**Jonah Commentary**

**Jonah Chapter 1**

Jon 1:1

**“Jonah the son of Amittai.”** This is the Jonah of 2 Kings 14:25, who was from Gath-hepher in the Galilee (contrast what the Pharisees thought they knew; John 7:52), and he most likely lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, as 2 Kings indicates.

Jon 1:2

**“Get up.”** The Hebrew word translated “Get up” is *qum* (#06965 קוּם), and although *qum* has a wide semantic range and many different meanings, “get up” is a meaning that figures prominently in the book of Jonah. The phrase occurs in Jonah 1:2, 6; 3:2.

God told Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh (Jon. 1:2), and Jonah did get up, but to flee from God to Tarshish (Jon. 1:3). Then on the boat, the captain told Jonah to get up and pray (Jon. 1:6). After Jonah was vomited out by the fish God told Jonah a second time to get up and go to Nineveh and Jonah did (Jon. 3:2-3). Then, after hearing of Jonah’s prophecy, the king of Nineveh got up off his throne and dressed in sackcloth and sat in ashes.

**“Nineveh.”** Nineveh was located a little east of the east bank of the Tigris River in Mesopotamia, and the ancient ruins are now in the suburbs of the modern city of Mosul in Iraq. The name “Nineveh” is a transliteration of one of the names of the goddess Ishtar. Nineveh provided a great source of learning about the ancient Near East because when it was excavated more than 16,000 clay tablets and fragments comprising some 10,000 texts were discovered there covering many different subjects including epics, legends, rituals, hymns, prayers, lists of gods and temples, letters, and historical texts, some even written in two languages, helping us to understand the ancient languages.

Nineveh is over 400 miles from the Phoenician coast and the mouth of the Orontes River, which is one of the places where Jonah would likely have been vomited out by the whale (or great fish), or he may have been vomited out further north, west of Carchemish. This is important to understand because Jesus Christ twice mentioned Jonah as being a sign, but the two signs are different. Jonah was a sign to Jesus’ generation because he was dead for three days and three nights and then got up (Matt. 12:40), and Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh because he walked alone into the capital city of an enemy country and boldly spoke the Word of God to it at the risk of his life (Luke 11:29-30). The people of Nineveh would have known nothing about him being dead in a whale, and would not have believed if he told them.

[For more on the two signs of Jonah, see commentary on Matt. 12:40.]

Jon 1:3

**“But Jonah got up.”** God told Jonah to “get up” (Jon. 1:2) and Jonah did “get up” (the same Hebrew word is used in Jonah 1:2 and 1:3). But he did not “get up” to obey God, he “got up” to flee from God and His command.

**“to flee to Tarshish.”** Jonah was a great prophet, and was used twice by Jesus Christ as an example (Matt. 12:40; Luke 11:29-32), so why did he flee from God’s command? The answer is that Jonah knew that Israel, his country and the people he loved, were caught up in great sin, and he knew that a day of reckoning was coming for Israel. Soon after Solomon’s death and the split of the United Kingdom of Israel into the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel, during the reign of the very first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I, the prophet Ahijah prophesied that because of its sin, the Northern Kingdom of Israel would be destroyed and would be scattered “beyond the Euphrates River” (cf. 1 Kings 14:1-16, see esp. 1 Kings 14:15). Now it seemed that woeful day had come.

In Jonah’s lifetime, the only power that was able to scatter Israel beyond the Euphrates River was Assyria. Egypt was south, not north, and Syria was not far enough north to be “beyond the River.” But Assyria was poised to attack and defeat Israel and carry them beyond the Euphrates, except they had some internal struggles that might have kept them from being so aggressive. In that political environment, suddenly the word of Yahweh came to Jonah that he was to travel over 600 miles to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and preach against it. Although Yahweh said for Jonah to preach in Assyria because their wickedness had come up to Him, Jonah knew that all the pagan countries were wicked in the sight of God. Jonah put history together with the prophecy of Ahijah and realized that if he preached to Nineveh and they repented of their sin and solved their internal problems, then they would come down and attack and destroy Israel and carry the people away to pagan lands (which is exactly what happened; see 2 Kings 17:5-6, 18).

Not wanting Israel to be destroyed, and perhaps hoping that God would give Israel more time to repent if he did not act to hasten their destruction, Jonah fled to Tarshish rather than obeying God. God, however, intervened and via the fish incident got Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah did preach to Nineveh, the people there did repent and were spared, and Jonah, seeing the inevitable future destruction of Israel, was angered by the Ninevites’ repentance (Jon. 3:5, 10; 4:1). But Jonah was right; the Assyrians did attack Israel, conquer it, and scatter the Israelites “beyond the Euphrates River.”

**“Tarshish.”** Tarshish is usually identified as a city in southwest Spain, Tartessos, near the mouth of the Guadalquivir River.[[1]](#footnote-14166) In a culture that generally believed that gods inhabited certain locations, for Jonah to run from God from Israel to Southwest Spain was going to the ends of the world. Jonah was a prophet and knew that God ruled the whole world, but he may have thought that if he got far enough from Israel, God would leave him alone and find someone more convenient to fulfill God’s will in the situation.

**“away from the presence of Yahweh.”** The phrase, “from the presence of Yahweh,” which occurs twice in this verse, is literally, “from the face of Yahweh,” but in this case “face” is used idiomatically and means “presence.” The belief of many people was that individual gods lived in different places. Yahweh was the God of Israel, so the belief was that if Jonah could get away from Israel there was a chance that he could get away from Yahweh.

[For more on people believing that different gods lived in different places on earth, see commentary on 1 Kings 20:23.]

Jon 1:4

**“But Yahweh hurled a great wind upon the sea.”** The vocabulary, that Yahweh “hurled” (the Hebrew is *tuwl*, #02904 טוּל) or “threw,” the same word is used for throwing a spear) a great wind shows us that the storm was not natural. It does not always happen that God strongly intervenes when someone wants to disobey Him, but in this case, He did. God intervened in Jonah’s life by hurling a great wind onto the sea, and in Jonah 1:15 the sailors intervened to save themselves and the ship by hurling (same Hebrew word) Jonah into the sea.

“**that the ship threatened to break up.”** The intensity of the storm was such that the ship is personified in the Hebrew text, and the text could literally read: “the ship thought it would break up,” or “the ship seriously considered breaking up.” Most lexicons and versions render the Hebrew idiomatically, that the ship was “about to break up.”

Jon 1:5

**“Then the mariners were afraid, and every man cried out to his god.”** The weather on the Mediterranean Sea is usually very predictable. There are very few untimely storms. The timing and ferocity of this storm led the sailors to believe it had a spiritual cause, or one that could be remedied by the gods. The fact that every sailor called out to his own god speaks to the diversity of the crew. The men believed in different gods, depending on where the man was from.

**“cargo.”** The Hebrew term is actually broader in meaning than just “cargo,” although that is its primary meaning here. The word could also be translated as “articles” or simply “things that were on the ship,” and that might include the cargo and anything else that was not vital, after all, these men were trying to keep the boat from sinking and thus save their lives.

**“to lighten it for them.”** Although the versions differ as to how to translate this, the sailors threw the cargo over to lighten the load “for them,” that is, the sailors saw the cargo as a huge danger to them and the ship, so for their own sake they threw it overboard.

Jon 1:6

**“Get up!** In Jonah 1:2 God told Jonah to “get up,” and here the captain does, using the same words. God uses the phrase again for a third time in Jonah 3:2, so the phrase is important in Jonah and in human life. God created the human race for a purpose, and people need to “Get up” and get doing God’s work.

**Call on your god!”** It is ironic that it is a pagan sailor who has to urge Jonah to pray. This is noteworthy because even if Jonah was not concerned for his own life he should have been concerned for the life of the ship’s crew. In this case, the pagan captain was more concerned about the crew and the ship than Jonah was. It is possible, but unlikely, that Jonah was so sound asleep and/or was not used to sailing and was below deck that he was not aware of the danger to the ship and crew. The Bible only tells us he was asleep.

It is noteworthy that the captain said, “Call on your god.” The captain was an experienced man and had just come from Joppa, the port of Israel at that time. He likely knew that Yahweh was the god of Israel and would have also known that none of the crew of his ship were worshipers of Yahweh. The captain was concerned for his crew and ship, and did not want to let there be any god of anyone on the ship who was not appealed to for help, so he demanded that Jonah get up and pray to his god, Yahweh. The phrase, “Call on your god,” refers to prayer (see commentary on 1 Cor. 1:2).

Jon 1:7

**“And they said to one another.”** The decision to cast lots did not come as a result of a meeting but was someone’s idea that then got passed back and forth among the crew until there was a general consensus on what they should do. The sailors were very superstitious, and they relied on things like lots to acquire information. Although throwing lots would not always yield truth, in this case, Yahweh guided the lots and they correctly pointed out Jonah as the cause of the untimely storm.

**“cast lots.”** There were various ways to cast lots. In this case, exactly how they did it is not described and is not vital to the story.

Jon 1:9

**“the God of heaven.”** In this context, that statement means the God whose primary abode is heaven. The gods of the other men might differ and be said to live somewhere else, for example, on a particular mountain, like the Greek gods were said to live on Mount Olympus. Also, although Jonah would have spelled “God” with a capital “G,” the other sailors would have considered Jonah’s god to be no better than their gods, and so would have understood “God” to be spelled with a lowercase “g.”

**“who made the sea and the dry land.”** To Christians today, the statement about God making the sea and the dry land would not have to be stated because it would have been understood. However, that was not the case in the ancient world. To the ancients, the various gods and goddesses had their own jobs and powers. One god might control the rain, another god might be in charge of victory in battle, a goddess might control love, etc. So in this eclectic context, Jonah says that he “feared” (i.e., worshiped) “Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” In saying that, Jonah gave the name of his God, where He lived, and some of what He did.

Jon 1:10

**“Then the men were exceedingly afraid.”** At this point, the men realized that Jonah was running away from a very powerful God who was the cause of this untimely storm, and so they became very afraid.

**“because he had told them.”** This statement shows us that there had been much more conversation between Jonah and the sailors than is revealed in the book of Jonah. Nevertheless, the facts that we need to know to understand the events in the book of Jonah are in the book of Jonah.

Jon 1:11

**“What should we do to you.”** Different gods had different punishments for sin, and the sailors were not followers of Yahweh, so they asked Jonah what his god would require of him so the storm would stop.

**“was getting rougher and rougher.”** The Hebrew text uses an idiom: the sea “was walking and storming,” meaning that it was growing rougher and rougher, getting worse and worse. The different translations in the different English versions reflect the fact that a choice has to be made as to how to translate the Hebrew idiom.

Jon 1:12

**“Pick me up and throw me into the sea.”** The lives of the sailors and the well-being of the ship were at risk because of Jonah, and it seems at this point that he knew that his only option was to be thrown overboard to die in the ocean. Although we might think Jonah could have said, “Row me to land and let me off the ship,” his option to be thrown into the sea proved to be correct when the men tried to row him to shore but could not. This is an unusual case because God does not require the death penalty for disobedience to Him, but in this instance, God was setting up a type that would be clarified almost 800 years later when Jesus was three days and three nights in the grave and spoke of the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:40).

Jon 1:13

**“get *the ship* back to the land.”** The Hebrew text does not supply an object, but simply reads, “to bring back to land.” The implied object seems to be “the ship,” which is supplied in many versions. From the perspective of the sailors, getting the ship to land even in the storm would not have been impossible. In those ancient times, the ships did not have any reliable way to tell where they were once they were out of sight of land if it was cloudy, and most ships were quite small, so the custom was to sail along the coast in the sight of land. So it was likely that the sailors could see the land they were trying to get to, but the storm kept them from reaching land.

Jon 1:14

**“this man’s life.”** The Hebrew for “life” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), more generally “soul,” but here correctly understood as “life.”

[For more on nephesh and soul, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“do not hold against us innocent blood.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “Do not put on us innocent blood,” that is, “Do not hold us accountable for shedding innocent blood.” The sailors were afraid that if they threw Jonah overboard, the same god that was angry at Jonah would be angry at them. They were not familiar with Yahweh, and most pagan gods were capricious and vengeful.

Jon 1:15

**“and hurled him.”** This is the same word as “hurled” in Jonah 1:4 (see commentary on Jon. 1:4).

**“and the sea stopped its raging.”** This was clearly a miracle. The storm did not simply abate over time, but as soon as Jonah was in the water the storm stopped. This was clearly a sign to the sailors of the power and presence of Jonah’s God, Yahweh. The reduplication of the vocabulary in Jonah 1:16 shows the intensity of the sailors’ thoughts and actions: they feared Yahweh with fear, sacrificed a sacrifice, and vowed vows.

Jon 1:16

**“the men feared Yahweh with great fear.”** The reduplication of the vocabulary in Jonah 1:16 shows the intensity of the sailors’ thoughts and actions: they feared Yahweh with fear, sacrificed a sacrifice, and vowed vows. This is one of the places in Scripture when “feared Yahweh” clearly does not mean “have respect for Yahweh,” but means “were afraid of Yahweh.” These pagan sailors would have been very superstitious men—most ancient sailors were—and they had just seen the tremendous and miraculous power of Yahweh to make a deadly storm on the sea and then stop that storm, and that frightened them. Their fear of Yahweh, and desire to appease him and get safely back to port caused them to offer a sacrifice right then and there on the ship. Although there were not priests or Levites and they did not know the Mosaic Law, they sacrificed the way they would have in their religion, doing the best they could. They also vowed vows. Since they did not know Yahweh, the vows likely were vows to do more for Him when they got back to port, for example, offer more proper offerings.

Jon 1:17

**“had prepared.”** The Hebrew word more usually means “appointed” or “sent,” but here it seems to have the emphasis of “prepared” (cf. ASV, CJB, Douay-Rheims, KJV, GNV). The same Hebrew word is used in Jonah 4:6-8, when God prepared a vine to shade Jonah and then prepared a worm to kill the vine, and then prepared a scorching east wind to make Jonah uncomfortable. The book of Jonah emphasizes the role of God in human history.

**“great fish.”** Although the REV translation reads “fish,” we do not really know what swallowed Jonah. The reading “fish” comes from Jonah 1:17, but the Hebrew text allows for other sea creatures besides fish, including whales.” Today we very carefully classify life into things like phyla, genus, and species, and if the book of Jonah were written in modern times we would know exactly what swallowed Jonah. But the ancient classification of animals and sea life was much less exact than ours, and it was based on different standards. For example, we make a distinction between a “fish” and a “whale” based on things like whether it breathes air with lungs or via gills. Thus, a “fish” can be big or small, but they all have gills. Similarly, a “whale” can be big or relatively small—the dwarf sperm whale grows to only eight feet and is much smaller than many “fish”—but all whales have lungs. But the ancient cultures and vocabulary did not make those exact distinctions, so we cannot tell from the ancient Hebrew (and Greek) vocabulary whether what swallowed Jonah was a fish or whale. All we really know about the creature is that it was big enough to swallow Jonah whole.

Also, the text says, “Yahweh prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah,” so it is also possible that the creature that swallowed Jonah was not normal, but was some kind of aberration that God prepared so Jonah could be swallowed whole and be in the creature for three days and nights without being substantially damaged. The lack of exact knowledge of what swallowed Jonah explains the difference in the English versions. Although almost all English translations of Jonah 1:17 read “fish,” the identity of the creature in Matthew 12:40 is much more diverse, which seems strange since it seems that what swallowed Jonah according to the book of Jonah would be reproduced in what Jesus said about Jonah. Nevertheless, the English versions differ: “fish” (HCSB, ESV, NIV, NLT); “whale” (ASV, KJV, NAB, RSV ); and “sea monster” (CJB, NASB, NJB).

**“and Jonah was in the belly of the fish.”** Quoted in Matthew 12:40.

Jonah died inside the fish and was dead for three days and three nights, just as our Lord Jesus was dead in the grave for three days and three nights. It was by being dead for three days and three nights, and then being raised from the dead, that Jonah was a true type of Christ (see commentaries on Matt. 12:40 and Jon. 2:1). Sadly, the vast majority of the Christian world does not know about Jonah dying inside the fish and the Christian art is very unhelpful. Although most drawings and illustrations show Jonah kneeling in prayer, some pictures show Jonah in the fish sitting beside a campfire, while one picture that is likely for children showed Jonah with a chair and TV set!

**Jonah Chapter 2**

Jon 2:1

**“And Jonah prayed.”** The prayer Jonah prayed would have been very short because he would have quickly run out of oxygen and become unconscious and then died. It is not commonly known that Jonah died in the fish, but he did, and in that way was a “type” of Christ: Jonah was dead in the fish for three days and three nights and then was raised from the dead by God, and Jesus was dead in the “heart of the earth” for three days and three nights and then was raised by God.

It is because Jonah 2:1 says Jonah prayed out of the fish’s belly that most Christians believe Jonah was alive inside the fish. But it would have likely taken Jonah at least a minute to pass out inside the fish, and it could have been longer, and during that time Jonah would have prayed. Christians who think that Jonah was alive in the fish for three days know that would have had to have been a miracle, but what would have been the point of that miracle? What would have been its parallel in the Bible or history? In contrast, Jonah being dead for three days and three nights makes him a perfect type of Christ, who died on the cross and arose three days and nights later. Jonah being alive or Jonah being dead and then raised from the dead both required God to do a miracle for Jonah, but the miracle that best parallels the life of Christ is that Jonah was dead and then raised from the dead, and that also best fits what Jonah 2:2-9 says.

Jonah 2:2-9 is not the prayer that Jonah prayed from inside the huge fish. For one thing, in reading Jonah 2:2-9 it can be seen that some of what Jonah said could only have been said after Jonah was out of the fish and thus raised from the dead, not before then. For example, Jonah 2:2 says Jonah called and God heard his voice, but Jonah would have only known God heard him after he was out of the fish’s belly and alive on the shore; he would not have known that while still inside the fish. Also, the fact that Jonah had been thrown “into the depths” and “into the heart of the seas” is a record of him being thrown into the ocean, not a record of him being in the fish (Jon. 2:3). He thought he was going to die, a reasonable conclusion for one thrown off a ship into the ocean, yet he was confident of his resurrection (Jon. 2:3). In Jonah 2:5, Jonah is still remembering being in the ocean with the seaweed around him and the water up to his neck. But in Jonah 2:6 he is remembering being in the fish and blacking out, realizing he had died, and then giving God praise for raising him from death, from the “pit” (“pit” is commonly used for the grave). In Jonah 2:7, Jonah records that it was as his life was ebbing away that he remembered Yahweh and prayed a prayer, and he knew Yahweh heard him because Yahweh raised him from the dead.

[For more on Jonah being dead and the prayer he prayed, see commentary on Matt. 12:40.]

Jon 2:2

**“And he said.”** Jonah spoke this after God raised him from the dead. The verses that follow are not Jonah’s prayer, they are what he said about his experience of being in the water, then eaten by the fish, then being raised from the dead (see commentary on Jonah 2:1).

**“Out of *the midst of* my distress.”** Jonah had fled from Yahweh, but now his trouble brings him back to his roots and his reliance on Yahweh, and he calls out to Him. Often it takes trouble and distress to bring us to our knees and recognize our need for God. Thankfully, at those times Yahweh does not spurn us, saying, “I told you so,” but from His heart of mercy and grace He helps us.

**“the belly of Sheol.”** Sheol is the state of death. Jonah was saying he was as good as dead, which he was about to be; he died in the fish’s belly.

[For more information on Sheol, see Word Study: “Hades.”]

**“You heard my voice.”** Jonah could only have said this after he was raised from the dead.

Jon 2:3

**“you threw me.”** Jonah recognized that God caused the storm which resulted in his being in the sea.

**“The currents swirled around me.”** The translation “currents” fits the context and accords with the Ugaritic cognate (cf. Amplified Bible, CSB, LEB, LSB, NASB, NET, NIV). When Jonah was thrown into the water, the waves of the ocean pulled him around.

**“your breakers and your waves passed over me.”** Jonah apparently knew how to swim, and stayed afloat in the ocean for a short while before being swallowed by the fish.

Jon 2:4

**“I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight.’”** Jonah 2:4 is an important verse in that it gives supporting evidence for the fact that when a person dies, he is dead in every sense of the word and not alive in any form. Jonah is recalling what he thought before his death and resurrection. He thought he would die and stay dead until Judgment Day, when he would be raised from the dead (cf. John 5:21-29). During that time of being dead, he would not be in heaven or hell, he would be dead and thus banished from God’s sight and active care.

The Hebrew word translated as “banished” is *garash*, and it means “drive away, cast out, banish, and it is also used of divorcing a woman.

[For more information on the dead being dead in every way and not alive in any form or place, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

**“yet I will look again toward your holy Temple.”** Jonah was a prophet of God, and knew he had not rejected Yahweh or His law, but ran from Yahweh to protect Israel, and so he fully expected to be in the Resurrection of the Righteous and again see the Temple. This is the wonderful hope that sustains knowledgeable believers: there will be a resurrection from the dead and believers will get new and glorious bodies and live forever.

Some commentators believe that Jonah already knew he would be rescued from death, but there is no reason to believe that Jonah thought that or else he would not have said, “I have been banished from your sight,” which would occur when he died.

Some scholars think that the Greek text of Theodocian, which reads “how” (“How will I look again at your Temple”) is the correct reading, but that text disagrees with every other ancient witness and casts an unnecessary negative light on Jonah.

Jon 2:5

**“the point of death.”** The Hebrew text reads, “to the *nephesh*.” But the Hebrew word *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ) has many meanings. It can mean “life,” as it may mean here, “to the life,” or “to the soul,” that is, to the point of death (cf. ASV, CJB, ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV). Or, as many versions reflect, it can have a physiological meaning and thus mean “neck,” such that the water was up to Jonah’s neck (cf. CSB, NAB, NET, NJB). Frankly, it is hard to decide what the text meant here, and the use of *nephesh* may have been purposely used to picture Jonah’s peril in different ways by using one word, in a sort of amphibologia (double entendre).

Jon 2:6

**“I went down to the bottoms of the mountains.**” This is one of the verses that shows that Jonah’s recounting of his experience (Jon. 2:2-9) happened sometime after he had been vomited out of the fish and had been raised from the dead. There was no way he could have known this while he was in the fish; it had to be an awareness of what had happened to him after he was out of the fish.

**“The earth with its bars was around me forever.”** The “bars” were what kept gates closed and locked in the ancient world. The Old Testament refers to the gates of *Sheol* (Job 17:16; Isa. 38:10), and the “gates of death” (Job 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18). This is the same idea without using the word “gates.” In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said the “gates of *Hadēs*” (#86 ᾅδης) would not prevail against his believers, and that was because death could not conquer believers and keep them in the grave; the believers would be raised from the dead.

The Greek word *Hadēs* (#86 ᾅδης), came over into English as the loanword Hades (pronounced 'hay-dees). *Hadēs* was the Greek word that was used in both the Old Testament LXX and the New Testament to represent what the Hebrew word *Sheol* meant in the Hebrew language, which was the state of being dead. *Sheol* was not the physical grave itself, but the state of being dead (the actual physical grave was referred to in Hebrew as the *qeber* (#06913 קֶבֶר). Some theologians refer to *Sheol* as “gravedom” (the reign of the grave, or the reign of death). *Sheol* (*Hadēs* in the Greek Bible) is not a place, it is a state of being—the state of being dead. In the Hebrew Old Testament, dead people are said to be in *Sheol* (cf. Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 1 Kings 2:6; Job 7:9; Ps. 6:5; 16:10; 31:17; Prov. 7:27; Eccl. 9:10, etc.).

**“then you brought up my life from the pit.”** The Hebrew word translated “pit” is *shachath* (#07845 שַׁחַת), and it means “pit,” which was used for the grave; being dead (e.g., Job 17:14; 33:18; Ps. 30:9; 103:4; Isa. 51:14; Ezek. 28:8; Jon. 2:6).

Jon 2:7

**“life.”** The Hebrew is *nephesh*, which is often translated “soul” but here refers to Jonah’s human life. As Jonah neared death, he prayed to God, and the reason he knew God heard him is that these words of Jonah were recorded after God raised him from the dead.

[For more on “life,” see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“in to you, into your holy Temple.”** Jonah expected to be resurrected and again see Yahweh’s Temple. Jonah says that his prayer came to Yahweh in His holy Temple because Yahweh was known to dwell in His Temple above the mercy seat between the cherubim (see commentaries on Isa. 6:1 and Num. 7:89).

Jon 2:8

**“Those who worship worthless idols.”** This powerful and pointed verse speaks the truth! Only Yahweh God has the power to save and genuinely give mercy. People who rely on other gods or other things that promise life and deliverance will sadly find out too late that they have believed a lie. Salvation and wholeness come only from the true God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The phrase “worthless idols” is used in Psalm 31:6. Some versions read “worthless” while others read “lying.” The confusion is due to the fact that the Hebrew word has both meanings. The derogatory word translated “idols” is more literally, “nothings,” “vanities,” “empties,” and in this context, it refers to idols. Douglas Stuart translates the phrase “empty nothings.”[[2]](#footnote-32562)

The word “worship” is translated from the verbal root *shamar* (#08104 שָׁמַר), which means “to keep, guard, watch, watch over,” and in this context “keeping” or “watching over” pagan gods refers to worshiping them. Some other English Bibles besides the REV use “worship” (e.g. BBE, CJB, NAB, NCV, NEB, NET, NLT, NRSV).

Jon 2:9

**“But I...will sacrifice to you.”** This line expresses a simple but profound truth: God’s deliverance should be responded to with praise and worship. Especially as a prophet of Yahweh, Jonah would have offered sacrifices to Yahweh before this, but here Jonah responds to Yahweh’s saving his life by vowing to give thanks and offer sacrifices to Him.

**“Salvation belongs to Yahweh.”** Throughout the Old Testament, the word “salvation” almost always refers to temporal salvation, i.e., salvation from the situation you are in at the time; in other words, “deliverance.” However, in this context, and especially in light of Jonah 2:4 and 2:8, it seems that “salvation” is being used in a more universal sense and refers to both temporal salvation and eschatological salvation, i.e., salvation being everlasting life. Jonah knew that both his deliverance from death in the water and his everlasting life belonged to Yahweh.

Jon 2:10

**“Yahweh spoke to the fish.”** The whole universe and everything in it is the creation of God, and all God’s creation recognizes His voice. God likely did not actually “speak” to the fish using words, but “spoke” in a way that the fish obeyed.

**“vomited out Jonah.”** Many fish can vomit out that which they have just swallowed, but Jonah had been in the fish for three days and three nights. Nevertheless, it vomited out Jonah—completely whole and undigested—onto the dry land. That the fish could vomit Jonah onto the dry land shows that at the place where that happened the shore was steep to the point that the fish could mostly be in the water and yet Jonah could be spit up onto the dry land.

**“the dry land.”** Jonah, now on the Phoenician coast, was 400 miles from Nineveh. He still had a long journey ahead of him. The Bible does not tell us the details of how Jonah reached Nineveh. Perhaps from where he was he could join a caravan. Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, was a major destination point for trade and travel of all kinds.

**Jonah Chapter 3**

Jon 3:2

**“Get up! Go to Nineveh.”** This is exactly what God had said to Jonah when he was back in the land of Israel (Jon. 1:2).

Jon 3:3

**“So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh.”** In Jonah 1:3, Jonah “got up” and ran away from Yahweh. Now, a recommitted man, Jonah gets up and obeys God.

**“​exceedingly great city.”** The Hebrew uses the idiom, “a city great to God,” which if rendered literally would give the wrong impression to the reader. Using *elohim* as a descriptor, it means exactly what most English translations say, an exceedingly large city. The phrase, however, could also have the undertone meaning that the city was important to God, which it certainly was for His purposes in that day and age. Also, the word translated “great” can also mean “important.” So it seems very likely that there are a couple of meanings that God is trying to communicate built into a single sentence: that Nineveh was indeed a very large city, but also that it was important to God.

**“of a three-day journey.”** The Hebrew word translated “journey” in some English Bibles is *mahalak* (#04109 מַהֲלָךְ), and though it can mean “walk, journey, or “place to walk,” it can also refer to a visit (cf. NIV84, “a visit required three days”). Although many English translations say the city took three days to walk through (or walk around) even if a person could only walk 5 miles a day through the city, Nineveh was not 15 miles across, nor was it 45 miles in diameter (if a person walked 15 miles a day, a very reasonable amount for walking outside the city).

Nineveh was a very important city for politics and commerce, and social norms required lengthy greetings and introductions, as well as meals together and entertainment, so for a visitor to conduct serious business in the city could easily take three days.[[3]](#footnote-32613)

Jon 3:4

**“In 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown.”** This prophecy of Jonah did not come to pass because the circumstances changed and the people of Nineveh repented (see commentary on Deut. 18:20 about genuine and false prophets).

Jon 3:5

**“And the people of Nineveh believed God.”** This is nothing short of astounding. God’s people Israel rejected God’s prophets, but the pagan Assyrians believed Jonah.

Jon 3:6

**“the word.”** In this context, “the word” could be understood as “the news,” but it could also be that what Jonah said, “the word,” reached the king.

Jon 3:8

**“the violence that is in his hands.”** That the violence is “in his hands” means it was being done commonly, as a part of the way they lived.

Jon 3:9

**“change his mind.”** The Hebrew word translated “change his mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם), and in this context, it means to change one’s mind and the subsequent course of action (cf. CJB, NET, NJB, NLT, NRSV). God sometimes changes His mind in response to what people do, as we see here.

[For more information on God changing His mind, see commentary on Jer. 18:8.]

Jon 3:10

**“God changed his mind.”** The Hebrew word translated “changed his mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם), and here it refers to God changing His mind. God interacts with people and will sometimes change His mind and course of action if people have a change of heart and action (see commentary on Jer. 18:8; cf. NLT, NRSV).

**“and he did not do it.”** Jonah’s prophecy was conditional, even though nothing in the text says it was. Most prophecies are conditional and can be altered by the behavior of the person or people receiving the prophecy (cf. Ezek. 33:11-20).

**Jonah Chapter 4**

Jon 4:1

**“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly.”** Jonah must have waited around Nineveh for the fulfillment of the 40 days, and when no disaster occurred in Nineveh he became very angry. His belief that Assyria would march around the fertile crescent and launch an attack on Israel proved to be correct, as Israel was subsequently destroyed.

Jon 4:2

**“change your mind”** The Hebrew word translated by the phrase “change your mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם), and here it refers to God backing off of the consequences that were coming on the people for their sin. *Nacham* is used in Jonah 3:9, 10; and 4:2.

[For more on God changing His mind or having regret, see commentary on Jer. 18:8.]

Jon 4:3

**“for it is better for me to die than to live.”** The context of this verse is the mind of Jonah. He fled from the presence of Yahweh so he would not have to preach to the Assyrians, the Ninevites, and see them repent and then attack his country. Now he says it would be better for him to die than to live to see the Assyrian conquest of Israel and the horrific devastation that conquest would bring to the people and land of Israel. The Assyrians did repent at the preaching of Jonah; they did attack Israel and conquer it; and the devastation of Israel was horrific (perhaps more horrific), just as Jonah had thought. Archaeological evidence confirms that it took centuries for the land of Israel to recover, and some cities were never rebuilt, and the Israelites who were scattered in the Assyrian Captivity never returned to Israel.

Jon 4:4

**“Is it right for you to be angry?”** God asked Jonah this question, but Jonah never answered it. It is never right to be angry with God. God is love, and what He does is godly and purposeful. Nevertheless, due to the fallen nature of the world and the sinful nature of humankind (Jer. 17:9), there are times when God seems to act or fail to act in ways that we do not understand and thus what happens angers us, confuses us, or makes us brokenhearted. In this case, Jonah was angry at God because he realized that his people, Israel, were about to be destroyed (which is what happened—they were destroyed; see commentary on Jonah 1:3).

But the fault was not God’s it was Israel’s. Israel sinned egregiously against God, and by the time Jonah lived and prophesied, Israel had sinned against God for well over 100 years, and they continued to sin after Jonah’s lifetime in spite of all the prophets, such as Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos, who worked hard to get Israel to repent and return to God. The Devil is the ruler of the world and the god of this age (see commentary on Luke 4:6), and when we disobey God we open ourselves up to demonic attack, and that is exactly what Israel had done. Eventually, due to Israel’s continual sin, the prophecy of Ahijah (1 Kings 14:15) was fulfilled and Israel was destroyed by Assyria and the people were carried captive beyond the Euphrates River.

Jon 4:5

**“and made himself a booth there and sat under it in the shade.”** Wood is very scarce in the area of Nineveh, and not much that can provide shade can be found. So the “shade” that Jonah sat under was sparse, to say the least, but better than nothing. But the leaves of the vine (Jon. 4:6) would have provided wonderful shade.

Jon 4:6

**“a vine.”** The type of plant that God prepared to shade Jonah is not known. Some English versions simply say, “a plant.” The translation “gourd” apparently arose because early translators recognized that what grew up over Jonah was some kind of climbing vine, and gourd plants do that and have wide leaves, so “gourd” was a logical guess, but a guess nevertheless.

Jon 4:8

**“a scorching east wind.”** The “east wind” was the term for a wind that usually came off the desert and was hot, dry, unrelenting, and very uncomfortable (cf. Jer. 4:11; 13:24; 18:17; Hos. 13:15).

**“And he asked with *all* his soul to die.”** Jonah seems to have earnestly asked God to die, but there is no indication that God answered that prayer. Jonah lived during the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel, which was years before Assyria conquered and destroyed Israel, so it is likely that Jonah died of old age before Israel was destroyed.

**“It is better for me to die than to live.”** What Jonah means here is, “It is better for me to die than to live and see the destruction of my people, Israel.” Jonah loved his country and the people, and as a prophet, he had no doubt worked hard to try to get them to repent and return to God, but without success. It surely would have been hard for him to experience preaching to God’s people, Israel, without results, but then go to a cruel and sinful nation like Assyria and have them respond to his prophecy and repent. Jonah did not want to see the destruction of his people, so he prayed to die.

Jon 4:9

**“Is it right for you to be angry about the vine?”** Jonah would not answer God when God asked him if it was right for him to be angry about Nineveh’s repentence (Jonah 4:4), so God asked him about something less significant, the death of a plant. Perhaps that would “wake Jonah up” and get him thinking more correctly about his mistaken thinking and his not being in control of the world. Sadly, it did not. At this point, Jonah was still so angry (and perhaps hurt) that he was angry with God and life.

In this interaction between God and Jonah, we see the Father God’s love and care for people and especially the people like Jonah who have served him. God patiently and persistently tries to win people back to himself. In contrast, we see Jonah acting out as people often do when they are hurt and confused. They are emotional, obstinate, and unreasonable, just like Jonah was.

Jon 4:11

**“And I, shouldn’t I be concerned for Nineveh.”** God expresses his concern for all people and animals in His closing remarks to Jonah. Then the book abruptly ends in what to us humans is a most unsatisfactory way. What happened to Jonah? Did he see the error of his thinking? Did he go back to Israel and if so, how? We have no answers to those questions. Neither the Bible nor history tells us what happened to Jonah. We can assume that Jonah would have eventually calmed down, returned to Israel, and resumed his prophetic ministry, but that is an assumption.

What we do know is that the “end” of the book of Jonah is in 2 Kings. Jonah was correct and Ahijah’s prophecy was fulfilled (2 Kings 14:15). Assyria conquered and destroyed Israel (2 Kings 17:6-23).

1. Leslie Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah [NICOT], 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-14166)
2. Douglas K. Stuart, Hosea-Jonah [WBC], 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-32562)
3. For a more detailed study of the translation “visit,” see Douglas K. Stuart, Hosea-Jonah [WBC], 486-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-32613)