Jonah

# Introduction

Unlike the scrolls on either side, the Jonah scroll is a story not a collection of messages from Yahweh, but it fits among the Latter Prophets and specifically among the Twelve as a short scroll about a prophet. Its appearing close by Hosea and Amos fits Jonah’s having brought a message to Ephraim in the time of Jeroboam ben Jehoash, as Hosea and Amos did (2 Kings 14:23-27). But in this scroll, Jonah’s being the prophet who brought that message is just the jumping off point for a story about God and him. Jonah the scroll is thus atypical, and so is Jonah the prophet.[[1]](#footnote-1) The story fits 2 Kings’ account of him as Yahweh’s means of bringing deliverance and blessing to people whose “bad dealing” had come before Yahweh.[[2]](#footnote-2) But in 2 Kings these people were Ephraimites; and the story also jars with 2 Kings in portraying him resistant to serving Yahweh.

In the context of Hosea to Micah, it makes for illuminating comparison with the preceding scroll, Obadiah. These successive scrolls point to two different sides to Yahweh’s relationship with violent peoples. Obadiah declares Yahweh’s judgment, though leaving room for Edom to turn. Jonah starts with a declaration of judgment, but turns out to stand for Yahweh’s readiness to cancel judgment when Nineveh turns. We noted in connection with Obadiah that prophets can have various reasons for telling Israel about God’s intentions for the nations around: Israel shouldn’t fear them or trust them or write them off (Isaiah), or assume that Israel itself is so superior to them (Amos)—or be afraid that God will let them get away with what they shouldn’t get away with (Obadiah). Jonah comes at this question from yet another angle, but its story form makes for another difference from the other scrolls. As direct messages from Yahweh to his people, Isaiah, Obadiah, and Amos are explicit on the point(s) they want their listeners to get from their prophecies about other peoples. As a story rather than a direct message, a significant aspect of Jonah is that it doesn’t make its point(s) clear in that way. The listeners have to work it out.

## A Prophet in a Context (?)

In the time of Jeroboam, Assyria and Nineveh were irrelevant to Israel. Neither is mentioned in earlier chapters of 2 Kings. Assyria’s first mention comes in the chapter that follows the reference to Jonah (2 Kings 15:19-20), during the reign of one of Jeroboam’s successors.[[3]](#footnote-3) It marks Assyria’s starting to take an interest in the countries to its west. Perhaps Jonah lived on as a prophet through the reigns of Zechariah and Shallum and into the reign of Menachem. Yet even then Nineveh was not the big city it became fifty years later, after the destruction of Samaria itself; Sennacherib then made it the Assyrian capital, as it remained for more or less the entire century before the Assyrian empire collapsed (cf. 2 Kings 19:36).

Nineveh was thus of great importance in the time of Nahum, and Nahum is the one scroll outside Jonah that focuses on Nineveh—indeed, it is “the Nineveh pronouncement” (Nah. 1:1). Alongside the Jonah story in 2 Kings, the image of Nineveh in the Nahum scroll looks like background to the Jonah scroll. The influence of Nahum within the Prophets appears also in Isaiah 52:7 which reuses Nahum’s picture of someone bringing good news across the mountains (1:15 [2:1]) and applies it to the situation of Judahites in the time of Babylon’s domination. When the story about Jonah was told in the time of Babylonian or Persian or Greek domination, people could similarly see Nineveh as standing for the imperial capital of the day (cf. Ezra 6:22),[[4]](#footnote-4) even if (perhaps especially if) they knew it had been destroyed.

So the Jonah story would be more meaningful in the time of Babylonian, Persian, or Greek domination than in Jonah’s own time. There are other indications that the Jonah scroll was written some time after Jonah’s day. It uses a number of words and expressions characteristic of later Hebrew or of later Aramaic such as the relative *še* (1:7, 12; 4:10) alongside the usual *‘ăšer*, and the description of Yahweh as “the God of the heavens,” suggesting a date in the Second Temple period. This argument is not strong and it would be unwise to base anything on it in isolation, but it fits the picture of a story that would make sense if told some centuries after Jonah’s own day.

There being such a temporal gap between Jonah’s own time and the Jonah scroll carries no more implications for the scroll’s historical value than the time gap between Elijah and the writing of 1 Kings carries implications for the Elijah stories’ historical value. But study of the Jonah scroll has been skewed because discussion of it as a story has commonly focused on whether it is historical or fictional. This discussion has often presupposed that this question carries implications for whether the story is inspired and authoritative or not inspired and not authoritative, and the discussion has been further skewed by the related assumption that “historical until proved fictional” is equivalent to “innocent until proved guilty.”

It is inspired and authoritative either way; God likes both history and parable, as the Gospels show. Jesus’s own references to Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32) do not establish that he viewed the scroll as a historical narrative rather than a parabolic one. I myself refer to Lady Macbeth’s attempts to get the blood off her hands in connection with discussing the nature of atonement. When I refer to that motif in Shakespeare’s play, it does not imply that I think Lady Macbeth historically had this problem; and the likelihood that her attempts were not historical does not raise questions about the historicity of Jesus’s atoning death which I am seeking to discuss. The same applies to Jesus’s references to Jonah: they do not mean he was declaring a position on the historical nature of the story, and his teaching about his resurrection does not depend on the historical nature of the story. Rather, at the level of genre, the question “history or parable” (or something in between) is an entirely open one. The study of the story has to decide which it is.

## The Nature of the Story

That statement raises the further question of how one tells the difference, and answering that question is one of the most difficult of interpretive operations. It’s difficult not because of the problem of knowing whether a story contains inaccuracies: e.g., how big was Nineveh in Jonah’s day, or whether Nineveh’s repentance can have happened, or whether someone can survive for three days inside a fish. It’s because on one hand, a fiction writer may make sure that everything in a story is accurate and thereby look factual, while a history writer may use humor and other features of fiction and thereby look fictional. I do actually think that the prominence of irony and humor, or satire and parody, suggests that the Jonah scroll is an imaginative short story. So does the hyperbole: the fish, the size of the city, and the depth and speed of its repentance (including the involvement of the animals).[[5]](#footnote-5) But it’s not important whether Jonah is history or parable. The insight, importance, truthfulness, and reliability of the scroll are the same either way.

The modern category of short story helps articulate the nature of the Jonah scroll. I read somewhere that a short story as one that can be read in an hour but remembered for a lifetime—which certainly fits Jonah. A short story is a work of prose fiction that focuses on a limited number of incidents from the life of one person or a small group, which Jonah does. It has a simple plot and one central theme but it may make use of innovative literary devices or styles: Jonah uses personification such as having the sea raging and thinking (1:4, 15). It may narrate the extraordinary rather than the everyday: ““Jonah is *sensational* literature”[[6]](#footnote-6) and “the element of surprise is a key factor throughout the book.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It may be quite directly based on events, which have become the basis for some implicit illuminating reflection. Classically, stories are said to follow a structure comprising introduction, complication, rising action, crisis, climax, and resolution; a striking feature of Jonah is then that it goes through this sequence twice (except that it arguably reaches no resolution the second time). A short story from a traditional culture is meant to be told aloud, which links with the repetitions in the Jonah story. These include words such as bad, good, big, appoint, and throw that may or may not carry freight in terms of the message but do hold the story together as told.[[8]](#footnote-8) A related aspect is the extension or diminution of phrases that are repeated.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If one asks what message the author of the Jonah story was intending to convey, there are many possible answers. The problem of deciding which of them might be right attaches to the Jonah scroll in a distinctive way because of its distinctive nature as a short story. We have noted that prophetic scrolls generally express an explicit message from Yahweh about what Yahweh thinks about Israel and about other peoples in a particular context, about what his expectations of them are, and about what he himself is like as background to that message, and it is not so difficult to infer more context-transcendent truths from such prophetic statements. More distinctively, a prophetic scroll tells people in its context about things Yahweh intends to do; here inferring context-transcendent truths may be trickier. Hosea and Amos have also told us about things Yahweh has done with them as individuals (told Hosea who to marry, told Amos to leave his business to go and preach in another country), and inferring context-transcendent truths from these historical statements is much trickier. So it is with Jonah, since the entirety of the scroll is a story.

It makes things more complicated that the Jonah scroll is also sparing in the information it offers concerning its background or aim. It’s said that understanding what a great man is saying is made easier if you know what he was opposing.[[10]](#footnote-10) Applied to the Jonah scroll, that observation carries an irony, as is appropriate to this story full of irony. Accepting the usual critical view that it was composed in Judah in the Persian period doesn’t help, because widely divergent understandings of its background and aim have been held within that framework. The scroll doesn’t incorporate comments by the narrator that articulate its implications. It leaves things unexplained and it is content to raise questions and not answer them. In this respect Jonah differs from the First Testament’s other short stories, Ruth and Esther, and from the stories in Daniel 1—6 (one or two of which are almost as long as Jonah). They are more straightforward, and their message is easier to discern. Jonah leaves its readers to fill in the gaps.[[11]](#footnote-11) The storyteller did not directly indicate any hopes concerning the significance people would see for themselves in the story. As those other stories work on us by making things clear, Jonah works on us by making us think. Its closing with a question symbolizes its approach. Whereas the Hosea, Amos, and Micah scrolls begin by inviting us to read them against the background of the reign of Jeroboam and of Judahite kings in about his time, Jonah (like Joel and Obadiah) implicitly invite us not to ask about such a context as we seek to see their significance. And leaving interpretation to the people listening to the story leaves them free to bring ideas or assumptions or questions from outside the scroll and see how it illumines them. For instance, people may read the scroll on the assumption that Jonah stands for Israel as a people, or that he stands for the individual Judahite, or that he is a type of Christ.

## Three Key Themes

Within the scroll itself, three key themes may be identified. First, the story is about the attitude God can take and the relationship God can have with a great and violent city. The bad dealings of a big city may come up to God and he may do something about them. He may then send someone to preach to it, and he’s prepared to imperil “innocent” people in pursuing his purpose. He’s prepared to act against it for its waywardness but glad to remit its punishment if it turns from its waywardness. In any period from the eighth century onwards, Judah was under the domination of an imperial power and was ultimately controlled from its great capital. The story might invite Judah to rejoice in the fact that Yahweh intends to hold the great power to account, but to have a vision for its coming to repentance and finding mercy. Indeed, by its picture of Nineveh doing so, the story has the potential to make Israel jealous in the manner Paul will expound in Romans 10.[[12]](#footnote-12) It’s often been said that the message of Jonah is that Israel should be more open to other peoples,[[13]](#footnote-13) but there’s no reason to think that the average Israelite would be more xenophobic than the average Christian, or that the average Prophet would object to the idea of Nineveh repenting and finding Yahweh’s forgiveness; and anyway Nineveh is not your average foreign city. Anti-Judaic inclinations may be implicit in this understanding.[[14]](#footnote-14) But the story may suggest a satire on people who need to be more open to the way worshipers of other deities might teach them a thing or two, without compromising the fact that Yahweh the God of the heavens is the real God.

Second, the story is about the kind of person a prophet may or can be, almost a manual about how not to be a prophet.[[15]](#footnote-15) Prophets can be resistant to their vocation yet also willing to do what God says; they can be quite conflicted people; they can be simultaneously knowledgeable and slow on the uptake. Prophets need not to take themselves too seriously, and people in general need not to take them too seriously.[[16]](#footnote-16) Prophets may resist God’s commission, endanger people who worship other gods, and earn shame before them. “The tension in the book of Jonah does not reside in a perceived lack of coherence between human actions… and divine response, but rather between YHWH’s actions and a prophet’s response to them.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Jonah and Nahum neatly come together in the Septuagint order of the Twelve Prophets; they complement each other. Jonah was sent to proclaim to the Ninevites; Nahum was sent to teach Judah when they were miserably distressed.[[18]](#footnote-18) Jonah’s ministry is fulfilled in the city’s repentance and its finding forgiveness. Nahum’s ministry is fulfilled in its judgment.[[19]](#footnote-19) Jonah’s ministry reflects Yahweh’s ultimate will in his willingness to show mercy even to the most sinful of peoples, while Nahum’s ministry reflects the way Yahweh needs to act in some historical contexts.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Third, the story is about the sort of person Yahweh is. He is the one God, the God of the heavens, the creator of sea and land. He has power over creation and he may work out his purpose by means of nature. The story portrays Yahweh’s manifold involvement with nature (the storm, the fish, the animals, the plant, the worm, the wind, the sun). Yahweh is also sovereign over the great nations, gracious and compassionate, long-tempered and abounding in commitment, and as well as being sovereign, flexible enough to relent about sending bad fortune—to imperial powers as well as to Judahites. The Jonah scroll is an encouragement to repentance and an assurance that Yahweh’s threats can be cancelled;[[21]](#footnote-21) B. Megillah 31a notes that the Jewish community reads Jonah as the second lesson on the Day of Atonement. The people of God have to affirm both God’s sovereignty and the difference that human decisions make to what God does. They have to hold onto the reality of both God’s judgment and God’s compassion. The theodicy question presupposed by Jonah is “Are God’s *compassionate* actions just?” because Jonah’s problem is that Yahweh doesn’t fulfill his declarations of judgment on the great oppressor (Assyria, Babylon, Persia).[[22]](#footnote-22) A relationship with him involves awe, but he may respond when people seek him even if they don’t know much about him. Throwing lots, offering sacrifices, making pledges, and giving thanks and testimony in a psalm-like way may be good ways to relate to him. In relation to both the city and the prophet he is insistent on his moral authority, but both “innocent” people and wayward people may turn to him in crises.

# Jonah 1:1—2:10 [11]—God Sends a Prophet to Nineveh and Pursues Him

## Translation

1Yahweh’s message became a reality to Yônāh ben ‘Ămittay: 2”Get up, go to Nînəvēh, the big city, and call out against[[23]](#footnote-23) it, because their bad dealing[[24]](#footnote-24) has come up before me.” 3And Yônāh got up—to flee to Taršîš from before Yahweh.[[25]](#footnote-25) He went down to Yāpô and found a boat coming to Taršîš,[[26]](#footnote-26) gave its fare, and went down into it to come with them to Taršîš from before Yahweh.

4But Yahweh—he threw a big wind toward the sea, and a big storm came about in the sea. As the boat threatened to break up, 5the sailors were in awe and cried out each to his god,[[27]](#footnote-27) and they threw the things[[28]](#footnote-28) that were in the boat into the sea, to lighten it by means of them. Since Yônāh had gone down into the depths of the vessel, lain down, and gone deep asleep,[[29]](#footnote-29) 6the ship’s captain went up to him and said to him, “What’s with you being deep asleep? Get up, call to your God. Perhaps God[[30]](#footnote-30) may think about[[31]](#footnote-31) us and we won’t perish.”

7They said, each man to his neighbor, “Come on, let’s throw lots so we may know on whose account this bad fortune is ours.” They threw lots and the lot fell on Yônāh. 8They said to him, “Tell us, please, you on whose account this bad fortune has come to us:[[32]](#footnote-32) what’s your business? Where do you come from? What’s your country? What people are you from?” 9He said to them, “I’m a Hebrew.[[33]](#footnote-33) Yahweh the God of the heavens is the one of whom I’m in awe, the one who made sea and dry land.” 10The men were in great awe, and said to him, “Whatever have you done?” When[[34]](#footnote-34) the men knew that he was fleeing from before Yahweh, because he told them, 11they said to him, “What are we to do about you so the sea will calm down from upon us?” (because the sea was going stormier). 12He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea so the sea will calm down from upon you, because I acknowledge that this big storm is upon you on my account.”

13The men dug in, to get back[[35]](#footnote-35) to the dry land, but they couldn’t, because the sea was going stormier upon them. 14So they called to Yahweh, and said, “Oh, Yahweh, please, may we not perish for the life of this man. Don’t put upon us the blood of someone who is free of guilt, because you, Yahweh, have acted[[36]](#footnote-36) as you wanted.”[[37]](#footnote-37) 15And they picked up Yônāh and threw him into the sea; and the sea stopped from raging.

16The men were in great awe of Yahweh, and they offered a sacrifice[[38]](#footnote-38) to Yahweh and made pledges.[[39]](#footnote-39) 17And[[40]](#footnote-40) Yahweh commissioned a big fish to swallow Yônāh. Yônāh was in the fish’s insides for three days and three nights, 2:1and Yônāh pleaded with Yahweh his God from the fish’s[[41]](#footnote-41) insides.

2Then he said,

From my trouble I called

to Yahweh, and he answered me.

When I cried for help from Šə’ôl’s belly,

you listened to my voice.

3But you had hurled[[42]](#footnote-42) me into the depths,[[43]](#footnote-43) into the heart of the seas,

and the current—it was surrounding me.

All your breakers and your rollers—

they passed over me.

4I myself said,

I’ve been driven away from in front of your eyes.

Yet[[44]](#footnote-44) I will again look

to your sacred palace.

5The water engulfed me up to me neck[[45]](#footnote-45)

as the deep surrounded me.

Reed[[46]](#footnote-46) wrapped around my head

6to the feet of the mountains.

I went down into the earth,

its bars behind me permanently.

But you got my life up from the pit,

Yahweh my God.

7When my life[[47]](#footnote-47) was fading for me,

it was Yahweh I called to mind.

And my plea came to you,

to your sacred palace.

8People who take great heed[[48]](#footnote-48) of empty vanities

abandon[[49]](#footnote-49) their commitment.[[50]](#footnote-50)

9But I—with a thankful voice I will sacrifice to you;[[51]](#footnote-51)

what I have pledged I will fulfill—

deliverance is Yahweh’s!

10Yahweh said to the fish, and it threw up[[52]](#footnote-52) Yônāh onto the dry land.

## Interpretation

Act 1 of the story relates how Yahweh commissioned Jonah to undertake a task, how Jonah went in the opposite direction, how Yahweh pursued him, almost caused his death, but then rescued him, and how he responded with praise. English Bibles and printed Hebrew Bibles divide Act 1 into two parts, though they differ over whether to locate the division after the sailors make their vows (Hebrew) or after the fish swallows Jonah (English).[[53]](#footnote-53) MT provides a petuhah only at the end of chapter 2[[54]](#footnote-54) and I follow MT in treating the whole as one unit.

**Jonah 1:1-3.** “The book of Jonah does not begin with Jonah but with something better—the word of the LORD…. And in the end, this same LORD has the last word.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

While the opening of the scroll (v. 1) contains more or less the same words as the first verse of Joel, it lacks the vital “that” (“Yahweh’s message *that* became a reality”), which in Joel indicates that the message which follows is what counts. Here the event which follows is what counts, and the verse corresponds exactly to the introductions to narratives in passages such as 1 Kings 17:2, 8. In that story, the subsequent instruction also begins “Get up and go” (to a foreign town, moreover). It naturally gives some introduction to its hero, whereas here there’s no introduction to Jonah beyond his father’s name. It’s assumed that the audience knows of him, presumably from the story in 2 Kings.

Designating Nineveh (modern Mosul) as “the big city” (v. 2) indicates its status in light of the position it reached after Jonah’s day, and of the way it may be described in Genesis 10:11-12 (though Genesis is ambiguous over which city is the big one). While “call out against” is not a common expression, it’s notably used of the unnamed prophet at Beth-el in 1 Kings 13. Its implications would be clear enough, but “great and flourishing places ordinarily have great and crying sins.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Here the talk of the city’s “bad dealing” (*rā’āh*) makes things more explicit and introduces a word that will recur in several connections in the story. Like the English word “bad,” the Hebrew word covers bad things you do and bad experiences that come to you, sometimes with an implication that the two are linked. In connection with Nineveh’s bad dealing, Jonah is to speak out against it in the way Amos, Hosea and Micah spoke out against Beth-el, Samaria and Jerusalem, or against Philistia, Aram and Edom. Like Amos 1—2 and the First Testament as a whole, the story simply assumes that Yahweh is lord of Nineveh and thus of Assyria as of anywhere else, and that the Ninevites know what right and wrong are. The Nahum scroll may enable us to put flesh on what their “bad dealing” would imply (“continuous bad dealing” is the last phrase in Nahum): plotting against Yahweh, invading Israel, killing, lying, plundering, enslaving…:. It might not be self-evident that telling Nineveh about it fate is designed to give it chance to repent; executioners commonly want their victims to know why they are dying. But the First Testament elsewhere assumes that proclaiming calamity has the aim of getting people to repent, or at least that repentance will open up the possibility of divine reconsideration, and the people listening to the story might be expected to work it out. Jonah will later acknowledge that he “is fleeing through fear of success, not fear of failure”[[57]](#footnote-57) (4:2). While Amos, too, spoke out against other peoples for such wrongdoing, as far as we know he didn’t leave Beth-el in order to do so. Beth-el of course wasn’t so safe, but Nineveh?

One might thus hardly blame Jonah for hightailing it in the opposite direction (v. 3), though the story begins to unfold differently from the way stories about prophets are supposed to unfold—even if “the resistance to calling seen in a Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah or Jonah seems to be of the very essence of the genuine prophet.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Whereas Balaam and Amos are told to “flee” and don’t (Num. 24:11; Amos 7:12), Jonah’s flight is more like Cain’s, the first of several links with Genesis 4 in Jonah’s story.[[59]](#footnote-59) “The prophetic hero becomes the villain”;[[60]](#footnote-60)from now on Jonah “carries his prophetic role like an albatross around his neck.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Nor does his action immediately match Amos’s declaration that there’s no way of avoiding prophesying when Yahweh speaks to you, though his subsequent experience in this chapter fits Amos’s associated comment that the Yahweh who speaks is uncomfortably lion-like (Amos 3:8). So is Jonah scared? Or does he not want to turn out to be a prophet whose words fail to come true?[[62]](#footnote-62) Is it that Jonah cares about Israel and doesn’t want Nineveh to be preserved so it can then bring calamity on Israel?[[63]](#footnote-63)— after all, “the repentance of the nations would be the ruin of the Jews.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Or is he afraid that the Ninevites’ repentance will cause Yahweh to be angry with unrepentant Israel?[[65]](#footnote-65) Jonah’s willingness to sacrifice himself for the Gentile sailors shows that his problem isn’t simply that the Ninevites are Gentiles, but that they’re especially wicked Gentiles.[[66]](#footnote-66) And if we had been given a commission like Jonah’s, surely “we should think that we have never seen or heard of anything more preposterous or impossible than to have one single man attack such an empire.” [[67]](#footnote-67) But “by implying nothing in 1:2-3 with regard to Jonah’s reasons for fleeing to Tarshish, the author leaves it to the reader to guess (doubtless quite wrongly!) what these might be.” We have to wait until 4:2 for the answer.[[68]](#footnote-68) Meanwhile Jonah “got up” as Yahweh said, but did so in order to “go down.” He doesn’t follow Elijah, who “got up and went” as he was told (1 Kings 17:10), though the story of the prophet to Beth-el in 1 Kings 13 overlaps with Jonah’s story. Jonah doesn’t attempt to argue, like Moses; he just flees. “The opening verses portray a sovereign divine initiative, but God’s word does not even manage to get a proper hearing from its first recipient.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

Tarshish “has been located at practically every important Mediterranean trading station known to present-day scholars,”[[70]](#footnote-70) including Tarsus in Turkey, Rhodes in the Aegean, Carthage in North Africa, Sardinia between France and Italy, and Tartessus in Spain.[[71]](#footnote-71) But “this entire chase after detail” is “irrelevant to the subject in hand”; it doesn’t make any difference to the story.[[72]](#footnote-72) Indeed, it’s unlikely that people hearing the Jonah story would know where Tarshish was. The name suggested somewhere legendary a long way away west, way in the opposite direction from Nineveh, as far away from Nineveh as possible, a place where Yahweh had never got involved (Isa. 66:19). Its reputation in connection with trade would make it a plausible place to find a boat going there, with a cargo of precious metals, animals, ivory, rugs, wine, and/or spices (see Ezek. 27). And the port of Yafo or Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, would be a plausible place to locate such a boat. It might also be attractive because it was effectively outside Israel; it was nominally in Dan, but the Danites had never been able to enter into possession of the area and it was under Philistine then Assyrian control. The repeated phrase “from before Yahweh” may hint at the risk involved in Jonah’s hightailing it; standing before someone means being their servant. So the question is, how will Yahweh respond to Jonah’s flagrant rebellion?

**Jonah 1:4-6.** The phrase “from before Yahweh” has pointed to the implausibility of Jonah’s flight. Where can you go from before Yahweh?! Jonah’s flight does not recognize the truth in the declaration common to Amos 9 and Psalm 139 that it’s impossible to run far enough to get away from God’s presence.[[73]](#footnote-73) People listening to his story might be invited to smile at his theological naiveté that imagines Yahweh’s reach being limited to Israel. “We might well wonder what Jonah could be thinking.”[[74]](#footnote-74) But “to be a prophet is not necessarily to be a great theologian.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

No, you can’t get away from Yahweh that easily (v. 4). The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 11.5) declares that the death of anyone who suppresses his prophecy is at the hands of Heaven (that is, not of the Sanhedrin itself), and Jonah find this out. Yahweh chooses to exercise his power in the natural world, and thereby shows he has no limitations of the kind Jonah assumes. It’s almost as if Yahweh will go to desperate lengths to stop Jonah: “in effect, YHWH disrupts the creation order itself in order to catch a prophet who does not fulfill his proper function.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

The sailors are evidently not Israelites (v. 5); one is perhaps to assume that they’re from Tarshish and are on their way home. Whatever their background, they begin to show they have more insight than Jonah. He has continued his journey down—down to Yafo, down to the boat, down to its bowels, and into a deep sleep. “There is every sign that the prophet has wiped Nineveh from his consciousness.”[[77]](#footnote-77) On the part of the sailors, fear would be a reasonable reaction to what is happening. But in the translation I use the word “awe” rather than “fear” in light of the verb’s recurring in vv. 9, 10, and 16. “Awe” is an attitude may drive people to prayer as well as to sensible action. “He that will learn to pray, let him go to sea.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Unfortunately the sailors don’t know who is the one responsible for the storm, as the story’s listeners do.[[79]](#footnote-79) They are at their wit’s end (Ps. 107:27 KJV): “it is not exactly fair, of course, but the LORD has better things than fairness in mind.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

Jonah seems to feel neither awe nor fear (v. 6); he apparently hasn’t noticed the storm. Perhaps falling asleep is a way of avoiding reality. “Go down” and “lie down” are words often used of people dying (notably Ps. 88:4-5 [5-6]). But “going into deep sleep” (*rādam*; cf. the noun *tardēmāh*) suggests sloth, vulnerability or trance (see e.g., Gen. 2:21; 15:12; Judg. 4:21; Prov. 19:15). Jonah’s lethargy contrasts with the efforts and drive of the captain and his men as they pray and attempt to procure their safety. “Get up, call on your God,” says the captain, echoing Yahweh’s own original words to Jonah. The narrator doesn’t tell us whether Jonah did get to pray. Perhaps he doesn’t pray and the reason is he knows prayers get answered, and that’s why he wants to sleep, not pray.[[81]](#footnote-81) The captain allows for the possibility of mercy for himself and his crew; Jonah makes no comment.

**Jonah 1:7-12.** Prayer and lightening the ship are evidently not enough. The sailors’ assumption is not only that a god might deliver them from a chance storm but that maybe there’s no such thing as a chance storm, that the gods can be expected to tell them why the storm happened.

Making lots come out in a revealing way (v. 7) is the means by which the gods may be expected to signal the answer (cf. Josh. 7:13-18; 1 Sam 14:36-42). As will be the case when they pray and offer sacrifice and as the Ninevites will show when they repent, they indicate they know as well as any Israelite (specifically Jonah) how to relate to God in such circumstances.[[82]](#footnote-82) The lots may have been pieces of wood, stone, or pot with the names of passengers and crew; it was then Jonah’s lot that came out. The story began by attaching the word “bad” to Nineveh; the word now attaches itself to Jonah.[[83]](#footnote-83)

A series of questions follows (v. 8), some slightly puzzling, but perhaps portraying the panic-stricken sailors trying to come to terms with what on earth is going on.

Initially (v. 9) Jonah pointedly avoids answering most of them, in particular by revealing that he is a runaway prophet,[[84]](#footnote-84) though in a moment it will become clear that he has to come clean about this fact. In calling himself a Hebrew, he uses a term Israelites sometimes use in describing themselves to foreigners (e.g., Exod. 1:19). He hadn’t been asked about his religion, but he provides significant information. He worships Yahweh (not like every Ephraimite in his day!); the motif of “awe” recurs. And, it turns out, he knows more about Yahweh than his action has implied. Yahweh is the God of the heavens. This description comes mostly in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel, often again in conversations with foreigners. The further portrayal of Yahweh as the one who made the sea and the dry land is more distinctive (but cf. Ps. 95:5) and relates to the context: Yahweh is the maker of the sea that threatens to engulf them and of the dry land that they would like to get back to. Jonah worships no tin-pot little god, then. Yet it’s not obvious that he is in as much awe of Yahweh as the sailors are of their gods, or as they will be of Yahweh in due course. Jonah claimed awe, but everything about him has denied it: if he is in awe of such a God, how could he be fleeing from him?[[85]](#footnote-85) But “the prophet cannot escape prophecy. His prophetic function adheres to Jonah wherever he goes; he magnified the name of the Lord among the gentiles even when he ran away from Him.”[[86]](#footnote-86) And this played a vital role for them.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Their great awe (v. 10) then contrasts with Jonah’s rather small awe. *“*The sailors have uncovered not just the right man but also the right god.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

“At this juncture… Jonah capitulates and runs away no more”[[89]](#footnote-89) (vv. 11-12). But what is his mood when he answers their next question? Is it resignation? Is he determined to die rather than preach to Nineveh?[[90]](#footnote-90) He will make a giant splash, but will it be a leap of faith?[[91]](#footnote-91) Why does he require them to throw him overboard rather than just jumping, unlike Captain Lawrence Oates who simply went for a self-sacrificial suicidal Antarctic walk? Perhaps the answer lies somehow in his explanation, which links him with them, and also links with their desire to have that unnecessary information about him. They are all in this together. He is with them; they are with him. He won’t enter the sea alone. But perhaps, anyway, he’s not assuming he will drown. Perhaps he now recognizes that God is inclined to insist on achieving what he set out to achieve, and will therefore rescue him.

**Jonah 1:13-15.** The men do assume that Jonah will drown. Their refusal immediately to take the way out that Jonah has provided may again commend them, and/or may indicate their recognition that Yahweh doesn’t want Jonah’s life, but wants Jonah to speak,[[92]](#footnote-92) and/or may anticipate the quandary implied by v. 14.

So they try to get back to land (v. 13). Ships did not sail straight across the Mediterranean but stayed reasonably near the shore (without risking being wrecked there), and they commonly carried oars as well as sails, more to cope with being becalmed than with the threat of capsizing (Ezek. 27 offers a detailed picture of the kind of ship this might be—one that goes to Tarshish, in fact).

But eventually they are driven to pray to the Yahweh Jonah has introduced them to (v. 14). There are three aspects to their prayer. There is a naming of Yahweh by these foreign sailors, prefaced by an “Oh” and followed by a “please.” There is the actual petition, also expressed twice, though the doubling reflects their no-win situation—they are in mortal peril because of Jonah but sending him to his death might put them in a different mortal danger.[[93]](#footnote-93) And there is some reasoning, which in effect declares that their action is execution rather than murder because they are acting in accordance with Yahweh’s own action, which itself resembles the implementing of a judge’s verdict.

The sea’s reaction (v. 15) showed that Jonah knew what he was talking about.

**Jonah 1:16—2:1 [2].** One might have imagined the sailors expecting to say “‘Thus died Jonah’” when they reached land, “as they brought the marvellous narrative to a close.”**[[94]](#footnote-94)** But they again show themselves perceptive in their response of great awe.

It is now explicitly great awe for Yahweh (v. 16) “How the narrator laughs at the Hebrew who takes great pains to flee from his God, and in the process… brings non-Israelites to believe in this God.”[[95]](#footnote-95) Sailors were quite used to offering sacrifices on board ship,[[96]](#footnote-96) and apparently we are to infer that they hadn’t thrown everything overboard with the “things” in v. 5 (though Jerome thinks of the sacrifice of a broken spirit or a sacrifice of praise or a sacrifice of words: cf. Pss. 51:17 [19]; 50:14; Hosea 14:2).[[97]](#footnote-97) Tg implies that their sacrifice would be an expression of thanksgiving for the calming of the storm and their own deliverance. When Yahweh does something amazing for you, especially in rescuing you from catastrophe in answer to your prayers, you do make a thank offering to him, and the pledges (presumably of further sacrifices) might then suggest that their interim recognition will be complemented by the more complete proper public recognition and testimony; cf. the sequence in Isaiah 19:21. Yet the mention of pledges following on the mention of sacrifice looks a little odd; and sacrifices and pledges can be associated with prayer. This association suggests that the sailors were not giving thanks for their deliverance but continuing to pray for God’s mercy for themselves[[98]](#footnote-98) and even for Jonah, and promising further offerings if Yahweh answers their prayer. They add prayer to their awe.

What happens next (1:17 [2:1]) supports the idea that their sacrifices and pledges relate to prayer. The printed Hebrew chapter division obscures the sequence, as do NRSV’s “but” and TNIV’s “now.” In response to the sacrifice and pledges, Yahweh commissions a fish to rescue Jonah; the fish is more responsive to Yahweh’s commission than Jonah had been. “Three days and three nights” suggests “a long time” (cf. 1 Sam. 30:12), especially given the mention of the nights as well as the days which makes explicit that the period is three full days. “Jonah must have thought these the longest days and nights ever lived under the sun.”[[99]](#footnote-99) Yet the story shows no more interest in such dynamics than it shows in the identity of the fish or the practicalities of survival there. The fish is a plot device, a *piscis ex machina*.The point is that being in the fish is much better than being in the sea. “Rather than kill him or lethim die, YHWH imprisons Jonah in the belly of the fish to demonstrate further that there is nowhere in the world, even death, where Jonah can flee” (cf. Amos 9:2-3).[[100]](#footnote-100)

Once again a *waw*-consecutive follows (2:1 [2]). Eventually Jonah prays. Perhaps “had it not been that he had glorified Allah, he would certainly have remained inside the fish till the Day of Resurrection.”[[101]](#footnote-101) The regular verb for praying (*hitpallēl*) and the noun for prayer (*təpillāh*) have their background in ordinary life as terms that apply to pleading with a judge who (you hope) will make a decision on your behalf.

**Jonah 2:2 [3].** Yet another *waw*-consecutive follows. The psalm-like thanksgiving that Jonah will now pray is probably not the prayer that v. 1 [2] referred to, since “praying” (*hitpallēl*)implies asking for something and what follows is an act of praise.[[102]](#footnote-102) It is a textbook example of a thanksgiving psalm, which tells the story of how a suppliant experienced a life-threatening predicament, how he or she prayed, how Yahweh listened to the prayer, and how he acted to deliver the suppliant, who then affirms the nature of Yahweh and makes a commitment for the future. A thanksgiving psalm may tell its story more than once, and Jonah’s psalm does so by summarizing it (v. 2 [3]) and then giving a detailed version (vv. 3-7 [4-8]) before coming to the affirmation and commitment (vv. 8-9 [9-10]). Like a typical thanksgiving psalm, it gives not a literal account of the event it relates, but a metaphorical and theological one that sets the experience of life-threatening peril and of God’s act of deliverance in the context of other such experiences and acts. Indeed, it is almost as if the thanksgiving avoids making tight links with the story: it says “belly” when it could have repeated the word “insides,” it says “hurled” when it could have repeated the word “threw,” and of course “in the belly of the fish no seaweed grows.”[[103]](#footnote-103) On the other hand, “went down” in v. 6 [7] brings to a climax the sequence of occurrences of this verb: see 1:3, 3, 5. It would be unimaginative to ask whether the story is asking us to infer that Jonah composed this act of praise while inside the fish or whether he composed it subsequently (as unimaginative as asking what genus the fish belonged to). When biblical stories tell us what people said in different situations, they are regularly imagining the kind of thing that someone might properly say and/or telling us something of the significance of the event.

“The ‘mother lode’ of intertextual citation and paraphrase is found in the psalm of Jonah.”[[104]](#footnote-104) The first line closely resembles Psalm 120:1 (“To Yahweh in my trouble I called, and he answered me”) though the difference in word order makes it even more difficult to construe the line as a bicolon than is the case with that line in the psalm. Jonah’s testimony that he called to Yahweh and heard Yahweh answer makes for some irony in relation to chapter 1, where Yahweh bade Jonah call to Nineveh (but he didn’t) and where the captain bade Jonah call to his God (but we are not told that he did), and where the sailors did call to Yahweh. So would it also be unimaginative to ask when Jonah did call to Yahweh? Was it during the storm, in accordance with the captain’s bidding? Or was it as he hit the water? And what form did the answer take? Answers to prayer in the First Testament commonly come in two stages. There’s an answer in words, “Yes, I’ve heard, and I will act,” and then there’s an answer in deeds that in due course fulfill the words. Is Jonah saying that Yahweh has given him the stage one answer (the stage two will come when the fish deposits him on dry land)? Or is he designating his being swallowed by the fish as the stage two answer? Of course no one hears the testimony and thanksgiving from inside the fish, so that v. 9 will necessarily promise that when it’s practicable he will give the thanksgiving and testimony that are proper to such an answer to prayer.

Oddly enough, similar questions are raised by Psalm 120:1. There is also in that verse a move from a statement about Yahweh to a statement made to Yahweh, as there is here. The alternation is common in thanksgiving psalms because such psalms are also testimonies. Thus Jonah speaks to Yahweh to give thanks and simultaneously speaks about Yahweh to give testimony (to those who will later hear his story!). The second line in the thanksgiving as a whole parallels the first line and intensifies it. Cry for help (*šāwa’*)is a stronger and rarer verb than call (*qārā’*), with the neat characteristic that it resembles the word for “deliver” (*yāša’*). She’ol’s belly is a stronger and more vivid expression than trouble. It implies a personification of the realm of death, which resembles an animal that eagerly swallows people up (cf. Hos. 13:14 and the comments). There is further irony in Jonah’s praying from here, when it’s the place where someone like Jonah thought about going in order to get away from Yahweh on the assumption that Yahweh didn’t get involved there.[[105]](#footnote-105)

**Jonah 2:3-4 [4-5]**. The thanksgiving moves to its more detailed account of what happened and Yahweh did (cf. the sequence in Pss. 18; 30; 116). It begins by using the metaphor of drowning to describe the ordeal, which might seem apposite or might seem incongruous. The account then relates Jonah’s thinking as he went through the experience.

Whereas one might initially take the first words (v. 3 [4]) to be declaring directly that Yahweh’s responsibility lay behind the action of the sailors, it soon becomes clear that Jonah is continuing to speak in metaphor. Both lines affirm Yahweh’s responsibility for Jonah’s peril—you hurled, your breakers, your rollers. The second line again parallels and restates the first; it exactly corresponds to Psalm 42:7b [8b]. Other psalms also use the imagery of depths (e.g., Ps. 69:2, 15 [3, 16]), of the heart of the seas (Ps. 46:2 [3]), and of the current or flood (Pss. 24:2; 93:3)—the last word is the regular term for an ordinary river but it can also denote the tumultuous waters under the earth. Jonah speaks of an overwhelming, life-threatening experience as one that was like drowning in the ocean; deep-water imagery dominates the psalm in an unparalleled way.[[106]](#footnote-106) The portrait is not merely literal or metaphorical or psychological but theological. Such an experience meant being engulfed by forces of tumult and disorder that God was not merely declining to restrain in the way that he normally does but was deliberately letting loose.

Jonah’s inference (v. 4a [5a]) was that he had not only been thrown into the sea. He had been thrown out from the realm where Yahweh watches over people. Another suppliant found consolation in the fact that his plea is always in front of Yahweh (Ps. 38:9 [10]); even the suppliant of Psalm 88 sets his cry in front of Yahweh (Ps. 88:1 [2]). Jonah had concluded that he had been driven out from that position. The verb is the one used for Yahweh driving out the Canaanites, for a husband throwing his wife out in divorcing her, for Cain being driven out from Yahweh’s presence, and for the Ephraimites being driven out from Yahweh’s household (Hos. 9:15).

But against obvious logic (v. 4b [5b]), he believed this was not the end of the story. “Here is the turning point.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Prayer out of the depths commonly expresses an outrageous trust in Yahweh; that trust is one of the considerations a suppliant puts before Yahweh in seeking to get him to act. In this instance, Jonah may not have been implying a confidence that he would in due course be able to enter Yahweh’s presence, but he had been indicating an insistence that he would not be stopped from reaching out to Yahweh even if Yahweh had pushed him away (cf. Ps. 22). While Yahweh’s “palace” can denote the Jerusalem temple, in the Psalms and the Prophets it can also denote Yahweh’s dwelling in the heavens (e.g., Hab. 2:20; Pss. 11:4; 138:2); that reference makes sense here. If you are in Jerusalem you can go to Yahweh’s palace and meet with Yahweh there. But Israelites knew that being unable to go to the temple doesn’t mean having no access to Yahweh. They could pray towards the temple as Yahweh’s earthly dwelling (cf. 1 Kings 8; Dan. 6) and they could pray towards that dwelling in the heavens (perhaps one should not distinguish the two too sharply). Once again there is parallelism between the two lines in v. 4 rather than between cola, though here it is a parallelism of contrast.

**Jonah 2:5-7 [6-8].** Jonah reverts to describing his ordeal as like drowning, but does so as a lead in to his account of Yahweh’s act of rescue.

In his further account of his nightmare (vv. 5-6a [6-7a]) he now gives up reworking language that’s familiar from the Psalms and in three parallel lines offers his own frightening formulation of what it had been like almost to drown, metaphorically speaking. The deep (*təhôm*) is another expression for the literal depths of the ocean but also for something with more metaphysical overtones, a repository of tumultuous forces that God needed to restrain but can let loose (Gen. 7:11; 8:2; Exod. 15:5, 8). Reed or seaweed suggests the growth on the ocean floor in which one could get fatally entangled; it thus also suggests a parallel image to the ropes with which She’ol catches and holds its victims. The feet of the mountains are their extreme bottoms in the subterranean and sub-oceanic depths. The earth is here the (under)world, where the gates of Hades had been closed and barred behind him (cf. Matt. 16:18).

His declaration about Yahweh’s rescue (v. 6b [7b]) follows that further recollection of the threatened calamity. MT’s not making v. 6b a new verse fits the fact that it stands in contrasting parallelism with the preceding line about going down to the (under)world from which there is no escape. “Pit” is another term for the realm of death, like (under)world or She’ol. It parallels the term “grave” when used as a metonym (Ps. 88:11 [12]); people who were not buried in a rock-hewn tomb might well be buried in a grave-pit. ). The invocation of “Yahweh my God” makes for a neat link with the account in chapter 1 which spoke of everyone crying out to his god, with the captain’s exhortation to call out to his God, and with Jonah’s own declaration about being in awe of Yahweh as the God of the heavens, the maker of sea and dry land. It makes for an even more poignant contrast with his speaking of Yahweh in vv. 3 and 4 [4 and 5] and of no one in vv. 5-6a [6-7a].

Jonah again combines thanksgiving and testimony (v. 7 [8]), as he had in his summary in v. 2 [3]; here he interweaves them in aba order (thanksgiving in vv. 6b and 7b [7b and 8b], testimony in v. 7a [8a]). “Calling to mind” (*zākar*, traditionally translated “remember”) is a key motif in prayer. Calling us to mind or being mindful of us is what one asks for from God (e.g., Ps. 89:47, 50 [48, 51]); calling God to mind or being mindful of God is what prayer itself involves (e.g., Pss. 42:4, 6 [5, 7]; 63:6 [7]). The emphasis on Yahweh being the object of prayer takes further the link with chapter 1 and its references to prayer to various deities. Yahweh was the one Jonah focused on, and Jonah was the one Yahweh then focused on. The days in the fish had driven him to pray (!), v. 1 [2] told us, and Jonah had turned toward Yahweh’s sacred palace, he had said in v. 4 [5]. It had worked, even when She’ol had got its hands on him and when he was thus in a place where Yahweh is not inclined to intervene (Ps. 88:5 [6]). If you can just get your plea to Yahweh (v. 7b [8b], the noun linked with the verb in v. 1 [2]), he will not be able to resist the temptation to respond.

**Jonah 2:8-9 [9-10]**. When people praying a thanksgiving/testimony psalm have finished telling their story, they commonly round it off by affirming some implications. Here Jonah notes three typical ones.

The first (v. 8 [9]) he articulates by means of an indirect statement, once more expressing himself in terms from the Psalms. “Take heed” is a common verb, but Psalm 31:6 [7] uses it in a unique way in relating it to “empty vanities” or “vanities of emptiness.” A vanity is something that is mere breath; a “vanity of vanities” (Eccles. 1:2; 12:8) is something that is utterly breath, totally empty. The more creative expression “vanity of emptiness” appears only in Psalm 31 and here in Jonah. Vanity is a way of characterizing the other gods that Jonah’s fellow-Ephraimites were only too tempted to go off and worship, as if these gods could answer their prayers (cf. Jer. 2:5; 8:19). Emptiness is another way of characterizing them (e.g., Ps. 24:4; Jer. 18:15). Both terms gain part of their purchase from being applied to gods who can be represented by images, which may look impressive and may seem helpful but are actually powerless and hollow. Jonah further enhances the uniqueness of the psalm’s expression by using a unique intensive form of the verb. While the sailors’ gods would count as empty vanities if Israelites were worshiping them, the First Testament is more sympathetic to their worship by people who don’t have the chance to acknowledge Yahweh. Israelites seeking their help, however, are “abandoning their commitment.” One can fault Jonah in various ways, but giving up on his commitment to Yahweh to follow other gods is not one of them (he’s like David in this respect).[[108]](#footnote-108)

In contrast (v. 9 [10]), Jonah will offer to Yahweh the thanksgiving sacrifice that gives appropriate costly outward expression to his gratitude for Yahweh’s answering his prayer and delivering him. Offering the sacrifice in the company of his family and friends and other people in the temple will also give him further chance to give testimony to his rescue. Such sacrifice and giving of testimony will fulfill the pledge that he is making at this moment—or perhaps, by implication, a pledge he made when he was praying (cf. Ps. 116:17-18). The final colon concludes the prayer with the kind of affirmation about Yahweh and his sovereignty that properly closes a testimony/thanksgiving (cf. Ps. 3:8 [9]). One could picture his telling his story as his fulfilling his pledge.[[109]](#footnote-109) Meanwhile, “shut up still in his darksome grave… we hear him nevertheless singing marvellously—far more marvellously than Paul and Silas in the prison.”[[110]](#footnote-110)

**Jonah 2:11 [12].** The first half of Jonah’s story closes as “the text reverts again to prose to record Jonah’s somewhat unconventional, and very unceremonious return to land.”[[111]](#footnote-111) Presumably the dry land is the coast of the eastern Mediterranean not far from where his sea adventure had started.

Chapter 2 “is, in a way, the happiest part of the story.”[[112]](#footnote-112) But the story itself is only half over[[113]](#footnote-113) and its structure is the obverse of the structure of a romantic comedy where a reversal threatens to derail things but will not ultimately do so.

## Theological Implications

1. God sometimes sends prophets, but it’s not possible to see whether there is a rationale for God’s choice of the person to take hold of in this connection. Why someone resistant and not very intelligent like Jonah? We can’t go behind God’s decisions about whom he chooses. We can say that God’s election is not for the sake of the chosen but for the sake of God’s purpose.[[114]](#footnote-114) “The only reason why the word of Jonah the prophet is convincing is because he is such a screwup.”[[115]](#footnote-115)
2. Does the waywardness and violence of a big city always come up to God? And then is it the case that “whenever God’s wrath is about to be kindled, He usually first sends His Word to save a few”?[[116]](#footnote-116) It’s not possible to see whether there is a rationale about the cities to which God chooses to send a prophet. Why Nineveh, even when it became a big city?
3. Yahweh the God of the heavens is the one of whom it’s wise to be in awe, the one who made sea and dry land. “‘The Lord sent out a great wind….’ It is not said there *arose* a great wind.”[[117]](#footnote-117) God can choose to intervene and use his power over nature in the world, but it’s not possible to see whether there’s a rationale for when and how he does so. Psalm 107:23-32 generalizes the experience of the sailors in Jonah’s story. Matthew 8:23-27 tells of an analogous experience, when someone else fell asleep Jonah-like, but perhaps did so more clearly as an indication of trust in God; “Who is this, that even wind and sea obey him?”[[118]](#footnote-118) Acts 27:13-44 tells of another variant on the story with a prophet-like figure playing yet another role as he undertakes his accidental-on purpose journey to the Nineveh of the day. and also manifesting deep trust.

The Old Testament ranks a sea voyage (Ps. 10722f.) with desert-wandering, captivity and sickness as one of the forms of extreme human misery; of the misery from which it is the gracious and mighty will of God, which we cannot extol too highly, to redeem us. It is thus the more noteworthy that the most striking Messianic deeds of Jesus are His walking on the sea in royal freedom, and His commanding the waves and storm to be still by His Word. And when we are finally given in Ac. 27-28 an accurate description, down to the last nautical details, of Paul’s stormy but ultimately successful voyage from Caesarea through Crete and Malta to Puteoli, it is certainly not done merely for the sake of historical completeness or out of curiosity, but because the New Testament author, too, knows the sign of the sea and sees in this occurrence an emulation of Solomon, Jehoshophat and Jonah, a confirmation of the hymn of praise of Ps. 10713f., and finally, in connexion with the miracles of Jesus Himself on the sea, the fulfilment of all Old Testament prophecy concerning God’s lordship over the dangerous sea, and therefore a confirmation of Gen. 19-10.[[119]](#footnote-119)

1. Why such a big hammer to crack as small nut? Why not commission another prophet? There may be many reasons for seeking to evade God’s call, but one may find it difficult to escape from God, for the theological reason that both Amos and Obadiah have noted. And one may also find it difficult to escape from God’s call.[[120]](#footnote-120) Here. “the person who is trying to escape from Yahweh… has never for a single moment escaped Yahweh’s eyes or his grasp. It is in his very failure that Yahweh uses him for his service.”[[121]](#footnote-121) “He stoops to man’s loftiness”; as he wrestled with Jacob, so he does with Jonah, “as an equal.”[[122]](#footnote-122) But who knows how many people God lets escape?
2. The instincts of ordinary pagans about the way to cope when catastrophe threatens may not be so wrong. Whereas it’s possible to assume mistakenly that everything has an explanation, the modern instinct may also be to assume mistakenly that nothing has an explanation. And God may guide through the casting of lots (e.g., Prov. 16:33; Acts 1:26).
3. When Peter gets a summons in Yafo to set off to Caesarea, he goes, and there he acknowledges that “in every nation someone who is in awe of God and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35).[[123]](#footnote-123) This fact does not make it unnecessary to tell such people about Jesus; it makes it necessary.
4. On board the ship Jonah was down below fast asleep when because of him the storm threatened to engulf the ship and its crew.

But the lot fell on him. And the upshot was that to save the ship and the crew, the rest hesitantly—and even with vows and sacrifices—yet also resolutely threw him into the sea, and the storm was abated. The only thing was that Jonah openly confessed his guilt to these pagans and himself advised them what to do, whereas, when the world threatens to cast Christianity overboard, it is seldom ready to admit that the general misery which has brought this about can have anything whatever to do with its own guilt, but usually sees all the failings in the evil world, and, far from being prepared to denounce its own sin and make free restitution for its fault, it normally protests most vociferously against any open threats of ejection.[[124]](#footnote-124)

1. “Perhaps…,” the captain says, like Amos speaking to the Ephraimites about the prayer they might pray (Amos 5:15). It is an important word in prayer, combining boldness and humility.[[125]](#footnote-125)
2. “When Jonah finds himself in the watery Deep, he joins that company of Israelites who have experienced the threat and terror of an untimely death and cried to Yahweh for deliverance.”[[126]](#footnote-126)

The fact that the place of death is conceived as a kind of city or house which is sealed up ( Jonah 27), or locked with a key ( Rev. 118, 91, 201), or as a place where men are bound with cords ( Ps. 185, 1163), or again in Ps. 9417 and 11517 as the land of silence, or in Is. 2619 as the house of “dust,” or in Ps. 886 etc. as the realm of “darkness,” shows that these are simply pictures which reflect the actual view of death which is being entertained. This is even more true of its localisations, and especially of the fact that the place of death and the realm of the dead is always sought somewhere in the depths, and that it is described as an “underworld” (She’ol).[[127]](#footnote-127)

1. Prayer involves calling to Yahweh, crying for help from the realm of death, challenging Yahweh about what he has done, looking to him in his sacred palace in the heavens, calling him to mind. It involves saying thank you and giving testimony. It involves saying help me, help me, help me, sorry, sorry, sorry, thank you, thank you, thank you.[[128]](#footnote-128) One expects to say the first and/or the second and one gets the chance to say the third.
2. Whereas the medieval antiphon acknowledges that “In the midst of life we are in death,” Jonah found that in the midst of death he was still alive.[[129]](#footnote-129) A survivor of the Belsen concentration camp also said, “In my happier days I used to remark on the aptitude of the saying, ‘When in life we are in the midst of death.’ I have since learnt that it's more apt to say, ‘When in death we are in the midst of life.’”[[130]](#footnote-130)
3. In due course Jesus will go through the sequence one reads about in Jonah. He will enter the realm of death with apparent finality but be miraculously raised from it. People will then be able to look back at the story of the miraculous deliverance of Jonah and see it recapitulated in Jesus (Matt. 12:38-40; 16:1-4).
4. “Very many groups within the church deserve no more than to be devoured and spat out; and yet that church must not forget the playful triumph of her God who, in spite of all, still makes her serviceable and ready to set out at long last on the way to Nineveh.”[[131]](#footnote-131)

# Jonah 3:1—4:11—God Sends a Prophet to Nineveh and Pursues Him

## Translation

3:1Yahweh’s message became a reality to Yônāh a second time, saying: 2”Get up, go to Nînəvēh, the big city, and call out to it[[132]](#footnote-132) the proclamation that I am going to speak[[133]](#footnote-133) to you.” 3And Jonah got up and went to Nînəvēh in accordance with Yahweh’s word.

Nînəvēh was an extraordinarily big city,[[134]](#footnote-134) three days’ walk. 4Yônāh began to come into the city one day’s walk, and he called out, “Forty[[135]](#footnote-135) days more, and Nînəvēh is going to overturn.”[[136]](#footnote-136) 5The people of Nînəvēh trusted in God.[[137]](#footnote-137) They called for a fast and clothed themselves in sack, from the biggest person among them to the least among them.

6The thing reached the king of Nînəvēh, and he got up from his throne, removed his cloak from on him, covered himself with sack, and sat in ash. 7He had it cried out:[[138]](#footnote-138)

In Nînəvēh, by the decree of the king and his lords: human being and animal (cattle and herd) are not to taste[[139]](#footnote-139) anything. They are not to graze[[140]](#footnote-140) and they are not to drink, 8and human being and animal are to cover themselves in sack. They are to call to God strongly, and to turn back each one from his bad way and from the violence that’s in the palms of their hands. 9Who knows, God[[141]](#footnote-141) may turn back and relent, and turn back from his angry blazing, and we will not perish.

10God saw what they did, that they turned back from their bad way, and God relented about the bad fortune that he spoke about doing to them. He didn’t do it.

4:1But it seemed bad to Yônāh, a great bad thing, and it made him blaze.[[142]](#footnote-142) 2He prayed to Yahweh,

Oh, Yahweh, this was what I said, wasn’t it, when I was still on my land. That’s why I anticipated it by fleeing to Taršîš, because I knew that you were “a gracious God, compassionate and long-tempered, big in commitment,” and relenting about anything bad. 3Now Yahweh, please take my life from me, because my dying is good, better than my life.

4But Yahweh said, “Is it in a good way[[143]](#footnote-143) that you’re blazing?”

5Yônāh had gone out[[144]](#footnote-144) from the city and sat east of the city. He made a shelter for himself there and sat under it in the shade until he should see what would happen in the city. 6Yahweh God commissioned a qîqāyôn[[145]](#footnote-145) and it grew up over Yônāh to be a shadow over his head and to rescue[[146]](#footnote-146) him from a situation that was bad for him. Yônāh was glad about the qîqāyôn, with great gladness.[[147]](#footnote-147) 7But God commissioned a worm as dawn came next day. It struck down the qîqāyôn and it withered. 8And when the sun rose, God commissioned a scorching east wind and the sun struck down on Yônāh’s head. He became faint and asked for his life, that he might die. He said, “My dying is good, better than my life.”

9God said to Yônāh, “Is it in a good way that you’re blazing about the qîqāyôn?” He said, “It’s in a good way that I’m blazing, to death.” 10Yahweh said, “You pitied the qîqāyôn, which you didn’t labor for and you didn’t grow, which came into being as the child of a night and perished as the child of a night. 11And I—I won’t pity Nînəvēh, the big city, in which there are more than[[148]](#footnote-148) 120,000 people who don’t know their right from their left, and many animals….

## Interpretation

“With Jonah’s efficient, if not graceful, exit from the fish, the story progresses to the goal he has so desperately been trying to avoid.”[[149]](#footnote-149) We may again follow MT in treating what are two chapters in printed Bibles as one section, though that chapter division does again divide the section conveniently—more deftly than was the case earlier. Chapter 3 follows neatly from the conclusion of chapter 2; this time Jonah does as Yahweh says, and his mission is spectacularly successful. But chapter 4 takes us back to the Jonah of chapter 1 whom Yahweh tries to deal with again, by less drastic actions and by arguments. The story ends by leaving Jonah and the audience with a question relating to where the story started.

**Jonah 3:1-3a**. The opening of Act Two pointedly parallels the opening of Act One. It indicates that Yahweh will not be put off and that his designated agent may not be able to escape his commission.[[150]](#footnote-150) Yahweh persists with his purpose for Nineveh and with his purpose through Jonah. “He is fortunate to be reprieved. Had not the disobedient prophet in 1 K 13 been mangled by a lion?”[[151]](#footnote-151)

The very beginning (vv. 1-2a) is exactly the same as 1:1-2a apart from the natural addition “a second time.” But then the differences (v. 2b) are first that Yahweh tells Jonah to preach “to” not “against” Nineveh. Then, suggesting that it is not just a rhetorical difference, he does not take up the reference to Nineveh’s bad dealings coming up to him. These differences imply the more positive prospect that Jonah fears….

As happened the first time, Jonah promptly got up (v. 3a); again the verb is the same. But this time he acts “in accordance with Yahweh’s word,” which is ironically the expression used in connection with the promise Jonah was given for King Jeroboam (2 Kings 14:25). The only other occasion when it’s used of a prophet as opposed to someone such as a king is when it’s used of Elijah, so it makes for a nice extension of the implicit comparison of Jonah with Elijah when he reacts to Yahweh’s message becoming a reality to him (1 Kings 17:5; see the comments on Jonah 1:1). This is more how the story of a prophet is supposed to work. The story is back on track.[[152]](#footnote-152) So has Jonah changed? Or does he think Yahweh has changed? Jonah thought he knew God and could disobey, but he doesn’t know God and ultimately he can’t disobey.[[153]](#footnote-153)

**Jonah 3:3b-5.** It’s not clear what the three days’ walk (v. 3b) implies, though it’s clear the impression that the description is meant to convey. A city of the numbers specified in 4:11 might be ten or more times the population of Samaria or Jerusalem in Jonah’s day and twenty or more times the population in the Persian period, though it’s not unrealistic for Nineveh in its heyday. But it hardly requires three days simply to walk through once or to walk around once; more likely the implication is that it would take three days to go and preach in every neighborhood.

But the point about this note (v. 4) is that whatever impression of size it’s meant to convey, Jonah needed only to preach for one of the projected three days to get a prodigious response. The story doesn’t tell us how he knew what to preach, but presumably we are to infer that Yahweh had fulfilled the undertaking to which v. 2 refers. “Jonah uses here no rhetorical ornaments” and “did not gently lead the Ninevites to God, but threatened them with destruction, and seemed to have given them no hope of pardon.”[[154]](#footnote-154) In general terms, the threat of the city overturning is not surprising; Yahweh has overturned wicked towns before and has threatened to do the same to Israel (Gen. 19:25, 29; Deut. 29:23 [22]; Lam. 4:6; cf. Jer. 20:16; Amos 4:11). But the forty days’ notice carries the implication that people’s reaction might make a difference, and the story’s Israelite audience would know that threats are always—well, threats (see Jer. 18). Prophets often simply declare what’s hanging over the people and leave it to them to work out the implications, though they do usually give reasons for the threat; maybe it’s assumed that no one needs to be told the rationale for confronting a city like Nineveh. Is the length of time an expression of divine generosity yet also an indication that there are limits? Is it the kind of symbolic or round number that people couldn’t take literalistically (e.g., by waiting until day 39)? Or is Jonah giving them a long period in the hope that they will never get around to it?[[155]](#footnote-155) Is he deliberately trying to discourage them from responding to God?[[156]](#footnote-156) There may also be an implication that Nineveh is going to overturn either one way or the other (cf. b. Sanhedrin 89b). Perhaps the Ninevites took advantage of Jonah’s and Yahweh’s ambiguity.[[157]](#footnote-157)

But in the story maybe the point is that the Ninevites don’t need forty days (v. 5). “Nothing in the story so far has prepared us for the stunning abrupt good news of 3:5.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Jonah is evidently “endowed with irresistible enthusiasm.”[[159]](#footnote-159) He gets this response when he has gone only a third of the way through the city; further, “the extremely elliptical description of how the prophet persuades the foreign city makes the vigorous response to his call all the more impressive.”[[160]](#footnote-160) Trusting or believing in God (*he’ĕmîn bə*)implies both that they believed what God said through Jonah and that they trusted that it would make a difference if they responded in the way they did. It is what Abraham did when confronted by an implausible declaration of Yahweh’s intent (Gen 15:6) but what Israel was often disinclined to do (e.g., Deut. 9:23; Ps. 78:22, 32). In the present context, Israel’s failure of such belief in connection with the fall of Samaria and of Jerusalem (2 Kings 17:14) is especially significant. The Ninevites knew they would need to express their penitence in fasting; the expression “proclaim a fast” comes in Jeremiah 36:9 in a context where it soon becomes clear that the king has less insight than the ordinary people of Jerusalem or (we will soon learn) than the king of Nineveh. Jeremiah expected sackcloth, the public expression of self-humbling, too (Jer. 4:8; 6:22). “Fasting is the body’s way of praying; you voluntarily empty yourself” and thus appeal to God to have mercy and fill you; putting on sackcloth has a similar message, “putting on destitution like a garment.”[[161]](#footnote-161) Again, in Jeremiah, too, both the big people and the little people are engaged in wrongdoing but also know how to turn to the prophet (Jer. 6:13; 8:10; 42:1).

The whole city with one consent,

Was knocking at the gates of the grave![[162]](#footnote-162)

“The miracle of the Ninevites’ fasting and wearing sackcloth equals the miracle of Jonah being saved by the big fish.[[163]](#footnote-163)

**Jonah 3:6-10.** Apparently Jonah did not start at the top, like a prophet in Ephraim or Judah, but the king hears (v. 6)—maybe hears about Jonah’s message, or maybe hears about what is going on in the city (unless this subsection is background to v. 5). He catches on, and adds the other marker of penitence, sitting in ash (e.g., Jer. 6:26) instead of sitting on his throne. We don’t discover who the king is; it’s not very important. It’s more important that he’s modeling how a king should react, and offering a contrast with many an Israelite king.[[164]](#footnote-164) “King of Nineveh” is an odd expression, as “King of London” would be, even when Nineveh became the Assyrian capital; Nineveh is being portrayed after the manner of a city state.

He has a message proclaimed through the city (v. 7). The issuing of a decree by the king and his advisers would again make sense to Israelites listening in the Persian period; compare the stories in Daniel (the Aramaic equivalent of the word for “decree” recurs there, and in Ezra, as it does not elsewhere in the First Testament). Crying out (*zā’aq*) is what the mariners did to their gods in 1:5. Perhaps there is an implication that the king was also commissioning people to cry out to God. His decree hastens to catch up with his people and to top it. There are various degrees of fasting; one may eat and drink simply, or one may not eat during the day and eat at night. The king seems to impose a ban on eating or drinking anything; there is to be no tasting menu, no tapas, here. Presumably the decree involves a hyperbole, as is suggested by the extending of the ban to animals. But animals, after all, belong to the community along with human beings, so it’s appropriate for them to join in the community’s self-denial as it shows to God how serious it is. They are, furthermore, part of the city that will be overthrown: compare the Noah story, Jehoiaqim’s description of Jeremiah’s warning, and Jeremiah’s declaration about Babylon (Jer. 36:29; 51:62). In stories about earlier days, when a town was “devoted” (put to the sword), the killing commonly includes the animals (e.g., Josh. 6:20; 1 Sam. 15:3).

The animals also join the human community in wearing sack (v. 8), which needn’t be another hyperbole; ancient writers such as Herodotus (IX, 24) refer to soldiers trimming their horses’ hair as well as their own, and in the West, it has been usual for horses to wear appropriately colored capes in parades.[[165]](#footnote-165)Perhaps they are also to join in the people’s urgent prayer; an Assyrian decree requires that the meadow joins with its people in prayer on some occasion of communal mourning and repentance.[[166]](#footnote-166) Nature can join in praise; it has the requisite physical assets such as “arms” (branches and breakers) to wave. So it is quite plausible for animals with their lowing and bleating also to involve themselves in “calling” strongly to God, as they cry out to Yahweh elsewhere (e.g., Joel 1:20; Ps. 104:21, 27; Job 38:41).[[167]](#footnote-167) Here it’s explicit that this is what the king commissions, and “call” is the verb that came in 1:6, 14; 2:2. But while symbolic action is required, the king recognizes that moral action is also needed. “Turning back” (*šûb*)is one standard First Testament equivalent to the English word “repent”; it makes clear that repentance refers to an action of the whole person. It is a turning from bad ways; compare the reference to bad dealing in 1:2. The expression now applies to each individual. It’s a turning from violence, which brings to mind the violence of national powers (e.g., Joel 3:19 [4:19]; Obad. 10): “God becomes concerned about the sins of the other nations when they rise in severity and cross the Chamas [*ḥāmās*, violence]threshold.”[[168]](#footnote-168) But the king’s reference to violence in the palms of their hands puts the focus on violence within the community exercised by the powerful toward the powerless (e.g., Amos 3:10; 6:3; Mic. 6:10)—which would include him. It’s “a display of repentance that rivals any recorded in the Bible.”[[169]](#footnote-169)

Perhaps God may turn back and relent (*niḥam*)if people turn back (v. 9). The words correspond to Joel 2:14, but they also compare with the ship captain’s “perhaps” in 1:6. The “who knows” is wise because God sometimes declares the intention not to turn back (Jer. 4:28) and things worked out the opposite way when David asked the “Who knows” question (2 Sam. 12:22). Yet God does sometimes relent (e.g., Amos 7:3). The people of Nineveh are asking to be treated the way Moses successfully prayed for Israel to be treated on Sinai (see Exod. 32:11-14). And Yahweh has also said that if any nation (not just Israel) turns back from its bad dealing, he will relent of the bad fortune he spoke of bringing (Jer. 18:7-8). Nineveh qualifies. The audience for the story knows, and Jonah (we will discover) knows. Whereas turning back is an action word, relenting is an attitude and feelings word; it refers to making a decision, with some implication that it makes one feel better. So maybe God will feel able or driven to respond to the Ninevites’ change of heart, expressed in their changed behavior and their symbolic display of distress. Maybe he will then turn from the blazing wrath to which he is quite entitled. Maybe they won’t perish (cf. 1:6, 14).

The king’s hopes are fulfilled (v. 10). In case there should be any doubt that the Ninevites have fulfilled the qualifications of Jeremiah 18, the story is explicit that God saw that they turned back from their bad way and fulfilled the specification about fasting in Isaiah 58.[[170]](#footnote-170) M. Ta’anit 2.1 comments, “It is not written of the men of Nineveh that ‘God saw their sackcloth and their fasting,’ but *And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way*.”

Jonah fled from God,

And the Ninevites from holiness.

Justice placed them in fetters,

Yea, both of them, like criminals.

They offered repentance to her,

And both were delivered.[[171]](#footnote-171)

“No fire and brimstone fell on this latter-day Sodom after all.”[[172]](#footnote-172)

**Jonah 4:1-4**. The chapter division usefully marks the story’s return to a focus on Jonah, but it keeps a focus on what is “bad” [*ra’*] for other people and for Jonah, and on what is “good” [*ṭôb*]in Jonah’s eyes, and in God’s.

What has happened “changes Jonah’s whole universe”[[173]](#footnote-173) (v. 1). While “success has come to Jonah, or so one would think,”[[174]](#footnote-174) that is not how he sees it. “Had God not pursued him to the gates of Sheol just so he could saddle him with an apparently frivolous errand?”[[175]](#footnote-175) Yahweh’s “turning away from *rā’â* is to Jonah *ra’*, one might almost say *rā’â gedôlâ,*”something really bad.[[176]](#footnote-176) God has given up his blazing anger, but he thus transfers the blazing to Jonah. Why is it so? It seems not to be that he is simply against foreigners; he had fled to a foreign land and had quite a positive relationship with foreign sailors. There is no indication that he is against Nineveh because it is the imperial capital, though that might be presupposed. But in Jonah’s day Assyria was not Ephraim’s oppressor and in the Persian period relationships with the imperial power (the Assyria of the day) were good. There is no indication that it is because Nineveh’s pardon will mean Israel’s destruction[[177]](#footnote-177) nor that he is afraid of being judged to be a false prophet.[[178]](#footnote-178) There is more indication that it is wickedness that offends Jonah. “A colonial power (read: Nineveh) should not be let off the hook but called to account for its past and ongoing violent actions.”[[179]](#footnote-179) It’s hard to learn to love the bloody city.[[180]](#footnote-180) And it ill behooves readers from superpower/imperialist cultures to say that Jonah should do so.[[181]](#footnote-181) Such a city’s bad dealing and its violence (1:2; 3:8) mean a bad fate should come upon it. Every prophet says so.

Jonah’s explicit reason more or less says as much (v. 2). He pleads with Yahweh, as he did in 2:1. “Oh,” he begins, as the sailors did in 1:14. English translations add lots of “Ohs” that are not in the scriptural text, but these “Ohs” are really there. Such “Ohs” regularly lead into pleas for forgiveness and mercy. The sailors were beseeching God that they might not die because of Jonah; he is beseeching God that he may die because of Nineveh. He now lets us in on the answer to the question raised by 1:3: why did he hightail it as far away from Nineveh as possible? Apparently he had told Yahweh, but the narrator hasn’t told us. The way he now puts it to Yahweh (“this was what I said, wasn’t it”) corresponds to what the Israelites said when they seemed to be facing disaster at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:12). The Ninevites have been responding to Yahweh like Israel at one of its better moments in Exodus 14—15 (see 1:16; 3:5); Jonah responds like Israel on one of its worse moments.[[182]](#footnote-182) He is a knowledgeable theologian if not a wise one. He knows the basic truths about Yahweh that go back to Sinai. His theological statement corresponds in particular to that in Joel 2:13 (see the comments). The extra note in their joint recollection of Yahweh’s characteristics is their adding that he has a capacity to relent, a significant addition in Joel and in Jonah; that word come only in these two versions of this description of Yahweh. The knowledgeable theologian Jonah is aware that this principle doesn’t apply only to Israelites when they do wrong (the point in Joel). It applies to people such as Ninevites when they do wrong. “God was everything that Jonah feared.”[[183]](#footnote-183) He knows what the Bible says and he doesn’t like it.[[184]](#footnote-184)

He cannot live with who God is (v. 3). Yahweh’s capacity to relent was implicitly the basis on which Jonah was pleading for life in 2:1 [2]; here he is pleading to die, like Elijah in rather different circumstances (1 Kings 19:4); MT has a setumah or petuhah after v. 3. Yahweh’s action is bad; his own death will be good. Although the narrator has described Jonah as blazing angry, Jonah’s observations about his feelings reflect how close anger is to gloom or depression.[[185]](#footnote-185) Jonah is “a kind of ‘unprophet,’” whom readers must learn not to follow,[[186]](#footnote-186) “an *anti-prophet* (at least much of the time)” because he refuses to work for the future that God desires. Jonah fears the future that God desires because it is a future in which Nineveh is spared instead ofbeingdestroyed**.[[187]](#footnote-187)** “The gentiles in the story love life: their fear of death spurs both the sailors and the Ninevites to obey the Lord. But the prophet loves justice.” He wants to die “because of his displeasure with the Lord’s mercy.”[[188]](#footnote-188)

Yahweh is not convinced that taking over his blazing anger from Yahweh is good (v. 4). The Ninevites have turned from the bad dealing they were involved in; Yahweh has turned from the bad fortune he intended to bring; will Jonah turn from his view of what counts as bad?[[189]](#footnote-189)

**Jonah 4:5-8.** Unless Jonah’s leaving Nineveh is a response of disgust at Yahweh’s question, the story moves back a little. Chronologically this scene belongs before 3:10, and 4:9 will pick us up at 4:4 again. The effect of the dischronologized arrangement is to deal with the Nineveh element of the story first in a way that makes it possible then to focus on Jonah and the questions he raises, as the real subject.

So Jonah had left the city (v. 5). He had presumably arrived from the west, and having gone through the city, he leaves via the east. He had finished preaching and had perhaps seen the people’s reaction. Yahweh has not told him what would happen, though he has his suspicions (we know from v. 2); and he knows that the people don’t know what will happen. One doesn’t need to have visited Nineveh in particular to be aware that a Middle Eastern climate necessitates some shelter. He may be waiting there for forty days.

In this context, Yahweh begins to toy with him (v. 6).[[190]](#footnote-190) Perhaps the shelter was not really adequate. We don’t know what a qiqayon was, but it evidently gave him some nice shade, and it rescues him from a bad situation, as he and the sailors had needed rescue from a bad situation in the boat. Yahweh has done some “commissioning” as he did in sending the fish. For the meantime, Jonah is happy, though in another sense it is not clear that he has been rescued from his bad situation (see v. 4 and the comments). Further, the description of his capacity to move from blazing anger to great delight on the basis of the growth of a shady plant makes fun of him.

But now there are two more commissions (vv. 7-8). “Jonah finds out that this is not going to be his day.”[[191]](#footnote-191) From Jonah’s perspective there have been two good commissions and now there are two bad ones. It wouldn’t be surprising if the link between the wind coming and the sun striking Jonah was that the wind destroyed the shelter. From Yahweh’s perspective, though, they all form part of his one purpose, to turn Jonah into a servant who sees things Yahweh’s way. It’s the point at which Jonah asks for death as something good, something better than life. We reach again the point we reached at v. 3. Here, in saying that he asked for his life, that he might die, the narrator again makes a link with the story of Elijah, who used exactly those words when he was sitting under a tree (1 Kings 19:4). But it is Jonah who “is quite possibly the most persistently and intensely dejected character in literature.”[[192]](#footnote-192)

**Jonah 4:9-11.** And once again we reach the point where God asks a question (v. 9), the same question as in v. 4 though now updated in light of the qiqayon affair. This time Jonah gets the chance to answer; he doesn’t treat it as a rhetorical question. It’s a trick question in the sense that he will be impaled whether he answers yes or no; if he had said no, he would have granted God’s right to decide what he does with his gifts.[[193]](#footnote-193)

We haven’t been told that Jonah pitied the qiqayon (v. 10). Perhaps we are to believe that Yahweh reliably tells us that he did, or perhaps Yahweh speaks ironically; Jonah was actually just resentful and any pity he had was self-directed. “Behind Nineveh,… behind the kikayon, is the real object of Jonah’s fascination which is himself.”[[194]](#footnote-194) It was just a plant that lived a day, one whose life began one night and that died the next night.

But Jonah doesn’t care about Nineveh or its animals (v. 11). What’s up with that? “God highlights where the real absurdity lies.”[[195]](#footnote-195) Once again the story recognizes how Nineveh’s animals are part of its community, who have joined in its act of repentance and thus must surely find a response from Yahweh.[[196]](#footnote-196) Whereas the Ninevites themselves have been described as living badly and as characterized by violence, Yahweh now describes them as not knowing right from left. While that could denote simply their not knowing which way to turn in life (cf. Gen. 24:49) it could also denote the right or wrong way to go (e.g., Deut. 5:32 [39]; 17:11). They aren’t children (Deut. 1:39), but they are child-like. So shouldn’t Yahweh pity them? The answer might not seem self-evident. The First Testament often declares that Yahweh withholds pity from wayward people—that is Israelites (e.g., Jer. 13:14; Ezek. 5:11), who’d been told not to worship idols; the Ninevites hadn’t.[[197]](#footnote-197) Yahweh is looking Jonah straight in the eye and confronting what he would think he has a right to expect of Yahweh. The story closes as it opens in a way that shows it is at least as much about God’s relationship with Jonah as about God’s relationship with Nineveh.[[198]](#footnote-198) Jonah is “a queer and odd saint,” but God loves him.[[199]](#footnote-199) He is trying by all means to win him and to educate him.[[200]](#footnote-200)

I wonder what happened to Jonah. Charles E. Smith has a nice new conclusion to the story. Jonah falls off a cliff and a Ninevite, appreciative of Jonah’s ministry, rescues him. Jonah now wants to stay in Nineveh with his new friends but Yahweh says he can stay for dinner but then he has other work for him.[[201]](#footnote-201) Jonah didn’t respond to Yahweh’s word at the beginning and he doesn’t respond to Yahweh’s word at the end.[[202]](#footnote-202) “It is a story about waiting… a unique suspense story.”[[203]](#footnote-203) At the end it waits for a response.

## Theological Implications

1. “Taking the brutal metropolis as an example,” 3:3-10 is “an exposition of what it means to arrive at belief in God.” It involves a response to an unconditional declaration of Nineveh’s downfall, but “advance notice” that “creates a space in which faith is possible. The first consequence of faith is acceptance of the judgment as deserved,” demonstrated symbolically, the second is that turning from violence, and the third is the cry to God that doesn’t take anything for granted.[[204]](#footnote-204)
2. “It is almost as if the narrator wanted to say: I have not found such faith in Israel. It is not without reason that Mt. 12:41 referred to this behavior of the Ninevites”[[205]](#footnote-205) (compare also the way Luke 11:29-32 speaks of Jonah as a sign to the Ninevites). “The world of today, whose days are numbered, and the churches in that world, will have to search their hearts anew, to see whether their faith and hope can compete with Nineveh’s.”[[206]](#footnote-206)

When compared with that repentance,

This of ours is like a dream.[[207]](#footnote-207)

1. Repentance involves a change in one’s inner attitude to one’s way of life, a symbolic outward expression of mourning, a change of moral behavior, a pleading with God in words, a placing of trust in God, and a casting of oneself on God’s mercy without presumption.
2. The story envisaging a ruthless imperial power repenting and acknowledging God is “a subversive (liturgical) drama that stirs a vision of hope for the community stripped of power and meaning.”[[208]](#footnote-208)
3. Jonah is a man who has deliberately done wrong. But

even as a wrongdoer he cannot fall from the hand of God; he cannot, as it were, snatch himself out of the divine grasp. And that means that, even as he identifies himself with wrong, he cannot cease to be the man who is the divine work and possession. As God is still the same, so man is still the same even when that catastrophe breaks upon him, even in the consuming fire of the wrath of God, even in his mortal sickness, even when he has to perish, even in his dying and destruction. If he has no power to prevent this, this does not mean that he has the power to put an end to his existence as the good creature and the elect of God, which would mean that he has the power to escape the kingdom of God and effectively to oppose the will of God. That is what Jonah tried to do: “But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down unto it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 13). But, of course, he failed. As God was still the same in relation to him, he was still the same before God, His commissioned prophet. He was this even when the terrible storm broke upon him and when he tried to sleep it out in the sides of the ship, as man so often likes to do when the judgment of God comes upon him. He was this even when he was to be cast into the sea, and actually was cast into the sea. He was this in the belly of the great fish and therefore in the final extremity of the divine judgment which overtook him. And his salvation was not a new thing, but the realisation of the inflexible divine purpose against which he had striven in vain.[[209]](#footnote-209)

1. Our turning from our bad way of life is necessary to God’s turning from bring bad fortune to us but it is nor the cause of it or a condition of it.
2. The story says nothing about forgiveness or pardon. It speaks of relenting. It is possible to have forgiveness but not relenting or relenting but not forgiveness. Like Calvin, Ibn Ezra is hesitant about talk of God relenting; “the Torah speaks in the language of people.”[[210]](#footnote-210) (On the question whether God really relents or only seems to us to do so, see the comments on the theological implications of Joel 2:1-17.)
3. Jonah’s prayer is the only angry prayer in the Scriptures.[[211]](#footnote-211) But prayer means telling God what is going on, what you are thinking, and what you want, even though it is wrong. God does not respond to Jonah’s prayer in a way that suggests he shouldn’t have prayed until he had his act together and could pray appropriately. Jonah himself knows he has the freedom of the Psalms to pray, as he had when he was thrown out of the boat and swallowed by the fish. Anger or doubt or resentment is our way into prayer, not something that makes prayer impossible. Of course we may find that God responds with a rebuke. But these dynamics show that prayer is a personal relationship like that between children and parents. It is not like a meeting between an accused and a judge.
4. Why don’t the wind and the sea argue with God over being harnessed to God’s terrifying action and endangering of lives?[[212]](#footnote-212) The Scriptures elsewhere credit the animate and inanimate world with the capacity to relate to God (cf. 3:7). Perhaps they accept that God doesn’t mind toying with sailors, with the sea, with people’s property, with Jonah, and with plants in order to further his creative purpose.
5. “What Nineveh meant in the mythology of Israel can be understood only by our generation who carry the searing memory of Auschwitz. The Assyrians were the Nazi stormtroopers of the ancient world.”[[213]](#footnote-213) To ask Jonah to forgive the Ninevites is like asking Elie Wiesel to forgive the Nazis. Yet the story makes no reference to Ninevite wrongdoing to Israel. It’s concerned with wrongdoing, period. So maybe it raises the question whether Americans or Brits forgive the Nazis, or whether we forgive terrorists who attack people other than our own, and whether we forgive oppressive regimes.
6. “Everyone who does what is bad is good in Yahweh’s eyes. He delights in them. Where is the God who exercises authority?” (Mal. 2:17). The story speaks to the impatience of people who are worked up because despite all the prophecies the great world empire has not been destroyed, “since Yahweh is always further postponing his judgment on the heathen and giving them more scope for repentance.”[[214]](#footnote-214)
7. Yahweh’s rescinding his threat to Nineveh parallels his rescinding his threat to Hezekiah (2 Kings 20), and Jonah’s reaction contrasts with Isaiah’s. But there’s no indication that Yahweh told Jonah himself of his decision; he does not involve Jonah as he involved Isaiah. He treats Jonah the same way as he treats Cain and Job. [[215]](#footnote-215)
8. The wicked city’s helplessness has to be taken into account as well as its deliberate waywardness.
9. In Jonah, the imperial city finds salvation (perhaps deliverance would be a better word) yet without becoming chosen. It does not convert to Yahweh. Nor does it enter into a new relationship with Israel. The Jonah scroll does not picture Zion as the center of the world. “Any idea of domination or exercising power is exclusively left to YHWH.[[216]](#footnote-216)
10. Yahweh’s concern for the animals in Nineveh matches the fact that they even appear in the Decalogue.[[217]](#footnote-217)
11. In the end God can do as he likes. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matt. 20:15).[[218]](#footnote-218)
12. “The great city is portrayed in Jonah as ordered and disordered, as just and unjust.” It is characterized by violence but it is capable of repentance and change. Can a great city “provide comfort, either for those who inhabit it or for those whose lives are lived outside and yet are deeply influenced by the actions of the urban centre”? “For God the city counts.”[[219]](#footnote-219)
13. Yet of course Yahweh did destroy Nineveh, so readers of the scroll perhaps couldn’t be faulted if they understood Yahweh’s closing words as a statement rather than a question: “But I will not pity Nineveh….”[[220]](#footnote-220)
14. Well before the end of the Jonah story we have discovered that Jonah is a conflicted person. On one hand, he runs away from God’s commission and struggles against what he knows to be the truth about God. While God does succeed in getting him to go to Nineveh, God does not succeed in shaping his graceless message (3:4), the belligerent anger with which he responds to Nineveh’s deliverance (4:1)[[221]](#footnote-221) or even his failure to recognize God’s graciousness toward him (4:6–11).[[222]](#footnote-222) On the other hand, he gives profound testimony to what God has done for him and accepts God’s commission the second time. It fills out this picture that many other acts can be read either in a negative or a positive way. There is a dominant side to his person but also a shadow side. God’s commitment to him is to work with him to bring the two together.[[223]](#footnote-223) One can’t fault him for being conflicted, any more than one can fault someone who has been bereaved for being depressed. He is “a mass of nonsensical contradictions. The prophet whose nation has known the ravages of imperialistic power and been the victim of an empire engorged with violence and self-interest has no interest in seeing them spared what he must think to be a horrible fate.”[[224]](#footnote-224) The man who in a mysterious way was the object of God’s patience is slow to understand it.

Indeed, we might say that he shows crass ignorance in respect of the message read to him. He is called to be the prophet of the fact that in consideration of the penitence of the Ninevites God will repent of His intention to destroy the city. And he, of all people, makes this complaint against God: “For I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.” Indeed, he justifies his own original disobedience, thus in a sense repeating the sin that had been so wonderfully forgiven: “O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish” (42). This prophet, just rescued from death, wearies of life, and in his final words he, the psalmist of ch. 2, impatiently prays down even upon himself the impatience of God: “Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.” There then follows in 45f. the exquisite repetition of the whole in the shape of an unmistakable burlesque. The prophet instals himself in the eastern part of the town to see what will happen. He rejoices in a gourd which gives him the necessary shade as he waits for the outburst of God’s anger. “So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.” But as a symbolic judgment God sent a worm which smote the gourd that it withered, and Jonah experienced in a most unwelcome way the heat of the sun, and had fresh occasion to desire his own death and therefore God’s impatience. The ironical question: “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” does not help him. Yes, he answers: “I do well to be angry that life has been so spoiled for me.” What more can be done? Who is in the right? The impatient prophet who raises such a lament for the gourd and thinks “that it is justified,” or the patient God whose final word we hear in the question: “And should not I spare that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” We are not told that the prophet learned his lesson. But we must obviously learn from his story who and what God is and is not. For again we are not told that Jonah’s impatient prayer for the action of an impatient God found any answer. It would seem that with the 120,000 minors and other inhabitants of the town and the mass of cattle he himself did not perish but was left alive-with a life which both he and they had forfeited. The truth of God’s patience with Nineveh and with himself for his own salvation is the ultimate message of this Scripture. And in this way does it not express, more powerfully than any picture of judgment and punishment on the city and the prophet could ever do, the omnipotent holy and righteous Godhead of God?[[225]](#footnote-225)

1. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 80-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See “Messages from God in a Political Context” in the Introduction to Hosea to Micah above. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Lacocque/Lacocque, *Jonah Complex*, 36, and the endnote; and the extensive material in Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, 135-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See further Simon, *Jonah*, xv-xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 435 (italics original). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Ernst R. Wendland, “Recursion and Variation in the ‘Prophecy’ of Jonah,” Part II, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35 (1997): 189-209 (206-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Limburg, *Jonah*, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A quotation in Lacocque/Lacocque, *Jonah Complex*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Diana Edelman, “Jonah among the Twelve in the MT,” in Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.), *The Production of Prophecy* (London: Equinox, 2009), 150-67 (153). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Martin, *Jonah*, 15-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. E.g., George A. F. Knight, *Ruth and Jonah* (London: SCM, 1950), 52-54;cf. Phyllis Trible’s comments, “The Book of Jonah,” *NIB* 7:488-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets* 1:305. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. A. Pénicaud, “Jonas,” in C. Clivaz and others (eds.), *Écritures et réécritures* (Leuven : Peeters, 2012), 169-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. John C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh!’” *JSOT* 21 (1981): 59-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Calvin, *Minor Prophets* 3:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Theodore, *Twelve Prophets*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jeremias, *Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. R. E. Clements, “The Purpose of the Book of Jonah,” in G. W. Anderson and others (eds.), *Congress Volume: Edinburgh 1974* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 16-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Terence E. Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” *ZAW* 90 (1978): 227-37 (227, 229). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. LXX, Vg have “in it,” as at 3:2, but there the preposition is *‘el*; here it’s ‘*al*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hardly “their bad situation”: cf. Douglas K. Stuart, “The Great City of Nineveh (Jon. 1:2),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171 (2014): 387-400 (393-94). But the chapter does play with the double meaning of *rā’āh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Here and where the phrase recurs, Tg explains, “from before [i.e., to avoid] prophesying in Yahweh’s name,” because to serve Yahweh is to stand “before Yahweh” (cf. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, 337). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. LXX, Vg, but the Hebrew lacks “to” (contrast the other references to Tarshish in the verse) and “from Tarshish” is thus possible; David Qimchi (in *miqrā’ôt gədôlôt* on the passage) has “coming to and from Tarshish.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Tg adds, “but they saw that they were useless.” So they were, though the story doesn’t make the point and is more friendly to them and to their spirituality. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Kēlîm*, a usefully vague word that could cover vessels, equipment, and cargo. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. LXX nicely has “snoring” here and in v. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In isolation we would translate “your god” and “the god” (i.e., that god). But *hā’ĕlōhîm* will be a term used to refer to (the one) God by the king of Nineveh and by the narrator (3:9, 10), and here too the narrator knows that the audience knows that Jonah’s god is that God; the form of words here attaches that significance to the two words on the ship captain’s lips, whether or not he quite realizes it. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. LXX “deliver,” Tg “have compassion on,” convey the implication. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. I take the sentence to involve an elliptical relative clause referring to Jonah himself; “Tell us, who is responsible” (TNIV) is the question that the lot has already answered. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. LXX “a servant of the Lord” implies *‘ebed yhwh* for MT *‘ibrî*. D and r are easily confused in Hebrew, *y* can be an abbreviation for *yhwh*,and 2 Kings 14:25 has likely influenced the reading (cf. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, 340). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. LXX, Vg has “because”; this clause then catches us up on something that had already happened. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Apparently internal hiphil (cf. BDB 999b); alternatively one could infer “get it [the boat] back.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The MT accent suggests “You are Yahweh; you have acted….” But one would then expect the copula (cf. Neh. 9:6-7) and/or an “and” (cf. the noun clause in v. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A similar formulation appears in Pss. 115:3; 135:6, where one might take the qatal verbs as gnomic and translate them as present, but here the context suggests reference to what Yahweh has been doing, in sending the storm. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Tg “said they would make a sacrifice,” on the assumption that sacrificing at sea was either impossible or inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Literally, they awed an awe, sacrificed a sacrifice, and pledged pledges. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. TNIV has “now,” suggesting a circumstantial clause as in 3:3, but this clause is a regular *waw*-consecutive. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. On possible ways of explaining why the fish has now become feminine, see e.g., Sasson, *Jonah*, 155-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *TTH*, 76 argues against the pluperfect translation in such a context; but see *IBHS* 33.2.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Bə* on *biləbab* which follows also applies to *məṣûlāh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For MT *‘ak* Theod “how” implies *‘ȇk*, which avoids attributing a statement of commitment to Jonah at this point. With the same result LXX probably takes the line as an unmarked question (cf. GK 150a)—though its *ara* could be read either way. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. LXX takes *nepeš* to have its more common general meaning of “life.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For MT *sûp* LXX nicely has “end,” implying *sôp*. Tg and Aq imply a reference to the Red/Reed Sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Nepeš* here, as in v. 5; in v. 6 “life” was *ḥayyim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Šāmar* piel comes only here in the First Testament, but it is frequent in later Hebrew (*DTT*, 1600-1). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. “Forfeit” (TNIV) is a rather attenuated way to take *‘āzab*: see next note. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. TNIV follows BDB 737b in taking the suffix on *ḥasdām* as objective; the word then refers to Yahweh’s commitment to his people. But this usage would be very unusual and the parallelism (along with the contrast in v. 9a) suggests the more straightforward understanding, a reference to their commitment to Yahweh. David Qimchi (in *miqrā’ôt gədôlôt* on the passage) notes the nice interpretation of the noun as *ḥesed* II. “their shameful thing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. TNIV suggests removing the maqqeph from *‘ezbəḥā-ləkā* so as to read this colon as a bicolon; the subsequent two cola then become another bicolon. In MT a tricolon fittingly closes the prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. While BDB allows for parsing *wayyāqē’* either as qal or as hiphil, the other occurrences of the hiphil mean “throw up” rather than “cause to throw up,” which unfortunately works against the possibility that the verb means “Yahweh made the fish throw up” (cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, 218, 220). More delicately Tg is able to use the verb *pəlēṭ* which also means discharge in the sense of release or spare (cf. Levine, *Aramaic Version of Jonah*, 82). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Magonet (*Form and Meaning*, 55) calls 1:17 [2:1] a “transition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Though MT (C) locates it after 2:9 [10], MT (L) after 2:10 [11]; each codex has a setumah where the other has a petuhah. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Cary, *Jonah*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Hutcheson, *Minor Prophets*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Levine, *Aramaic Version of Jonah*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Barth, *CD* I, 1:330. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See David J. Downs, “The Specter of Exile in the Story of Jonah,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 31 (2009): 27-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Chaim Lewis, “Jonah,” *Judaism* 21 (1972): 159-63 (162). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. So e.g., Theodoret, *Twelve Prophets*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Theodore, *Twelve Prophets*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Jerome, [*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) (PL 25, column 1121b). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. So *Pirkȇ de Rabbi Eliezer* (London: Kegan Paul, 1916), chapter 11; Rabbi Eliezer is a first or second century figure but this work attributed to him seems to come from some centuries later. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:42. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. George M. Landes, “The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah,” *Interpretation* 21 (1967): 1-31 (14). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Cf. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Sasson, *Jonah*, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Jerome ([*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) (PL 25, column 1122bc) and Tg take it to refer to the (Mediterranean) Sea, which fits with the use of the expression “Tarshish ships” to mean “ocean-going vessels” (e.g., 1 Kings 22:48 [49]). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Theodore, *Twelve Prophets*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Cf. Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over*, xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Cary, *Jonah*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets* 1:311. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Mary Mills, “Urban Morality and the Great City in the Book of Jonah,” *Political Theology* 11 (2010): 453-65 (461). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. From proverbs collected by George Herbert (1593-1633) in his *Complete Works* (London: Nelson, 1855), 296 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Cary, *Jonah*, 47, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Luecke, *Violent Sleep*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Cf. Brent A. Strawn, “Jonah’s Sailors and Their Lot Casting,” *Biblica* 91 (2010): 66-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Cf. Cary, *Jonah*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Cf. Simon, *Jonah*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Cf. Ibn Ezra,in *miqrā’ôt gədôlôt* on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Simon, *Jonah*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See Carl J. Bosma, “Jonah 1:9,” *CTJ* 48 (2013): 65-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Sasson, *Jonah*, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Cf. Ibn Ezra,in *miqrā’ôt gədôlôt* on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Cf. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Cf. Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets* 1:315. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Martin, *Jonah*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 109 (but laughs in an affectionate way, I’d say). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Jerome, [*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) (PL 25, column 1130d). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Cf. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:68. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Sweeney, *Minor Prophets* 2:316. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Qur’an, Sura 37:143-44 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Cf. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Wellhausen, *Kleinen Propheten* 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ernst R. Wendland, “Recursion and Variaton in the ‘Prophecy’ of Jonah,” Part I, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35 (1997)*:*67-98 (80). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Cf. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Martin, *Jonah*, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ian J. Vaillancourt compares the ambiguity of Jonah and David (and Abraham) in “The Pious Prayer of an Imperfect Prophet,” *Journal for the Evangelical Study of* *the OT* 4 (2015): 171-89. See also from a different angle Annette Schellenberg, “An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets?” *JSOT* 39 (2015): 353-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Theodoret, *Twelve Prophets*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Martin, *Jonah*, 202-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Alexander, in Baker/Alexander/Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 480; unless, of course, one takes it as one big irony (so e.g., David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah* [Atlanta: Scholars, 1995], 110-13, 123-24; and see the discussion in Amanda W. Benckhuysen, “Revisiting the Psalm of Jonah,” *CTJ* 47 [2012]: 5-31). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Cf. Timmer’s comments, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 21, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Cary, *Jonah*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:40. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Martin, *Jonah*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Cf. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Barth, *CD* III, 1:149. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Cf. Bellis (ed.). *Many Voices*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Cf. Cyril, *Twelve Prophets* 2:151. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Barth, *CD* IV, 3:468 [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Landes, “Kerygma of the Book of Jonah,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Barth, *CD* III, 2:590. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. With apologies to Anne Lamott who describes the two best prayers that she knows as "Help me, help me, help me" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you” (*Travelling Mercies* [reprinted New York: Anchor, 2000], 82). [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor* (New York: OUP, 1976), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. The preposition is *‘el*, where as in 1:2 it was ‘*al*. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. LXX has “I spoke,” but the verb is a participle; Vg has “speak,” but it is presumably the common use of the participle to refer to something about to happen. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Literally, “a big city for/of God,” “great even for God” (Levine, *Aramaic Version of Jonah*, 84); cf. *IBHS* 14.5b; DG 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. LXX has three, perhaps assimilating to v.3 and preferring something more realistic to the traditional use of forty? Aq, Sym, Theod have “forty.” [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. The verb is niphal (contrast the qal passive in Lam. 4:6; the hophal was also available (Job 30:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Cf. LXX, Vg. “Believed God” (NRSV, JPSV, TNIV) risks watering down the significance of *he’ĕmîn bə*. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. “And said” follows, to introduces the actual words; usually that expression leads straight into them, so “In Nineveh” looks like the beginning of the statement itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Decree is *ṭa’am*; taste is *ṭā’am*. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. “Graze” comes from the verb *rā’āh*, which is also the word for “bad way” in the next verse [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Whereas in v. 8 the king said *‘ĕlōhîm*, here he says *hā’ĕlōhîm*; the narrator uses *hā’ĕlōhîm* twice in v. 10 and *‘ĕlōhîm* twice in 4:8-9, and uses *yhwh* a number of times and *yhwh ‘ĕlōhîm* once. There is thus no consistent pattern in the usage through the Jonah scroll, though F. D. Kidner notes a tendency to use *yhwh* in an Israelite context and [*hā*]*’ĕlōhîm* elsewhere (“The Distribution of Divine Names in Jonah,” *TynB* 21 [1970]: 126-28). Magonet (*Form and Meaning*, 33-38) has a more detailed analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. LXX has “he was confused, Sym “he was saddened,” which fits the context; see also Jerome’s comments ([*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) [PL 1144d-1145b]). But angry is the usual meaning and was the meaning in 3:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. I take *hȇṭēb* as an infinitive used adverbially (see Yoo-ki Kim, “The Function of *hyṭb* in Jonah 4 and Its Translation,” *Biblica* 90 [2009]: 389-393), but I have translated in a way that keeps the link with other occurrences of *ṭôb* and related words in the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. On the pluperfect, see the note on 2:3 [4]. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. LXX translates “gourd,” a climbing plant. Vg translates “ivy”; Jerome says he was accused of sacrilege for this translation ([*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) [PL 25, column 1147c]). Augustine indeed critiqued him for disturbing the saints by it, which adds to Augustine’s conviction that Jerome should not be translating the First Testament directly from the Hebrew (Letter 71 [NPNF I, 1:326-28]): see further Carolinne White, *The Correspondence (394-419) between Jerome and Augustine of Hippo* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990). One might well have asked, “Is it in a good way that you’re blazing about the qîqāyôn?” On the various possibilities for identifying the plant, see Bernard P. Robinson, “Jonah’s Qiqayon Plant,” *ZAW* 97 (1985): 390-403. Interpreters have looked for one that is quick-growing but short-lived, but it’s God’s special action that generate its speedy growth and decline (*Janson, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 88). [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. A nice paronomasia between *ṣēl* and *ləhaṣṣēl* suggests how the shade is Jonah’s salvation; 4QXIIg *lhṣl* implies *ləhāṣēl* “to shade” for MT *ləhaṣṣēl* (Fuller, “The Twelve,” 312); cf. LXX, Vg. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. The structure with the adverbial accusative phrase compares and contrasts with the one in v. 1 and also with the several in 1:16 (especially “great awe”). [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. *Harbēh min* is a tortuous way to say “more than” but the context doesn’t seem to allow for any of the other possible functions of *harbēh* (on which see *DCH* 7:400-1). [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Cf. Trible, “The Book of Jonah,” *NIB* 7:515. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Cf. Limburg, *Jonah*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Calvin, *Minor Prophets* 3:97. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. So R. W. L. Moberly, “Preaching for a Response?” *VT* 53 (2001): 156-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Cf. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Cf. Trible, “The Book of Jonah,” *NIB* 7:515. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Cary, *Jonah*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Cyril, *Twelve Prophets* 2:168. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Cf. Simon, *Jonah*, 27, 28, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Cary, *Jonah*, 111, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Ephraem, *Repentance of Nineveh* 5:243-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Cf. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Text 5 in Johannes Friedrich and others (eds.), *Die Inschriften vom Tell Halaf* (Osnabrück: Biblio-Verlag, 1967), 13-14; cf. Donald J. Wiseman, “Jonah’s Nineveh,” *TynB* 30 (1979), 29-51 (51). [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Cf. Yael Shemesh, “And Many Beasts” (Jonah 4:11): The Function And Status Of Animals In The

     Book Of Jonah,” *JHS* 10/6 (2010), 19.. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Bob, *Go to Nineveh*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, “Jonah and the Religious Other,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48 (2013): 71-84 (80). [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Cyril, *Twelve Prophets* 2:170-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Ephraem, *Repentance of Nineveh,* Proemium. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Lacocque/Lacocque, *Jonah Complex*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Sasson, *Jonah*, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. G. I. Davies, “The Uses of R’’ Qal and the Meaning of Jonah iv 1,” *VT* 27 (1977): 106-11 (109). [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. So Jerome, [*In Jonam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Jonam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) (PL 25, column 1145ab), which drives Calvin to call Jerome frivolous, foolish, puerile, dull, and wayward (*Minor Prophets* 3:117)—and a few other things over the next two days’ lectures (neither does Augustine escape Calvin’s lash). [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. So *Pirkȇ de Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Jione Havea, “Adjusting Jonah,” *International Review of Mission* 102 (2013): 44-55 (49) [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Cf. Luecke, *Violent Sleep*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. See Chesung Justin Ryu, “Silence as Resistance,” *JSOT* 34 (2009): 195-218. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 495. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Cf. Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, “Educating Jonah,” in *Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 181-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Cf. Abraham D. Cohen, “The Tragedy of Jonah,” *Judaism* 21 (1972): 164-75 (170-73). [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. David Leong, “Prophet, Pagan, Prayer,” *Ex auditu* 29 (2013): 112-30 (114). [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. McLaughlin, “Jonah and the Religious Other,” 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Simon, *Jonah*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:94. Luther compares God’s toying with Peter in Acts 10 and notes how in both cases the toying has a constructive aim. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Parry, *The Honeymoon Is Over*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Cf. Fretheim, *Reading Hosea—Micah*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Sandor Goodheart, “Prophecy, Sacrifice and Repentance in the Story of Jonah,” *Semeia* 33 (1985):43-63 (54). [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Alexander, in Baker/Alexander/Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. On this striking closing reference to the animals, see e.g., Gerald O. West, “Juxtaposing ‘Many Cattle’ in Biblical Narrative (Jonah 4:11), Imperial Narrative, Neo–Indigenous Narrative,” *OTE* 27 (2014): 722-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Cf. Abarnabel on the passage, in Bob, *Go to Nineveh*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Cf. Rob Barrett, “Meaning More Than They Say,” *JSOT* 37 (2012): 237-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Luther, *Minor Prophets* 2:91, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Cf. Tzvi Abusch, “Jonah and God,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 13 (2013) 146-52. Cf. Moberly, “Educating Jonah.” [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Alice Ogden Bellis (ed.), *Many Voices*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Cf. Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over*, xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, 130, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 156-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Alfred Jepsen, *TDOT* 1:305 (cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Ephraem, *Repentance of Nineveh* 1:61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 207; cf. Stephen Patrick Riley, “When the Empire Does Not Strike Back,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47 (2012): 116-26 (119). [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Barth, *CD* IV, 1:540. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Ibn Ezra, in *miqrā’ôt gədôlôt* on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Sasson, *Jonah*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Cf. Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, 141-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Lewis, “Jonah,” 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Wellhausen, , *Kleinen Propheten*, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Sasson, *Jonah*, 294-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, “Jonah and the Other,” in Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana V. Edelman (eds.), *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 201-18 (218). [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Barth, *CD* III, 1:180. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Mills, “Urban Morality and the Great City in the Book of Jonah,” 456, 460, 462. See further Mills, “Polyphonic Narration in Ecclesiastes and Jonah,” in Katherine Dell and Will Kynes (eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 71-83; and Mills, *Urban Imagination in Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Clark, 2012), 121-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Cf. e.g., Ehud Ben Zvi, “Jonah 4:11 and the Metaprophetic Character of the Book of Jonah,” *JHS* 9/5 (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. See Trible, “The Book of Jonah,” *NIB* 7:524-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Fretheim, *Reading Hosea-Micah*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Cf. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Daniel Timmer, “The Intertextual Israelite Jonah *face à* *l’empire*,” *JHS* 9/9 (2009), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Barth, *CD* II, 1:414. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)