

JONAH 3:
REPENTANCE OF THE CREATION AND THE CREATOR

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Main Idea of the Passage

YHWH's word comes to Jonah for the second time, and Jonah reluctantly obeys. The city of Nineveh, rather than the prophet Jonah, ironically serves as excellent example of repentance, just as the ship's crew of gentiles did in the first episode. YHWH responds with grace for Nineveh despite his previous announcement that the city would be overturned.

Literary Context

Chapter 3 marks a new beginning for the character of Jonah and serves as a hinge between the two halves of the book. As the word of YHWH came to Jonah in 1:1-2, so it comes again (3:1) as an almost exact replica of the first occurrence. This mirror effect conjures up within the reader "a sense of literary déjà vu" and a sense of expectation.¹ This reoccurrence is possibly the most important parallel structure in the book, and the *differences* between the two accounts are as significant as the similarities.² The anticipation during the second "episode," therefore, is fully derived from the preceding events in the first two chapters.

Another important parallel preceding Jonah 3 is the gentiles' conversion stories. From Joppa³ Jonah boarded a boat full of gentile mariners *who would repent* in chapter one, foreshadowing the greater repentance in Jonah 3. Their earnest desire to be separated

¹ Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy*, Hearing the Message of Scripture Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 122.

² Phillip Cary, *Jonah*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 20.

³ Approximately 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Joppa was the most common port in the south. Hence, the reason issues arise when associating this Jonah with "Jonah, son of Amittai," whose family was from the north (2 Kgs 14:25). "Joppa," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Ewell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1209.

from despair is apparent in their tossing of Jonah from the boat, which (literally) leaves him to the fish.

The setting in Jonah 3 describes the prophet safe on dry land again, as opposed to being deep down at sea near death, though the exact location is untold.⁴ Likewise, the length of time between the fish's ejection of Jonah and YHWH's second call is intentionally unspecified, giving extra focus and clarity to YHWH's word.⁵ Another certainty is that Jonah already tried to escape YHWH's call and failed, but he is soon to obey (albeit reluctantly) the call to go into Nineveh and preach.

Translation & Exegetical outline

Translation Method

The translation here is based on Youngblood's commentary yet with minor alterations. Synthesis among his, Cary's,⁶ Sasson's,⁷ and four popular translations (NIV, ESV, NASB, and HCSB) must suffice when Hebrew is out of the question. Despite seeking for the most commonly used words and phrases, an apparent preference among the five translations is *intentionally ignored* here: Cary, the ESV, and the NASB all translate the first verb in Jonah 3:2 as "Arise." (By contrast, the HCSB offers, "Get up!"; Youngblood finds, "Up!"; the Sasson and the NIV merely say "Set out" and "Go" (respectively) with no consideration for the directional connotation of the verb.) So, although "arise" is the most common preference, "Up!" remains. Conversely, part of

⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, World Biblical Commentary 31 (Waco: Words Books, 1987), 481; Youngblood, 123.

⁵ Youngblood, 123.

⁶ Cary, 24-5.

⁷ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 5-6.

Youngblood's translation is modified here to better align with the majority by altering his "metropolis," to "city" (3:1, 3). Likewise, Youngblood's "so" (1:3a) is modified to "but" since most commentators use either use it or something similar.⁸

For someone working only with English, options are few. This translation, rather than arbitrarily fusing several others together, belongs mostly to Youngblood with the exceptions of aforementioned alterations.

Translation

3 ¹YHWH's word came to Jonah again: ²"Up! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to them the proclamation I am about to speak to you."

³So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh as YHWH commanded. Now Nineveh was a great city belonging to God. (It was) a three-day journey. ⁴Jonah had just begun making his way into the city, a single day's journey, when he announced, "Forty days until Nineveh is overturned." ⁵Then the men of Nineveh trusted God and announced a fast and wore sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶The message reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne and disrobed and clothed himself with sackcloth and sat upon the dust. ⁷Then he issued a proclamation and said in Nineveh by royal authority with the help of his officials,

"Both man and beast, both herds and flocks must taste nothing.

They must not graze.

They must not drink water.

⁸They must cover themselves with sackcloth, both man and beast.

They must cry out to God earnestly.

They must repent, each one, of his wicked behavior and the violence that he performs with his own hands.

⁹Who knows?

God may change his mind
and relent

and recover from his intense anger so that we will not perish."

¹⁰Then God saw their deeds, that they repented of their wicked behavior. So he relented concerning the disaster that he threatened to perform against them, and he did not do it.

⁸ Sasson uses the word "instead" in place of "so" or "but." Either way if most translators think the word is used to highlight a contradictory behavior (as indicated by their translations), then "but" is preferable. Sasson, 67.

Outline

- I. Jonah Descends from YHWH's Calling. (Ch.1-2)
- II. Jonah Reluctantly Obeys YHWH's Calling. (Ch.3-4)
 - a. Jonah accomplishes God's mission in Nineveh. (Ch.3)
 - i. Jonah obeys and accomplishes YHWH's mission in Nineveh. (3:1-5)
 - 1. YHWH calls Jonah a second time (3:1).
 - 2. YHWH tells Jonah the message he is to preach in Nineveh (3:2).
 - 3. Jonah goes to Nineveh (3:3).
 - 4. Jonah preaches, going through the city (3:4).
 - 5. The Ninevites believe and fast (3:5).
 - ii. The king of Nineveh directs the citizens to repent and repents, himself. (3:6-9)
 - 1. The king repents (3:6).
 - 2. The king decrees (3:7-9).
 - iii. God has mercy on Nineveh after seeing their repentance. (3:10)
 - b. YHWH questions petulant Jonah. (Ch.4)
 - i. Jonah whines. (4:1-4)
 - 1. Jonah requests death because he is not doing what he wishes he were. (4:1-3)
 - 2. YHWH questions Jonah's anger. (4:4)

Structure and Literary Form

Jonah is grounded in parallel structures that support the book's message. Since the book is neatly divided in half, the mirrored images between halves are crucial to the narrative. In addition to such external parallelism, however, internal parallelism laced within each macro unit unites the story.⁹ Chapter three begins to unfold the second half of the story from the center the entire book.

The second macro unit of the book (3:1-4:11) is divided into two main sections: 3:1-10 and 4:1-11. The former completes the narrative set in Nineveh; the latter addresses Jonah's attitude and reveals the core lesson of the book. Like the first macro unit (Ch.1-2), the second (Ch.3-4) follows a pattern of scenes or parallel episodes. Each contains,

⁹ Youngblood, 94.

like most narratives, an exposition (stage-setting), some rising action (pre-peak episode), a climax (peak episode), and falling action or denouement (post-peak episode).¹⁰ Two exceptions occur: the first macro unit has almost no falling action (except, perhaps, one considers Jonah's landing upon dry ground to be "falling"), but the second has a legitimate sense of falling action and denouement (or, post-peak episode).¹¹

Jonah 3 is a pattern familiar among prophetic accounts: judgment preached, repentance accepted or rejected, followed by deliverance or condemnation.¹² However, there are some unusual elements unique to the book of Jonah. The narrative, first of all, is mostly about the prophet rather than those on the other side of judgment.¹³ Moreover, the exaggeration in the narrative is unlike other books in that it juxtaposes Jonah's heard-heartedness with the gentiles' quick submission.¹⁴

The book of Jonah refuses to be tied down to only a single genre. Opinions among Biblical scholars might begin: allegory, parable, midrash,¹⁵ folk tale,¹⁶ children's story,¹⁷

¹⁰ Youngblood, 39.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fretheim, *Reading Hosea-Micah: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2013), 180.

¹³ Ibid, 170.

¹⁴ Ibid, 171.

¹⁵ For a refutation of the first three genres, see Douglas Stuart, "Jonah," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 458.

¹⁶ Andre and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 125.

¹⁷ Russel Dalton convincingly pleads to stop reducing *Jonah* to a children's story and stripping it of its most instructive points for religious education. Russel W. Dalton, "Perfect Prophets, Helpful Hippos, and Happy Endings: Noah and Jonah in Children's Bible Storybooks in the United States," *Religious Education* 102.3(2007): 298-313.

novella, satire,¹⁸ comedy, parody,¹⁹ tragedy, and the list goes on.²⁰ Jonah 3 in itself contains many literary forms, including prophetic account, commission narrative (Jonah's is unique), conversion story, oracle of doom, and king's royal edict.²¹ Such is evidence to the depth of the book of *Jonah* and the wonders that lay inside it and part of the reason scholars, laymen, and yes, children--keep returning to it.

Explanation of the Text

- i. Jonah Reluctantly Obeys and Accomplishes YHWH's Mission in Nineveh.

(3:1-5)

1. YHWH Gives Jonah Another Chance (3:1).

The repetition of the prophetic word formula has a familiar ring because it began the story (1:1), and it now initiates a new start. Jonah finds himself upon the dry land of Palestine when he hears YHWH's word seemingly immediately after the fish expels

¹⁸ Holbert labels Jonah as satire based on what he describes as the ambiguous intention of the author of Jonah. He concludes that "Jonah is a Hebrew prophet disobedient and hypocritical, angered by God's will to save, yet claiming to affirm God's power to do so, having witnessed it in his own person. Jonah is thus an attack on Hebrew prophetic prophecy." John C. Holbert, "Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh": Satire in the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981): 60.

¹⁹ Klynes recapitulates historical views of Jonah as a parody. He quite successfully defends and nuances Jonah as a "respecting" parody rather than a "ridiculing" parody: "Like Joyce's parody in *Ulysses* of the heroic patterns in the *Odyssey*, when Jonah responds to God's call by running in the opposite direction, he, and not the prophets who obeyed as they should, is the butt of the joke. Jonah would then be a respecting parody which, though humorous, respectfully uses the prophetic texts it parodies as a standards by which to satirize the unrepentance and disobedience of its readers." Will J. Klynes, "Beat your Parodies into Swords, and Your Parodied books into Spears: A New Paradigm for Parody in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 19.3 (2011): 300-303.

²⁰ Alexander quite comprehensively reviews the most commonly held positions. He also argues for the historicity of the story: "It seems reasonable to suppose that the author of Kings incorporated these happenings into his account because he viewed them as actual historical events. If ancient Israelites believed that God had sent ravens to feed Elijah, could they not also accept as historically probable the sojourn of Jonah inside the belly of a great fish?" T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah and Genre." *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985): 46, 59.

²¹ Youngblood, 124, 129-131.

him.²² Does YHWH in fact speak to Jonah *immediately* after Jonah reaches land, or has much time expired? The text simply does not say. Thus, the focus is upon the fact that YHWH is speaking *again* to Jonah, exhibiting His steadfast love. YHWH is not merely toying prophet (though there is a sense in which He is has some fun with Jonah): YHWH is relentlessly pursuing Jonah for this mission. The verse (3:1) serves as a bridge to transition from where Jonah is--to where he is about to go.

2. YHWH Tells Jonah the Message He is to Preach in Nineveh (3:2).

Three imperatives from YHWH call Jonah to his prophetic duty: [get] *up, go, and proclaim*. The trouble for Jonah, however, lies not in what he must do but *where*: Nineveh. Jonah already knows where YHWH was about to tell him to go, having ignored His call before, but perhaps he could have a new perspective after his near-death experience in the belly of a fish.

Nineveh was considered “the seat of the greatest enemy of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.”²³ One of Assyria’s four main metropolises at that time, Nineveh was not yet the capital during the time of Jonah’s preaching.²⁴ Nonetheless, it was still a strong and vital city to the Assyrian Empire and one of the least desirable places for prophets to preach.²⁵

²² Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 481.

²³ A. Kirk Grayson, “Nineveh,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1118-9.

²⁴ This assumes an eighth-century B.C. dating of *Jonah* based on the mention of Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. Surprisingly though and unique to *Jonah*, “the book floats free of any historical anchor or time signature.” Yvonne Sherwood, “Jonah,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford, 2011), 1:477-481.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Three other major cities include ASSHUR, CALAH, and ARBELA. Not until the seventh century did Sennacherib choose to massively remodel and embellish the city that would be Assyria’s capital until its fall to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C.

3. Jonah Goes to Nineveh (3:3a-c).

As a commission narrative, the next step would be for Jonah to respond, but he surprisingly gives no objection.²⁶ This occasion is unique for that reason, but it is also the parallel verse of 1:3:

But Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish, away from YHWH's presence. He descended to Joppa. He found a ship bound for Tarshish. He paid its hire, and he descended into it to accompany them to Tarshish, away from YHWH's presence.²⁷

The differences between the two are significant: Jonah goes *to Nineveh* instead of fleeing *away* from where YHWH calls him to go; Jonah is no longer *descending* but only going *up*.²⁸ Moreover, the phrase "as YHWH commanded" (3:3a) occurs once, as opposed to the phrase double occurrence of "away from YHWH's presence" that emphasizes Jonah's spiritual misdirection (1:3b, 1:3g).²⁹

Likewise, YHWH calls to Jonah, "so" Jonah gets up and goes to Nineveh (3:3a), "but" he fled the first time (1:3a). This change of conjunction between the English clauses illuminates *why* Jonah acts how he does: the first (1:3a) describes Jonah acting *contrary* to YHWH's will, and the second (3:3a) connotes him acting in *compliance* with YHWH's will.

²⁶ Norman C. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965): 318-9.

²⁷ Youngblood, 21.

²⁸ Youngblood notes, "The repetition of this verb indicates that Jonah's westward journey [in the first chapter] is, spiritually speaking, a downward journey." *Ibid*, 51-2. Likewise, when Jonah comes "up," his journey is getting closer to being in line with YHWH's will for him.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

In what sense does the author mean Nineveh was a great city belonging to God? Surely, all cities belong to God, so that is emphasized,³⁰ but perhaps the original Israelite audience needed to hear it.³¹ Another commonly held position is that Nineveh's temples to many gods throughout the centuries, including but not limited to: Nabu, Assur, Adad, Ninurta, and Ishtar of Nineveh.³² However, the author's use of "God" rather than the more specific "YHWH" relates the fact that Nineveh does not yet know him at this point in the story, though she is about to if she does not repent.³³

4. **Jonah Preaches, Going through the City (3:4).**

Continuing with Jonah's response, he goes into Nineveh and before he even gets to the center of the city (one day into a three day journey),³⁴ he cries out, "Forty days until Nineveh is overturned" (3:4). As Tribble suggests, the emphasis here shifts away from Jonah and toward Nineveh, whereas in the corresponding scene of first section, the response was focused on Jonah (1:3).³⁵ Such a shift in focus suggests the author's aim to inform readers on matters of YHWH's character: he is concerned for all peoples.

³⁰ Sasson, 229.

³¹ Youngblood summarizes the other commonly held interpretations, so there is no need to go into too much depth here: (1) "a greatest city to the gods," i.e., Nineveh "as a polytheistic cult center, (2) "the greatest city," and (3) "an important city for God's purposes." Youngblood, 133.

³² D. J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 36.

³³ James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 78.

³⁴ Sasson suggests that the purpose of contrasting Jonah's single-day journey into Nineveh with the previously stated three-day journey (3:3c), is to emphasize Jonah's rush to, (as the idiom goes), *get it over with*. Sasson also provides of other commentators' perceptions with whom he disagrees. Sasson, 236. For another helpful discussion see Wiseman, 36-9.

³⁵ Phyllis Tribble notes the "infinitive phrase ['to enter the city,' in Tribble's translation] plays off the opposite, 'to-flee to-Tarshish.'" Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 178-9.

Why then was Jonah so quick to go—well, the *second* time? Perhaps one of the primary reasons is Jonah expected and hoped that Nineveh would indeed be overturned.³⁶ Indeed, this must be the shortest sermon in the prophetic history of Israel. It noticeably uses the same brooding language that describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:25, 29).³⁷

Why *forty* days, though?³⁸ Perhaps the number's emphasis is toward a *generous* length of time YHWH is offering to Nineveh to get her act together.³⁹ Should one not expect such a stronghold of a wicked nation to take *extra* time to repent thoroughly (even though they end up taking little time in this story)? After all, those in the Ancient Near East generally used more relatively than specifically: three (very soon), seven (soon), forty (much later).⁴⁰ Stuart suggests forty days would not sound far off, from the perspective of a nation on the precipice of judgment, but this is unlikely.⁴¹ Surely for the original Israelite audience of this story, the number also summoned memories of times of

³⁶ George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm," *Interpretation* 21 (January 1967): 28-9.

³⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 108.

³⁸ This assumes "forty" is the correct translation, as opposed to the LXX's "three." For an extensive treatment of this, see R. W. L. Moberly, "Preaching for a Response? Jonah's Message to the Ninevites Reconsidered," *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 156-68.

³⁹ Moberly persuasively suggests Jonah wants the Ninevites to believe they have more time than they do, so as to trick them into not taking the threat seriously (as if to procrastinate). Moberly, 167.

⁴⁰ "Forty," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 304-5.

⁴¹ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 289.

purging: forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness, forty days YHWH flooded the earth, and forty years Egypt was desolate (Ezek 29:11).⁴²

5. The Ninevites Believe and Fast (3:5).

As the author describes Nineveh's to Jonah's message, the focus turns away from Jonah again and toward Nineveh. Like the gentiles on the boat, the citizens of Nineveh, great and small (alluding to Joel 2:16), trusted God,⁴³ announced a fast, and wore sackcloth immediately upon hearing the message.⁴⁴ Wolff notes that the Hebrew for "repent" does not only entail abstaining from food but instead is "a comprehensive word for the period of mourning and repentance that is to be spent."⁴⁵ Their repentance, however, merely precedes and prepares the reader for a greater change decreed by the king (3:6-9).⁴⁶

ii. The King of Nineveh Directs Everyone and Everything to Repent, Humbling Himself.

(3:6-9)

1. The King Repents (3:6).

As the author transitions to the story of the king of Nineveh, a compelling sense of YHWH's overarching reign in the world: not only have the citizens repented, but now

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The verb for *trust* "recalls the exemplary faith of Abraham, who similarly "Believed God," with the result that YHWH regarded him as just (Gen 15:6). Youngblood, 135.

⁴⁴ Philip Peter Jenson. *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: A Theological Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 74.

⁴⁵ Hans Walter Wolf, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 151.

⁴⁶ For further treatment of the verb *repent*, including a history of its usage in English, see: John T. Willis, "The 'Repentance' of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah," *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 16 (1994): 157.

the king joins them. Youngblood correctly observes that such an act is unusual: kings are usually the ones to commence major religious activities, not citizens.⁴⁷ In the Ancient Near East kings stood “between the divine and human realms mediating the power of the deity in his city and beyond.”⁴⁸ Are not kings usually rulers over entire countries, rather than cities? Indeed, and the Hebrew phrase translated “king of Nineveh” is only found in Jonah 3:6 and in no other Old Testament scriptures.⁴⁹ Youngblood attributes this distinctive phrase to the author’s rhetorical purposes and in this case, they are at least two: to undermine the power of the ruler and to relate Nineveh to Sodom again (by recalling the title “king of Sodom”).⁵⁰

The king noticeably does four things: *stands* from the throne, disrobes himself of royal attire), *clothes* himself again in sackcloth, and *sits* upon the dust. Thus, he rises (3:6b) to fall (3:6e) and unclothes (3:6c) to clothe in more humble attire (3:6d). This inverted structure implies “he has ‘overturned’ in dwelling, dress, and dignity.”⁵¹ In the context of this leveling of hierarchy, the king finally uses what authority he has left to the glory of the God is meeting for the first time.

⁴⁷ Youngblood, 136.

⁴⁸ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 278.

⁴⁹ Paul Ferguson, “Who Was the ‘King of Nineveh’ in Jonah 3:6?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 301. Ferguson hypothesizes that the title “king of Nineveh” is not anachronistic but referential to a provincial governor, arguing for an early dating of *Jonah*. He concludes that knowing whom the verse refers to, is impossible, yet he argues for the worth of recognizing the phrase as non-anachronistic.

⁵⁰ Youngblood, 137.

⁵¹ Tribble, 184.

2. The King Decrees (3:7-9).

Lowly now the king issues a high proclamation for all living creatures to forego any activity unrelated to repentance. Thus, he (with the help of his officers) orders man and beast: to dress in sackcloth, to cry out to God, and to repent *in hopes that God will change His mind and relent from the overturning Jonah prophesied*. This reiterates the Abraham-like faith professed by the *hoi polloi* (3:5) and dramatically ignites the intensity of the story.

The king repeats “both man and beast” must participate in this repentance (3:7, 8), so what is the significance? The repetition at least in part highlights the *thoroughness* of the purge: superficiality plays no part in their repentance. From the greatest creature to the smallest, all of Nineveh is remorseful.⁵² Nineveh also confesses sins of wicked behavior and violence, which Jonah did not mention specifically in his proclamation (3:4). Nineveh continues to prove an exemplary figure of repentance in contrast to the prophet.

iii. God Gives Mercy to Nineveh after Seeing Their Repentance. (3:10)

1. God changes his mind about destroying Nineveh. (3:10)

In response YHWH does two things: he *sees* (3:10a) and he *relents* (3:10c), which is reemphasized (3:10e). What he sees is their earnest repentance (3:10b); what he relents from is the disaster (more literally, *evil*) he had threatened (3:10c-d). The latter action is telling of YHWH’s conditional prophecies (even if his prophets, like Jonah, fail to mention it). Perhaps Jonah only spoke that which YHWH gave him in a divine council;

⁵² Noting the fact that YHWH used a whale to save Jonah--and later a worm and plant to teach him a lesson-- Youngblood suggests that perhaps the flood narrative should be brought to mind. Likewise, Fretheim posits the original Israelite audience was also meant to see (and perhaps be embarrassed at) how much better than Israel were the non-human creatures obeying God. Youngblood, 139; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 111.

the text is quiet on the issue. Nonetheless, the author's inclusion of the king's proposal (3:9b) is likely supposed to raise questions for Israel and today's church, regarding YHWH's ability to change his own mind. YHWH's sovereignty apparently has no limits, and thus he has the liberty to keep, dismiss, and gather a flock for himself as he sees fit.⁵³

Canonical & Practical Significance

The Essence of Repentance

Most New Testament references to Jonah address two ideas, usually in tandem: the "sign of Jonah" and the repentance of Nineveh.⁵⁴ In Matthew, the "sign of Jonah" refers to his three-day stay in the belly of the fish, as Christ stayed in the grave for three days (12:40); Luke handles the sign differently, highlighting the *person* of each figure rather than the *burial* of each (11:29-30).⁵⁵ The fact that Jonah was underwater for his three days, Ben Zvi suggests, could be indicative of the baptism Jesus brings.⁵⁶

Jesus' contrast of the Ninevites' repentance (Jonah 3) with the scribes' and Pharisees' stubbornness is most striking (Matt 12:38, 41; Luke 11:32). What an indictment that even the cruelest nation in history, Assyria, can repent, but the very ones should be leading God's people *are denying Jesus*. Jonah preaches merely five words and

⁵³ This does not mean he is capricious, and the implications of this are worth more discussion. See pertinent sections below.

⁵⁴ Mark Allen Powell observes a distinction: in Matthew, the "sign of Jonah" focuses on Jonah's three-day stay in the belly of the fish, as Christ stayed in the grave for three days (12:40). On the other hand, Luke handles the "sign of Jonah" differently, highlighting the *person* of each figure (Jonah and Jesus) rather than their respective *burials* (11:29-30). Mark Allen Powell, "Echoes of Jonah in the New Testament," *Word & World* 27.2 (2007): 159.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 367 (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, 139).

ignites a citywide repentance; Jesus exhibits much more but receives much less.⁵⁷

Matthew and Luke are thus referencing Jonah in hopes of removing the veil from the eyes of the church--both then and now.

YHWH's Freedom to Change his Mind

Election is an interesting concept that has even confused the Elect throughout the millennia, leading some to believe nothing could forfeit their salvation. Likewise, the ability of YHWH to change his mind (even regarding who is *elect*) has, in fact, never changed. The overlapping issues have resurfaced more in the United States with resurgence of the Neo-Calvinist movement.⁵⁸ What's at stake in this crucial debate over God's ability to change his mind?

First, accountability is maintained when one's theology includes the ideals set forth in Jonah 3 and related texts (cf. Jer. 18:7-10). Misunderstandings can lead to erroneously equating grace with license to sin. Even if God receives glory through loving and forgiving sinners, his people should not go on sinning, as Paul explains clearly (Rom 6:1, 15). Taking one's own accountability seriously could have a direct correspondence with increasing in holiness.

Biblical prophecy is also difficult to make sense of without an understanding of God's immutability. What about verses that imply or say directly God does not change

⁵⁷ Powell, 159.

⁵⁸ Mark Oppenheimer, "Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival," *New York Times*, January 4, 2014, accessed May 10, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1hn9AHG>. Oppenheimer notes that the theological orientation known as Calvinism is especially thriving among church members in their 20's and 30's, a demographic many churches struggle to keep. Perhaps such is telling of young Christians' craving for authentic, bold faith, as many well-known Calvinist preachers like John Piper, D. A. Carson, Timothy Keller, and Marc Driscoll exhibit with serious focus on text and reason.

his mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Psalm 110:4)?⁵⁹ They must stand beside scriptures that describe the opposite (Jer. 18:5-10, 26:3; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:10, 4:2; Exod 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6) and vice versa.⁶⁰ In scripture YHWH states his intentions in various ways, namely in *decrees* and *announcements*, that latter being subject to implicit conditionality.⁶¹ Once this is understood or at least believed, God's people may be more secure in faith and even more appreciative of God's continuing mercy while remembering: YHWH can remove from his presence anyone or anything he deems necessary, or else he is not *fully* sovereign.

Preaching the Word

Finally, preachers may note Jonah's success was "without entertainment or amusement without a marketing scheme or an advertising campaign."⁶² When the Holy Spirit moves upon a people (John 3:8), they may repent—or resist (Acts 7:51). The preacher's may proclaim the Gospel by God's word even in the toughest of pulpits, as Jonah exemplifies quite well.

⁵⁹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 152 (1995): 387.

⁶⁰ John T. Willis notes and refutes four problems asserted by those who attribute God's "repentance" as anthropomorphisms: (1) Some scriptures say YWHH does not repent; (2) it sabotages YHWH's "transcendence and total differentiation from humankind; (3) the philosophical argument that God knows the future, inhibiting him from falsely declaring the future; (4) the notion that emotions are only characteristic of humans, as taught by Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, and Neoplatonists. Willis, 156-175.

⁶¹ Chisholm includes that decrees may be either formal or informal (i.e., marked or unmarked), and that announcements may likewise be marked or unmarked and *conditional*. The latter is the focus of his article. Chisholm, 389.

⁶² Lawson, 332.

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