

# INTRODUCTION TO

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# JONAH



## *Author and Title*

The title of the book is the name of the main character, Jonah. The book is anonymous, and there are no indicators elsewhere in Scripture to identify the author. The foundational source for the book was likely Jonah's own telling of the story after his return from Nineveh.

## *Date*

Since Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782–753 B.C.; see 2 Kings 14:23–28), and since *Sirach* 49:10 (from the 2nd century B.C.) refers to the “twelve prophets” (namely, the 12 Minor Prophets, of which Jonah is the fifth), the book of Jonah was written sometime between the middle of the eighth and the end of the third centuries. No compelling evidence leads to a more precise date.

## *Theme*

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for “us” (Jonah and the Israelites) but also for “them” (the pagan sailors and Ninevites).

## *Purpose, Occasion, and Background*

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 B.C. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans (2 Kings 13:3). But because of the Lord's great compassion (2 Kings 13:4, 23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression (2 Kings 13:5). This deliverance came through a “savior” (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810–783 B.C.), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798–782 B.C.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Though Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was “according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God's providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Arameans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire (where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy). Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771–754 B.C.). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah's call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745–727 B.C.) would gain control and reestablish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727–722) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

### Genre

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an *allegory*, using fictional figures to symbolize some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God's mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as a historical and not a fictional figure (see the specific historical and geographical details in 1:1–3; 3:2–10; 4:11; cf. also 2 Kings 14:25). Another proposal is that the book is a *parable* to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The book of Jonah has all the marks of a *prophetic narrative*, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book (“the word of the LORD came to”) is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) and is used in other prophetic narratives as well (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish “provides transportation” for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact “appoint” the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matt. 12:41).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly *didactic* (as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm); that is, the story is told *to teach the reader key lessons*. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

### Key Themes

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to “us” but also available for “them.” This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion: (1) Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. (2) The story ends with the question, “Should I not pity Nineveh . . . ?” (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that “perished” (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not “perish.”

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God's sovereign control over events on the earth
2. God's determination to get his message to the nations
3. The need for repentance from sin in general
4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular
5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent.

### History of Salvation Summary

Jonah's rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era (Matt. 28:18–20;



### The Setting of Jonah

c. 760 B.C.

Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.

Luke 24:47). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible, pp. 23–26. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ, pp. 2635–2662.)

#### Literary Features

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book (see below).

The main category for the book is satire—the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the book of Jonah: (1) the *object of attack* is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community (in the OT, the nation of Israel); (2) the *satiric vehicle* is narrative or story; (3) the *satiric norm* or standard by which Jonah's bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries; (4) the *satiric tone* is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure—someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important. (1) The *giantesque motif*—the motif of the unexpectedly large (e.g., the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah's eight-word sermon accomplishes). (2) A *pervasive irony* (e.g., the ironic discrepancy between Jonah's prophetic vocation and his ignominious behavior, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God). (3) *Humor*, as Jonah's behavior is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

#### Outline

The story of Jonah unfolds in seven episodes (see diagram, p. 1686):

- A. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1–3)
- B. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16)
  - C. Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17–2:10)
- A' Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a)
  - B' Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10)
    - C' Jonah's angry prayer (4:1–4)
- D. Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5–11)

The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. By this paralleling the author invites the reader to make a number of comparisons and contrasts, which will be drawn out in the notes. The final episode is unparalleled and thus stands out as the climax of the story, ending with the penetrating question, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Seven Episodes in Jonah

(7) Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5-11) <i>"Should not I pity Nineveh . . . ?"</i>	
(3) Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17-2:10) <i>How does Jonah respond to God's grace toward him?</i>	(6) Jonah's angry prayer (4:1-4) <i>How does Jonah respond to God's grace toward others?</i>
(2) Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4-16) <i>How responsive are the pagan sailors?</i>	(5) Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b-10) <i>How responsive are the pagan Ninevites?</i>
(1) Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1-3) <i>What will happen to Jonah?</i>	(4) Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1-3a) <i>What will happen to the Ninevites?</i>

# JONAH

## Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup><sup>2</sup>2 Kgs. 14:25  
<sup>2</sup>Gen. 10:11, 12; 2 Kgs. 19:36; Nah. 1:1; Zeph. 2:13; Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:30, 32 <sup>c</sup>ch. 3:3; 4:11  
<sup>3</sup>Rev. 18:5  
<sup>3</sup>ch. 4:2 <sup>2</sup>See 1 Kgs. 10:22  
<sup>4</sup>See Josh. 19:46 <sup>1</sup>Gen. 4:16; [Ps. 139:9, 10]  
<sup>4</sup>[Ps. 107:25] <sup>1</sup>1 Kgs. 22:48; Ps. 48:7  
<sup>5</sup>[Ps. 107:28] [Acts 27:18, 19, 38]  
<sup>6</sup>[See ver. 5 above] <sup>m</sup>[ch. 3:9]  
<sup>7</sup>[Judg. 20:9]

## Jonah Flees the Presence of the LORD

**1** Now the word of the LORD came to <sup>a</sup>Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to <sup>b</sup>Nineveh, that <sup>c</sup>great city, and call out against it, <sup>d</sup>for their evil <sup>1</sup>has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>But Jonah <sup>e</sup>rose to flee to <sup>f</sup>Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to <sup>g</sup>Joppa and found a ship going to <sup>f</sup>Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to <sup>f</sup>Tarshish, <sup>h</sup>away from the presence of the LORD.

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

## Jonah Is Thrown into the Sea

<sup>7</sup>And they said to one another, “Come, let us <sup>n</sup>cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup>Then they

<sup>1</sup>The same Hebrew word can mean *evil* or *disaster*, depending on the context; so throughout Jonah

**1:1–3** *Jonah’s Commissioning and Flight.* This episode records Jonah’s call to prophesy and his flight from that call. Two questions drive the plot: (1) What will happen to the Ninevites? and (2) What will happen to Jonah? (See diagram, p. 1686.)

**1:1** Jonah prophesied prosperity for Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28). Jonah means “dove,” a symbol for Israel as silly and senseless (Hos. 7:11); Jonah will be true to his name. **Son of Amittai** means “son of my faithfulness”; Jonah will remain the object of God’s faithful love.

**1:2** Nineveh sat on the east bank of the Tigris River about 220 miles (354 km) north of present-day Baghdad and over 500 miles (805 km) northeast of Israel.

## Occurrences of the key word (*ra’ah*; “evil”/“disaster”/“discomfort”) in Jonah

1:2	The Lord confronts Jonah with the <b>evil</b> of the city Nineveh.
1:7	The sailors decide to cast lots to find the source of the <b>evil</b> they experience.
1:8	The sailors confront Jonah, wondering why <b>evil</b> has come upon them.
3:8	The Ninevite king calls for inhabitants of the city to turn from <b>evil</b> .
3:10	God sees the city turn from <b>evil</b> , and he relents from the <b>disaster</b> he was sending.
4:1	God’s gracious response to Nineveh <b>displeased</b> Jonah greatly.
4:2	Jonah’s anger arises from the fact that God relents from <b>disaster</b> .
4:6	The Lord appoints a plant to save Jonah from his <b>discomfort</b> .

**Great** (Hb. *gadol*) is used 14 times in Jonah. Nineveh was an important (“great”) city (see 3:3). **evil**. As the *ESV* footnote indicates, the same Hebrew term (Hb. *ra’ah*; used 9 times in Jonah [see chart to the left]) can mean “evil” or “disaster.” The Ninevites were evil, and they were in line for disaster.

**1:3 To Tarshish** is repeated three times in this verse to underscore that Jonah is not going to Nineveh. Tarshish, an unknown locale associated with distant coastlands, was somewhere in the western Mediterranean—the opposite direction from Nineveh. **From the presence of the LORD** is repeated at the end of this verse to underscore Jonah’s purpose in going to Tarshish. **Went down** (see also v. 5; 2:6; the same verb is used for **went on board**) is also a euphemism for death (e.g., Gen. 37:35). The suggestion is that each step away from the presence of the Lord is one step closer to “going down” to death (see notes on Jonah 1:5; 2:6).

**1:4–16** *Jonah and the Pagan Sailors.* This episode highlights Jonah’s encounter with pagan sailors and raises the question, Who fears the Lord—Jonah or the pagans? The key repeated word is “fear”: at the beginning and end the sailors “fear” (vv. 5, 16); in the middle Jonah claims to “fear” the Lord (v. 9) while the sailors actually fear (v. 10a).

**1:4–5 Hurled** is used four times in this episode (vv. 4, 5, 12, 15). Just as God hurled the great wind, the sailors hurled the cargo. **cried out**. The sailors pray, evidently believing that a divine being could come to their aid. **had gone down**. In contrast to the sailors, Jonah goes down below deck, taking yet another step closer to death (see note on v. 3).

**1:6 Arise, call out** echoes God’s commission in v. 2. Ironically, the Israelite prophet has to be summoned to prayer by a pagan sailor. **not perish**. “Perish” is repeated in v. 14; 3:9; 4:10. Ironically, a pagan, not Jonah, is concerned that people not perish.

**1:7 cast lots**. Casting lots was used in the ancient world to discern the divine will (e.g., Num. 26:55; Josh. 18:6). Israelites believed that God controlled the outcome (Prov. 16:33). **Evil** (Hb. *ra’ah*) may here suggest “disaster” (see chart to the left).

said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”<sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear <sup>o</sup>the LORD, the God of heaven, <sup>p</sup>who made the sea and the dry land.”<sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that <sup>h</sup>he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

<sup>11</sup>Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup>He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, <sup>q</sup>for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the men rowed hard<sup>1</sup> to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. <sup>14</sup>Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and <sup>r</sup>lay not on us innocent blood, <sup>s</sup>for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”<sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, <sup>t</sup>and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, <sup>u</sup>and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD <sup>v</sup>and made vows.

*A Great Fish Swallows Jonah*

<sup>17,2</sup> And the LORD appointed<sup>3</sup> a great fish to swallow up Jonah. <sup>w</sup>And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

*Jonah’s Prayer*

**2** Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup>saying,

<sup>x</sup>“ I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,  
and he answered me;  
<sup>y</sup>out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
<sup>z</sup>and you heard my voice.  
<sup>3</sup> <sup>a</sup>For you cast me into the deep,  
into the heart of the seas,

<sup>1</sup>Hebrew *the men dug in [their oars]* <sup>2</sup>Ch 2:1 in Hebrew <sup>3</sup>Or *had appointed*

<sup>9</sup>Rev. 11:13 <sup>p</sup>Ps. 146:6  
<sup>10</sup><sup>q</sup>[See ver. 3 above]  
<sup>12</sup><sup>q</sup>[Josh. 7:20]  
<sup>14</sup>Deut. 21:8 <sup>r</sup>[Ps. 115:3]  
<sup>15</sup>Ps. 65:7; Luke 8:24  
<sup>16</sup><sup>r</sup>[Gen. 8:20; 31:54]  
<sup>s</sup>See ch. 2:9  
<sup>17</sup><sup>w</sup>Matt. 12:40; 16:4;  
[Luke 11:30]  
**Chapter 2**  
<sup>2</sup>Ps. 3:4; 120:1; Lam. 3:55 <sup>y</sup>Ps. 118:5 <sup>z</sup>Lam. 3:56  
<sup>3</sup>Ps. 88:6, 7

**1:9–10 Hebrew** is an ethnic term used to identify Israelites in international contexts (e.g., Gen. 40:15; Ex. 1:19; 1 Sam. 4:6). Jonah claims to **fear the LORD**, but his actions contradict his confession. **God of heaven** refers to the universal and supreme God (see Ezra 1:2; Neh. 2:20; Dan. 2:37). **made the sea**. Ironically, Jonah confesses to fear the God who controls the sea, which Jonah is crossing to escape from the presence of God (Jonah 1:3). The sailors who were “afraid” (v. 5) are now **exceedingly afraid**.

**1:12–13 hurl**. See note on vv. 4–5. **rowed hard**. It would have been natural for these pagans to hurl Jonah overboard immediately, but they did not. **The sea grew more and more tempestuous**, for God was not ready to have Jonah delivered to dry land.

**1:14–15 called out**. Whereas each of the sailors had prayed to his god (v. 5), they now pray to the **LORD**. The pagan sailors, not Jonah, are concerned that people **not perish** (see note on v. 6). **Have done as it pleased you** echoes the liturgical language of Ps. 115:3 and 135:6, and is thus the sailors’ confession of faith in the absolute sovereignty of God. The sailors’ actions are in harmony with God’s: as God had **hurled** the wind onto the **sea** (see note on Jonah 1:4–5) to start the storm, the sailors now hurl **Jonah** to stop the storm (see v. 12).

**1:16 feared the LORD exceedingly**. What started as a general fear (v. 5) grew into an intense fear (v. 10) and matured into the fear—that is, the reverent worship—of the Lord (v. 16). **sacrifice . . . vows**. The exact response expected from people who fear the Lord (2 Kings 17:32–36; Ps. 22:5; 61:5; 76:11).

**1:17–2:10 Jonah’s Grateful Prayer**. Jonah’s prayer (2:2b–9) is framed by an introduction (1:17–2:2a) and a conclusion (2:10), both of which mention the “fish.”

**1:17 appointed**. This is the first of four uses of “appoint” that underscore God’s sovereign control over creation (cf. 4:6–8). **Fish** (Hb. *dag*) is not limited

to what is called “fish” today (generally cold-blooded vertebrate sea creatures with fins and gills) but is a general word for an aquatic beast, which cannot be identified further. However, a large whale such as a sperm whale could easily swallow a man whole. **three days and three nights**. Though this may be a symbolic expression for a time of dying and rising (cf. Hos. 6:2), it more likely describes the actual number of days, or parts of three days, according to accepted reckoning of days at that time (cf. 1 Sam. 30:12; 2 Kings 20:5, 8). In either case it has associations with return from death or near-death—which perhaps is why Jesus likened the time between his own death and resurrection to Jonah’s time in the fish (Matt. 12:40).

**2:1** Finally, **Jonah prayed**. He did not pray for God to save the *pagan sailors*, but he did thank God for saving *him*.

**2:2–9** Jonah’s prayer is not a request to be saved *from* the fish but is thanksgiving for being saved *by* the fish. Verse 2 summarizes the prayer: **Jonah called** for help and God **answered**. Verses 3–6a expand on Jonah’s call for help; vv. 6b–10 expand on God’s answer.

**2:2 Sheol** refers to the realm of the dead, which one would enter by going through a gate made of “bars” (see v. 6 and Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps. 9:13). Jonah did not literally pray from Sheol but describes his near-death experience (see Ps. 30:2–3).

**2:3–4 you cast me**. Though it was the sailors who had hurled Jonah into the sea (1:15), he knows that God was working sovereignly through them, and so he can say that God cast him into the sea. **Look upon**, or “look toward,” refers to the ancient practice of praying toward the temple (see 2:7; 1 Kings 8:30, 35, 38, 42; Dan. 6:10).

**2:6 I went down** (see notes on 1:3; 1:4–5). Jonah’s descent to death is almost complete as he reaches the **roots of the mountains** at the bottom of the seas, where the gates of Sheol are located. Since the **bars** refer to the gates of Sheol (see note on 2:2), the **land** refers to the realm of the dead (see Ps. 63:9; Ezek. 26:20; 32:18, 24), as does **pit** (see Job 33:22–24; Ps. 49:9;



<sup>3</sup>Ps. 42:7

<sup>4</sup>Ps. 31:22 <sup>d</sup>[1 Kgs. 8:35, 38]

<sup>5</sup>[Lam. 3:54] <sup>f</sup>Ps. 69:1

<sup>7</sup>[2 Chr. 30:27]

<sup>8</sup>Ps. 31:6; [2 Kgs. 17:15; Jer. 2:5] <sup>i</sup>[Jer. 2:13]

<sup>9</sup>Ps. 50:14; [Hos. 14:2; Heb. 13:15] <sup>k</sup>Ps. 3:8

#### Chapter 3

<sup>2</sup>See ch. 1:2

<sup>3</sup>[See ver. 2 above]

- and the flood surrounded me;  
<sup>b</sup>all your waves and your billows  
 passed over me.  
<sup>4</sup> <sup>c</sup>Then I said, ‘I am driven away  
 from your sight;  
<sup>d</sup>yet I shall again look  
 upon your holy temple.’  
<sup>5</sup> <sup>e</sup>The waters closed in over me <sup>f</sup>to take my life;  
 the deep surrounded me;  
 weeds were wrapped about my head  
<sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains.  
 I went down to the land  
 whose bars closed upon me forever;  
 yet you brought up my life from the pit,  
 O LORD my God.  
<sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away,  
 I remembered the LORD,  
<sup>g</sup>and my prayer came to you,  
 into your holy temple.  
<sup>8</sup> <sup>h</sup>Those who pay regard to vain idols  
<sup>i</sup>forsake their hope of steadfast love.  
<sup>9</sup> <sup>j</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
 will sacrifice to you;  
 what I have vowed I will pay.  
<sup>k</sup>Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

<sup>10</sup>And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

#### *Jonah Goes to Nineveh*

**3** Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now <sup>i</sup>Nineveh was an exceedingly great city,<sup>1</sup> three days’ journey in breadth.<sup>2</sup> <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

<sup>1</sup> Hebrew a great city to God <sup>2</sup>Or a visit was a three days’ journey

103:4). **you brought.** Jonah had done nothing to deserve being rescued; his salvation was by grace alone.

**2:8–9 Those who pay regard to vain idols** refers to the pagan sailors, who prayed each to his own god (1:5), but it is also a message to Jonah’s idolatrous fellow Israelites. Ironically, these sailors ended up experiencing God’s **steadfast love**, while Jonah ended up in the sea. **Sacrifice . . . vowed** recalls the actions of the sailors (1:16), from which Jonah is now like. **Salvation belongs to the LORD** is Jonah’s confession that God is the sovereign source of salvation, though the rest of the story will show that Jonah believes God is free to save any, as long as they are “us” and not “them” (see 4:1–4).

**2:10 Vomited** can express disgust (Job 20:15; Prov. 23:8; 25:16), and some interpreters see here an indication that God was still displeased with the hostility toward the Ninevites that was still in Jonah’s heart (as revealed in Jonah 4), in spite of the obvious gratitude of his prayer. Nevertheless, the fish’s action brought deliverance to Jonah, an indication of God’s favor.

**3:1–3a Jonah’s Recommissioning and Compliance.** The fourth episode parallels the first (1:1–3) and focuses on the second question raised at the beginning of the story: “What will happen to the Ninevites?” (see note on 1:1–3).

**3:1–2 The second time** underscores God’s determination to get his message

to the Ninevites and to use Jonah in the process. **The message that I tell you** replaces “for their evil has come up before me” (1:2).

**3:3a Jonah went to Nineveh** instead of fleeing to Tarshish. He complies with God’s will, but whether this compliance is from the heart remains to be seen.

**3:3b–10 Jonah and the Pagan Ninevites.** The fifth episode parallels the second (1:4–16) and focuses on how responsive the pagan Ninevites—like the pagan sailors—are to God’s word. The structure follows the pattern of corporate repentance found elsewhere in the OT (cf. 1 Sam. 7:3–14; Joel 1–2): (1) message of divine judgment (Jonah 3:3a–5); (2) account of human repenting (vv. 6–9); and (3) record of divine relenting (v. 10).

**3:3b an exceedingly great city** (cf. ESV footnote, “a great city to God”; see 1:2; 3:2). Nineveh is *important* to God and will be the recipient of his *great* compassion. **three days’ journey in breadth** (cf. ESV footnote, “a visit was a three days’ journey”). In Jonah’s day neither the circumference nor the diameter of the walled city of **Nineveh** (see plan, p. 1691) was a three-day walk. The phrase may refer to the time it would take Jonah to walk throughout the city, preaching his message. (Nineveh could also refer to the much larger administrative area including the city and the outlying villages, which was 30–56 miles/48–90 km across.)

**3:4 Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!** “Overthrown”

<sup>5m</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God. <sup>n</sup>They called for a fast and <sup>o</sup>put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

*The People of Nineveh Repent*

<sup>6</sup>The word reached<sup>1</sup> the king of Nineveh, and <sup>p</sup>he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, <sup>q</sup>and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, <sup>r</sup>“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor <sup>s</sup>beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup>but let man and <sup>s</sup>beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. <sup>t</sup>Let everyone turn from his evil way and from <sup>u</sup>the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may turn and relent <sup>w</sup>and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

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

*Jonah's Anger and the LORD's Compassion*

**4** But it displeased Jonah exceedingly,<sup>2</sup> and <sup>v</sup>he was angry. <sup>2</sup>And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? <sup>z</sup>That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a <sup>a</sup>gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and <sup>a</sup>relenting from disaster. <sup>3b</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, <sup>c</sup>for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, <sup>d</sup>“Do you do well to be angry?”

<sup>5</sup>Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and <sup>e</sup>made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. <sup>6</sup>Now the LORD God appointed a plant<sup>1</sup> and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade

<sup>1</sup>Or had reached <sup>2</sup>Hebrew it was exceedingly evil to Jonah

<sup>5m</sup>[Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32] <sup>n</sup>See 2 Chr. 20:3  
<sup>o</sup>See 2 Sam. 3:31  
<sup>6p</sup>[Job 1:20; Ezek. 26:16]  
<sup>q</sup>Job 2:8  
<sup>7r</sup>[Dan. 6:26] <sup>s</sup>ch. 4:11; Ps. 36:6; Joel 1:18, 20]  
<sup>8t</sup>[See ver. 7 above] Jer. 18:11; 36:3 <sup>u</sup>Isa. 59:6  
<sup>9w</sup>2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14  
<sup>x</sup>Ps. 85:3  
<sup>10y</sup>[Jer. 18:8]  
**Chapter 4**  
<sup>1v</sup>[ver. 4, 9]  
<sup>2z</sup>ch. 1:3 <sup>a</sup>See Joel 2:13  
<sup>3b</sup>[1 Kgs. 19:4] <sup>c</sup>[Eccles. 7:1]  
<sup>4d</sup>[ver. 1, 9]  
<sup>5e</sup>[Neh. 8:15]

is the same verb used for God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:21, 25, 29). Although the threat sounds unconditional, a condition was implied: If people repent, God will relent (see Jer. 18:7–8). Jonah knows this condition is included (see Jonah 4:2), and the king of Nineveh will hope that it is (see 3:9).

**3:5 Believed** is the first word in the Hebrew text of the sentence, and the grammar underscores the immediacy of Nineveh's repentance. To **fast** and wear **sackcloth** were ancient demonstrations of mourning (Neh. 9:1; Est. 4:3; Dan. 9:3).

**3:6 The word that reached the king of Nineveh** was the “word” of the Lord (see 1:1; 3:1, 3). The “king of Nineveh” was probably not the king of Assyria, since Nineveh was not an Assyrian capital in Jonah's day; he may have been a provincial governor who ruled from Nineveh.

**3:7–8 issued a proclamation.** It seems odd that the king would tell everyone to fast and put on sackcloth when they had already done so (v. 5). Therefore it is more likely that v. 5 and vv. 6–9 are in topical rather than chronological order. First the king issued the proclamation, and then the people carried it out (see a similar summons to repentance in Joel 1:13–14). By putting the people's response ahead of the king's proclamation, the author underscores the immediacy of the people's response and that they are responding to Jonah's message, not just to the king's command. The Ninevites each **turn from his evil way**, whereas the Israelites did not (cf. 2 Kings 17:13–14).

**3:9 Who knows?** expresses hope (see 2 Sam. 12:22) that **God may turn and relent**—the exact hope of the prophet Joel for the people of Judah (Joel 2:14). **we may not perish.** This is the third time a pagan has been concerned that people not perish (see Jonah 1:14 and note on 1:6); ironically, Jonah has not expressed any such concern.

**3:10 evil . . . disaster.** Both terms translate Hebrew *ra'ah* (see note on 1:2). The use of the same word underscores the close connection between human action and divine response. God did not carry out the threatened disaster because the Ninevites repented of their evil (see note on 3:4). From a temporal perspective, God responds to human action; from an eternal perspective, God chooses the means (human repenting) as well as the end (divine relenting). The repentance of Gentiles contrasts with the repeated lack of repentance on the part of Israel (see note on vv. 7–8).

**4:1–4 Jonah's Angry Prayer.** The sixth episode parallels the third (1:17–2:10) and focuses on Jonah's self-centeredness and hypocrisy. Both episodes have the same structure: (1) Jonah “prayed to the LORD” (1:17–2:1a; 4:1–2a); (2) Jonah's prayer (2:1b–9; 4:2b–3); and (3) “the LORD spoke/said” (2:10; 4:4).

**4:1 it displeased Jonah exceedingly** (cf. the esv footnote, “it was exceedingly evil to Jonah”). In the previous episode (see 3:10) the pagans got rid of their “evil” and God got rid of the “disaster” he had threatened (both Hb. *ra'ah*). The pagans are in harmony with God, but Jonah is not, as he alone is now characterized by “displeasure” (or “evil”; Hb. *ra'ah*).

**4:2** This is Jonah's second prayer; the repetition of **prayed to the LORD** (see 2:1) invites the reader to compare the two. **gracious God . . . relenting from disaster.** These same words occur in Joel 2:13 as the basis for hope (see Ex. 34:6–7; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 145:8). Ironically, this standard confession of the compassionate character of God is the root of Jonah's anger. **Steadfast love**, when extended to Jonah, filled him with thanksgiving (Jonah 2:8), but when extended to the Ninevites, filled him with anger.

**4:3 My life** translates Hebrew *napshi* (“my soul”), and **to live** translates Hebrew *khayay* (“my life”). These two expressions occur in Jonah's first prayer, where he is grateful that his “life” was brought up from the pit (2:6) and his fainting “life/soul” was revived (2:7). Ironically, when God extends the same mercy to the Ninevites, Jonah wishes his “life” and “soul” to be taken.

**4:5–11 Jonah's Lesson about Compassion.** The seventh and final episode has no parallel and thus stands out as the climax of the story.

**4:5 Jonah went out . . . till he should see.** Apparently, Jonah hopes that God still will not relent but will destroy the city after all. **sat under it in the shade.** Jonah is hot—both emotionally (i.e., angry) and physically.

**4:6 the LORD God appointed.** This is the second use of the verb “appoint” (see 1:17). The kind of **plant** appointed is not known; the term (Hb. *qiqayon*) occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but a castor oil plant or a gourd plant, both of which have large leaves, are the most common suggestions. **Discomfort** (or “evil,” Hb. *ra'ah*; see esv footnote and note on 1:2), refers both to Jonah's outer “discomfort” and to his inner “evil.” **Jonah was exceedingly glad.** The grammar of this phrase is identical to that at



<sup>8</sup>Jer. 18:17 <sup>6</sup>[Ps. 121:6]  
<sup>7</sup>[Amos 8:13] <sup>5</sup>[See ver. 3  
 above]  
<sup>9</sup>[ver. 1, 4]  
<sup>11</sup>[See ch. 1:2 <sup>4</sup>[ch. 3:7]

over his head, to save him from his discomfort.<sup>2</sup> So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.<sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.<sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching<sup>f</sup> east wind,<sup>9</sup> and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he<sup>h</sup> was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, <sup>c</sup>“It is better for me to die than to live.”<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, <sup>i</sup>“Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”<sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, <sup>j</sup>“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.”<sup>11</sup> And should not I pity<sup>j</sup> Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much<sup>k</sup> cattle?”

<sup>1</sup> Hebrew *qiqayon*, probably the castor oil plant; also verses 7, 9, 10 <sup>2</sup> Or *his evil*

the beginning of 4:1 (“It displeased Jonah exceedingly”) and underscores the contrast between Jonah’s anger at the salvation of the Ninevites and his joy at his own salvation.

**4:7–8 God appointed a worm . . . God appointed a scorching east wind.** These are the third and fourth uses of the verb “appoint” (see note on v. 6). The “east wind” is a drying wind from the desert.

**4:9 angry for the plant.** As God had questioned the justice of Jonah’s anger over the salvation of the Ninevites (v. 4), he now questions the justice of Jonah’s anger over the destruction of the plant.

**4:10–11 perished.** Finally Jonah expresses concern over something perishing

(see note on 3:9), but ironically it is a plant, not the **120,000** people **who do not know their right hand from their left**, an idiom for being morally and spiritually unaware, that probably refers to the entire population. Jonah’s compassion for the plant explains the rather odd expression that translates the final words in the Hebrew text, **and also much cattle**. The ironic question raised by these words is: If Jonah will not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the 120,000 people whom God created and cares for, will Jonah not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the animals, since after all, Jonah was willing to have compassion on a plant? The question is left unanswered so that the readers of the book may answer it for themselves.

### The City of Nineveh

Nineveh, which was situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khosr rivers (modern-day Mosul, Iraq), was first settled in the seventh millennium B.C. According to the Bible, Nimrod was the founder of the city (Gen. 10:11). Major excavations took place under the direction of Henry Layard from 1845 to 1854. The diagram below pictures the results of those excavations, especially as they reflect the period of the Assyrian Empire (1420–609 B.C.). Around 1000 B.C. there occurred a great revival of Assyrian power, and Nineveh became a royal city. It was a thriving city during the first half of the first millennium, and contained such luxuries as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, and even a zoo. One of the great archaeological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.; called Osnappar in Ezra 4:10). The size of the city was approximately 1,850 acres. The book of Jonah reflects the flourishing nature of Nineveh at this time (3:1–5). Nineveh eventually fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. The invading armies dammed the rivers that supplied water to the city, causing a flood that broke through one of the perimeter walls giving the foreign armies access to the city.



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Printed in the United States of America

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