



JONAH

An Old Testament Exegetical Commentary



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BRO. CRAIG MOSS
www.craigmoss.com

Introduction To Jonah

Historical Background

The book of Jonah was most likely written by the Jonah the prophet of Israel. The time of the writing was around the early eighth century B.C. during the rule of King Jeroboam II. Jonah was the son of a priest named Amittai (Jon. 1:1). According to the Jewish historian Jerome, Jonah's place of birth was Gath-Hepher, in the land of the tribe of Zebulun.² The Assyrians were the major political power in the region at the time. Nineveh was the Assyrian capital. Traditionally it was believed to be an actual account that took place in the life of the prophet Jonah. Robert Chisholm pointed out that Jesus spoke of Jonah and his trial in Matthew 12:40 in which he was prophesying of His own resurrection.³ It is not likely that Jesus would use a known fictional story to convey His literal non-fictional resurrection. Dr. Harold Wilmington noted that the literal translation was held by both the early church and Jewish tradition.⁴

Prevailing Conditions

God told Jonah that Nineveh's "wickedness is come up before [Him]" (Jon. 1:2). The Assyrians were ungodly pagans who worshipped various false gods. They were vicious and hard people. They were even "known to impale their enemies on stakes in front of their towns and hang their heads from trees in the king's gardens."⁵ Torture was one of their ways of punishing

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible: King James Version*.

² Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "Jonah," in *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* (Public Domain: E-Sword Bible Software, 1886-1891), Ch.1 Introduction.

³ Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 407.

⁴ Harold Wilmington, *Wilmington's Guide to the Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981-2011), 136.

⁵ E. Ray Clenandon, "Jonah, Book of," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, et al., (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), accessed July 31, 2018, <https://app.wordsearchbible.com/reader>.

their captives. They would even skin their victims and cover the city wall with their skins.⁶ Jonah despised the Ninevites, as evidenced by the fact that he was “very angry” (4:1) with God for being “gracious,” “and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness” (4:3) to the Ninevites, by not judging them for their wickedness.

Characters

There are two main characters in the book of Jonah, Jonah (the protagonist) is one of the main characters, and God (the antagonist) is the other. The Ninevites are sort of antagonists as well, but they are minor characters that help move the narrative along.⁷ Some other minor characters include the mariners on the ship that Jonah was taking to Tarsus (Jon. 1:3) they were a foil to Jonah, while the great fish was an agent⁸ working on behalf of God (1:17) to help move the story along as well.

Major Argument

Tremper Longman said that “the central conflict of the book of Jonah [is that] God gives Jonah a command to preach in the city of Nineveh, and Jonah refuses by hopping on a boat that is sailing in the opposite direction.”⁹ Jonah’s flight caused God to take measures that would force Jonah to obey His command, so that could forgive the Ninevites because He is a God “ready to forgive” (Ps. 86:5).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 73.

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

Major Themes

The major themes include: God's willingness to forgive the most vile offenders if they repent (forgiveness and repentance); obedience and disobedience; God's omniscience (He knew that Nineveh would repent); God's omnipotence (causing the wind and the tempest, and having a great fish prepared to swallow Jonah at the right time and place); God's sovereignty and power over life and death (Jonah lived even though he was trapped in the belly of a great fish, and the people of Nineveh's execution was stayed when they repented, even though they deserved to be destroyed); Prayer (1:14; 2:1; 3:8; 4:2).

Exegetical Outline Summary Statements

Major Summary Statement 1:1–17

In the first chapter of the book of Jonah, the call of God to His prophet Jonah was to go to the city of Nineveh. Previously, in 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was a “national hero when he accomplished the first mission God gave him.”¹⁰ Nineveh was the capital of the kingdom of the Assyrians. They were wicked and vile people, who persecuted anyone who did not agree with them. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, so he contradicted the call of God and boarded a ship to Tarsus. God sent a great storm that battered the ship and caused Jonah to be confronted by the mariners. It was revealed to the mariners that Jonah was the problem. They threw him overboard per own instructions, and he was swallowed by a great fish.

The Call of Jonah: (1:1-3)

(1:1) The narrative begins like most prophetic books, with an announcement concerning

¹⁰ Trent Butler, *Holman Old Testament Commentary - Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), 261.

the “word” which is transliterated as *dâbâr*, meaning: “speech, saying, or utterance”¹¹ of the “LORD,” transliterated as *yehôvâh*, which means “the existing One,”¹² which is the appropriate name of the true God. This utterance came to the prophet Jonah, or *yônâh*, which means dove,¹³ The same word was used for the bird that Noah sent out from the Ark so that he could know when the earth was dry (Gen. 8). It is also an image that has been used to represent the Holy Spirit (Mat. 3:16). Jonah is called by God as a prophet to convey the message in the power of the Spirit of God to the people of Nineveh. In this passage, God told Jonah to go to “that great city” (1:2), Nineveh, which means “abode of Ninus,” who was the first Assyrian king.¹⁴ Nineveh was the capital of Assyria.¹⁵ Jonah was told to “cry,” or *qârâ*, meaning “to call out [or] proclaim” judgment against the “wickedness” of Nineveh in the sight of God. (1:3) After a brief argument with God (Jonah 4:2) “Jonah rose up to flee [*bârach*, or “run away”]¹⁶ unto Tarshish [a city of the Phoenicians in a distant part of the Mediterranean Sea]¹⁷ from the presence of the LORD” The once national hero is now a reluctant rebel against God. He hated the people of Nineveh so much that he did not want to be the vessel that God would use to bring them to repentance. Therefore, instead of going east toward Nineveh where God told him to go, He headed the opposite direction. He went down to Joppa, “which was a primary port of Jerusalem”¹⁸ and he located a ship heading for Tarshish; he paid the fare “and went down into it” [into the sleeping quarters of the ship] to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD” (1:3).

¹¹ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew Definitions*, (Oxford, EN: Clarendon Press, 1906) Digital, np.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Jackson, *Chronological Antiquities or the Antiquities and Chronology of the Most Ancient Kingdoms from the Creation of the World for Space of Five Thousand Years*, (Digital: London: J. Noon, 1752), 259.

¹⁵ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Contradiction of Jonah: (1:4-6)

In the next segment of Jonah chapter one, (4) God sent out a “great wind,” or *rúach*, which is “the wind, of heaven,”¹⁹ “or even violent exhalation,”²⁰ into the sea. This was no ordinary wind, it was a providential God sent wind that caused a mighty “tempest,” a *se’ârâh*, meaning, a “whirlwind”²¹ or “a hurricane”²² in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken, or “be dashed to pieces.”²³ (5) Then the mariners, or *mallâch*,²⁴ which is a “Hebrew word formed from the word for salt, and denotes those occupied with the salt sea.”²⁵ These men were afraid, and cried, or *zâ’aq*, which means “to call (to one’s aid),” every man unto his god (to be differentiated from Jonah’s God). Perowne suggested that they were likely Phoenicians, which would explain their array of gods.²⁶ They “cast forth,” or *tûl*: “to hurl” overboard, the wares, or *kelîy*, which includes: “articles, vessels, utensils, tools and furniture,” that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them.²⁷ While all of this was going on, Jonah was in the sleeping quarters fast asleep. Perowne suggested that he was apparently “moody, miserable, and weary with mental conflict and bodily fatigue.”²⁸ (6) That was when the “shipmaster,” or *rab*, meaning: “captain,”²⁹ woke up Jonah, and asked him, “What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God.” Their gods could not help them, that prompted them to look for another God to call on. They had hopes that Jonah’s God would be the one that would answer, and that they would not

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James A. Strong, *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, (Public Domain: E-Sword Bible Software, 1890), Digital, np.

²¹ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs’*, Digital, np.

²² James A. Strong, *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

²³ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, Jonah 1:4-5.

²⁴ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs’*, Digital, np.

²⁵ T. T. Perowne, “Jonah,” in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, ed. J. J. S. Perowne, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889), Part 3, Ch.1:5.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.1:5.

²⁹ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs’*, Digital, np.

perish, but Jonah was not on speaking terms with his God. He was running from Him, and in rebellion against Him.

The Uncovering of Jonah: (1:7-9)

The next passage finds Jonah in a predicament. (1:7) “And they said every one to his fellow [or *rêya*’, meaning “friend or companion”³⁰], Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.” The mariners saw that the gods were not answering their prayers, and Jonah was not praying. They concluded that one of the gods sent the storm as judgment for a crime that one of them committed and decided to draw lots to find out who the culprit was.³¹ “Lots,” or *gôrâl*, were “pebbles used for systematically making decisions.”³² It was a practice that was popular through the Old Testament and even in the book of Acts (1:26). The lot fell upon Jonah, identifying him as the reason the evil was upon them. The Scripture says, “be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). Jonah was found out, God had allowed the pebbles to point out Jonah as the culprit. (Jonah 1:8) God in His sovereignty was working His will out in Jonah’s life. Jonah was confronted by the mariners, they began to question him, “for whose cause this evil is upon us?” They were giving him an opportunity to confess his sin.³³ They continued to interrogate him: “What is thine occupation? And whence comest thou? What is thy country? And of what people art thou?” These men were in dire straits over the hurricane, their lives were at stake, they wanted and needed answers immediately. (1:9) Jonah responded to their questions telling them that he was a Hebrew and that he feared the God of heaven, who is also the Creator God, and the very God who was causing the tempest that they were being affected by.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.1:7.

³² Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

³³ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, Jonah 1:6-8.

The Confrontation of Jonah: (1:10-14)

The mariners were extremely afraid; they were in fear for their lives. They knew that Jonah had fled from the presence of the God. They began to question Jonah further. They asked him, “Why hast thou done this?” (10) They had no idea how to appease another man’s god, let alone their limited understanding of who Jonah’s God was.³⁴ They wanted to know what to do to him to make the sea calm. Verse 11 says that “the sea wrought [‘was going’] and was tempestuous [‘being tossed’].”³⁵ The waters were raging. (12) Jonah told them that the only option that they had was to “Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea, which means to pick him up and throw him overboard. He said that that was the only way that the sea would “be calm [or *shâthaq*, meaning, “to subside, be calm, cease, be quiet.”] unto you.” However, Jonah’s assessment may not have been completely valid, as Robert Chisholm pointed out, the more appropriate answer for Jonah would likely have been to repent immediately and submit to his call to Nineveh.³⁶ In the end of verse 12, he admitted that he was the problem! “I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.” The mariners did not listen to Jonah’s solution at first, but rather, tried, unsuccessfully, rowing hard, to get the ship to the land. (1:13) They apparently had more compassion on Jonah than Jonah had on them. He knew what the problem was, and took so long to tell them. It again states that the “sea wrought and was tempestuous against them.” They were struggling and losing all hope. The mariners began to cry out to Jonah’s God in verse 1:14, something that Jonah should have been doing, but has neglected to do thus far. “We beseech, thee, O LORD, we beseech thee” (Jon. 1:14) They were praying to the God that Jonah was running from. They asked God to spare their lives, and not allow them to perish for

³⁴ John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1985), 1466.

³⁵ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.1:11.

³⁶ Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 411.

what they were about to do to His prophet. They feared His God more than he did! They even acknowledged that Jonah’s God does as He pleases. Perowne pointed out that the mariners acknowledged Jehovah, a God they had never met, and called to Him, instead of their gods.³⁷

The Casting Over and Consumption of Jonah: (1:15-17)

Jonah had told them what they needed to do. After praying to Jonah’s God, in verse 1:15, the mariners heeded Jonah’s counsel, took him up, “and cast him forth into the sea.” Perowne also added that they did it respectfully, and Jonah did not try to struggle with them.³⁸ The sea then yielded its raging, and there was no longer a “great wind [or a] mighty tempest” (Jon 1:4). The pagans, the sea, the wind, the tempest all obeyed the God that Jonah had disobeyed; God had heard their prayers and answered them when they obeyed Him! When they noticed the abrupt change in the conditions of the storm which revealed the power of Jonah’s God, the mariners feared Him even more exceedingly! (16) The pagan mariners were moved by their fear and reverence for the God that truly does control the weather, to offer a “sacrifice,” or *zabach* meaning, “thank offering”³⁹ to Him, and make “vows,” or *nêder* meaning, “votive offerings”⁴⁰ to Him!

(17) When the mariners threw Jonah overboard, God had prepared a “great fish,” or *gâdôl* meaning, “great or large”⁴¹ and *dâg*, meaning simply “fish”⁴² to “swallow up” or *baw-lah*, meaning, “devour, eat up, or swallow down,”⁴³ Jonah. Although many theologians allude to the great fish as not being a whale, Jesus said that Jonah “was three days and three nights in the

³⁷ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.1:14-16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Ch.1:15.

³⁹ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

whale’s belly” (Mat. 12:40). The word Jesus used for “whale” was *kētōs* which means, “a huge fish, a whale.”⁴⁴ Thayer defined *kētōs* as “a sea monster, whale, or huge fish.”⁴⁵ The King James Bible translators felt that “whale” was the correct rendering in the text, and that is this author’s position as well. The biology of a whale was irrelevant, as was the geography, in that God had “prepared” or “appointed” the great fish. The possibility also remains that at the time when Jesus referenced the whale, that the shark was considered a whale, as there is no reference to sharks in the Scripture, because they were not known as sharks until “A mere six hundred years ago.”⁴⁶ Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for “three days and three nights,” constituting approximately seventy-two hours.

Major Summary Statement 2:1-10

The second chapter of Jonah opens with Jonah still inside the great fish’s belly, praying in penitence to God. In his prayer, he acknowledges that God is the one who is keeping him alive in his current state. It is not a prayer for forgiveness, but praises for forgiveness already received. When he praises the Lord, God has him vomited back up on dry land.

Jonah’s Prayer, Penitence, Predicament, Praising, and Proclamation (2:1-9)

Chapter two begins with, “Then Jonah prayed” The word “prayed” is *pālal*, and means, “to intercede, pray: intreat, judge, make supplication.” This is the first time in the narration that Jonah began to speak to God, and he does so out of his desperate situation. He gave reasons for his prayer. He cried because of his condition. (1:2) It was a putrid place to be, and Jonah referred

⁴⁴ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np..

⁴⁵ Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer's Greek Definitions*, (Public Domain: E-Sword Bible Software, 1886, 1889), Digital, np.

⁴⁶ Grace Costantino, *Sharks Were Once Called Seadogs, And Other Little Known Facts*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/sharks-were-once-called-sea-dogs-and-other-little-known-facts-180952320/>, (accessed July 31, 2018).

to is as his affliction, or *tsârâh*, meaning, “adversity, distress, tribulation or trouble.”⁴⁷ He proclaimed that God heard his cry! He likened the belly of the fish to “hell” (1:2), or *she ’ôl*, meaning, “underworld, grave, hell, or pit.”⁴⁸ Again, acknowledging that God heard him. He states in verse of that passage, that it was God that cast him into the “deep,” or *metsûlâh*, meaning, “the deep sea.”⁴⁹ He emphasized his plight with descriptive words about his watery grave like the deep, the seas which “express the idea of the boundless ocean,”⁵⁰ the floods, thy billows or *mishbâr* meaning “breakers”⁵¹ or waves that break waves, and thy waves which passed over him. There is no physical reason that Jonah survived this ordeal, he should have drowned. Jonah continued by saying that he had been cast out of God’s sight, but he did not stop there, he concluded, “yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.” Jonah knew that God was preserving him, and that he would one day be restored. Regardless to the hopelessness of his current situation, his hope was in his God. Jonah continued in his prayer to express his predicament graphically. In the fifth verse, He expressed how the waters “compassed” him about, or *’âphaph*, meaning that they surrounded him, even to his soul or *neh ’fesh*, meaning “soul, self, life, creature, or person.”⁵² Jonah said that “the weeds were wrapped around his head” (2:5). The weeds were “water plants,” possibly seaweed. His predicament seemed as if his life would be consumed. Jonah explains that he went down to the “bottoms” or *qetseb* of the mountains (2:6), meaning the base of the mountains at the very bottom of the sea. He described it in terms of a prison, “the earth with her bars,” that were about him forever. However, he proclaimed, while still in the belly of the fish, that the Lord his God has brought up his life from corruption, or

⁴⁷ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁴⁸ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, Jonah 2:3-4.

⁵¹ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁵² Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

shachath, meaning, “pit, destruction, or grave.”⁵³ Jonah said, “When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD” (2:7). The word “fainted” is from *’âṭaph*, which means, “to languish or be overwhelmed.”⁵⁴ Perowne said that he was referring to a film or a darkness that comes over both the eye and the mind when one is fainting or suffering from exhaustion.⁵⁵ It was in that overwhelming time of Jonah’s darkest hour that he became mindful of God. From the belly of the fish, Jonah declared that his prayer was heard in God’s holy temple.

In the next verse, Jonah said, “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy” (2:8). Observe, or *shâmar*, means “to keep, guard, observe, or give heed.”⁵⁶ Lying, or *shâv’*, means “emptiness, vanity, or falsehood.”⁵⁷ Vanities, or “*hăbêl*, meaning, “breath or vapour.”⁵⁸ Therefore, in this verse, Jonah is saying that people who guard or observe vain, empty breath, forsake their own mercy. It is likely that Jonah was speaking about himself. Considering the vileness and reputation of the Ninevites, when Jonah fled to save his life, he was regarding his own empty breath more than the word which the Lord spoken to him. (1:1) As a result, he forsook his own *chêsêd*, or “goodness, kindness, and faithfulness.” However, his direction changed. He will now sacrifice or *zâbach*, meaning to “slaughter or kill,”⁵⁹ with the voice of thanksgiving. He promised also to pay that which he had vowed. Jonah’s last recorded words inside the great fish were, “Salvation is of the LORD,” who had compassion on His undeserving servant.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁵⁵ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.2:7.

⁵⁶ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The Puking Up of Jonah (2:10)

The second chapter of Jonah opened with Jonah praying and ended with the great fish puking. The Lord, demonstrating his sovereignty over the earth and its creatures, spoke to the fish, and it vomited or *qâyâh*, meaning “to spue out or disgorge”⁶⁰ Jonah upon the dry land. God knew exactly what measures it would take before Jonah would begin to obey Him and had the great fish ready to puke him up on “the coast of Palestine, probably the country near Joppa.”⁶¹

Major Summary Statement 3:1–10

Immediately following the chastisement of the LORD for his rebellion and disobedience; after being delivered from the belly of the great fish, which could only be a miracle considering the “very strong acids and enzymes”⁶² in the belly of a fish; we see the restatement of God’s call. We also see Jonah’s obedience as he went to Nineveh and preached God’s judgment against that city. The people of Nineveh believed Jonah’s preaching and repented before God. After seeing Nineveh’s response, God, in His infinite mercy and loving grace spared that great city from its impending judgment.

Jonah Obeyed God (Jon. 3:1–4)

After being puked up on the shore of Palestine, God spoke to Jonah again (1), restating the original call from Jon. 1:2. God did not change His mind, nor was His will altered by the rebellion of His prophet. He told Jonah “preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee” (3:2). The word “preach” or *qârâ*’ means to “to call, call out, recite, read, cry out, [or] proclaim.”⁶³ That is exactly what Jonah did, in verse 3, Jonah traveled to Nineveh. In that same verse, we are given a

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, Jonah 2:10.

⁶² Artist, Guy M. "Jonah and the Whale's Intestines." News24. News24, June 10, 2014.

⁶³ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

measurement concerning Nineveh, it was “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” (3:3). What was meant by this measurement is not certain, some believe it to be the circumference of the city would take three days journey to traverse,⁶⁴ while others contend that it is the diameter of the city that would take three days to cross on foot.⁶⁵ Since the average person walks about two miles per hour, and a days walk would likely be about ten to twelve hours of actual walking time, that would give a circumference of about sixty to seventy-two miles. That would mean that the city was around a little over four-hundred square miles. There were over “sixscore thousand persons [one-hundred and twenty-thousand people] and also much cattle” (Jon. 4:11) in the city, making it the practical answer, depending upon how many cattle is considered “much cattle.” This is important in the light of verse 4, which states “And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jon. 3:4). It does not say that he went a day’s journey and preached, but that he “began” to enter into the city and was preaching. This means that he would travel through the city in a day, preaching God’s judgment to all who would hear. With the city having a circumference of sixty to seventy-two miles, that would give it a diameter of only about twenty to twenty-two miles, and Jonah would have preached through the city from end to end within a day. Jonah’s message to Nineveh consisted of five Hebrew words.

Ninevites Believed God (3:5-9)

Upon hearing Jonah’s message of doom, “the people of Nineveh believed God.” they immediately fasted, and put on sackcloth, or *śaq*, which was the mesh cloth that was used for the sacks of grain. Sackcloth was something “worn in mourning or humiliation.”⁶⁶ This is indicative

⁶⁴ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.3:3.

⁶⁵ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, Jonah 3:3.

⁶⁶ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

of these pagan people humbling themselves, and mourning in repentance and remorse before the God of Jonah. The mourners were “from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (Jon. 3:5). In this context the greatest is the word *gâdôl*, which means, “older,”⁶⁷ and the least, or *qâṭôn*, meaning “young, small, insignificant, [or] unimportant,”⁶⁸ which would indicate age as the context for this verse. In verse 6, even the “King of Nineveh” left his throne and his kingly garb, and “covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” “Ashes,” were symbolic of “worthlessness,”⁶⁹ The king of Nineveh humbled himself to a position of worthlessness before God. He then “caused it to be proclaimed [herald or announce publicly]⁷⁰ and published [to command]⁷¹ through Nineveh by decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water” (3:7) He not only commanded that the people were to fast, but even the animals could not eat during this fast. The king further ordered that both “man and beast [were to] be covered with sackcloth” (3:8). This is the only time in Scripture that animals were to fast and be covered with sackcloth before God, and that by the order of a pagan king in a pagan land. The king also ordered the people to “cry mightily [‘vehemently; with great earnestness’]⁷² unto God.” As stated previously, the Ninevites were wicked and vile people, who persecuted anyone who did not agree with them. The king called for them to repent from their evil ways, “and from the violence that is in their hands.” He did this in hopes that “God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger” (3:9). “Repent,” in this case means “(in a favorable sense) to pity”⁷³ them, so that they might not

⁶⁷ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁶⁸ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁷¹ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

⁷² Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 2, (New York: S. Converse, 1828), 15.

⁷³ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

have to perish. The Ninevites were seriously affected by the word of the Lord preached by Jonah, the one who rebelled against the word of the Lord and fled just a couple chapters ago. They threw themselves upon His mercy, not knowing Him or whether He would turn from His wrath. They allowed God to have His will and way, while Jonah wanted God to do things his way.

God Has Mercy on the Ninevites (3:10)

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way” (3:10). Their turning from evil was God's desire. The Scripture says that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pt. 3:9). Unlike Jonah, who hated the Ninevites, the God who created them had mercy on them. “the Lord pitieth them that fear him” (Ps. 103:13). He “repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.” God turned, as the king of Nineveh had hoped He would.

Major Summary Statement 4:1–11

The prophet Jonah got exceedingly angry and complained to God for having compassion and mercy to the people of Nineveh. He so soon forgot that this was the very same God had mercy on his rebellion and redeemed him from the belly of the great fish in chapter 2. Jonah's rebellion was far worse than the crimes of Nineveh in the eyes of God, (2 Pt. 2:21) yet; he expected God to judge them because they were not of his ancestry. God questioned Jonah's anger. Then He used a gourd for an illustration to show him how his understanding was wrong.

Jonah Got Angry with God; God Questioned Jonah's Anger (4:1–4)

This chapter begins with what is probably the most distressing verse in the whole book, and possibly in the Old Testament as a whole. “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry” (4:1). The man of God, Jonah, who preached to the Ninevites, got angry and emotional with God over staying His judgment from Nineveh. His hypocrisy is evident in that he

wanted God to forgive his rebellion, but not forgive the sins of the Ninevites. The root of bitterness in Jonah’s heart was evidenced further in his words when “he prayed unto the LORD” (4:2). Jonah reminded God that the probability of His graciousness and mercifulness toward Nineveh was the reason he fled to Tarsus! Jonah knew the character⁷⁴ and willingness of God to be “slow to anger, and of great kindness,” and turn His wrath away from them when they turn from their sins. (Jer. 26:3) The emotional prophet, in a tantrum, makes an irrational plea to God to “take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live” (4:3). How soon he forgot the belly of the great fish! When he was at the point of dying, just two days prior, he prayed a much different prayer. He did not really want to die; it was that he did not want the Ninevites to live. Jonah’s displeasure could no doubt be seen and felt by the Ninevites, as he expressed his anger with God while still in Nineveh. Instead of rejoicing with those who God had spared, he was bitter with God. God simply responded to Jonah’s tantrum with a question, “Doest thou well to be angry?” (4:4) God responded mercifully and sensibly to the merciless emotional prophet! Jonah, regardless to God’s mercy, once again cut off communication with God, and did not respond to His question.

Jonah the Confused Prophet (4:5-8)

“So, Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city” (4:5) After his temper-tantrum Jonah left Nineveh and made a booth or *sûkkâh*, meaning “a hut or a lair”⁷⁵ for himself, that is, a “rude or temporary shelter.”⁷⁶ This hut would be the equivalent of some branches fastened together with palm throngs stretched across it to provide shade from the

⁷⁴ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.4:4.

⁷⁵ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁷⁶ Francis Brown, et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs'*, Digital, np.

immense desert heat. He set up the booth “on the east side of the city,” which would have the opening facing the city, because he wanted to “see what would become of the city” (4:5). (4:6) “God prepared a gourd,” or *qîyqâyôn*, meaning, “a plant: perhaps a gourd, castor-oil plant, bottle-gourd,”⁷⁷ which is a vine with large leaves that shade its fruit. God has it “to come up over,” or to grow over the top of Jonah, “that it might be a shadow over his head,” or give him shade. God did this “to deliver him from his grief.” God once again is extending mercy to His rebellious disgruntled prophet. “Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd,” once again, self-centered Jonah is pleased with God being merciful to him, even though he is displeased with God being merciful with the Ninevites. (4:7) “But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.” God prepared a worm to attack the gourd and kill it, withering its leaves, exposing Jonah to the elements. (4:8) After the gourd’s leaves were withered, the sun rose, scorching the withered leaves and drying them out. “God prepared a vehement [*chăřîyshîy*, meaning, “harsh, hot, sultry, silent”] east wind. It was a wind that was harsh enough and hot enough to blow the dried out leaves off the gourd vine that was providing Jonah with shade, yet, a wind that was silent enough to not alert Jonah to his exposure to the extreme heat. As the sun beat on Jonah’s head, it says, “that he fainted,” or, *’âlah*, meaning “to veil or cover; figuratively to be languid.”⁷⁸ This is understood as meaning “the film that comes over the eyes in fainting and exhaustion, or to the clouding of the mental powers from the same cause.”⁷⁹ He did not lose consciousness, that is evident in that he “wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.” Once again, upset over things not going his way, he forgot that just a couple days before he prayed and praised God for sparing his life. This time it is

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ James A. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, Digital, np.

⁷⁹ T. T. Perowne, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Part 3, Ch.4:8.

evident that he was angry with God for allowing the gourd to be killed. (4:9) God, through the gourd, got Jonah's attention once again. Furthermore, a truly sad truth in the book of Jonah was that Jonah failed to see that the Mariners revered God and obeyed His word, the wind and sea obeyed God, the great fish obeyed God, the Ninevites and their king obeyed God, the gourd obeyed God, the worm obeyed God, the east wind obeyed God; only Jonah disobeyed God!

God Calls Jonah on His Imbalanced Morals (9-11)

God called Jonah on his anger. "And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?" As stated above, Jonah was angry that God allowed the gourd to be killed. This time Jonah responded to God. That marks the second time God has had to speak to Jonah twice because he cut off communication with Him. His response was, "I do well to be angry, even unto death." Jonah, once again, mentions his desire for death. The Lord was not phased with Jonah's consistent mention of death, in fact, He did not honor it with a response at all. Instead, God used the last two verses to show Jonah how imbalanced his morals were, showing him that he cared about a gourd that he had not created or labored over. (4:10) He continued by telling Jonah, that the gourd "came up in a night, and perished in a night." Jonah did not even have time to know anything about the gourd, except, it gave him shade. His concern for the death of the gourd was once again a revelation of his self-centered attitude. God pointed out that Jonah was angry at Him for caring about one hundred and twenty thousand "persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand," and their cattle, all of which He created, and He cared about. (4:11) Jonah had no compassion for anyone but himself. He had no compassion for the mariners who cared about him (1:13) despite his nearly costing their lives, and he had no compassion for the Ninevites who God was going to overthrow, but instead, spared them when they repented. God was abundantly more merciful than Jonah was, and He still is today. The Ninevites are a

great example of what the psalmist meant when he said: “For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee” (Psa. 86:5)

Applications

Chapter One Application

To the eighth-century Hebrew living in and around Israel, the first chapter of Jonah tells them about the disobedient prophet who, due to his self-centered attitude, ran away from the call of God. The Israelite from this era would understand the dangers of going to Nineveh and speaking against the city. However, they would also understand that there would be dangers in disobeying God and that a great fish swallowed Jonah because of his disobedience. Some of the differences between the initial recipients of the book of Jonah and those who read it today are religious. The eighth-century BC Israelite had the Torah, and other Old Testament writings and the prophets of their time to tell them the words of the Lord. The modern believer has the complete Word of God to read, and pastors and teachers to help them understand it and apply it to their own lives. The modern unbelievers have evangelists and missionaries who proclaim the Word of God to them as well. Jonah’s call would equate to that of the modern missionary to a hostile foreign field. Politically, the Israelite has been oppressed by the Assyrians, who are a savage people. The modern believer, especially in the United States, has no conception of what oppression is. The universal principles in chapter one are: when God calls you to go and do something, go and do it; and, no matter how far you run, you will never be able to flee from God. The New Testament confirms both principles. The apostle Paul wrote in one of his hardest letters, “woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16) “woe” is “a primary

exclamation of grief.”⁸⁰ The second principle is supported, in a sort of irony, when Peter, the son of Jonas, which is the New Testament translation of Jonah, boarded his fishing vessel saying “I go a fishing,” (Jn. 21:3) instead of being where he was supposed to be. The Lord knew where he was and stood on the shore waiting for him. Self-preservation motivated both men. God used fish to teach both men a lesson. A great fish consumed the Old Testament prophet Jonah; the New Testament apostle, the son of Jonas, was consumed with catching fish and caught a great number of them at the Lord’s word. Both ended up “cast, into the sea” (Jon. 1:15; Jn. 21:7). The believer today should be able to extract from the first chapter of Jonah that when God calls you to go and do something, it is best just to go and do whatever God tells you to do. Disobedience and running the opposite direction will prove to be fruitless.

Chapter Two Application

The original audience would have understood the chapter to mean that Jonah realized that his compassionate God would be his only way out of the belly of the great fish, and began praying and praising his Him. The great fish obeyed God and puked Jonah up on the shore. The difference between the initial audience is that they would have an idea of what kind of fish were in their region that were large enough to swallow a man whole. Thus they believed the story to be much more than folklore, Jewish tradition held to the literal translation of the book.⁸¹ People today do not truly know what kind of fish existed in that region over two-thousand years ago, thus, many people, including professing Christians, erroneously view the story as a legend or an allegory. Jesus validated the story in Mat. 12:40, using it to prophesy of His own resurrection. The universal principle of chapter two is that praying and praising can move the hand of God.

⁸⁰ Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer's Greek Definitions*, (Public Domain: E-Sword Bible Software, 1886, 1889), Digital, np.

⁸¹ Harold Wilmington, *Wilmington's Guide*, 136.

The New Testament supports these principles as well. Although not in their predicament for disobedience, Paul and Silas, after being imprisoned and beaten, prayed and sang praises to God, and “suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed” (Act. 16:26). Today's believers can understand that praying and praising God will move the hand of God in our circumstances.

Chapter Three Applications

The original audience would have understood the meaning of chapter three to be that God restated His call to Jonah, who this time listened, and went and preached to Nineveh. They would have understood that Nineveh repented and mourned in sackcloth and ashes and that God, therefore, withheld His judgment from them. The initial audience in Jonah's day were Jews who suffered at the hands of the Assyrians. These people that Jonah was preaching to were their enemies, and they knew that he could have lost his life for preaching against Nineveh. The majority of the church today are not suffering at the hands of those to whom they preach, and cannot perceive Jonah's situation. The exception is that in some foreign mission fields there is similar persecution, and missionaries do have to risk their lives to preach the gospel. The universal principle is that when sinners repent and cry out to God over their sins, God turns His wrath away from them. The New Testament both qualifies and modifies this principle. The wrath of God is determined against “the children of disobedience” (Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6), and “to them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness” (Rom. 2:8). The principle is modified in that when a person repents and cries out to God today, God's wrath is stayed against them, and satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our propitiator, (Rom. 3:25) who experienced the wrath of God for us. Christians today can apply this principle today in two

ways. One way they can apply it is that when they, or anyone else, repent of sin and call on the name of the Lord, they will be saved from God's eternal wrath. Another way that this principle can be understood is that when the believer messes up, repents of his sin, and confesses it, that God turns away his physical wrath from them.

Chapter Four Application

The original audience would have understood that Jonah was displeased with God for sparing the Ninevites from His wrath. They may have even shared his sentiment after being subject to the attacks of the Assyrians through the years. They would have realized that God was not pleased with Jonah's reaction to His mercy and grace being extended to the Ninevites. They would have concluded that it was wrong for Jonah to feel that way. The difference between the original recipients and believers today is that the eighth-century Israelite knew the wickedness and violence they suffered at the hands of the Ninevites, whereas today's believers, in most places do not know real persecution. The original audience would understand Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites, and possibly even his rebellion against God for sending him to them. The modern believer is not apt to understand hating your enemies, as they are commanded not to. The universal principle of the fourth chapter is that God cares about His creation, and wants His people to care about others as well, even when that part of His creation is vile and wicked against His people. The New Testament teaching is very supportive of this same principle. Jesus taught, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Mat. 5:44). Today's Christian should follow the clear teaching of Christ when it comes to those who oppose them. They should forgive, and love them enough to want to see God save them. In the words of Charles H. Spurgeon, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies.

And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.”⁸²

⁸² LifeWay Leadership, Leadership Quotes from Spurgeon – Part Two, April 11, 2016, <https://leadership.lifeway.com/2016/04/11/leadership-quotes-from-charles-spurgeon-part-two/> (accessed August 14, 2018).

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