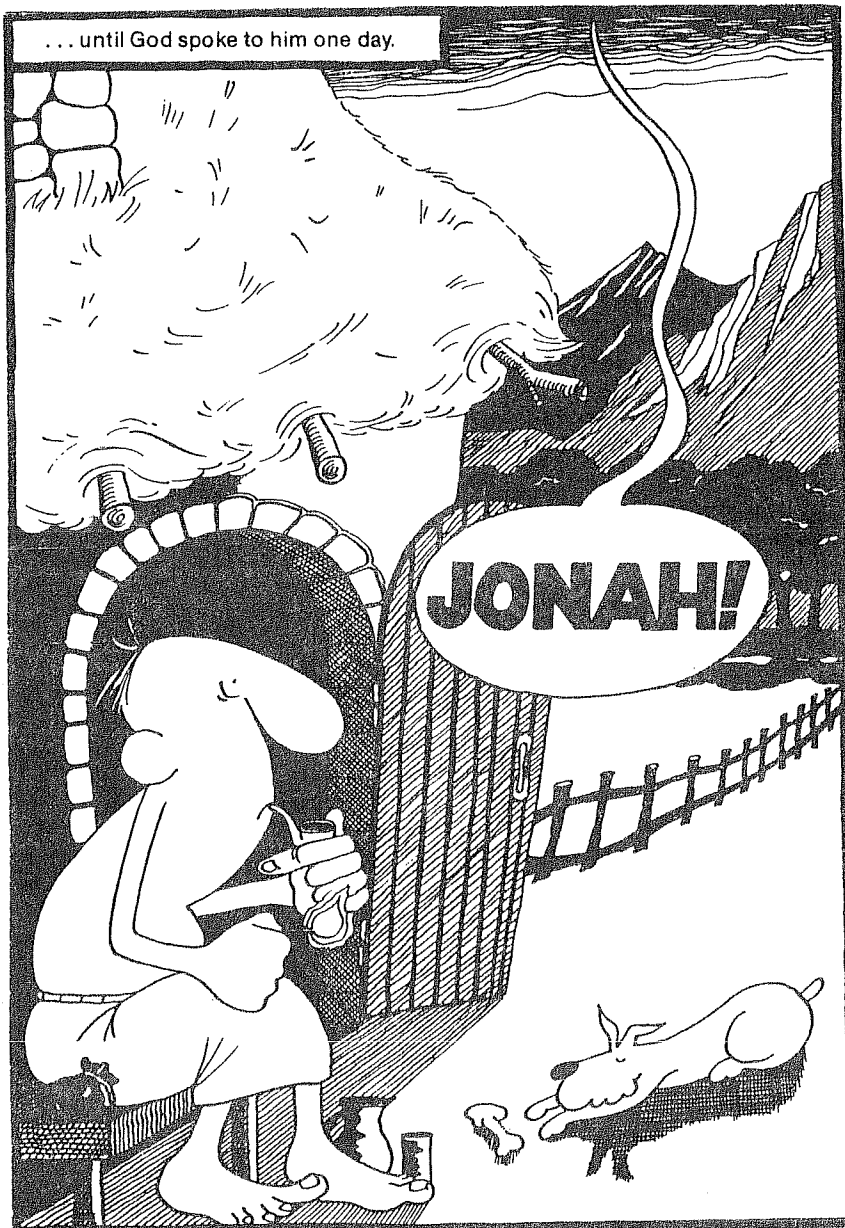


AN ISOGOGICAL TREATMENT OF THE BOOK OF JONAH



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I. A SUMMARY OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah demonstrates God was not forgetful of the Gentile world. In the first place He wanted Israel to be the chosen nation in which the revelation of Himself would be safeguarded and kept free from heathen idolatry and superstition. It was also His will that from Israel the light and glory of His grace toward sinners should shine upon all nations. The story of Jonah, however, demonstrates that many in Israel had become blind to this situation and felt that God's saving truth was only for them and not for all Gentiles.

II. AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR STUDY

I recall Jonah was the subject of much discussion twenty years ago in theological circles, especially those of certain brands of Lutheranism. The big question was: Are the events of Jonah historical or not? One group, following the best in rational and critical scholarship, felt moved to enlighten the world that Jonah was not historical. The other group, following more traditional principles of interpretation, reiterated the historicity of Jonah and exposed the former group. A particular theologian's attitude toward Jonah frequently became a cited measurement of his orthodoxy.

The preparation of this study of Jonah triggered some memories of personal experiences nearly twenty years ago involving Jonah while serving my vicarship. Having been assigned to serve in a congregation of unclear confessional alignment, I quickly learned how much significance Jonah held. Many people in the congregation on both sides of the Jonah question had been informed for what they should be looking. I watched more than one set of eyebrows rise in incredulity when I confessed an acceptance of Jonah as historical. On the other hand the conservatives in the congregation asked that we make Jonah the subject of a careful study in the vicar's Bible class. Studying Jonah under such circumstances was a lot like shimmying up a thorn tree. Once up there, how should you come down?

Enough for reminiscing.

Before proceeding to specifics on Jonah we note Jonah is primarily a narrative. Other prophetic books of the Old Testament contain some narrative, but the Book of Jonah is all narrative. It is in this narrative that the prophetic message of the book is to be found. It is unfortunate and misleading that the narrative has come to be known as the story of Jonah and the whale. I would wager if you ask most Christians, or any man on the street for that matter, what the Book of Jonah is all about, the big fish will figure prominently in most replies. However, the whale or big fish appears in only one episode for a total of three verses.

This book, in fact, is not strictly speaking the story of Jonah. It is the story of God and His compassionate dealing with His servant Jonah. God is the chief actor because He is the one who called Jonah, sent the wind, sent the great fish, returned Jonah to land, produced repentance in Nineveh, spared the wicked, appointed the plant to grow for Jonah's protection, sent the worm and the wind to destroy the plant, and Himself delivered the great truth of the book for all readers of all times.

After saying all of the former, I would still say that Jonah is a remarkable little book. Its forty-eight verses relate twelve miracles. The frequency and magnitude of its miracles are the cause for rejection by its critics. The two miracles most marked as unbelievable by "reasonable" men are the seventy-two hour preservation of Jonah in the digestive tract of the fish and the mass conversion of all inhabitants of Nineveh -- hundreds of thousands of the former -- a feat our Savior never came close to duplicating while on earth.

It needs to be said that the attacks of doubters can not shake the faith of those who believe God is almighty. The clear words of scripture lead us to believe our God could prepare a "fish" capable of swallowing, not only a "minor" prophet like Jonah -- but a "major" prophet, if He wanted to.

III. THE AUTHOR, DATES AND CANONICITY OF JONAH

From reading the book one is led to consider Jonah a truly unique prophet. He lets God know exactly what he is thinking. There is an openness with God here which is commendable -- like Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof. But, even with his strong personality, Jonah is not the hero of the book bearing his name. This is a story without a hero. Jonah is simply a Hebrew who fears and does confess the Lord. He attempts to flee. He knows as he prays from the deep "salvation comes from the Lord" (2:9). And he confesses the Lord is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (4:2). And yet he would rather die than see God's patience and mercy in free and full operation.

There are two possible authors for the Book of Jonah: The eighth century B.C. prophet named Jonah or an anonymous fourth century B.C. author who sacrificed his own identity to relate a truth of greater importance. Let's examine these two possibilities with the support for each.

By uniform tradition of the ancient Jewish and early Christian Church, our author has been identified as the prophet "Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher" (II Kings 14:25). This Jonah prophesied at the time of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.) of Israel. He lived at about the same time as Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom and Isaiah and Micah in the southern kingdom. He had announced to King Jeroboam the restoration of the ancient boundaries of the kingdom whereby the glory and majesty of Israel were once more established. In the Book of Jonah he was sent to Nineveh as a special messenger of God to preach the need for repentance.

There is significance for the earlier author of Jonah. It was the careful plan of the Lord in the eighth century B.C. to send Jonah to the chief city of Assyria with His stern message of judgement. Perhaps through the ministry of this prophet God proposed to turn the Assyrian nation temporarily from her unparalleled wickedness and bloodthirstiness, thus delaying her actual conquest of Israel until the time intended by Him later in the century.

The earlier author would have begun his prophetic ministry shortly before the reign of Jeroboam or at least before the king had obtained his more outstanding military triumphs.

Secular events could be found to support the earlier author. Assyrian records

indicate plagues and famine befell the country in both 765 and 759 B.C. and a total eclipse of the sun occurred in 763 B.C. To a superstitious heathen -- any one of these events, together with the appearance of a strange prophet could trigger some type of spiritual renewal.

For the benefit of and support of a historical interpretation of Jonah we need to remind ourselves of certain considerations:

A. The form of the book is that of a simple historical narrative and was so regarded by both Jews and Christians until the mid-1800's.

B. There are several references to Jonah as historical: the Book of Tobias (14:4,8) dating from second century B.C.; the Book of III Maccabees (6:8), dating from the first century B.C.; and the Antiquities of Josephus (IX,10,2) written toward the close of the first century A.D. All speak of Jonah's call and preaching to Nineveh as an actual fact.

In view of the opinions of critics, we need to remind ourselves that the compilers of the Canon have placed the Book of Jonah among the minor prophets. This could only have been done because they were firmly convinced the prophet Jonah was the author.

Now for a look at evidence for a later composition by an anonymous author. It is common for critical scholars of the last one hundred-fifty years to date Jonah at 100-250 years after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon (beginning in 539 B.C.). While no single piece of evidence can demonstrate this position, it is based on several findings.

In support of this position, critics often cite the following: nowhere does it state that the eighth century prophet Jonah composed the book. The language used is more characteristic of the post-exilic period than of any other (presence of Aramaisms). Moreover, apparently unclear information about the city of Nineveh (3:3) suggests a time when the city was no longer in existence. Also, the world of thought in which the book moves, seems most closely paralleled by other literature from this period or by problems known to be current to the Israelite community of this period.

We would like to explore this last point in detail. It has been most common to consider the Book of Jonah a reaction to the reforms or "narrow nationalism" of Jewish leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah (approximately 450-400 B.C.). These leaders of the post-exilic community faced a number of problems associated with what might be called religious identity.

This led Ezra and Nehemiah to take some rather decisive measures to cut the Jewish community off from non-Jews. At this time Samaritans were being excluded from all participation in the worship of Jehovah in Jerusalem. However noble their intention, this move had rather unfortunate side effects. A separatist tendency led to measures and attitudes of intolerance toward non-Jews and an exclusivistic perspective on the part of the Jewish community. It is thought by many critical scholars that this was the problem to which the Book of Jonah was addressed.

Here is a sample of the kind of meaning a typical critic will find in Jonah: "It

is rightly suggested that Jonah is a figure used by the author as a vehicle for describing his own contemporaries". That is, Jonah's thoughts and actions are sketched by the author in such a way as to parallel those of the audience to which the book is addressed. "We will see that Jonah is a name which the author borrows from II Kings 14:25 because it provides a helpful starting point for dealing with the question of the justice of God raised by his contemporaries. Israel had been destroyed by Nineveh and now an Israelite prophet was called upon to offer life to the destroyer. How unfair this must have seemed not only to Jonah but to any Israelite." *1

This view reduces the Book of Jonah to a piece of fictitious literature, not a narrative of real events involving real people and places.

IV. INTERPRETING JONAH: HISTORICAL OR UNHISTORICAL

For over 2000 years most Christians and Jews have used the Book of Jonah as a historical narrative. There has emerged in more recent times, however, a perspective which views the book as something different from a historical account. Those who maintain this position understand the book to be more like the parables of Jesus than the Books of Kings. Who is right?

A spokesman for the critics responds: "The answer is not easy to come by, and no final solution is possible which absolutely excludes the other alternative. Whatever decision one makes on this question, it must be remembered that what is most important is enabling the message of the book to be heard clearly.

"Imaginative types of literature, such as parables or short stories, are just as capable of speaking the truth of God's Word as any historical narrative. The fact that Jesus in His teaching used such literature more than any other single type to do just that, should assist us in thinking about this matter."*2

The critics say that just because Jesus made use of Jonah (Matthew 12:39-42; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32), it does not indicate that this book is a historical narrative. Jesus may have been referring to Jonah in much of the same way that a modern preacher might refer to incidents from the parables of Jesus.

Besides, there are certain aspects of the book that make it difficult to accept as historical material. They point to..."the series of improbable occurrences in the story. In assessing the reasonableness of such matters, the possibility of miracle must always be kept in mind. At the same time, one has to be aware of making the jump from what God could have done to what He actually did do.

"It is thus improbable that the beasts of Nineveh fasted, cried out mightily to God and turned from their wicked ways. It is improbable that Jonah would have prayed a song of thanksgiving for having been delivered while in the belly of the fish. It is improbable that a city of hundreds of thousands of people, hostile to Israel and Israel's God would have been instantaneously and

*1 Fretheim, Terence E., The Message of Jonah, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), p. 29.

*2 Ibid., pp. 61-62.

completely converted."*3

The mass conversion of Nineveh is considered unbelievable since the event did not leave its mark anywhere else in recorded history. The Assyrian archives from the eighth century have been discovered. But there is no evidence of a conversion.

The critics point to the fact that proper names are used so rarely in the book. It is almost as if the author wanted to use only those that had some symbolic significance. Why only is Jonah named among the various persons introduced and why only are Nineveh, Tarshish and Joppa mentioned?

These names are not taken literally to refer to specific locations. Rather, they are interpreted to be figurative. Tarshish, repeated three times, is commonly located in present day Spain. It was almost certainly chosen by the author because it lay in the direction opposite from that of Nineveh and was the farthest known point in the westerly direction.

Joppa, the chief Mediterranean port of Jerusalem, serves the important function of placing the beginning of the story in Palestine. This makes it clear that the story is for Israelites.

Nineveh, capitol city of Assyria, had been responsible for some of Israel's greatest disasters. Nineveh is a symbol for the worst in the pagan world. The author seems to say if the message of Jonah could have an effect upon Nineveh, it could have an effect on anybody.

If Jonah is purely a bunch of improbable elements, as the critics would have us believe, what purpose does its use serve? "It is thus not enough finally to pass off these improbable elements in the story as evidence for its unhistorical character, and leave it at that. Purposefully formulated, they contribute in significant ways the shaping of the message of the book. Yet, recognized as ironic exaggerations, these elements serve to reenforce the judgement that the book is not intended to report on historical events. The ironic cast, this intensification of incongruities, suggests that the author's intention moves beyond any simple reporting of events in the life of Jonah and others.

"To consider the book something other than historical literature does not detract one whit from its religious or theological value. There is no necessary relationship between the truth of a narrative and its historicity. Jesus' parables are no less true because they did not happen. And so, whatever one's decision on the question of historicity, the Book of Jonah is true."*4

Several questions are raised about the historicity or authenticity of some of the events or statements in Jonah. Believing scholars have provided their answers:

A. It is said to be hardly conceivable that a king of Assyria would have been referred to merely as the "King of Nineveh" by a Hebrew scholar living

*3 Ibid., p.62

*4 Ibid., p.66

in that period. Only a writer who lived at a much later date, long after Assyria had passed way, would have employed such terminology. Well established Hebrew usage in the historical books of the Old Testament provides good analogies for this title. For example, although Ahab was stated to be the King of Israel, he is occasionally referred to as the King of Samaria. Other instances do exist where the capitol city of the kingdom is used in the royal title. Jonah's use of the term "King of Nineveh" furnishes a perfect parallel to these examples.

B. It is also urged that Nineveh is spoken of in the past tense in 3:3. Critics would say this could only mean the city had long since ceased to exist. Rather it was evidently Jonah's particular purpose at that point to stress the fact that Nineveh had already become a very sizable city, although it had probably become even larger by the time the book was written.

C. The enormous size attributed to Nineveh is considered by some to be a fabulous element in the narrative. The author states it required three days to walk through the city because of the vastness of its dimensions (3:3,4). Yet it should be noted that the text does not actually say that Jonah needed three days to walk through Nineveh without stopping. It only states that he took three days to go through it on his preaching mission. Streetcorner preaching requires a fairly lengthy stop at each place to deliver the message. From the context it is only fair to assume that the phrase "going a day's journey" referred to that section of the city which he was able to cover as he paused to preach at many different points.

D. It is declared to be quite inconceivable that any heathen city such as Nineveh would have repented so quickly and so generally in response to the preaching of an unknown foreigner. Such a response from a pagan populous was nothing short of miraculous, but the narrative makes it plain that the will and power of God Almighty were the power and force behind Jonah's preaching. Who can limit the power of the Holy Ghost when His truth is preached?

Those who hold a post-exilic date for Jonah customarily appeal to an assortment of alleged Aramaisms which occur here and there in the text. Much work by people more knowledgeable than I has gone into this analysis. All demonstrate that words of apparent Aramaic origin were not purely such.*5

Those who would refer to the Book of Jonah as a myth must hear the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:39-42. The critics of the historicity of Jonah must realize that: 1) there is not the slightest indication in Matthew 12 that Jesus is referring to a parable or quoting from a drama or that the Pharisees regarded the story of Jonah as fiction; 2) there is not the slightest indication that Jesus or His opponents regarded Jonah or the repenting Ninevites as in any manner less historical than Solomon or the Queen of the South; 3) Jesus had been challenged to give the enemies a sign authenticating His claim to a divine mission. He would give them only one sign: Just as Jonah was in the fish and was delivered so Christ will be delivered from His grave. If Jonah's encounter in the belly of the fish was mythical, then Jesus' burial and three days in the

*5 Archer, Jr., Gleason L., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p.30.

grave and resurrection would also be a myth. Accordingly, as Jesus lay in the grave three days and rose again, , so is the three day captivity of Jonah in the fish's belly and his deliverance not a story or parable, but a fact, a historical truth.

Those who would deny the historicity of Jonah would do so on the basis that they just don't believe the miracles reported could have occurred. We need to look at some of the factors for the acceptance of the miracles in Jonah. Christians do not believe in a God limited to any human reason or size. We believe in a God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. According to Christ -- who calls Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life -- the Bible cannot be broken. It is the truth. In the Bible God tells us that He is a God whose wisdom is beyond our grasp and that He can accomplish the impossible. Therefore, it is not for man in any way to limit God's wisdom and power to such a level as man can understand. We need to bring every thought into captivity to Christ and His Word. Truly, before us we have miracles which are incredible. Miracles are just that when pondered by humans.

V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Jonah prophesied in a critical period in the history of both Assyria and Israel. God's gracious promise to Israel to restore her ancient boundaries was fulfilled under Jeroboam II. But since Israel did not repent of its wickedness it rushed into ruin. God's warning against Nineveh, pronounced by the same prophet during the period of the temporary decline of Assyria caused Nineveh to repent so that God spared that city and restored it to power.

Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria in Mesopotamia, represented the pride and power and brutality of the kingdoms of the world at their worst. Nineveh was the scourge of nations and bitterest enemy of God's people. It was situated on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, five hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem. Nineveh was a very old and great city, probably at that time the largest and strongest city of the world.

Nineveh was considered to refer to an area made up of the cities of Nineveh, Rehoboth, Calah and Resen. These cities lay in the shape of a parallelogram which was twenty miles in length and ten miles in width. The population of Nineveh could have been between six hundred thousand and one million.

For three centuries, Nineveh's military power was unmatched. The only armed forces that could give the Assyrians any opposition were the Egyptians. However, they too were conquered by the Assyrians. The Assyrian army of one hundred eighty-five thousand men was known for its ferocity in dealing with conquered peoples. Nineveh's prosperity can hardly be overestimated. It lay on the main travel and trade roads of the day. It held the possessions of all conquered nations. Its perversions and wickedness have been compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

After the death of Jeroboam II of Israel, a new period in the history of the two kingdoms began with the ascendancy of the Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms over Israel. Already in Ahab's time, Shalmaneser III, King of Assyria, fought a bloody battle at Karkar in Syria in order to quell a revolt of Syrian kings whom Ahab had joined.

Assyrian records show that the King of Israel, Jehu, paid tribute to the King of Assyria. It was not until the rule of Menahem that an Assyrian king had invaded Israel. That was the beginning of the downfall of the northern empire, leading to its collapse and deportation in 722 B.C.

VI. ISOGOGICAL STUDY OF JONAH

Outline

- A. Jonah's First Commission and His Flight (1:1-16)
 - B. Jonah's Rescue and Deliverance (1:17-2:10)
 - C. Jonah's Second Commission and His Obedience (3:1-10)
 - D. Jonah's Anger and God's Rebuke (4:1-11)
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A. Jonah's First Commission and Flight

- 1. God's commission and the prophet's flight (1:1-3)

Vs. 1-2.

The opening phrase of the book, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah...", is identical to that which is commonly found as an introduction to other prophetic books. Prophets had commonly been called upon to speak against the nations, but they had not necessarily been called upon to put in a personal appearance. Jonah was commanded to go to Nineveh and deliver God's message. Why does Jonah flee? Jonah defies the Lord's commission because he fears the people of Nineveh would repent and that God, being gracious and merciful, would not destroy them after all. He is fleeing not because of unbelief but because of a certain belief he has about God.

- 2. The storm at sea (1:4-5)

God proves Himself the "Hound of Heaven". He persists in seeking out Jonah. God's display of power has served an indispensable function. It has, in addition to stopping Jonah, captured the sailor's attention. Jonah sleeps.

- 3. Discovery and confession (1:6-10)

Vs. 6-8

The captain thought in heathen fashion there might be one god whose help had not been sought in prayer. He invites Jonah to resort to prayer in an apparent losing battle with the elements. As was common in their world of thought, the sailors believed the storm was the direct reaction of a god to some evil deed committed by someone on board. So they cast lots. As a result, Jonah is "stormed" with questions: who, what, where?

Vs. 9-10

The center of Jonah's response is his confession of a God as Creator and Lord. Jonah here is no different from any other believer, confessing his faith in a life surrounded by disobedient actions. The sailors are terrified. They cannot quite imagine anyone treating his god in such a manner.

4. The stilling of the storm (1:11-16)

With the storm getting worse and worse, the sailors pressed Jonah for a solution. He confesses his actions have caused this evil to come upon them. Yet, they handle Jonah in a considerate manner. They seek to find a way out of the dilemma but there seems to be none. Now the sailors pray to Jonah's God, the one responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. They want to make sure that Jonah's God understands what they are about to do. Notice how they have thought of Jonah's God as "a god" -- not "the God".

B. Jonah's Rescue and Deliverance (1:17-2:10)

1. The prophet's prayer of thanksgiving for rescue from the sea (1:17-2:9)

Vs. 17

The Lord provided a great fish or sea monster. A specific identification is not important. We will not dispute but confess the fact our Lord has miraculous power to keep Jonah alive for three days and nights in the belly of the great fish.

Vs. 2-9

Jonah offers a psalm of thanksgiving, similar to those found elsewhere in the Old Testament (cf. Psalm 30, 32, 34, 107, 116). This is not a prayer for deliverance from the fish, rather a hymn of thanksgiving and praise for deliverance from death by drowning in the sea. Jonah knows he will be able to worship the Lord in His temple again. Sheol is commonly used to refer to the abode of the dead.

Vs. 10

Jonah's situation: He is transported back to land inside a fish's gut, mixed up with all kinds of fish food to be vomited up on the beach. Three days of undigested Jonah! How silly Jonah must have felt being vomited head over heels across the sand dunes! Aldous Huxley in his poem "Jonah" says, "Seated on the convex mound of one vast kidney, Jonah prays/and sings his canticles and hymns,/making the hollow vault resound God's goodness and mysterious ways/till the great fish spouts music as he swims."

C. Jonah's Second Commission and his Obedience (3:1-10)

1. God's renewal of his commission (3:1-2)

What will Jonah do with the Lord's second commission? This time a repentant Jonah arises and goes to Nineveh, ready to preach the message which the Lord will give.

2. The prophet's preaching and Nineveh's repentance (3:3-9)

Vs. 3-4

In Verse 4 is the only prophetic element in the Book of Jonah. God's message to the disobedient of Nineveh...only five words in the Hebrew. No direct evidence exists that Jonah brought more than a preaching of graceless law and doom to the Ninevites. There seems to be no offer or acceptance of God's pardoning grace in the Savior.

A voice to the contrary is Werner Franzmann writing in Bible History Commentary : Old Testament. He makes a convincing case for evangelical preaching by Jonah. First of all he contends the words of 3:5, "the Ninevites believed God," can mean confidence in the Lord's pardon through the Messiah, as this expression means in other passages (Moses describing Abraham's saving faith in Genesis 15:6; Exodus 14:31; II Chronicles 20:20).

Secondly, Franzmann feels there are textual evidences that "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed," was only part of Jonah's message. He refers to 3:1 and 3:3 where the Hebrew word Lord (our Jehovah) is used, designating God as the covenant God, the God of free grace in the Messiah. Since Jonah was the Lord's faithful spokesman, it would seem right to conclude he offered the Ninevites a complete message of hope through the grace of Christ.

Franzmann offers further evidence for his position by referring to 4:2, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." These words provide Jonah's reason for being angry. Jonah knew God had spared Nineveh because according to the words above, quoted from Exodus 34:6, it is the Lord's nature to be compassionate and to show love. Then our commentator draws attention to the word "love" as quoted by Jonah. "The Hebrew for 'love' is used only of God's faithful covenant love. Jonah was angry with God because He had proved true to His covenant name and had extended His saving love in the Messiah to Gentiles -- something abhorrent to the self-righteous Jews."*6

Vs. 5-9

No preacher has ever met with such success. God had prepared a way for this message to find its way to the hearts of the hearers. Even the animals are involved. All Ninevites are urged by their king to turn to the true God, seeking His mercy for past sins. How are we to understand this "who knows" of the V.9? It is merely the expression of a desperate man who is confronted with his sins.

3. God's forgiveness (3:10)

God decides that in light of the people's repentance, He will change His course of action. Moved by His compassion He will not destroy them.

*6 Franzmann, Werner H., Bible History Commentary : Old Testament, (Board for Parish Education, Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, 1980), p.470.

D. Jonah's Anger and God's Rebuke (4:1-11)

1. The prophet's anger over God's mercy.

Vs. 1-2

Jonah's reaction is almost incomprehensible. What narrowness he displays in respect to God's mercy. He admits he knew God was gracious. This knowledge moved him to flee to Tarshish in the first place. Now instead of praising God for His mercy, Jonah has the boldness to scold. He feels God is being too patient with the Ninevites.

Luther says of these verses, "This is, I think, a queer and odd saint who is angry because of God's mercy for sinners, begrudging all the benefits and wishing all the evil. This militates against the nature of love which does everything good and wishes every good even to enemies. It is still more amazing to find this attitude in Jonah after he had experienced the great sternness of the divine will in the ocean and in the whale."*7

Vs. 3-5

Because of what God has done on behalf of the Ninevites, Jonah asks God to take his life. When we realize how rare a death wish is in the Old Testament, this is even more striking. Here is a picture of the tenderness of God in the face of Jonah's anger. The Lord of history stoops to hold a conversation with a rebellious child. What patience!

Jonah repents by challenging God on the firmness of His decision. This is evidently an impasse between God and Jonah. Still hoping Nineveh would be destroyed, Jonah built a shelter to wait and see what would happen.

2. God's lesson for the prophet (4:6-11)

Vs. 6-7

The Lord takes steps to correct and teach Jonah by providing a shady vine. It is a merciful action on God's part to allow Jonah to sit in the shadow of His generosity and protection from the sun. Jonah reacts happily. But the Lord had a lesson which He wanted to teach Jonah. He sent a worm to remove the kind gift of a shady plant. Attempts to determine the kind of plant have been unsuccessful. It seems to have been one with very large leaves which would provide shade.

Vs. 8-11

Then a hot east wind is sent to discomfort Jonah. He is thus given a taste of what it is like to experience destruction. What misery! In his "fainting" he again wants to just simply die.

*7 Luther, Martin Luther's Works, (trans. Charles D. Froehlich. Volume 19 "Lectures on the Minor Prophets II." Concordia Publishing House, 1974), p. 91.

When the Lord asked Jonah whether he was justified in being angry about the loss of the plant, Jonah insisted he was. The Lord pointed out that just as Jonah felt compassion for the mere plant for which Jonah was not responsible, should He, the Lord, not have compassion on a large city of precious humans? This argument of the Lord exposed Jonah's lack of concern for lost souls and reduced the prophet to silence. The Lord had clearly made His point!

VII. MEANING FOR TODAY

The story is God's and it ends with God's question, "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Jonah's answer is not recorded, but the story leaves no doubt as to how God wanted Jonah to answer it. The question raised here by God is renewed in Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard, when the generous owner asks the workers who are grumbling at grace bestowed on others "are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). It is a question meant to disturb the complaisant people of complaisant churches who would claim God's unlimited mercy to themselves but would limit it to others. The Book of Jonah would remind us that these protests against God's mercy come from un-Christian attitudes.

Luther saw significance in the powerful Word of God which was at work, through which God was turning hearts to faith wherever it was spoken -- to Jew and Gentile alike. "This account shows that even this wicked kingdom of the Assyrians was a concern for God -- although they were uncircumcised Gentiles, not belonging to the people of Israel, whom God had chosen for Himself. And what is more, they were oppressing Israel. Thus God has always had His Christian people among nations along with the Jews, although the Jews themselves failed to perceive this and even despised all the other nations who did not have the Law. So there is no doubt that there are here and there in the world today many Christians who are totally unknown to the world, whom God has chosen for Himself. We are taught in this account how powerful, active, and effective God's Word is."*8

*8 Ibid., p.4.

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