to Jonah... ‘Arise, go to Nineveh...and proclaim...’
This is nearly the same as 1:1–2a. This time, however (in 1:2b), the LORD promised to give the words.

Verse 4 “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Apparently these are the words the LORD gave Jonah to preach. They were only five words in Hebrew, not many to convert a great city! Were there others? Did Jonah give a personal testimony? Did the Ninevites know what had happened to him? Was there an additional sign, such as, a solar eclipse? The book does not say.

Luke 11:30 tells us that “Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites” just as Jesus would be a sign to His own generation. The parallel passage in Matthew 12:38–41 gives more detail. “The sign of Jonah the prophet” was his being “three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster. So shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” This may imply that the Ninevites knew about Jonah’s rescue. But if it does, why does the book not tell us so?⁵ Apparently the *means* of their conversion was not as important as the LORD’s *sovereign power* in it!

Verse 7 “Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock...eat or drink water.” Is this an exxageration or a demonstration of the depth of their repentance? Probably the latter (not unique in that culture).

Verse 8 “that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence....” This was precisely what happened, according to v. 10, prompting God to relent from judgment. “Turn” (Hebrew *shuv*) is the most common Old Testament expression for conversion, usually referring to man but also to God, as in the next verse.⁶

Verse 9 “Who knows, God may turn and relent...” This again reflects the book’s theme about God’s sovereignty. Even apparent conversion **cannot force Him** to turn and relent. Conversion in itself does not merit God’s goodness. Note that “turn,” used in verses 8 and 10 of the Ninevites, is here used of God. It may seem even more surprising that God is said to “relent” or “repent” (Hebrew *niham*), since 1 Samuel 15:29 denies that possibility.⁷ In what sense, then, does He repent? Only *in appearance*. He does not repent by actually changing His mind but *seems to change*, just as the wind can seem fiercer when we turn into it.

Verse 10 “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways....”
Turning from “evil ways” indicates the desire to abandon them. This is one aspect of being converted, emphasized by the term *repent*.⁸ Another aspect of conversion is turning “to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

⁵ If Jonah did not tell them, they may have known from other sources. Direct evidence is not needed. Remember that the resurrected Jesus appeared only to those who believed in Him.

⁶ The verb *shuv* itself has no moral content. One can **turn** toward good, as in Jer. 18:8, or toward evil, as in Jer. 18:10. The same is true of the Greek equivalent, *epistrepho*. To 1 Thess. 1:9 and James 5:19-20, contrast Gal. 4:9.

⁷ God “will not lie or **change His mind**. He is not a man that He should **change His mind**” (1 Sam. 15:29). Yet, verse 11 uses the same verb in describing God: “I **regret** that I have made Saul king.” So do many other verses (e.g., Gen. 6:6, 7; Exod. 32:12, 14; Jer. 18:8; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3, 6).

⁸ In 2 Cor. 7:8-11 the apostle says, “I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance.... Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation...but worldly sorrow brings death.”

Several of the elements of Jonah 3:9–10 are found in Exodus 32:11–14. Moses requested that God turn from His burning anger and change His mind about doing harm to Israel, which He did.

Chapter 4

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF JONAH 4		
A Report/Question 1–2 1 Jonah’s anger 1 2 Jonah’s question 2		
	B Request/Question 3–4 1 Jonah requests death 3 2 God questions Jonah 4	
		C Jonah’s Response/God’s Response 5–6a 1 Jonah builds hut 5 2 God gives plant to save Jonah 6a
		C ¹ Jonah’s Response/God’s Response 6b–8a 1 Jonah very glad 6b 2 God kills plant to afflict Jonah 6b–8a
	B ¹ Request/Question 8b–9a 1 Jonah requests death 8b 2 God questions Jonah 9a	
A ¹ Report/Question 9b–11 1 Jonah’s anger 9b 2 God’s question 10–11		

Verse 1 “But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.” What displeased him was God’s repenting from judging the Ninevites. Just when God dropped His anger, Jonah started his. His anger prompted him to desire death (v. 3), a feeling intensified by his great physical discomfort (v. 8). Verse 8 shows the depth of his disgust. Twice the LORD questioned Jonah’s “reason to be angry” (vv. 4, 9).

Verse 2 “I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness....” At this point the book finally reveals Jonah’s reason for fleeing from the LORD’s presence so as not to preach to Nineveh. Jonah knew that the LORD’s character might prompt Him to let the Ninevites off the hook. His description of the LORD’s character is quite common in the Old Testament. See the following passages in context, for example:

Thus, real repentance is more than sorrow for the consequences of one’s actions. It is also more than just “changing one’s mind,” a popular definition too closely based on parts of the Greek word (*metanoia*) rather than its usage.

Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; and especially Exodus 34:6. Jonah did not want the LORD to have this chance to be true to Himself!

Verses 3-9 “Death is better to me than life. And the LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?” This is repeated in verses 8d–9a. Jonah was certainly capable of emotion. He was “extremely happy about the plant” God provided to deliver him from discomfort (v. 6). But when the worm killed it and the wind and sun attacked him (vv. 7–8), he became “angry about the plant” (v. 9). But his emotions were topsy-turvy. He could be happy about his own comfort, but not that Nineveh was spared!

Verses 10–11 “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work....Should I not have compassion on Nineveh...as well as many animals?” Here God contrasted His creature Jonah with Himself as Creator—and was patiently showing Jonah the difference in their attitudes.

The lesson for Jonah is the same for us. If we truly come to know and love our Creator, His concerns will become our own.