

## THE BOOK OF

# JONAH

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## INTRODUCTION

JONAH was the son of Amittai, of Gath-hepher in Zebulun (called Gittah-hepher in <sup><690></sup>Joshua 19:10-13), so that he belonged to the kingdom of the ten tribes, not to Judah. His date is to be gathered from <sup><1245></sup>2 Kings 14:25-27, "He (Jeroboam II) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gath-hepher. For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter: for there was not any shut up, nor any left, nor any helper for Israel. And the Lord said not that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven: but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash." Now as this prophecy of Jonah was given at a time when Israel was at the lowest point of depression, when "there was not any shut up or left," that is, confined or left at large, none to act as a helper for Israel, it cannot have been given in Jeroboam's reign, which was marked by prosperity, for in it Syria was worsted in fulfillment of the prophecy, and Israel raised to its former "greatness." It must have been, therefore, in the early part of the reign of Joash, Jeroboam's father, who had found Israel in subjection to Syria, but had raised it by victories which were followed up so successfully by Jeroboam. Thus Jonah was the earliest of the prophets, and close upon Elisha, who died in Joash's reign, having just before his death given a token prophetic of the thrice defeat of Syria (<sup><1234></sup>2 Kings 13:14-21). Hosea and Amos prophesied also in the reign of Jeroboam II, but towards the closing part of his forty-one years' reign. The transactions in the Book of Jonah probably occurred in the latter part of his life; if so, the book is not much older than part of the writings of Hosea and Amos. The use of the third person is no argument against Jonah himself being the writer: for the sacred writers in mentioning themselves do so in the third person (compare <sup><685></sup>John 19:26). Nor is the use of the past tense (Jon 3:3, "Now Nineveh *was* an exceeding great city") a proof that Nineveh's greatness was past when the Book of Jonah was being written; it

is simply used to carry on the negative uniformly, — “the word of the Lord *came* to Jonah ... so Jonah *arose* ... now Nineveh *was*,” etc. (Jon 1:1 3:3). The mention of its *greatness* proves rather that the book was written at an early date, *before* the Israelites had that intimate knowledge of it which they must have had soon afterwards through frequent Assyrian inroads.

As early as JULIAN and PORPHYRY, pagans ridiculed the credulity of Christians in believing the deliverance of Jonah by a fish. Some infidels have derived it from the heathen fable of the deliverance of Andromeda from a sea monster by Perseus [APOLLONORUS, *The Library*, 2.4,3]; or from that of Arion the musician thrown into the sea by sailors, and carried safe to shore on a dolphin [HERODOTUS, *History*, 1.24]; or from that of Hercules, who sprang into the jaws of a sea monster, and was three days in its belly, when he undertook to save Hesione [DIODORUS SICULUS, *Historical Library*, 4.42; HOMER, *The Iliad*, 20.145; 21.442]. Probably the heathen fables are, vice versa, corruptions of the sacred narrative, if there be any connection. JEROME states that near Joppa lay rocks, pointed out as those to which Andromeda was bound when exposed to the sea monster. This fable implies the likelihood of the story of Jonah having passed through the Phoenicians in a corrupted form to Greece. That the account of Jonah is history, and not parable (as rationalists represent), appears from our Lord’s reference to it, in which the *personal existence*, *miraculous fate*, and *prophetical office* of Jonah are explicitly asserted: “No sign shall be given but the *sign of the prophet* Jonas: for, as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (<sup>4023</sup>Matthew 12:39,40). The Lord recognizes his being in the belly of the fish as a “sign,” that is, a real miracle, typical of a similar event in His own history; and assumes the execution of the prophet’s commission to Nineveh, “The men of Nineveh ... repented at the preaching of Jonas; and behold, a greater than Jonas is here” (<sup>4024</sup>Matthew 12:41).

It seemed strange to KIMCHI, a Jew himself, that the Book of Jonah is among the Scriptures, as the only prophecy in it concerns Nineveh, a heathen city, and makes no mention of Israel, which is referred to by every other prophet. The reason seems to be: a tacit reproof of Israel is intended; a heathen people were ready to repent at the first preaching of the prophet, a stranger to them; but Israel, who boasted of being God’s elect, repented not, though warned by their own prophets at all seasons. This was an anticipatory streak of light before the dawn of the full “light to lighten the Gentiles” (<sup>4025</sup>Luke 2:32). Jonah is himself a strange paradox: a prophet of God, and yet a runaway from God: a man drowned, and yet alive: a preacher of repentance, yet one that repines at repentance. Yet Jonah, saved

from the jaws of death himself on repentance, was the fittest to give a hope to Nineveh, doomed though it was, of a merciful respite on its repentance. The patience and pity of God stand in striking contrast with the selfishness and hard-heartedness of man.

Nineveh in particular was chosen to teach Israel these lessons, on account of its being capital of the then world kingdom, and because it was now beginning to make its power felt by Israel. Our Lord (<sup><402H></sup>Matthew 12:41) makes Nineveh's repentance a reproof of the Jews' impenitence in His day, just as Jonah provoked Israel to jealousy (<sup><452H></sup>Deuteronomy 32:21) by the same example. Jonah's mission to Nineveh implied that a heathen city afforded as legitimate a field for the prophet's labors as Israel, and with a more successful result (compare <sup><400E></sup>Amos 9:7).

The book is prose narrative throughout, except the prayer of thanksgiving in the second chapter (Jon 2:1-9). The Chaldaisms in the original do not prove spuriousness, or a later age, but were natural in the language of one living in Zebulun on the borders of the north, whence *Aramaic* peculiarities would readily arise; moreover, his message to Nineveh implies acquaintance with Assyrian. Living as Jonah did in a part of Israel exposed to Assyrian invasions, he probably stood in the same relation to Assyria as Elijah and Elisha had stood to Syria. The purity of the language implies the antiquity of the book, and the likelihood of its being Jonah's own writing. Indeed, none but Jonah could have written or dictated such peculiar details, known only to himself.

The tradition that places the tomb of Jonah opposite to Mosul, and names it "Nebbi Junus" (that is, "prophet Jonah"), originated probably in the spot having been occupied by a Christian church or convent dedicated to him [LAYARD]. A more ancient tradition of JEROME'S time placed the tomb in Jonah's native village of Gath-hepher.

# CHAPTER 1

## JONAH 1:1-17.

### JONAH'S COMMISSION TO NINEVEH, FLIGHT, PUNISHMENT, AND PRESERVATION BY MIRACLE.

1. **Jonah** — meaning in *Hebrew*, “dove.” Compare <sup><0088></sup>Genesis 8:8,9, where the dove in vain seeks rest after flying from Noah and the ark: so Jonah. GROTIUS not so well explains it, “one sprung from Greece” or Ionia, where there were prophets called *Amythaonidae*.

**Amittai** — *Hebrew* for “truth,” “truth-telling”; appropriate to a prophet.

2. **to Nineveh** — east of the Tigris, opposite the modern Mosul. The only case of a prophet being sent to the heathen. Jonah, however, is sent to Nineveh, not solely for Nineveh’s good, but also to shame *Israel*, by the fact of a heathen city repenting at the first preaching of a single stranger, Jonah, whereas God’s people will not repent, though preached to by their many national prophets, late and early. Nineveh means “the residence of Ninus,” that is, Nimrod. <sup><0088></sup>Genesis 10:11, where the translation ought to be, “*He* (Nimrod) went forth *into Assyria* and builded Nineveh.” Modern research into the cuneiform inscriptions confirms the Scripture account that Babylon was founded earlier than Nineveh, and that both cities were built by descendants of Ham, encroaching on the territory assigned to Shem (<sup><0088></sup>Genesis 10:5,6,8,10,25).

**great city** — four hundred eighty stadia in circumference, one hundred fifty in length, and ninety in breadth [DIODORUS SICULUS, 2.3]. Taken by Arbaces the Mede, in the reign of Sardanapalus, about the seventh year of Uzziah; and a second time by Nabopolassar of Babylon and Cyaxares the Mede in 625 B.C. See on Jon 3:3.

**cry** — (<sup><2406></sup>Isaiah 40:6 58:1).

**come up before me** — (<sup><0088></sup>Genesis 4:10 6:13 18:21 <sup><5006></sup>Ezra 9:6 <sup><6805></sup>Revelation 18:5); that is, their wickedness is so great as to require My open interposition for punishment.

3. **flee** — Jonah’s motive for flight is hinted at in Jon 4:2: fear that after venturing on such a dangerous commission to so powerful a heathen city,

his prophetic threats should be set aside by God's "repenting of the evil," just as God had so long spared Israel notwithstanding so many provocations, and so he should seem a false prophet. Besides, he may have felt it beneath him to discharge a commission to a foreign idolatrous nation, whose destruction he desired rather than their repentance. This is the only case of a prophet, charged with a prophetic message, concealing it.

**from the presence of the Lord** — (Compare <sup><0016></sup>Genesis 4:16). Jonah thought in fleeing from the land of Israel, where Jehovah was peculiarly present, that he should escape from Jehovah's prophecy-inspiring influence. He probably knew the truth stated in <sup><1307></sup>Psalms 139:7-10, but virtually ignored it (compare <sup><0008></sup>Genesis 3:8-10 <sup><2324></sup>Jeremiah 23:24).

**went down** — appropriate in going from land to the sea (<sup><1973></sup>Psalms 107:23).

**Joppa** — now Jaffa, in the region of Dan; a harbor as early as Solomon's time (<sup><4216></sup>2 Chronicles 2:16).

**Tarshish** — Tartessus in Spain; in the farthest west at the greatest distance from Nineveh in the east.

**4. sent out** — literally, *caused a wind to burst forth*. COVERDALE translates, "hurled a greate wynde into the see."

**5. mariners were afraid** — though used to storms; the danger therefore must have been extreme.

**cried every man unto his god** — The idols proved unable to save them, though each, according to Phoenician custom, called on his tutelary god. But Jehovah proved able: and the heathen sailors owned it in the end by sacrificing to Him (Jon 1:16).

**into the sides** — that is, the interior recesses (compare <sup><0213></sup>1 Samuel 24:3 <sup><3143></sup>Isaiah 14:13,15). Those conscious of guilt shrink from the presence of their fellow man into concealment.

**fast asleep** — Sleep is no necessary proof of innocence; it may be the fruit of carnal security and a seared conscience. How different was Jesus' sleep on the Sea of Galilee! (<sup><4037></sup>Mark 4:37-39). Guilty Jonah's indifference to fear contrasts with the unoffending mariners' alarm. The original therefore is in the nominative absolute: "But *as for Jonah*, he," etc. Compare spiritually, <sup><4054></sup>Ephesians 5:14.

**6. call upon thy God** — The ancient heathen in dangers called on foreign gods, besides their national ones (compare <sup><1973></sup>Psalms 107:28). MAURER translates the preceding clause, "What is the reason that thou sleepest?"

**think upon us** — for good (compare <sup><0081></sup>Genesis 8:1 <sup><0025></sup>Exodus 2:25 3:7,9 <sup><007></sup>Psalms 40:17).

**7. cast lots** — God sometimes sanctioned this mode of deciding in difficult cases. Compare the similar instance of Achan, whose guilt involved Israel in suffering, until God revealed the offender, probably by the casting of lots (<sup><063></sup>Proverbs 16:33 <sup><402></sup>Acts 1:26). Primitive tradition and natural conscience led even the heathen to believe that one guilty man involves all his associates, though innocent, in punishment. So CICERO [*The Nature of the Gods*, 3.37] mentions that the mariners sailing with Diagoras, an atheist, attributed a storm that overtook them to his presence in the ship (compare HORACE'S *Odes*, 3.2.26).

**8.** The guilty individual being discovered is interrogated so as to make full confession with his own mouth. So in Achan's case (<sup><0079></sup>Joshua 7:19).

**9. I am an Hebrew** — He does not say "an Israelite." For this was the name used among themselves; "Hebrew," among foreigners (<sup><0415></sup>Genesis 40:15 <sup><0188></sup>Exodus 3:18).

**I fear the Lord** — in profession: his practice belied his profession: his profession aggravated his guilt.

**God ... which ... made the sea** — appropriately expressed, as accounting for the tempest sent on the *sea*. The heathen had distinct gods for the "heaven," the "sea," and the "land." Jehovah is the one and only true God of all alike. Jonah at last is awakened by the violent remedy from his lethargy. Jonah was but the reflection of Israel's backsliding from God, and so must bear the righteous punishment. The guilt of the minister is the result of that of the people, as in Moses' case (<sup><1021></sup>Deuteronomy 4:21). This is what makes Jonah a suitable type of Messiah, who bore the *imputed* sin of the people.

**10.** "The men were exceedingly afraid," when made aware of the wrath of so powerful a God at the flight of Jonah.

**Why hast thou done this?** — If professors of religion do wrong, they will hear of it from those who make no such profession.

**11. What shall we do unto thee?** — They ask this, as Jonah himself must best know how his God is to be appeased. "We would gladly save thee, if we can do so, and yet be saved ourselves" (Jon 1:13,14).

**12. cast me ... into the sea** — Herein Jonah is a type of Messiah, the one man who offered Himself to die, in order to allay the stormy flood of God's wrath (compare <sup><3911></sup>Psalms 69:1,2, as to Messiah), which otherwise

must have engulfed all other men. So Caiaphas by the Spirit declared it expedient that one man should die, and that the whole nation should not perish (<sup><6153></sup>John 11:50). Jonah also herein is a specimen of true repentance, which leads the penitent to “accept the punishment of his iniquity” (<sup><6364></sup>Leviticus 26:41,43), and to be more indignant at his sin than at his suffering.

**13. *they could not*** — (<sup><6163></sup>Proverbs 21:30). Wind and tide — God’s displeasure and God’s counsel were against them.

**14. *for this man’s life*** — that is, for taking this man’s life.

***innocent blood*** — Do not punish us as Thou wouldst punish the shedders of innocent blood (compare <sup><6208></sup>Deuteronomy 21:8). In the case of the Antitype, Pontius Pilate washed his hands and confessed Christ’s *innocence*, “I am innocent of the blood of this *just* person.” But whereas Jonah the victim was guilty and the sailors innocent, Christ our sacrificial victim was innocent and Pontius Pilate and nil of us men were guilty. But by *imputation* of our guilt to Him and His righteousness to us, the spotless Antitype exactly corresponds to the guilty type.

***thou ... Lord, hast done as it pleased thee*** — That Jonah has embarked in this ship, that a tempest has arisen, that he has been detected by casting of lots, that he has passed sentence on himself, is all Thy doing. We reluctantly put him to death, but it is Thy pleasure it should be so.

**15. *sea ceased ... raging*** — so at Jesus’ word (<sup><6184></sup>Luke 8:24). God spares the prayerful penitent, a truth illustrated now in the case of the sailors, presently in that of Jonah, and thirdly, in that of Nineveh.

**16. *offered a sacrifice*** — They offered some sacrifice of thanksgiving at once, and vowed more when they should land. GLASSIUS thinks it means only, “They *promised* to offer a sacrifice.”

**17. *prepared a great fish*** — not *created* specially for this purpose, but appointed in His providence, to which all creatures are subservient. The fish, through a mistranslation of <sup><6240></sup>Matthew 12:40, was formerly supposed to be a whale; there, as here, the original means “a great fish.” The whale’s neck is too narrow to receive a man. BOCHART thinks, the *dog-fish*, the stomach of which is so large that the body of a man in armor was once found in it [*Hierozoicon*, 2.5.12]. Others, the *shark* [JEBB]. The *cavity in the whale’s throat*, large enough, according to CAPTAIN SCORESBY, to hold a ship’s jolly boat full of men. A *miracle* in any view is needed, and we have no data to speculate further. A “sign” or miracle it is expressly called by our Lord in <sup><6129></sup>Matthew 12:39. Respiration in such a position could only

be by miracle. The miraculous interposition was not without a sufficient reason; it was calculated to affect not only Jonah, but also Nineveh and Israel. The life of a prophet was often marked by experiences which made him, through sympathy, best suited for discharging the prophetic function to his hearers and his people. The infinite resources of God in mercy as well as judgment are prefigured in the devourer being transformed into Jonah's preserver. Jonah's condition under punishment, shut out from the outer world, was rendered as much as possible the emblem of death, a present type to Nineveh and Israel, of the death in sin, as his deliverance was of the spiritual resurrection on repentance; as also, a future type of Jesus' literal death for sin, and resurrection by the Spirit of God.

*three days and three nights* — probably, like the Antitype, Christ, Jonah was cast forth on the land on the *third* day (<sup>4020</sup>Matthew 12:40); the Hebrew counting the first and third parts of days as whole twenty-four hour days.



# CHAPTER 2

## JONAH 2:1-10.

### JONAH'S PRAYER OF FAITH AND DELIVERANCE.

1. *his God* — “his” still, though Jonah had fled from Him. Faith enables Jonah now to feel this; just as the returning prodigal says of the Father, from whom he had wandered, “I will arise and go to my Father” (<sup><4258></sup>Luke 15:18).

*out of the fish's belly* — Every place may serve as an oratory. No place is amiss for prayer. Others translate, “when (delivered) out of the fish's belly.” *English Version* is better.

2. His prayer is partly descriptive and precatory, partly eucharistical. Jonah incorporates with his own language inspired utterances familiar to the Church long before in Jon 2:2, <sup><4300></sup>Psalm 120:1; in Jon 2:3, <sup><4307></sup>Psalm 42:7; in Jon 2:4, <sup><4312></sup>Psalm 31:22; in Jon 2:5, <sup><4310></sup>Psalm 69:1; in Jon 2:7, <sup><4318></sup>Psalm 142:3 18:6; in Jon 2:8, <sup><4316></sup>Psalm 31:6; in Jon 2:9, <sup><4317></sup>Psalm 116:17,18,3:8. Jonah, an inspired man, thus attests both the antiquity and inspiration of the Psalms. It marks the spirit of faith, that Jonah identifies himself with the saints of old, appropriating their experiences as recorded in the Word of God (<sup><4319></sup>Psalm 119:50). Affliction opens up the mine of Scripture, before seen only on the surface.

*out of the belly of hell* — *Sheol*, the unseen world, which the belly of the fish resembled.

3. *thou hadst cast ... thy billows ... thy waves* — Jonah recognizes the source whence his sufferings came. It was no mere chance, but *the hand of God* which sent them. Compare Job's similar recognition of God's hand in calamities, <sup><4302></sup>Job 1:21 2:10; and David's, <sup><4305></sup>2 Samuel 16:5-11.

4. *cast out from thy sight* — that is, from Thy favorable regard. A just retribution on one who had fled “*from the presence of the Lord*” (Jon 1:3). Now that he has got his desire, he feels it to be his bitterest sorrow to be deprived of God's presence, which once he regarded as a burden, and from which he desired to escape. He had turned his back on God; so God turned His back on him, making his sin his punishment.

**toward thy holy temple** — In the confidence of faith he anticipates yet to see the temple at Jerusalem, the appointed place of worship (<sup><1088></sup>1 Kings 8:38), and there to render thanksgiving [HENDERSON]. Rather, I think, “Though cast out of Thy sight, I will still *with the eye of faith* once more *look in prayer* towards Thy temple at Jerusalem, whither, as Thy earthly throne, Thou hast desired Thy worshippers to direct their prayers.”

**5. even to the soul** — that is, threatening to extinguish the *animal life*.

**weeds** — He felt as if the seaweeds through which he was dragged were wrapped about his head.

**6. bottoms of ... mountains** — their *extremities* where they *terminate* in the hidden depths of the sea. Compare <sup><9807></sup>Psalms 18:7, “the foundations of the hills” (<sup><9885></sup>Psalms 18:15).

**earth with her bars was about me** — Earth, the land of the living, is (not “was”) shut against me.

**for ever** — so far as any effort of *mine* can deliver me.

**yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption** — rather, “Thou bringest ... from the pit” [MAURER]. As in the previous clauses he expresses the hopelessness of his state, so in this, his sure hope of deliverance through Jehovah’s infinite resources. “Against hope he believes in hope,” and speaks as if the deliverance were actually being accomplished. Hezekiah seems to have incorporated Jonah’s very words in his prayer (<sup><2387></sup>Isaiah 38:17), just as Jonah appropriated the language of the Psalms.

**7. soul fainted ... I remembered the Lord** — beautifully exemplifying the triumph of spirit over flesh, of faith over sense (<sup><9739></sup>Psalms 73:26 42:6). For a time troubles shut out hope; but faith revived when Jonah “remembered the Lord,” what a gracious God He is, and how now He still preserves his life and consciousness in his dark prison-house.

**into thine holy temple** — the temple at Jerusalem (Jon 2:4). As there he looks in believing prayer towards it, so here he regards his prayer as already heard.

**8. observe lying vanities** — regard or reverence idols, powerless to save (<sup><9307></sup>Psalms 31:6).

**mercy** — Jehovah, the very idea of whom is identified now in Jonah’s mind with mercy and loving-kindness. As the Psalmist (<sup><9347></sup>Psalms 144:2) styles Him, “my goodness”; God who is to me all beneficence. Compare

<sup><4547></sup>Psalm 59:17, “the God of my mercy,” literally, “my kindness-God.” Jonah had “forsaken His own mercy,” God, to flee to heathen lands where “lying vanities” (idols) were worshipped. But now, taught by his own preservation in conscious life in the fish’s belly, and by the inability of the mariners idols to lull the storm (Jon 1:5), estrangement from God seems estrangement from his own happiness (<sup><2423></sup>Jeremiah 2:13 17:13). Prayer has been restrained in Jonah’s case, so that he was “fast asleep” in the midst of danger, heretofore; but now prayer is the sure sign of his return to God.

**9. *I will sacrifice ... thanksgiving*** — In the believing anticipation of sure deliverance, he offers thanksgivings already. So Jehoshaphat (<sup><4422></sup>Chronicles 20:21) appointed singers to *praise* the Lord in front of the army before the battle with Moab and Ammon, as if the victory was already gained. God honors such confidence in Him. There is also herein a mark of sanctified affliction, that he vows amendment and thankful obedience (<sup><4362></sup>Psalm 119:67).

**10. *upon the dry land*** — probably on the coast of Palestine.

# CHAPTER 3

## JONAH 3:1-10.

### JONAH'S SECOND COMMISSION TO NINEVEH: THE NINEVITES REPENT OF THEIR EVIL WAY: SO GOD REPENTS OF THE EVIL THREATENED.

2. *preach ... the preaching* — literally, “proclaim the proclamation.” On the former occasion the specific object of his commission to Nineveh was declared; here it is indeterminate. This is to show how freely he yields himself, in the spirit of unconditional obedience, to speak whatever God may please.

3. *arose and went* — like the son who was at first disobedient to the father’s command, “Go work in my vineyard,” but who afterwards “repented and went” (<sup><1218></sup>Matthew 21:28,29). Jonah was thus the fittest instrument for proclaiming judgment, and yet hope of mercy on repentance to Nineveh, being himself a living exemplification of both — judgment in his entombment in the fish, mercy on repentance in his deliverance. Israel professing to obey, but not obeying, and so doomed to exile in the same Nineveh, answers to the son who said, “I go, sir, and went not.” In <sup><1213></sup>Luke 11:30 it is said that Jonas was not only a sign to the men in Christ’s time, but also “unto the Ninevites.” On the latter occasion (<sup><1216></sup>Matthew 16:1-4) when the Pharisees and Sadducees tempted Him, asking a sign *from heaven*, He answered, “No sign shall be given, but the sign of the prophet Jonas,” <sup><1219></sup>Matthew 12:39. Thus the sign had a *twofold* aspect, a direct bearing on the Ninevites, an indirect bearing on the Jews in Christ’s time. To the Ninevites he was not merely a prophet, but himself a wonder in the earth, as one who had tasted of death, and yet had not seen corruption, but had now returned to witness among them for God. If the Ninevites had indulged in a captious spirit, they never would have inquired and so known Jonah’s wonderful history; but being humbled by God’s awful message, they learned from Jonah himself that it was the previous concealing in his bosom of the same message of their own doom that caused him to be entombed as an outcast from the living. Thus he was a “sign” to them of wrath on the one hand, and, on the other, of mercy. Guilty Jonah saved from the jaws of death gives a ray of hope to guilty Nineveh. Thus God, who brings good from evil, made Jonah in his fall, punishment, and

restoration, a sign (an *embodied lesson* or *living symbol*) through which the Ninevites were roused to hear and repent, as they would not have been likely to do, had he gone on the first commission before his living entombment and resurrection. To do evil that good may come, is a policy which can only come from Satan; but from evil already done to extract an instrument against the kingdom of darkness, is a triumphant display of the grace and wisdom of God. To the Pharisees in Christ's time, who, not content with the many signs exhibited by Him, still demanded a sign *from heaven*, He gave a sign in the opposite quarter, namely, Jonah, who came "out of the belly of *hell*" (the unseen region). They looked for a Messiah gloriously coming in the clouds of *heaven*; the Messiah, on the contrary, is to pass through a like, though a deeper, humiliation than Jonah; He is to lie "in the heart of *the earth*." Jonah and his Antitype alike appeared low and friendless among their hearers; both victims to death for God's wrath against sin, both preaching repentance. Repentance derives all its efficacy from the death of Christ, just as Jonah's message derived its weight with the Ninevites from his entombment. The Jews stumbled at Christ's death, the very fact which ought to have led them to Him, as Jonah's entombment attracted the Ninevites to his message. As Jonah's restoration gave hope of God's placability to Nineveh, so Christ's resurrection assures us God is fully reconciled to man by Christ's death. But Jonah's entombment only had the effect of a *moral suasive*; Christ's resurrection assures us God is fully reconciliation between God and man [FAIRBAIRN].

***Nineveh was an exceeding great city*** — literally, "great to God," that is, before God. All greatness was in the Hebrew mind associated with GOD; hence arose the idiom (compare "great mountains," *Margin*, "mountains of God," <sup>4816</sup>Psalm 36:6; "goodly cedars," *Margin*, "cedars of God," <sup>4810</sup>Psalm 80:10; "a mighty hunter *before the Lord*," <sup>4119</sup>Genesis 10:9).

***three days' journey*** — that is, about sixty miles, allowing about twenty miles for a day's journey. Jonah's statement is confirmed by heathen writers, who describe Nineveh as four hundred eighty stadia in circumference [DIODORUS SICULUS, 2.3]. HERODOTUS defines a day's journey to be one hundred fifty stadia; so three days' journey will not be much below DIODORUS' estimate. The parallelogram in Central Assyria covered with remains of buildings has Khorsabad northeast; Koyunjik and Nebbi Yunus near the Tigris, northwest; Nimroud, between the Tigris and the Zab, southwest; and Karamless, at a distance inward from the Zab, southeast. From Koyunjik to Nimroud is about eighteen miles; from Khorsabad to Karamless, the same; from Koyunjik to Khorsabad, thirteen or fourteen miles; from Nimroud to Karamless, fourteen miles. The length thus was greater than the breadth; compare Jon 3:4, "a day's journey,"

which is confirmed by heathen writers and by modern measurements. The walls were a hundred feet high, and broad enough to allow three chariots abreast, and had moreover fifteen hundred lofty towers. The space between, including large parks and arable ground, as well as houses, was Nineveh in its full extent. The oldest palaces are at Nimroud, which was probably the original site. LAYARD latterly has thought that the name Nineveh belonged originally to Koyunjik, rather than to Nimroud. Jonah (Jon 4:11) mentions the children as numbering one hundred twenty thousand, which would give about a million to the whole population. Existing ruins show that Nineveh acquired its greatest extent under the kings of the second dynasty, that is, the kings mentioned in Scripture; it was then that Jonah visited it, and the reports of its magnificence were carried to the west [LAYARD].

**4. *a day's journey*** — not going straight forward without stopping: for the city was but eighteen miles in length; but stopping in his progress from time to time to announce his message to the crowds gathering about him.

***Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*** — The commission, given indefinitely at his setting out, assumes now on his arrival a definite form, and that severer than before. It is no longer a cry against the sins of Nineveh, but an announcement of its ruin in forty days. This number is in Scripture associated often with humiliation. It was forty days that Moses, Elijah, and Christ fasted. Forty years elapsed from the beginning of Christ's ministry (the antitype of Jonah's) to the destruction of Jerusalem. The more definite form of the denunciation implies that Nineveh has now almost filled up the measure of her guilt. The change in the form which the Ninevites would hear from Jonah on anxious inquiry into his history, would alarm them the more, as implying the increasing nearness and certainty of their doom, and would at the same time reprove Jonah for his previous guilt in delaying to warn them. The very solitariness of the one message announced by the stranger thus suddenly appearing among them, would impress them with the more awe. Learning from him, that so far from lightly prophesying evil against them, he had shrunk from announcing a less severe denunciation, and therefore had been east into the deep and only saved by miracle, they felt how imminent was their peril, threatened as they now were by a prophet whose fortunes were so closely bound up with theirs. In Noah's days one hundred twenty years of warning were given to men, yet they repented not till the flood came, and it was too late. But in the case of Nineveh, God granted a double mercy: first, that its people should repent immediately after threatening; second, that pardon should immediately follow their repentance.

**5. *believed God*** — gave credit to Jonah's message from God; thus recognizing Jehovah as the true God.

**fast ... sackcloth** — In the East outward actions are often used as symbolical expressions of inward feelings. So fasting and clothing in sackcloth were customary in humiliation. Compare in Ahab's case, parallel to that of Nineveh, both receiving a *respite* on penitence (<sup>1277</sup>1 Kings 21:27 20:31,32 <sup>2013</sup>Joel 1:13).

**from the greatest ... to the least** — The penitence was not partial, but pervading all classes.

**6. in ashes** — emblem of the deepest humiliation (<sup>808</sup>Job 2:8 <sup>3273</sup>Ezekiel 27:30).

**7. neither ... beast ... taste any thing** — The brute creatures share in the evil effects of man's sin (Jon 4:11 <sup>6101</sup>Romans 8:20,22); so they here according to Eastern custom, are made to share in man's outward indications of humiliation. "When the Persian general Masistias was slain, the horses and mules of the Persians were shorn, as well as themselves" [NEWCOME from PLUTARCH; also HERODOTUS, 9.24].

**8. cry ... turn** — Prayer without reformation is a mockery of God (<sup>668</sup>Psalms 66:18 <sup>2806</sup>Isaiah 58:6). Prayer, on the other hand, must precede true reformation, as we cannot turn to God from our evil way unless God first turns us (<sup>2818</sup>Jeremiah 31:18,19).

**9. Who can tell** — (Compare <sup>2014</sup>Joel 2:14). Their acting on a vague possibility of God's mercy, without any special ground of encouragement, is the more remarkable instance of faith, as they had to break through long-rooted prejudices in giving up idols to seek Jehovah at all. The only ground which their ready faith rested on, was the fact of God sending one to warn them, instead of destroying them at once; this suggested the thought of a possibility of pardon. Hence they are cited by Christ as about to condemn in the judgment those who, with much greater light and privileges, yet repent not (<sup>4024</sup>Matthew 12:41).

**10. God repented of the evil** — When the message was sent to them, they were so ripe for judgment that a purpose of destruction to take effect in forty days was the only word God's righteous abhorrence of sin admitted of as to them. But when they repented, the position in which they stood towards God's righteousness was altered. So God's mode of dealing with them must alter accordingly, if God is not to be inconsistent with His own immutable character of dealing with men according to their works and state of heart, taking vengeance at last on the hardened impenitent, and delighting to show mercy on the penitent. Compare Abraham's reasoning, <sup>01825</sup>Genesis 18:25 <sup>3201</sup>Ezekiel 18:21-25 <sup>3107</sup>Jeremiah 18:7-10. What was really a change in them and in God's corresponding dealings is, in condescension to human

conceptions, represented as a change in God (compare <sup><E214</sup>Exodus 32:14), who, in His essential righteousness and mercy, changeth not (<sup><E39</sup>Numbers 23:19 <sup><E59</sup>1 Samuel 15:29 Malachi 3:6 <sup><E17</sup>James 1:17). The reason why the announcement of destruction was made absolute, and not dependent on Nineveh's continued impenitence, was that this form was the only one calculated to rouse them; and at the same time it was a *truthful* representation of God's purpose towards Nineveh under its existing state, and of Nineveh's due. When that state ceased, a new relation of Nineveh to God, not contemplated in the message, came in, and room was made for the word to take effect, "the curse causeless shall not come" [FAIRBAIRN]. Prophecy is not merely for the sake of proving God's omniscience by the verification of predictions of the future, but is mainly designed to vindicate God's justice and mercy in dealing with the impenitent and penitent respectively (<sup><E122</sup>Romans 11:22). The Bible ever assigns the first place to the eternal principles of righteousness, rooted in the character of God, subordinating to them all divine arrangements. God's sparing Nineveh, when in the jaws of destruction, on the first dawn of repentance encourages the timid penitent, and shows beforehand that Israel's doom, soon after accomplished, is to be ascribed, not to unwillingness to forgive on God's part, but to their own obstinate impenitence.



# CHAPTER 4

## JONAH 4:1-11.

### JONAH FRETS AT GOD'S MERCY TO NINEVEH: IS REPROVED BY THE TYPE OF A GOURD.

1. **angry** — literally, “hot,” probably, with *grief* or *vexation*, rather than *anger* [FAIRBAIRN]. How sad the contrast between God’s feeling on the repentance of Nineveh towards Him, and Jonah’s feeling on the repentance of God towards Nineveh. Strange in one who was himself a monument of mercy on his repentance! We all, like him, need the lesson taught in the parable of the unforgiving, though forgiven, debtor (<sup><41823></sup>Matthew 18:23-35). Jonah was grieved because Nineveh’s preservation, after his denunciation, made him seem a false prophet [CALVIN]. But it would make Jonah a demon, not a man, to have preferred the destruction of six hundred thousand men rather than that his prophecy should be set aside through God’s mercy triumphing over judgment. And God in that case would have severely chastised, whereas he only expostulates mildly with him, and by a mode of dealing, at once gentle and condescending, tries to show him his error. Moreover, Jonah himself, in apologizing for his vexation, does not mention *the failure of his prediction* as the cause: but solely the thought of God’s *slowness to anger*. This was what led him to flee to Tarshish at his first commission; not the likelihood *then* of his prediction being falsified; for in fact his commission then was not to foretell Nineveh’s downfall, but simply to “cry against” Nineveh’s “wickedness” as having “come up before God.” Jonah could hardly have been so vexed for the letter of his prediction failing, when the end of his commission had virtually been gained in leading Nineveh to repentance. This then cannot have been regarded by Jonah as the *ultimate* end of his commission. If Nineveh had been the prominent object with him, he would have rejoiced at the result of his mission. But Israel was the prominent aim of Jonah, as a prophet of the elect people. Probably then he regarded the destruction of Nineveh as fitted to be an example of God’s judgment at last suspending His long forbearance so as to startle Israel from its desperate degeneracy, heightened by its new prosperity under Jeroboam II at that very time, in a way that all other means had failed to do. Jonah, despairing of anything effectual being done for God in Israel, unless there were first given a striking example of severity, thought when he proclaimed the downfall of Nineveh in forty

days, that now at last God is about to give such an example; so when this means of awakening Israel was set aside by God's mercy on Nineveh's repentance, he was bitterly disappointed, not from pride or mercilessness, but from hopelessness as to anything being possible for the reformation of Israel, now that his cherished hope is baffled. But GOD'S plan was to teach Israel, by the example of Nineveh, how inexcusable is their own impenitence, and how inevitable their ruin if they persevere. Repenting Nineveh has proved herself more worthy of God's favor than apostate Israel; the children of the covenant have not only fallen down to, but actually below, the level of a heathen people; Israel, therefore, must go down, and the heathen rise above her. Jonah did not know the important lessons of hope to the penitent, and condemnation to those amidst outward privileges impenitent, which Nineveh's preservation on repentance was to have for aftertimes, and to all ages. He could not foresee that Messiah Himself was thus to apply that history. A lesson to us that if we *could* in any particular alter the plan of Providence, it would not be for the better, but for the worse [FAIRBAIRN].

**2. *my saying*** — my thought, or feeling.

***fled before*** — *I anticipated by fleeing*, the disappointment of my design through Thy long-suffering mercy.

***gracious ... and merciful***, etc. — Jonah here has before his mind <sup><2306</sup>Exodus 34:6; as Joel (<sup><2023</sup>Joel 2:13) in his turn quotes from Jonah.

**3.** Jonah's impatience of life under disappointed hopes of Israel's reformation through the destruction of Nineveh, is like that of Elijah at his plan for reforming Israel (<sup><1801</sup>1 Kings 18:1-46) failing through Jezebel (<sup><1904</sup>1 Kings 19:4).

**4. *Doest thou well to be angry?*** — or *grieved*; rather as the *Margin*, "Art thou *much* angry," or "grieved?" [FAIRBAIRN with the *Septuagint* and *Syriac*]. But *English Version* suits the spirit of the passage, and is quite tenable in the *Hebrew* [GESENIUS].

**5. *made him a booth*** — that is, a temporary hut of branches and leaves, so slightly formed as to be open to the wind and sun's heat.

***see what would become of the city*** — The term of forty days had not yet elapsed, and Jonah did not know that anything more than a suspension, or mitigation, of judgment had been granted to Nineveh. Therefore, not from sullenness, but in order to watch the event from a neighboring station, he lodged in the booth. As a stranger, he did not know the depth of Nineveh's repentance; besides, from the Old Testament standpoint he knew that

chastening judgments often followed, as in David's case (<sup>4020</sup>2 Samuel 12:10-12,14), even where sin had been repented of. To show him what he knew not, the largeness and completeness of God's mercy to penitent Nineveh, and the reasonableness of it, God made his booth a school of discipline to give him more enlightened views.

**6. gourd** — *Hebrew, kikaion*; the Egyptian *kiki*, the "ricinus" or castor-oil plant, commonly called "palm-christ" (*palma-christi*). It grows from eight to ten feet high. Only one leaf grows on a branch, but that leaf being often more than a foot large, the collective leaves give good shelter from the heat. It grows rapidly, and fades as suddenly when injured.

**to deliver him from his grief** — It was therefore *grief*, not selfish anger, which Jonah felt (see on Jon 4:1). Some external comforts will often turn the mind away from its sorrowful bent.

**7. a worm** — of a particular kind, deadly to the ricinus. A small worm at the root destroys a large gourd. So it takes but little to make our creature comforts wither. It should silence discontent to remember, that when our gourd is gone, our God is not gone.

**the next day** — after Jonah was so "exceeding glad" (compare <sup>4800</sup>Psalm 80:7).

**8. vehement** — rather, "scorching"; the *Margin*, "silent," expressing sultry *stillness*, not *vehemence*.

**9.** (See on Jon 4:4).

**I do well to be angry, even unto death** — "I am very much grieved, even to death" [FAIRBAIRN]. So the Antitype (<sup>4125</sup>Matthew 26:38).

**10, 11.** The main lesson of the book. If Jonah so pities a plant which cost him no toil to rear, and which is so short lived and valueless, much more must Jehovah pity those hundreds of thousands of immortal men and women in great Nineveh whom He has made with such a display of creative power, especially when many of them repent, and seeing that, if all in it were destroyed, "more than six score thousand" of *unoffending* children, besides "much cattle," would be involved in the common destruction: Compare the same argument drawn from God's justice and mercy in <sup>4182</sup>Genesis 18:23-33. A similar illustration from the insignificance of a plant, which "to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven," and which, nevertheless, is clothed by God with surpassing beauty, is given by Christ to prove that God will care for the infinitely more precious bodies and souls of men who are to live for ever (<sup>4165</sup>Matthew 6:28-30). One soul is of more value than the whole world; surely, then, one soul is of more

value than many gourds. The point of comparison spiritually is the *need* which Jonah, for the time being, had of the foliage of the gourd. However he might dispense with it at other times, now it was necessary for his comfort, and almost for his life. So now that Nineveh, as a city, fears God and turns to Him, God's cause needs it, and would suffer by its overthrow, just as Jonah's material well-being suffered by the withering of the gourd. If there were any hope of Israel's being awakened by Nineveh's destruction to fulfill her high destination of being a light to surrounding heathenism, then there would not have been the same need to God's cause of Nineveh's preservation, (though there would have always been need of saving the penitent). But as Israel, after judgments, now with returning prosperity turns back to apostasy, the means *needed* to vindicate God's cause, and provoke Israel, if possible, to jealousy, is the example of the great capital of heathendom suddenly repenting at the first warning, and consequently being spared. Thus Israel would see the kingdom of heaven transplanted from its ancient seat to another which would willingly yield its spiritual fruits. The tidings which Jonah brought back to his countrymen of Nineveh's repentance and rescue, would, if believably understood, be far more fitted than the news of its overthrow to recall Israel to the service of God. Israel failed to learn the lesson, and so was cast out of her land. But even this was not an unmitigated evil. Jonah was a type, as of Christ, so also of Israel. Jonah, though an outcast, was highly honored of God in Nineveh; so Israel's outcast condition would prove no impediment to her serving God's cause still, if only she was faithful to God. Ezekiel and Daniel were so at Babylon; and the Jews, scattered in all lands as witnesses for the one true God, pioneered the way for Christianity, so that it spread with a rapidity which otherwise was not likely to have attended it [FAIRBAIRN].

**11. *that cannot discern between their right hand and their left*** — children under three or four years old (<sup>(~~RE~~39)</sup>Deuteronomy 1:39). *Six score thousand* of these, allowing them to be a fifth of the whole, would give a *total* population of six hundred thousand.

***much cattle*** — God cares even for the brute creatures, of which man takes little account. These in wonderful powers and in utility are far above the shrub which Jonah is so concerned about. Yet Jonah is reckless as to their destruction and that of innocent children. The abruptness of the close of the book is more strikingly suggestive than if the thought had been followed out in detail.