JONAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

JAMES BRUCKNER

ZONDERVAN™
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49530 USA

Dedication

To Kristine Anne
embraced by the LORD
light of Christ
God's treasured dove and comfort

ZONDERVAN™

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bruckner, James K.
Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah / James K. Bruckner.—1st ed.
p. cm.—(NIV application commentary)
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN: 0-310-20637-5
1. Bible. O.T. Jonah—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T. Nahum—Commentaries.
3. Bible. O.T. Habakkuk—Commentaries. 4. Bible. O.T. Zephaniah—Commentaries.
I. Title. II. Series.
BS1605.53 .B78 2004
224'.9077—dc22

2003022095
CIP

04 05 06 07 08 09 10 /◆ DC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Introduction to Jonah

JONAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, AND ZEPHANIAH are four of the minor prophets. Although they are "minor" in length (each is about fifty verses), they are a crucial portion of God's revelation to his people. Originally, they were part of one scroll called "The Book of the Twelve," which included Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, *Jonah*, Micah, *Nahum*, *Habakkuk*, *Zephaniah*, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These twelve cover approximately three hundred significant years (750 B.C. to 450 B.C.) of Israel's prophetic tradition. Their canonical order is based on biblical references to the prophets' political activity. The first five prophets (Hosea to Jonah) were active sometime during the reign of Jeroboam II (d. 746 B.C.), king of the ten northern tribes. Micah was active just after that time (Micah 1:1), probably until 701 B.C., when Jerusalem almost fell to the Assyrians (see Isa. 36–39).

After a period of seventy years, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah speak, during the new crisis of the rise of Babylon, which destroyed Nineveh (Nahum's prophecy) and would later destroy Judah (Habakkuk's and Zephaniah's prophecies). Jeremiah was a contemporary of these prophets. None of the minor prophets prophesied during the seventy-year Babylonian exile. The last three (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) coincide with the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. The four books covered in this commentary are at the center of "The Book of the Twelve."[1] They call God's people to consider what it means to be faithful when violent enemies press upon them.

Jonah's Content and Messages

THE BOOK OF Jonah contains only fifty-eight verses, but those few verses include a storm at sea, the conversion of sailors, a miraculous rescue, a song of praise, the repentance of Israel's archenemy, and an intensely honest dialogue between the Yahweh and Israel's most reluctant prophet. They reveal the nature of Yahweh's relationship to the Gentile sailors, to Israel's enemy Nineveh, to nonhuman creation (the wind, a fish, vine, worm, and cattle), as well as to his messenger Jonah. The book is, in many ways, a microcosm of God's relationship to his whole creation in history. Although the narrative is sometimes melodramatic, it covers serious subject matter. It provides an

1. Micah is too long to be included in this volume.

occasion for discussion of what no one really wants to talk about: God's role in the persistence of evil in the world. Jonah is engaged in an earnest protest (his running away from Nineveh) and discussion (in ch. 4) with God about the violent Ninevites.

The theme of life and death is developed in all four chapters, as the narrative explores life in relationship to Yahweh. The text considers the Ninevites' evil and their repentance, Jonah's response to God's difficult call, and the sailors' trust in and worship of the true God. Chapter 1 is about the threatened death and saved life of the sailors and Jonah. Chapter 2 concerns Jonah's death and life within Yahweh's great fish. Chapter 3 is about the death and life of the Ninevites and their animals. Chapter 4 focuses on the life and death of the vine as God's object lesson for the Ninevites' and Jonah's life in the presence of the Creator.

The book is also about the struggle of all peoples to come to terms with God's reputation. Jonah was reluctant to go and preach against Nineveh (1:1–4) because of their legendary violence and terror. He knew that if they should repent, God would likely relent from his fierce anger. His preference was that they should be destroyed. As Jonah said, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2b).

Jonah runs from Yahweh's presence (in Israel) by boarding a ship for Tarshish, and Yahweh "hurls" a great wind to slow him down. The storm causes the sailors, whose lives are on the line (1:5–12), to cry out to their own gods, lighten the ship, and cast lots to discover whose sin caused such a violent storm. They interrogate Jonah, hear his witness, and are terrified, since his god is Yahweh, who "made the sea and the land." Finally, they ask Yahweh's prophet what to do. He acknowledges his guilt and offers himself as a sacrifice for their safety.

The sailors' relationship to Yahweh then moves to the foreground (1:13–16). With charity toward Jonah, they attempt to row out of their difficulty, but the sea grows "even wilder than before," and they cry out to Yahweh for mercy. When they throw Jonah overboard, the sea stands still, and the sailors believe, offer sacrifices, and make vows to the God of heaven, sea, and earth. With the sailors worshiping onboard, the text's attention turns to Jonah in the water. Yahweh's great fish swallows him, and Jonah, like the sailors, prays a prayer of thanksgiving (1:17, 2:1–10).

In chapter 2 Jonah gives thanks for his life, from within the belly of the great fish. It begins with a summary of his "distress and cry" and continues with four more stanzas (verses) that describe Jonah's distress in the water before he was swallowed (2:3–6). The waves at the surface swept over him, and he longed for the temple, sunk to the seaweed on the bottom, and finally

to the ocean floor (2:6). The song of thanks concludes with Jonah's refrain, and he declares that "salvation comes from the LORD." Yahweh's fish then vomits Jonah onto dry land (2:7–10).

Jonah 3 concerns the Ninevites' (and their animals') relationship to the Creator. When Yahweh's word comes to Jonah "a second time," he obeys immediately, and he completes the mission on the first day: "The Ninevites believed God" (3:1–5). The king hears how the city has been overturned in repentance. He, too, responds in belief and in hope that God will "with compassion turn from his fierce anger." God does (3:6–10).

Chapter 4 returns to Jonah's relationship with God and highlights Jonah's anger and God's abiding love. Jonah has fulfilled his calling to Nineveh only under the threat of his own death (see ch. 2). Now his anger with Yahweh's way is made fully manifest (4:1–5). In an attempt to demonstrate his compassion and make his point, Yahweh sends a vine to shade him, then a worm to destroy the shade, and finally a scorching wind (4:6–8). The book concludes as Yahweh reasons with Jonah, declaring his concern for all he has created, including 120,000 Ninevites as well as their cattle (4:9–11).

Interpretations

THROUGH THE CENTURIES Christians have held many diverse and wide-ranging interpretations of the primary message of Jonah. The narrative's rich imagery and plentiful themes help explain this diversity. Commentaries have, unfortunately, often focused on one salient message or another as if it were the message of the whole. Four general messages have been developed through the centuries of interpretation that continue to influence our understanding of Jonah today, although each limits the book in its own way.[2]

The Sovereignty of God and a Moral Tale: John Calvin and Disney's Pinocchio

THIS TRADITION OF interpretation presents Jonah as a negative example. Calvin suggests that Jonah wrote this account in order to teach us the futility of fleeing from God. Jonah is severely chastised by Calvin for his "disgraceful obstinacy" in fleeing his duty for the pleasures of Tarshish.[3] In a secular twist on this view, Walt Disney's movie *Pinocchio* (which rewrote the original book

2. See Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000) for a fine history of interpretation.

3. Cited, with an extensive summary of this theme in ibid., 32–42.

with Jonah-like themes) portrays a rebellious puppet who is swallowed by a whale. The moral fairy tale of "the sufferings of the disobedient" plays out a warning similar to Calvin's reading of Jonah.[4] The characters of both Jonah and Pinocchio are portrayed as negative moral examples, whose behavior and attitudes we are to avoid in order to thwart suffering. The purpose of Jonah is to make us obedient through the fear of Yahweh.

A related vein of interpretation has been to see Jonah as an allegory for the church's responsibility to missionary outreach. When one is called to ministry or mission, resistance is futile. This approach does not take into account the vibrant biblical tradition of vigorous conversation and even protest that God invites (with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and many of the prophets). Neither does it consider Jesus' positive assessment of Jonah as an example in relation to himself (Matt. 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32).

Repentance and Forgiveness of the Ninevites

THE AMAZINGLY SWIFT repentance and deliverance of the Ninevites is a strong message in chapter 3. The miracle of their repentance from evil is in many ways as astounding as the fish that swallows Jonah. There are several lessons in this theme. Sometimes God's grace breaks in unexpectedly, people turn to him, and God forgives. If the Ninevites can repent, anyone can. Their model of repentance has been presented as the main theme of Jonah in the history of interpretation by both Christian and Jewish commentators.[5] Jonah is an antihero in this tradition of interpretation. He is opposed to the repentance (and even the survival!) of Israel's violent enemy, the Ninevites. According to this view, the purpose of Jonah is, therefore, to demonstrate the love of God for all people and to bring us to repentance before a gracious and merciful God. This God will not condemn anyone who seeks him.

The limitation of this theme is its relative absence in chapters 1, 2, and 4. The sailors in chapter 1, for instance, simply cry out to their gods and to God to be saved from the storm (not necessarily for repentance). Jonah does not repent in his prayer in chapter 2 but simply gives thanks for his unexpected deliverance. Jonah once again does not repent in chapter 4 (though we may wish he would) but remains angry and defiant before God. In addition, Yahweh's rationale (in ch. 4) for pardon is not that the Ninevites should be accepted because of their repentance (even though that is necessary). He argues, rather, that they are to be pitied as his ignorant creation (4:11). Certainly repentance is an important theme, but it does not carry the weight of all four chapters.

4. See ibid., 60–61.

5. See full discussion of the theme of repentance in the Bridging Contexts section of ch. 3.

Jonah Is Submitted to Scientific Proofs

POPULARIZED BY REV. E. PUSEY'S 1860 commentary, this relatively recent tradition focuses on the size and species of the fish/whale, the size of the fish's larynx and stomach, the availability of breathable air, and so on.[6] In this view Jonah is a litmus test of one's belief in science as a means of proving the veracity of the Bible. This approach limits the message of Jonah to two verses and a specific nineteenth-century view of reality (1:17: "But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights"; 2:10: "And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.").

Preoccupation with the big fish (the Heb. has "big fish," not "whale") has had both a positive and negative effect on the interpretation of Jonah in communities of faith. Positively, the great fish has kindled imagination and interest in Jonah as a book. Negatively, however, the great fish has so dominated this interpretation that the discussion of the book has been limited to this question: "Was Jonah really swallowed by that whale?" This question has served as a distraction from God's Word. For some, it is a test of literary sophistication, and to answer "yes" excludes you from the company of the supposedly well-read. Answer "no," and many will assume that you do not believe in miracles, or worse, in the authority of Scripture. When this litmus test is over, many assume that everything important about Jonah has been settled.

As to the question whether Jonah was really swallowed by the "whale," people of faith offer two possibilities: Either it really happened, or this is a literary device in a parable, telling a wonderful story of instruction. Some Christian interpreters have used this second approach in an attempt to rescue the book of Jonah for people of faith. Their motivation was to save the message (*kerygma*) of biblical books by demythologizing texts like Jonah.

I personally have no difficulty believing that the prophet was actually engulfed, housed, and vomited by a great fish. This miracle is easier to believe than the greater miracle of the Ninevites' immediate repentance. But the actuality of the fish is not an article of Christian faith. Many people of faith believe the bodily resurrection of Jesus and all his miracles, yet regard Jonah as similar to Jesus' story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). It is even possible to hold to the doctrine of the inerrancy of the original manuscripts of Scripture and regard Jonah as a unique parable about a real prophet (2 Kings 14:25). In any case, no other prophetic book is so focused on the prophet and filled with such parable-like writing.

As much as I believe the events described in the book, we should resist the use of the "whale" question as a litmus test for orthodoxy. Such a question

6. Sherwood, *A Biblical Text*, 42–47.

obfuscates the Word of God in Jonah and preempts a reader's discovering God's message for today. That message must not be eclipsed by our modern preoccupations with physical phenomena. The powerful messages of reconciliation with God, his creating power, and his persistent call for his people to speak to unbelievers concerning the Lord of all creation are essential themes of Jonah. How does the miracle of the big fish serve the message of the book? This unanticipated deliverance was a surprise to Jonah, who expected to die in the water. His own miraculous physical deliverance, when all hope was lost, caused him to rethink his views on God's way with evil men.

Jonah and Typologies: Like a Reluctant Israel or Like Christ?

IN A FOURTH interpretation, Jonah has been reshaped as a type or example of a prideful and haughty Jew (or Israel). Especially at the end of the Middle Ages in Europe this anti-Semitic typology began to take hold in sermons and commentary.[7] Jonah becomes a stingy prophet who refuses to share the word of Yahweh with the non-Jew. This view goads believers not to be narrow-minded in relation to God's forgiveness and grace. Unfortunately, this interpretive method often succumbs to the implication "narrow-minded, *like the Jews*" and leads to human judgment and disdain (anti-Semitism), the inversion of the forgiveness and grace of God. Such a typology with its inherent anti-Semitism deconstructs its own purpose and ought to be avoided.

The Jewish holocaust of the twentieth century requires a fresh assessment of Christian interpretation. The biblical facts of the Jonah text simply do not support the split Jew-Gentile reading. No judgment is given in Jonah against the (Gentile pagan) sailors who pray to their own gods, nor for their subsequent sacrifice to Yahweh that takes place on the *ship*, rather than in Jerusalem. "Gentiles" (*goyim*) are never mentioned or even alluded to as Jonah's problem. Jonah's issue with Nineveh is its violence and wickedness (see comments on 1:2; 3:8, 10). These problems pertain to Israel as well, as we see in the other prophetic books.

Another typology has its origin in the New Testament. Jesus compared himself to Jonah in a positive light. The early church fathers followed this interpretation of Jonah as a sign (or type) of Jesus' own ministry, death, and resurrection (Matt. 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32). Jonah—in the ship, in the water, in the fish, and back on dry land (chs. 1 and 2)—is compared to Jesus' incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jonah's success in his preaching in Nineveh and its people, resulting in salvation through repentance (chs. 3 and 4), is compared to Jesus' success in preaching and saving human-

7. For a catalogue of this widespread tendency see ibid., 21–31, 65–87.

ity. The limitations of any typology apply to this reading as well. If Jonah is read Christologically, it is no longer read as Jonah. Yet, Jesus has pointed out a positive lens through which the prophet ought to be (but almost never is) viewed. The positive application of this theme will be explored in the Contemporary Significance section of chapter 1.

It is presently in fashion to claim that since Jonah does not state a purpose or single theme, since it contains so many theological themes and possibilities, and since it has such a long and diverse history of interpretation, determining a single theme is imprudent. The complexities and diverse wonders of the text should all be faithfully considered.[8] Jonah certainly is rich in text and in interpretation. This commentary attempts to reflect some of that great inheritance. At the same time, limitations of space and the commitment to edify the church require at least some general proposal of theme.

The Rehabilitation of Jonah's Reputation in Our Eyes

UNDERSTANDING JONAH AS a true prophet of God, in its original biblical context, is a challenge for evangelical readers. As long as we insist that Jonah is an example of a "bad" prophet, we will never understand why Jesus used him as a twofold "good" example. Jesus' favorable view of the prophet invites us to remove our modern theological lenses and examine Jonah's biblical roots and the context of other faithful prophets. Jesus' positive appraisal of Jonah leads us to consider him as a faithful example of preaching (ch. 3) and challenges our preconceptions of the prophet's motivations for fleeing to Tarshish.

Jonah was a faithful prophet because God was deeply involved in his life at every stage. Jonah's frailty in running from God's call is not hidden from view, but Jesus neither vilifies nor blames him for it. His reputation as a true prophet is not tarnished. Few biblical figures are iron-clad in their faithfulness (perhaps Joseph or Daniel comes the closest). Most of them confirmed God's call on their lives first by resisting it. This pattern of "call—resistance—call confirmed with a sign" is repeated in the lives of many people whom God called to difficult tasks, including Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, and even the apostle Peter.

God visited Abraham four times with the promise that he would make him a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–6; 17:1–21; 18:1–15). After Yahweh's first call (Gen. 12), Abram went forth from Haran, but in Egypt he relied on trickery to save himself, thereby jeopardizing Sarai in Pharaoh's harem (12:10–20). Called a second time (Gen. 15), Abram argued with God and

8. Cf. Phyllis Trible, "The Book of Jonah," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:490.

suggested that Eliezer of Damascus be his heir. God, unperturbed, simply repeated to Abram the promise of a son and gave him a terrifying dream to confirm it (15:12–20). Called a third time, Abraham (by this time God had changed his and Sarah's names) fell down laughing and pleaded that God bless Ishmael, the son of his concubine, instead of persisting in blessing the nations through Sarah's son (17:17–18). Again, Abraham was not chastised for his differing viewpoint; God accepted and understood his perspective, while insisting on his own.

In Genesis 18 Abraham negotiated with God over the fate of Sodom, asking nine questions (18:23–33). God welcomed Abraham's participation, which he had initiated (18:17–21). Finally, before Isaac was conceived, Abraham and Sarah again jeopardized God's calling when Abraham lied and Sarah moved into Abimelech's tent (20:1–18). All wombs were closed and an epidemic broke out. After Sarah was restored to Abraham, she conceived and bore Isaac (21:1–3).

A similar summary can be written for the call of Moses, who resisted God's call with many arguments until God became angry with him (Ex. 3:11–4:17). Later he passively resisted God by not circumcising his son. Without the intervention of his wife, Zipporah, he would have been killed (4:24–26). Nonetheless, Moses was not considered a bad example for his resistance. It is a necessary part of the narrative and is a biblical view of the relationship between God and the people he calls. God's call comes with abundant grace to strengthen the frail of heart. Jonah's story is in many ways similar.

The prophet Jeremiah struggled to the point of death with his call and messages from Yahweh:

> O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived;
> you overpowered me and prevailed.
> I am ridiculed all day long;
> everyone mocks me.
> Whenever I speak, I cry out
> proclaiming violence and destruction.
> So the word of the LORD has brought me
> insult and reproach all day long.
> But if I say, "I will not mention him
> or speak any more in his name,"
> his word is in my heart like a fire,
> a fire shut up in my bones.
> I am weary of holding it in;
> indeed, I cannot. (Jer. 20:7–9)

Jeremiah resisted Yahweh to the point that he cried out for his own death (Jer. 20:14–18), much like Jonah (Jonah 1:12; 4:3, 8, 9). This is an integral part of the life of prophets who are called to the most difficult tasks. Jonah's flight from Israel was not moral rebellion as it is sometimes described. It was prophetic resistance, in the classical Old Testament tradition, to an extremely difficult word from Yahweh (forgiveness of the terror-mongers of Nineveh). God honored Jonah's resistance, as he honored the resistance of Abram, Moses, and Jeremiah. Yahweh confirmed his call by facing him and delivering him from death.[9]

If we return Jonah to his Old Testament context, our modern "iron-clad" view of him and of prophets in general may be rehabilitated. In Scripture God does not work with automatons but with people of intelligence and integrity, whose authentic humanity is part of his difficult work in the world. Jonah's protest in running was both a genuine protest and a theological rebellion (sin). Nonetheless, God is not surprised (as we are) that those whom he calls struggle with that call. If we rehabilitate our view of Jonah, we may also find ourselves and our own hidden protests against God rehabilitated as well. We may find hope for our struggles against the persistence and longevity of violent persons and nations who inflict terror on civilian populations. When we consider that God's plan is that even these people come to repentance and be forgiven, we may have a new appreciation for Jonah's flight.

Historical Context

THE PROPHET JONAH, son of Amittai, is mentioned twice in the Old Testament (2 Kings 14:25; Jonah 1:1). In 2 Kings 14:23–27 he is described as a true prophet:

> In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant *Jonah son of Amittai*, the prophet from Gath Hepher.

9. A New Testament case could also be made for this "call—resistance—call confirmed with a sign" pattern from the lives of apostles Peter and Paul. Paul even boasts about his human weakness (1 Cor. 2:3; 15:43; 2 Cor. 11:30). His early zealous resistance to the gospel in the name of God, which in turn prepared him for his uniquely effective apostleship, is well known.

> The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.

Dating Jonah

COGENT ARGUMENTS AND warrants have been given by scholars for dates in each of the centuries between the eighth and the fourth centuries B.C. The dating of the final form of the composition of Jonah is widely disputed and includes a vast array of suggestions.[10] Mainstream scholarship argues for the fifth-fourth century range. Arguments for this later dating include Jonah's familiarity with Jeremiah (seventh-century B.C.) and Aramaic spellings, words, and grammatical constructions common to postexilic writing (after 538 B.C.). Further, Persian influences (538–333 B.C.) are seen in two descriptions of Ninevite practice: the decree given "by the decree of the king and his nobles" (3:7) and "but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth" (3:8a). This commentary does not seek to summarize those arguments or to offer a new suggestion for the writer's or the editor's correct quarter century.

Jonah's disagreement with Yahweh concerning the forgiveness of violent enemies was an enduring theological dialogue that could have been discussed in Israel as early as Jonah's lifetime (770 B.C.). Forward from this time the manuscript could have been edited and preserved through the centuries of Assyria's power and fall (612), still being relevant in the time of the Babylonian exile (587–538) and in the subsequent struggle of reconstruction under the Persians (538–333). The messages of the book continued to be relevant while the Jews were under the thumb of the Greeks (333–163) and the Romans (163 B.C.–A.D. 70) until it found its present place in the Hebrew canon (about A.D. 90).

The dispute in Jonah concerning the forgiveness of the violent Ninevites would have been more readily accepted at a time after Assyria was no longer a threat to Israel (after 612 B.C.). It is no surprise that after the destruction of Nineveh, Jonah's perspective in his dispute with Yahweh was taken seriously by Israel (that Nineveh should have been destroyed). Nineveh's evil did, in fact, outlast its repentance, as it was overturned in destruction by the Babylonian-Mede alliance in 612 B.C. Scholarly agreement on a date for Jonah is less important (and less possible) than awareness of the historical suffering of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and their overzealous violence. The inspiration of this book enabled Israel to consider the same question of forgiveness with each of its subsequent oppressors (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, etc.).

10. See James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 28–29.

The layers of history may echo the same enduring question, regardless of date: "If the violent repent, should God forgive them without consequence for their actions?" Jonah's objection is always relevant.

Time Chart: Historical Events and the Canonical Order of the Twelve Minor Prophets

THE CANONICAL SETTING of the book is essential for understanding why Jonah ran from Yahweh's call to Nineveh. The narrative of Jonah is set (by the biblical canon) in the eighth century B.C. during the days of Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.). "Jonah son of Amittai" is the prophet of 2 Kings 14:25, and the style and content of Jonah easily fit following the Elijah and Elisha narratives of 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13. Jonah follows Hosea and Amos, his contemporaries, who also prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. Micah follows Jonah since Micah prophesied after the death of Jeroboam II (Mic. 1:1).

Regardless of when Jonah reached its final form, it is presented in the Book of the Twelve as a book to be understood and interpreted in an eighth-century context. In the eighth century Assyria had already established a hundred-year-old reputation throughout the ancient Near East as a cruel enemy. Near the end of Jonah's life Assyria was rising to its greatest height of power and terror. The following chart demonstrates Jonah's canonical (biblical) context.

Event	Date B.C.
Death of Ashurnasirpal II (Assyria), who boasted of his violence and torture	859
Battle of Qarqar: Shalmanezer III* (Assyria) defeats King Ahab (Israel)	853
Death of Jeroboam II**	746
Beginning of Assyrian domination of ancient Near East	745
Israel pillaged by Tiglath-Pileser III (Assyria) (2 Kings 15)	734–732
Building of Nineveh into a "great city" by Tiglath-Pileser III	727
Israel's northern ten tribes are destroyed/enslaved by Shalmanezer V	722
Prophet **Micah**'s arrival in Jerusalem (after Jeroboam)	before 701
Sennacherib of Assyria besieges (but does not capture) Jerusalem and sacks Judean cities (2 Kings 18–19)	701
Josiah (Judah) reforms Jerusalem in the ways of Yahweh (2 Kings 22–23)	621
Nahum active in Jerusalem, prophesies Assyria's (Nineveh's) fall	615
Nineveh's fall to Babylonians and Medes	612

Habakkuk prophesies the fall of Judah to Babylon	605
Zephaniah prophesies of Judah's judgment and surviving remnant***	622
Babylonians capture Jerusalem and first exiles deported	597
Jerusalem falls again after rebellion; major deportation	586
Babylon falls to Cyrus (Persian); exiles begin to return to the land	539
Haggai and **Zechariah** prophesy during reign of Darius I (Persia)	520
Malachi prophesies during the Ezra–Nehemiah mission	460–430

*According to Shalmanezer III, Ahab lost 2000 chariots and 10,000 men; Israel paid tribute to Assyria.

Prophets **Hosea, **Joel**, **Amos**, and **Obadiah** (with Isaiah) were active during some part of the reign of Jeroboam II (Israel). **Jonah** prophesied correctly during this reign that Jeroboam II would restore Israel's borders (2 Kings 14:25–27).

***Placed out of sequence in the biblical canon probably because the remnant had hope in his prophecy.

The Terror-Mongers of Nineveh, Assyria

THE ASSYRIAN KINGS were proud of their cruel and terrible reputation and went to great trouble and expense to record their exploits for posterity.[11] Archaeologists have uncovered many reliefs (large stone wall panels with carved depictions) of grisly post-battle scenes, which were erected in palaces so that they could be seen daily. In addition, written descriptions of post-battle tortures of prisoners were preserved on obelisks and cylindrical pillars. Discovered in these pictorial and written displays are gruesome details and horrific boasting. "It is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know."[12]

Assyrians boasted of their cruelty to captured peoples following the siege of their town or city, and their victims were not limited to combatants. (Warning: What follows is rated "R" for gore and violence.) Records brag of live dismemberment, often leaving one hand attached so they could shake it before the person died. They made parades of heads, requiring friends of the deceased to carry them elevated on poles. They boasted of their practice of stretching live prisoners with ropes so they could be skinned alive. The human skins were then displayed on city walls and on poles. They commissioned pictures of their

11. For a modern cultural analogy we might think of the slaughters of the Khmer Rouge killing fields of Cambodia, the million machete deaths in Rwanda, Hitler's eleven million, Stalin's twenty-five million lives taken, or Saddam Hussein's mass graves.

12. Erika Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1991): 52–61. I am indebted to Erika Bleibtreu for her compilation of these descriptions.

post-battle tortures where piles of heads, hands, and feet, and heads impaled on poles—eight heads to a stake—were displayed. They pulled out the tongues and testicles of live victims and burned the young alive.

Those who survived the sack of their city were tied in long lines of enslavement and deported to Assyrian cities to labor on building projects. Tens of thousands in hundreds of cities suffered this fate over the two hundred and fifty years of the Assyrians' reign of terror (c. 883–612). Two Assyrian kings distinguished themselves in boasting of cruelty before the time of the prophet Jonah son of Amittai. Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) wrote, for example:

> I flayed [the skin from] as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]. . . . I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [with them] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls. . . . I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of the heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.[13]

Ashurnasirpal's son, Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.), is famous for his pictorial depictions of cruelty in large stone relief wall panels. A description of one panel is enough:

> We see an Assyrian soldier grasping the hand and arm of a [living] captured enemy whose other hand and both feet have already been cut off. Dismembered hands and feet fly through the scene. Severed enemy heads hang from the conquered city's walls.[14]

This cultural tradition of boasting of torture continued in Assyrian records in the eighth century, as Assyria expanded its empire. Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 B.C.) threatened Israel, capturing and deporting some of the population (2 Kings 15:29). Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.) sacked Samaria (2 Kings 18:10). Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) finished the job in 722, leading to what we now call the "ten lost tribes of Israel." He enslaved 27,290 Israelites according to his record. Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.), who moved the capital of Assyria to Nineveh, besieged the people of Jerusalem. Yahweh delivered them miraculously (at the time of King Hezekiah and Isaiah), although the surrounding towns and villages fell and were plundered (2 Kings 19).[15]

---

13. Quoted in ibid., 57–58.

14. Ibid., 58.

15. Jerusalem later survived by paying tribute, but it was destroyed by the Babylonians 114 years later.

Given this historical context, the prophet Jonah was in a difficult situation. Yahweh asked him to go to his cultural enemies and proclaim judgment in the capital city ("Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned," 3:4). He was asked to risk his life preaching and had no guarantees that he would not, like other unwelcomed prophets, be killed. Yet if he succeeded in his mission and they repented, he would not be welcome in Israel. No one, including God's chosen prophet, desired the possibility and threat of their enduring existence. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. In this situation, many would, like Jonah, act on the third possibility, that of flight.

Literary Elements and Meaning

JONAH IS AN imaginative and superlative narrative. Most of the places, emotions, and events are called "great." The Hebrew root *gdl* is used fifteen times in the book in the following ways: 1:2 ("great city of Nineveh"); 1:4 ("great wind" and "such a violent [lit., great] storm"); 1:10 ("this *terrified* them"; lit., "they feared a great fear"); 1:12 ("great storm"); 1:16 ("greatly feared the LORD"); 1:17 ("great fish"); 3:2 ("great city of Nineveh"); 3:3 ("a *very important* city"; lit., "a great city to God"); 3:5 ("from the greatest [person] to the least"); 3:7 ("*nobles*"; lit., "great ones"); 4:1 ("greatly displeased"; lit., "great calamity"); 4:6 ("*very* happy"; lit., "greatly joyful"); 4:10 ("make it *grow*"; lit., "make it great"); 4:11 ("great city").

This "greatness" gives the story of Jonah timeless appeal to teachers and students. Some have interpreted these unusual superlatives as indicating the fantastical quality of the story, that is, that no one would mistake this "over the top" story for a historical narrative. (Something similar is sometimes argued for the creation story in Genesis 1.) Given the creational subject matter of Jonah, the claim to true "greatness" should not be so easily quarantined. It claims no less than a radical shift in Israel's orientation toward her enemies. It declares a new ethic in religious and political alignment. It calls Jonah to make God's word available to the most evil of Israel's antagonists, at his own peril. This is a story in which the superlatives linguistically undergird its assertion and have perpetuated its telling.

Jonah the Prophet: Lessons of Irony

THE BOOK OF Jonah is in a class by itself. It is not like other books of prophecy, and Jonah does not act like other prophets. Nor is this book filled with the prophet's poetic oracles. He speaks only a few words of formal prophecy (3:4b: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."). The book is written about Jonah in the past tense, and the book never refers to him as a prophet. It is sometimes called a parable or a satire. It looks like a historical narrative that belongs in 2 Kings, but it is in the "book of the prophets."

Jonah is most like the book of Job: a dialogue between God and a pious man who does not agree with God's way in the world. It is a didactic story of the wisdom tradition (included among prophets, because Jonah is a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25). This form of piety is common in the Old Testament, though it is not common in many Christian communities of faith. God invites his people into conversation, and even disputes, concerning his way in the world.

Jonah's argument with God is not unique, but Jonah runs away in refusal of his call. Ironically, when he is "convinced" to accept it, he is unbelievably successful. The whole city repents without an argument after only one day of a three-day mission. Rather than rejoicing, however, Jonah becomes suicidal, despairing of his own prophetic success.

The book is full of ironies. He is a true prophet who at first refuses to prophesy. Jonah says, "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (1:9b), but he runs from God on the sea, to another land (see Bridging Contexts on 1:9). He refuses (ch. 1) and is reluctant (ch. 3) to prophesy, yet the sailors and the Ninevites all turn to Yahweh. He leads the sailors and the Ninevites to the brink of death, but Yahweh saves them all. Pagans (sailors and Ninevites) turn to Yahweh in crisis (1:14; 3:5). Jonah runs (1:3) and walks away (4:5).

All this irony has a purpose for the reader and the message of the book. Things are not as simple as they seem. Jonah's protest and dialogue with Yahweh raises complex questions about God's relationship to the wicked of the world. His ironic responses draw the reader in to take a second look at the prophet who says more by his protestations and conversations than by the few words of his formal prophecy. Jonah reveals God's identity and way in the world through his conversations, arguments, and whole life of protest and response. He is an atypical prophet, but he is true to his calling, even in protest.

Structure

JONAH HAS A simple parallel structure, with two parallel stories.

- Jonah is with the pagan sailors/pagan Ninevites (chs. 1, 3).
- Jonah speaks to Yahweh (chs. 2, 4).

Seven scenes are established by divisions in the ancient manuscript.[16] This commentary further subdivides these seven scenes by rhetorical signs

16. Our Hebrew Bible is the Masoretic Text from the Leningrad codex, 1008 A.D. Its authenticity is confirmed by the Dead Seas Scroll of Jonah, discovered in 1955; it was hidden in Cave 4 near the Dead Sea around A.D. 90.

Jonah 2

FROM INSIDE THE fish, Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.
[2]He said:

"In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From the depths of the grave I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
[3]You hurled me into the deep,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.
[4]I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'
[5]The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
[6]To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you brought my life up from the pit,
O LORD my God.

[7]When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

[8]Those who cling to worthless idols
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.
[9]But I, with a song of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the LORD."

[10]And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Original Meaning

JONAH 2 IS Jonah's psalm of thanks from within the belly of the fish. The song primarily recounts Jonah's distress in the water and gives thanks for his rescue. It begins with a summary of his cry for help (2:2) and continues with four more stanzas describing Jonah's sinking in the water before he is swallowed by the fish (2:3–6). In the refrain (2:7–9) Jonah summarizes his cry for rescue and declares Yahweh as the true source of salvation. Then, the narrator tells us, Yahweh talked to the fish, and "it vomited Jonah onto dry land" (2:10).

The amazing context of this poetic prayer is Jonah's gratitude *while inside* the fish. He fully expected to die in the water. His thanksgiving within the belly of a fish is a proclamation of joy, with the realization that God has delivered him in spite of his running. Though he is not yet on dry land, his faith reaches a new dimension of understanding. He seems to have no doubt that, as he was delivered from drowning, he will also eventually be delivered safely to the shore.

Readers of narratives are sometimes tempted to move too quickly through poetry. This song, however, is critical to the interpretation of the book and may be the theologically richest part. Its content helps us to understand Jonah's point of view, as he speaks in the first person. The poem also offers a window into the nature and circumstances of true gratitude (see Contemporary Significance).

Inside the Fish (2:1)

IN CHAPTER 1, the captain of the sailors asked Jonah to pray to his god, and Jonah ignored him (1:6). Here for the first time Jonah speaks directly to Yahweh in response to his physical and unusual deliverance.[1] This is the prophet at his best, giving thanks for deliverance *before he is on dry land.* Surprisingly, perhaps, he does not mention the small problem of his residency in the fish. He demonstrates his comprehension of the miracle of deliverance and his full dependence on the mercy and compassion of Yahweh. He is grateful to be in Yahweh's keeping, even as he remains in the fish's belly.

The Hebrew text raises the question of whether the fish is male or female. In 1:17 noun "fish" is a masculine noun (*dag*) while in 2:1 "fish" is a feminine noun (*dagah*). It is possible that the anomaly is a scribal error (in 2:10, "the fish" is male again.). However, interpreters have attributed various meanings

1. Note that later (4:4–5), he again walks away without responding to Yahweh's question.

to the change.[2] The most obvious reason for the shift to the "female" fish is found in the immediate context of Jonah's prayer. The female capacities of the fish are echoed poetically in two birthing words in 2:2. The female word sets up the poetic concept of Jonah's "death" (male fish eats him) and rebirth (female fish carries and delivers him). "Inside" in 1:17b and 2:1 is a general Hebrew term for the "inward parts" (*me'eh*), which is a synonym of "womb" (*reḥem*).[3]

In 2:2 Jonah uses two other birthing words that develop this poetical image of his deliverance. (1) When he says "in my distress" (*ṣarah*, 2:2a), he uses a word that is specifically used of the "travail" of childbirth. It signifies being bound up or being tied in a tight place.[4] Jonah is alluding to the distress of a child about to be born (see Bridging Contexts section for further comments). (2) When he says, "from the depths [*beṭen*] of the grave" (2:2b), he literally says, "from the womb [belly] of Sheol" (Sheol is the place of the dead in the Old Testament).[5] This Hebrew phrase "womb of Sheol" is the only time "womb/belly" is used with "Sheol" in Scripture. It continues the image of Jonah's birthing. He is as good as dead but may be reborn.

The Five Stanzas of Jonah's Distress (2:2–6)

THE PRAYER IS in the form of a psalm with five stanzas and a refrain.[6] The five stanzas begin with 2:2 and proceed, one verse at a time, through 2:6. In the first stanza, Jonah summarizes the basic situation (2:2): "I called . . . and you heard my voice." In the second through the fifth stanzas, Jonah describes his progressive descent into his watery grave. In stanza 2 he is *on the surface of the water* (2:3). Jonah is hurled overboard, pulled by currents, and battered by breaking waves on the surface of the sea. In stanza 3 he is *in the midst of the seas* (2:4). While sinking, he feels banished from Yahweh, yet looks toward his presence. In stanza 4 Jonah is *near the bottom* (2:5). He is engulfed and surrounded by water, sinking to the seaweed at the bottom. By the last stanza

2. Is it a male or female fish? Rabbi Izkakais said that Jonah didn't pray in the male fish (1:17), which was larger, so it vomited him in the water and a female fish swallowed him. In this smaller place Jonah began to pray.

3. BDB, 589; see Isa. 63:15 and Jer. 31:20.

4. BDB, 865.

5. "Sheol" is a synonym of "the pit" and refers to the place of the dead where people are cut off from memory (Ps. 88:11–12), from knowledge (Eccl. 9:10), from return (Job 7:9; 10:22), and from the presence of God (Ps. 88:5, 10–12; 115:17; Isa. 38:18). Sheol is not, however, beyond God's power (Amos 9:2; Prov. 15:11; Ps. 139:8).

6. Many different organizational patterns have been proposed for this psalm. For a summary of seven of them, see Dorsey, *The Literary Structure*, 239.

he is *drowning* (2:6). The sands (bars) of the floor of the sea will be his grave, but Yahweh brings him up (by a fish).

The major theme of "going down" and being "brought up" by Yahweh as seen in chapter 1 is also present in chapter 2. Jonah calls from the *depths* of the grave (2:2). He is "hurled . . . into the *deep*" (2:3). He is banished from the temple (*mount*) in 2:4. "The *deep* surrounded" him (2:5). He "sank *down*" to the "*roots* of the mountains," but Yahweh brings his "life *up* from the *pit*" (2:6). In the refrain (2:7–9), Jonah's "prayer *rose*" to Yahweh in the temple ("temple" can mean "God's heavenly dwelling place," as in Ps. 11:4). Finally, Jonah leaves the depths and is *vomited up*, out of the depths of the sea, out of the depths of the fish, "onto dry land" (2:10).

An interesting and common Old Testament structure, called a *chiasmus*,[7] is present in this prayer. In the midst of Jonah's going "deeper and deeper," this structure demonstrates the "center" of Jonah's faith. A chiasm often follows the pattern A B C B′ A′. The "parallels" (A B/B′ A′) are created by the repetition of words or themes (see words in italics, below).[8] The center (C) is created by its isolation between the parallels. This center is often not only the structural center but also the interpretive (and theological) center of the rhetorical unit.

A (2:2) In my distress I called to *the* LORD, and he answered me.
From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.
  B (2:3) You hurled me into *the deep*, into the very heart of the seas,
  and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers
  swept over me.
    C (2:4) I said, "I have been banished from your sight;
    yet I will look again toward your holy temple."
  B′ (2:5) The engulfing waters threatened me, *the deep* surrounded me;
  seaweed was wrapped around my head.
A′ (2:6) To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath
barred me in forever.
But you brought *my life up from the pit*, O LORD my God.

In the first stanza (2:2 [A]), the phrases "in my distress" and "depths of the grave" refer to Jonah's drowning in the sea as he is sinking. (He confirms his experience of drowning in 2:7). "He answered me" and "You listened to my

7. The best source for studying Old and New Testament chiasms is Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992).

8. Sometimes the repetition is only recognized in the original Hebrew, since English translations vary.

cry" refer to Yahweh's fish that rescued Jonah from drowning. Note that Jonah begins by referring to God in the third person ("*he* answered me"), but immediately shifts to the more personal second person ("you"), which he uses until the refrain (2:7–9) at the end of the prayer. The first and second half of verse 2 are parallel, with the second half echoing the first ("In my distress I called"/"From the depths of the grave I called," and "He answered me"/"You listened to my cry"). This is typical for introductory summaries in psalms.[9]

Stanza 2 (2:3 [B]) begins a sensate description of Jonah's descent. The reader who has been adrift may feel the vertigo of Jonah's experience: "hurled . . . into the deep . . . currents swirled . . . waves and breakers swept over me." Jonah was thrown overboard by the sailors, but Jonah knows that Yahweh has done it, and thus he says, "You hurled me," implying that the sailors were innocent (as they prayed in 1:14).

Yahweh hurled him "into *the deep*," which his original listeners would have recognized. There was underlying anxiety and fear of chaos represented by deep (and potentially turbulent) water, as it was over *the deep* that the Spirit hovered at the creation. "Now the earth was formless [*tohu*] and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep [*tehom*], and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen. 1:2). The *deep* (*meṣulah*) and its synonym *depths* or *deep waters* (*tehom*) are words that refer to the "chaos" of deep water. Note the following passages:

> Pharaoh's chariots and his army
> he has hurled into the sea.
> The best of Pharaoh's officers
> are drowned in the Red Sea.
> The *deep waters* [*tehomot*] have covered them;
> they sank to *the depths* [*meṣolot*] like a stone. (Ex. 15:4–5)
>
> He makes *the depths* [*meṣulah*] churn like a boiling cauldron
> and stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment.
> Behind him he leaves a glistening wake;
> one would think *the deep* [*tehom*] had white hair. (Job 41:31–32)
>
> They saw the works of the LORD,
> his wonderful deeds in *the deep* [*meṣulah*].

9. Cf. Ps. 18:6:

> In my distress I called to the LORD;
> I cried to my God for help.
> From his temple he heard my voice;
> my cry came before him, into his ears.

For he spoke and stirred up a tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens
and went down to *the depths [tehomot]*;
in their peril their courage melted away. (Ps. 107:24–26)

The NIV translates the second "chaos" word (*tehom*) as "deep" in Jonah 2:5 as well. Jonah continues describing the experience of the deep: "into the very heart of the sea, and the currents swirled about me." "Waves" in 2:3b is, literally, "rollers"—from the same root (*gal*) as the name "Gilgal" (based on its rolling hill country.) A whisper of hope is seen in the adjective "your," as even the deep belongs to and is an agent of Yahweh.

Stanza 3 is the centerpiece of the five stanzas (2:4 [C]). It is set apart by Jonah's quoting himself ("I said") so that the listener/reader cannot miss the central point. It is the first indication that Jonah regrets leaving his place in the presence of Yahweh in the temple. It is the turning point. In 1:3 he "ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish." Here he turns for the first time to look back ("Yet I will look again toward").

Jonah remembers his own words: "I said, 'I have been banished.'" When Jonah says "banished" (*garaš*), it means he feels he has *no option of return*. Jonah was not banished from Yahweh's sight when he ran to Joppa's port; he ran of his own volition. He was not banished in the storm or through his inspired word to the sailors that the storm would become calm if they threw him overboard. Jonah experienced the banishment when he was lifted up and hurled over the gunwale, and then hit the water. The word *garaš* means "thrown out." At the moment he was physically "hurled" or "cast out" of the ship, he realized, apparently for the first time, that he could no longer keep his options open. The physical reality resounded in the disconsolate cry: "I have been banished."[10] He could no longer choose to go back.

"Yet I will look again toward your holy temple" (2:4b). This turning and looking is Jonah's hope. His offense was fleeing from the "presence of the LORD" (i.e., his place of employment in the temple). Here Jonah demonstrates his understanding of the power of simply turning again toward the presence of Yahweh! Even when he is "banished" (with no option of return), he can look to Yahweh. He cannot return, but he can turn and "look . . . toward." The same word (*nabaṭ*) is used when the Exodus people were dying from snakebite in the desert: "So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and *looked at [nabaṭ]* the bronze snake, he lived" (Num. 21:9).

10. His cry is set apart rhetorically as Jonah quotes himself in the words "I said."

Stanza 4 returns to the descriptive narrative of Jonah's drowning (2:5 [B']). He is "engulfed" and "surrounded" by "waters" and "the deep" ("surrounded" is the same word as "swirled" in 2:3). He nears the bottom of the sea, with seaweed wrapped around his head. He is in deep trouble. This stanza repeats the idea of the second stanza, but now "the deep" (*tehom* here; *meṣulah* in 2:3) threatens with seaweed instead of rolling and breaking waves. In 2:5 the expression "the engulfing waters threatened me" is, literally, "waters closed in on me, over life."

Stanza 5 takes Jonah to the ocean floor, "to the roots of the mountains" that are below the sea (2:6 [A']). The earth "barred me in." The word "bar" has two different meanings in English, even as in Hebrew. In both languages it means "bars" as those on a prison cell (as the grave was considered in the ancient Near East). It also denotes a "river bar" or "sand bar." Both meanings are relevant to Jonah's distress. He is about to be *imprisoned* forever in a grave of *sand*.

The chiasmus parallel is maintained in the name of Yahweh. "O LORD" in 2:6 echoes "to the LORD" (2:2). The parallel is also carried in reference to death. "Up from the pit" (2:6) mirrors the first stanza "from the depths of the grave" (2:2), using the synonyms "pit" (*šaḥat*) and "grave" (*še'ol*; cf. Ps. 103:2–4).[11]

The Refrain of Jonah's Deliverance (2:7–10)

THE SONG OF thanks concludes with Jonah's refrain, declaring that "salvation comes from the LORD." When his song is complete, Yahweh's fish vomits Jonah onto dry land (2:10). One contemporary singer-songwriter has captured the heart of this refrain by repeating the line "Salvation belongs to the LORD" after each line.[12]

[2:7]When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD
Salvation belongs to the LORD.
and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.
Salvation belongs to the LORD.
[2:8]Those who cling to worthless idols
Salvation belongs to the LORD.
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.
Salvation belongs to the LORD.

11. Sheol is the place of the dead under the earth, so "grave" is a good translation. See Gen. 37:35; Num. 16:30; Ps. 88:3–7; Isa. 38:17.

12. See Andrew Thompson, "Salvation Belongs to the Lord." © 2002. Used by permission. This song puts Jonah's entire second chapter psalm to music, using the biblical structure. You may listen to this song on the author's web page: http://www.personal.northpark.edu/jbruckner

[2:9]But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.
Salvation belongs to the LORD.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation belongs to the LORD.

In the first line (2:7a) Jonah recalls that he came as close as possible to death before turning in helplessness to Yahweh. "When my life was *ebbing away* [*ʿaṭaṭ*]" appropriately uses tidal language to communicate Jonah's fainting and feeble situation. When Jonah says, "I remembered you, LORD," this is more than simply recalling something to mind. In the Old Testament remembering has theological connotations. Remembering Yahweh is Israel's foremost responsibility, but Jonah did not remember Yahweh until his life was almost gone. Moses warned Israel to "remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (Deut. 8:18; cf. Ex. 20:2). They failed and "did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side" (Judg. 8:34).

"Your holy temple" is a central theme of the second line (2:7b). Yahweh is everywhere in the book of Jonah, but Jonah's specific references are always toward the temple (1:3; 2:4, 7). This is sometimes seen as Jonah's foolishness, especially since Yahweh comes to him in the storm, lots, and especially the fish (and later in the vine, worm, and wind). When Yahweh converses with Jonah about Nineveh (in ch. 4), he does not express great surprise that Yahweh is present on a hillside east of Nineveh. The presence of Yahweh in the "holy temple" cannot be a reference to Jonah's view of Yahweh's singular location. Rather, Yahweh's presence in the temple is a sign of the necessary gathering of the worshiping community (see Bridging Contexts section). Jonah never loses sight of the historically revealed Lord.

The third line (2:8a) about clinging to "worthless idols" is like a cannonball, given the context of Jonah. To whom is it referring? It introduces previously unidentified idols, worshiped by someone. The sailors have already worshiped Yahweh. Jonah is not confessing that he has been worshiping idols. The unidentified idol worshipers must be those who hear or read Jonah's witness and prayer. It may also allude to the sailors, who called upon their gods (idols?) for salvation from the storm, to no avail.

Idolatry in Israel was a constant problem (Hos. 4:12; Amos 5:26; cf. Deut. 32:21). The original language synonyms for the word "worthless" (*šawe'*) are "lies, deceit, futility," and it is used especially to refer to "false" prophets. Coming from Jonah, such a reference may sound undeservedly smug. Jonah, however, is preaching to his later readers. Clinging to "worthless idols" is

one thing he has not done in his protest. Even in his fleeing he has not turned to false gods and forfeited grace. He has received a severe form of grace for his flight from Yahweh's presence, but it is grace that has pursued him.

The fourth line (2:8b) warns and invites the reader at the same time. Those who cling to idols "forfeit the grace that could be theirs." This can mean forsaking "a righteous life."[13] Usually this kind of grace (*ḥesed*) means "God's pursuing love" for his people. The NIV appropriately translates "their *ḥesed*" as "grace that could be theirs." It is God's *ḥesed* that they lose (understanding "their" as possession of God's gifted grace rather than a pouring forth of their own piety toward God). "They deprive themselves of the steadfast love of God, which manifests itself in God's gracious acts."[14] They deprive themselves like someone who abandons a faithful and loving spouse.[15] Jonah probably knows the Psalm 31, which has the same expressions for "cling to worthless idols" and "love" (*ḥesed*): "I hate those who cling to *worthless idols*; I trust in the LORD. I will be glad and rejoice in your *love* (*ḥesed*), for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul" (Ps. 31:6–7).

In the fifth line (2:9a) Jonah makes a promise. "*But I*, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you." "But I" (*wa'ani*) is a common emphatic expression in many psalms (Ps. 5:7; 13:5; 31:14; 55:16; 59:16; 109:4; ten times in Ps. 119). This expression is usually followed by a declaration of trust or righteousness; it is always preceded by contrasting the wickedness of the masses or lack of trust. Jonah is willing to return to his prophetic post at the temple. Like the sailors, he wants to offer sacrifices to Yahweh. The thanksgiving sacrifice was a celebration and meal at the temple, where individuals delivered by God gave public testimony to Yahweh's act of deliverance (see Bridging Contexts section).

In the last line of the refrain (2:9b) Jonah promises to keep his vows: "What I have vowed I will make good." The expression "make good" is from the original root *šalom*, which has the sense of "make complete." He ends with the apex of the refrain, which is a confession of faith, "Salvation comes from the LORD." This is an echo of Psalm 3:8: "From the LORD comes deliverance." "Deliverance" and "salvation" are the same word in Hebrew, from the root *yaša'* (see Bridging Contexts section). The preposition "from" can also be translated "Salvation *belongs to* the LORD." Jonah's declaration is the one slight reference in this chapter to his disagreement with Yahweh concerning Nineveh. His complaint (expanded in ch. 4) is that he knows better than God

13. Isa. 57:1; Jer. 2:2; Hos. 6:4, 6.

14. Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson; 1996), 272.

15. Limburg, *Jonah*, 72. Hosea develops this theme of Israel forsaking God's *ḥesed*.

what ought to be done about Nineveh. Here he concedes that he knows that ultimately Yahweh is not bound by human rules of strict judgment/deliverance. Jonah has just learned this firsthand, since he did not expect to be rescued from drowning.

The chapter closes with Jonah's return to dry land (2:10; see comments on "dry land" at 1:13). Yahweh speaks (*'amar*) to the fish. This word is almost always translated "commanded" when God is the subject. When nonhuman creation is the hearer of God's speech, there is no resistance to his word. Only human beings need, in contrast, to be "commanded" by God. A simple word from the Creator is enough for the rest of the creation.

Jonah's regurgitation by the fish onto the land is not a happy transport, but it is his salvation. In the Old Testament, vomiting is usually a metaphor of judgment. As a biblical metaphor in Leviticus 18:25, 28; 20:22, the residents are spewed out of land, by the land, for disobedience to Yahweh. In contrast here, Jonah is spewed *in spite of* his disobedience. In Isaiah 28:4 Ephraim (northern Israel), is "swallowed" in judgment like a ripe fig. In Jeremiah 51:34, Jerusalem is swallowed, digested, and vomited out by Babylon. In Jonah, the metaphor of being swallowed and vomited is turned on its head. Both the swallowing and the vomiting are Jonah's salvation and deliverance.

Bridging Contexts

TWO MAIN POINTS should be made concerning this section of Jonah. On the one hand, the prayer/thanksgiving/psalm of Jonah from the belly of the fish is a classic Old Testament psalm. Commentators have traditionally interpreted Jonah's prayer in the context of biblical praise. It is in the standard form of some psalms of thanks. Verse 6 encapsulates his gratitude. He declares that he was dying, but Yahweh rescued him.

On the other hand, interpreters have tried to resolve the tensions of the psalm with the realities of the narrative. Jonah is not yet out of danger (he is still at sea, in a fish), but he nonetheless gives thanks for his deliverance. He claims piety in relation to God but has not repented of his flight from God. He claims piety in relation to "idolaters" (sailors, Ninevites, and Israelite listeners/readers), but his actions in chapter 1 (and 4) betray him.

A range of strategies for resolving the tensions between the psalm and the action of the narrative have been proposed. Interpreters have chosen to deny the tension, ignore it for the truth of the piety, castigate Jonah for his shallowness, or label his piety as ironic. These options will be described more fully. None of them succeeds in removing the tension, and the enduring truth of the tension remains.

Recognition of Jonah's true response is the first and necessary step in understanding this chapter. The formal elements of Jonah's heartfelt thanks for deliverance from the "drink" provide additional explanation.

Jonah's song of thanksgiving. This psalm contains the traditional elements of an individual's declarative narrative of praise to God for deliverance.[16] These are often called "psalms of thanksgiving" (*todah*). This kind of thanksgiving was accompanied by a sacrifice (a thank offering, a type of peace offering) to Yahweh that was expected when someone was rescued from death (from illness, accident, or a dangerous situation; see Lev. 3:6–11; 7:11–18; 22:18–30). The delivered person brought a meat offering that was cooked (with only the fat consumed by fire) and shared with the congregation.[17] Narrative *todah* psalms usually contain the following elements: (1) an introduction, including a summons to praise Yahweh and a summary of the theme; (2) a call to the congregation to praise Yahweh; (3) narrative account, including the crisis in retrospect and the rescue, often using "I cried," "you heard," and "you intervened"; and (4) a vow to praise.

Jonah 2 contains all of these elements, though (as in other psalms) not exactly in this order. Elements (1) and (2) are found at the end of the psalm in the refrain (2:7–9). The body of the prayer is the narrative account, including the crisis (2:2a) and the elements of the rescue (2:2b–6). This psalm was probably sung, with the refrain sung first (2:7–9) as the introduction. The refrain also doubles in this way as the concluding vow and praise (2:9).

Tensions between the song and the narrative. It has surprised readers through the centuries that Jonah prays a prayer of thanksgiving while he is still in mortal danger. He is giving thanks for his safety while he remains in the belly of a fish. Jonah has been rescued from the breakers, rollers, seaweed, and the sandy grave at the bottom of the sea. He is not, however, anywhere near dry land. He is still in motion, at sea, isolated, uncertain, and at great risk of death. Yahweh has said nothing to him, and Jonah has not repented of his running. Nonetheless, Jonah offers up a song of pure praise and thanksgiving to Yahweh. He declares his own piety and Yahweh's faithfulness. He is still in the depths of the sea but he is full of praise. These two juxtaposed truths of the text create an unresolved tension for the reader.

In order to resolve this tension (and other tensions in the chapter), some commentators have argued that chapter 2 was not part of the original book of Jonah. Historical critics suggest that this psalm was written and added at a later date than the narrative, or that the author simply borrowed it from an existing collection of psalms because of its water images. Some have sug-

16. For other examples of this type of psalm of praise, see Ps. 18, 30, 32, 92, 118, 138.
17. For a fuller description of the *todah* offering, see Limburg, *Jonah*, 67, 70.

gested that it was written in the safety of Jerusalem. Whatever the circumstances of its writing or origin, the song-prayer in the text is presented between two notices: Jonah was swallowed, then gave a prayer, after which he was vomited on dry land. It ought to be interpreted within this narrative sequence.

For an interpreter who seeks the meaning of the whole text of Jonah as we have received it in the canon, there is no compelling purpose for focusing on the history of the composition of book. The psalm/prayer is an integral part of the narrative development.[18] It expresses Jonah's deep gratitude for his unexpected deliverance. He is not fully delivered, but the unbelievable fish has turned Jonah's face back to Yahweh. The fish's appearance and swallowing of the prophet are powerful signs, which establish *some* anticipation of the possibility of his full deliverance to dry land. Jonah's prayer of thanks is the essential *beginning* of his experiential transformation (continued in the vine, worm, and wind encounters). The complete confidence of the prayer of thanks is not explicitly explained in the text. If one could read Jonah's mind (which we cannot), one might think that he would be pondering how to get out of the fish alive.[19] How Jonah expresses his gratitude in the psalm from the belly of the fish raises several other tensions.

Jonah claims piety in relation to "idolaters" (sailors and Ninevites). Jonah says, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you" (2:8–9a). This claim creates a tension because of Jonah's rebellious actions in chapter 1 and his angry conversation with God in chapter 4. Tension is also created by the abrupt reference to idolatry from a man with kelp wrapped around his head (2:5). Yes, Jonah is truly grateful for his deliverance and promises to complete the public service of thanksgiving in the temple. He expresses it, however, by contrasting himself to "idolaters."

The sailors are the only idolaters we have encountered, at a time when they had to cajole Jonah to pray to his God, something he never does in the narrative. While what Jonah says is true (idolaters forfeit grace, and their prayers to their gods *are* futile), it is spurious for Jonah to critique the sailors in relation to himself. His God is true, but his piety seems less faithful than theirs. In the storm, Jonah had little to be proud of in relation to the mariners. Both truths of the text (his gratitude for a true God and his expression of pride in relation to the sailors) create an unresolved tension for the reader.

---

18. Ibid., 33.

19. Keil thought Jonah regarded the fish as a convincing "pledge of his future complete deliverance." The text says nothing about this complete mature faith. Noted in Kleinert, *Jonah*, 26.

This tension is dealt with in a variety of ways by interpreters. On one end of the spectrum, Jonah may be a changed man. His repentance can be implied and his piety simple and genuine. This assumes a lot, however, since his attitude toward Nineveh is fundamentally the same in chapter 4. It may also be an expression of "counterfeit piety from a loquacious Jonah."[20] This implies, however, that his gratitude for his deliverance is not genuine. It could be instructively ironic, since Jonah declares the foolishness of those who "forfeit the grace that could be theirs" (2:8b) when he has himself turned his back on the presence of Yahweh, responds to Yahweh's call, and is safely back on dry land (Nineveh).

In contrast, the sailors turned toward Yahweh, sought God's direction, and were in fact saved. Now that the belly-ensconced Jonah recognizes Yahweh's grace, he is *not* in the temple, able to fulfill his calling, or in safety (see "Two truths," below.) Jonah is genuinely thankful and will fulfill his vow, but his language sounds like a late and "pious cover-up" for the fact that he still has not repented of his evasion of his call.

Jonah's self-centeredness. This theme, begun in chapter 1, continues in the midst of his praise in chapter 2. If this were only a matter of the formal construction of an independent psalm, it could be explained away.[21] The narrative context *and* the psalm reveal the prophet's self-centered viewpoint. Jonah's self-focused orientation is seen in his repetition of the pronoun "I" ten times in eight verses (2:2–9). In these verses he also says "my" seven times (not all occurrences shown).

Verse 2: In *my* distress *I* called to the LORD. . . . From the depths of the grave *I* called for help.
Verse 3: You hurled *me* into the deep.
Verse 4: *I* said, "*I* have been banished from your sight; yet *I* will look again toward your holy temple."
Verse 6: To the roots of the mountains *I* sank down.
Verse 7: When *my* life was ebbing away, *I* remembered you, LORD.
Verse 9: But *I*, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What *I* have vowed *I* will make good.

Jonah's perception of reality seems to be distorted.[22] His self-centered declarations and tone proclaim what his situation and his previous actions deny. Yes, Jonah is truly grateful, but his description of an unwavering and

20. Phyllis Trible, "The Book of Jonah" (*NIB*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:507.
21. Luther explained that Jonah must have written this later, at home, since its formality does not fit Jonah's messy situation in the belly of the fish. The text, however, offers no explanation of the kind, letting the tension ride.
22. Trible, "The Book of Jonah," 7:507.

thoroughgoing piety is hard to stomach in the context of his flight in chapter 1 and complaining in chapter 4. Jonah expresses his "conversion" here, but the problem of himself as "subject" and controller is in the grammar and the piety. He is making vows, but he is not repentant. He recalls his trust in Yahweh, yet he shows few signs of real trust. He has expressed thanks for the fact that he is still breathing, but that is all. He uses a flourish of words for his own deliverance, but has only a few reticent words for the Ninevites and sailors.

One widely accepted way of dealing with this tension is to regard Jonah's piety as an "inflated" expression of a "deflated" character, or even "grotesque" in relation to his actual actions. The story can only move on by means of a vomiting (nauseated) fish and by starting over with Yahweh's second call (3:1).[23] Perhaps in his reference to the temple and fulfilling vows there is a kind of bargaining maneuver. Whatever the case, Jonah has had a rough ride with God.

Two truths. The tension between the song and the narrative remain unresolved for a reason. The tensions remain and should not be resolved artificially because they remain in the prophet Jonah. He gives thanks from inside the fish because he is truly grateful that he is not dead yet. He does not need to wait to reach dry land to feel gratitude. Jonah has not left his fundamental beliefs about idolatry behind, despite his encounter with the exemplary sailors. Nor has he lost the deep convictions of his argument with Yahweh about Nineveh. He is grateful without repenting for running, because his basic beliefs have not changed. He still does not want Nineveh to have the opportunity to repent (see Bridging Contexts section of ch. 4).

Tension remains and must remain between the song and the narrative because Jonah is both grateful and defiant. He will go to Nineveh since Yahweh has made it clear that he *must* go. He will protest again later. For now, he will express his thanks for an unanticipated deliverance in a formal prayer.[24] The tension of his piety is not between irony and simple praise. It is not grotesque, nor should it be excluded as an editor's (misfit) addition. Jonah prays what he is capable of praying—and not more. God accepts the prayer for what it is: a stiff but true expression of thanks for not drowning. He uses formal poetry to express himself precisely *because* he is in the slime of the belly, going back to old familiar clichés and forms of the psalms he knows by heart.

Plainly put, Jonah has looked toward God (2:4, 7). It is enough for his deliverance. God will deal with his protest/running issues later. For now they must remain in tension. God answers those who call out in distress whether

23. Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 258; Trible, "The Book of Jonah," 7:506–7.

24. Sherwood describes the psalm as Jonah's "white handkerchief" (*A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 256).

their issues of protest are resolved or not. He delivers those who call out in times of trouble (2:9b). He accepts Jonah's thanks and his lack of repentance because he accepts Jonah's protest, not as sin but as a welcome dialogue.

When Jonah concludes with his (true) pious and dramatic declaration of Yahweh's salvation, he is vomited out. It is true that he seems now to be ready to go to Nineveh (even though his declaration is not repentance). Were it not for his equally dramatic protest about Yahweh's salvation of the Ninevites (ch. 4), we could assume that the "vomiting" functions simply to return him to dry land. Given his opposite dramatic expressions in both places, however, the vomiting suggests that the fish also had had enough of Jonah's tensions in his belly.

JONAH'S SONG OF thanksgiving demonstrates the power of praise and thanksgiving in any circumstance for the one who turns to Yahweh (2:4, 7). It is far more than a poetic interlude in the narrative. Although Jonah's song is not full of repentance, it is enough in this situation that he turns toward Yahweh in worship. It is the first necessary step for his journey home. He concedes God's call on his life, as part of a complex and rich inheritance of faith: "In my distress I *called* to the LORD, and he *answered* me. From the depths of the grave I *called* for help, and you *listened* to my cry" (2:2). The first two verses encapsulate the contemporary significance of chapter 2. *From inside the fish*, Jonah speaks in the *past* tense ("called," "answered," "called," and "listened"). Jonah thanks Yahweh and describes his gratitude for his salvation while still in the fish, far from his final safety.

The tension of Jonah's life. The believer's life on earth, after salvation but before its fulfillment, is somewhat like Jonah's situation. Jonah has been saved but not delivered to the ultimate safety of dry land. He has not drowned (as he expected and believed he deserved) but has been found by an unexpected grace. The inside of the belly of God's fish ought to have brought his death, but it becomes a place of (relative) safety and praise. He still suffers the difficulties and discomforts of an uncertain life (inside a fish!), but he gives unreserved thanks to Yahweh. Jonah does not repent of his protest. His thanksgiving, however, does end his fleeing. He turns to Yahweh and acknowledges his salvation even though he has not resolved his questions concerning his mission to Nineveh (cf. his discussion with Yahweh in 4:2–11).

One common conclusion concerning the tension between Jonah's genuine temple piety and his actions/attitudes toward the sailors and Ninevites is that Jonah's faith simply doesn't wear very well in the world. He is good with pious language and formal poetic prayers, but he cannot bring himself to have