

Commentary On The Book Of Jonah

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Introduction.

The book of Jonah claims to be a record of events in the life of Jonah, the son of Amittai, who prophesied the expansion of Israel to its former bounds just prior to, or during the early part of, the reign of Jeroboam II, possibly around 790-760 AD (2 Kings 14.25). Had it not been for the miraculous elements that the book contains it would undoubtedly have been accepted by all as intended to describe historical events, for there is no indication anywhere in the book that it is any other than a prophetic history in line with those of Elijah and Elisha. That being so any other view of it is pure speculation. The position held concerning it other than as history is really simply in the end a matter of individual presuppositions, and is not based on strict evidence at all, of which too much is lacking. The one thing, however, that should be taken into account is that Jesus Christ spoke of it as though it were history. He saw the experience of Jonah in the fish's belly as a sign of His own resurrection which could be cited as evidence, and recognised the conversion of the Assyrians as an historical fact. There will be no mythical Ninevites present at the Judgment, only real ones (Matthew 12.40-41). That being so it is in the end our view of Jesus Christ which will help to determine whether we see Jonah as historical or not.

Further evidence that it was not intended simply to be an allegory was Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh and his flight in the opposite direction, together with the mercy shown to the repentant sailors and passengers. This last had no particular lesson to teach in the line of allegory sensibly speaking, and was simply described because it was considered that it had happened, and in order to bring out the continuing mercy of God towards all who repent and seek His face, regardless of what nationality they are.

The Authorship and Date Of The Prophecy.

As no information is given in the book as to authorship and date (something quite normal in ancient books) it is impossible to speak with certainty about either authorship or date, although it is quite clear that it was written on the basis of information provided in one way or another by Jonah who, as mentioned above, prophesied in the early years of Jeroboam II. It is thus impossible to say whether it was written by Jonah himself, after meditating for some time on what had happened to him, or by one of his later followers or admirers who had access to traditions about his life. There are, however, a number of signs, or we may say hints, which may be seen as pointing to an early rather than a late date for its composition.

- The first sign of an early date is that all the Psalms whose ideas might be seen as called on by Jonah in his own psalm of thanksgiving for rescue from the dark waters of the sea, were apparently earlier Psalms, something which can therefore be seen as indicating an earlier rather than a later period, when other later Psalms could have been called on. Consider the following:

For Jonah 2.2, compare the ideas in Psalm 18.5-6 (Davidic); 30.3 (Davidic); 118.5 (anon); 120.1 (of Ascents). Jonah 2.3a, compare the ideas in 88.6, 7 (of the sons of Korah). Jonah 2.3b, compare Psalm 42.7 (of the sons of Korah). Jonah 2.4a, compare Psalm 31.22 (Davidic). Jonah 2.4b, compare Psalm 5.7 (Davidic). Jonah 2.5a, compare Psalm 18.5; 69.2 (Davidic). Jonah 2.6, compare Psalm 30.3 (Davidic). Jonah 2.7a, compare Psalm 142.3; 143.4 (Davidic). Jonah 2.7b, compare Psalm 18.6 (Davidic). Jonah 2.8a, compare Psalm 31.6 (Davidic). Jonah 2.9, compare Psalm 26.7; (Davidic);

50.14, 23 (Asaph); 116.17 (anon).

However none of the parallels are close enough to indicate citation of the particular Psalms and it is only the general ideas and thought forms that can be compared. We are not claiming the Jonah was familiar with all these Psalms. The similarities do, however, suggest that Jonah was fully alive to the worship of the Temple, as it was conducted at a reasonably early date.

- The second sign of an earlier date rather than a later lies in the fact that it was included among the prophets rather than the other writings, and placed among what were seen as the earliest prophets. It could, of course, be argued that that was because it was about Jonah. But on the whole prophecies do tend to be speaking about their own times, and it suggests that those responsible saw the message of Jonah as being directed at those times.
- The third sign of an early date is that it clearly refers to a time when Assyrian power was seen in Israel to be at a low point, that is, as one that did not affect Israel. We cannot see Jonah behaving in the same way and saying the same things if the great conquering kings had been in action, with Assyria as inveterate enemies of Israel. Both Jonah's attitude towards Assyria, and his arguments concerning Assyria, point to an Assyria which was not seen as a super-power, even if he was in awe at the size of Nineveh, which probably took him by surprise. Furthermore the description of the Assyrian king as 'the king of Nineveh', and his very reaction, both point to a time when Israel were not in awe of him. Whoever was the author would probably have taken these added factors concerning Assyria into consideration had it been of a late date, for historical perspective tended to be lacking among ancient historians. (How much more effective the story would have been if it had happened to Tiglath Pileser III, Sennacherib or Esarhaddon. The fact that that did not happen confirms that the writer was wanting what he said to be seen as genuine history).
- The fourth sign of an early date lies in the fact that the author does not demur at the thought of Assyrians responding to an Israelite prophet. At a later date this would probably have been seen as so unlikely that it would not have been considered.

There are really no pointers to a late date. The few 'Aramaisms' could have been used by writers at any time after Ugarit (c. 1200 BC at the latest), for many so-called 'Aramaisms' are testified to there, and neither its main message (see below) nor the language and grammar demand a late date. The reference to the king as 'the king of Nineveh' points to a time when he was seen as on a par with other kings rather than to a time when he was past history and only thought of as the great king of Assyria. This description of the king of a nation in terms of a leading city is quite common in Scripture (e.g. 1 Kings 21.1; Deuteronomy 4.2, 23, with 1.4; 3.2; 4.46; Judges 4.17 with 4.2, 23; 2 Kings 3.9, 12; 2 Chronicles 24.23). But what Israelite could have forgotten what Assyria had later done to Israel? And to suggest that, because Jonah speaks of Nineveh in the past as 'was a great city' (3.3), it signifies that it was no longer in existence, indicates desperation indeed. It need only indicate that it was so when Jonah was there. If I said that I had visited London and it was a great city full of bright lights, nobody would assume that I was a visitor from the twenty second century who lived long after London had been destroyed.

It will be readily agreed that the 'signs' described above can only be seen as indications rather than as strong evidence, and that other explanations can (as always when scholastic minds are at work) be provided for the phenomena, but nevertheless it is our view that they do give a feeling for an earlier date rather than a later one. The authorship and date do not, however, affect the message of the book.

The Message Of The Prophecy.

Taking the prophecy as a whole the main message is clearly the gracious willingness of God to respond to men's repentance no matter from what race they may come. Jonah's story commenced because YHWH wished to show mercy to the people of Nineveh if they repented. It continued in chapter 1 with the fact that He showed mercy to the repentant sailors of many nationalities. In chapter 2 he showed mercy to a repentant Jonah, the strict but disobedient Jewish prophet. In chapter 3 He showed mercy to the king and people of Nineveh when they repented. In chapter 4 He emphasised the fact that His willingness to show mercy to the repentant was basically reasonable and in accord with His character as YHWH Elohim, the God of the covenant and the God of the whole earth, and that Jonah needed to learn the same message. This then is the idea that underlies the whole book, that God will have mercy on all who repent, no matter what their background and antecedents.

This is a principle that in fact underlies the whole Biblical revelation, being revealed clearly in Genesis, confirmed in Exodus 12.38, 48, and in the continual reception of non-Israelites into Israel, in the acceptance of Rahab in Joshua 6.25, in the acceptance into the Davidic line of Ruth the Moabitess, and in the acceptance of Naaman the Syrian general (2 Kings 5), even though living in a foreign country, something which had possibly occurred within Jonah's living memory. It was an underlying principal of the message of Isaiah (e.g. Isaiah 2.2-4, 10-21; 11.4, 9; 18.7; 19.23-25; 42.6; etc. compare Micah 4.2-3). Thus it was not a new message in the 8th century BC, simply one that needed to be underlined.

The second overall message that it emphasises is that YHWH is sovereign over the whole world and controls everything in it. He sent His prophet to Nineveh, He acted against Jonah in foreign seas when he was on his way to Tarshish, and delivered the foreign sailors and passengers who called on Him. He arranged for a large fish to swallow Jonah, saving him from the deep, He kept him alive in the fish and praising God, He arranged for the fish to dump him in the right place, He brought about repentance in Nineveh, and He made His demonstrations to Jonah with the gourd on Assyrian soil. It was an Assyrian gourd, and He even controlled the Assyrian weather.

A third clear message is that God is always open to hear prayers of repentance. He heard the cry of the mariners from their stricken vessel; He heard the cry of Jonah when he was drowning in the deep, and then when he was in the innards of the large fish; and He heard the cry of the people of Nineveh. He even heard the heart cry of a disgruntled Jonah in Nineveh. It demonstrated that 'His ear is open to our cry'.

All these messages were ones that Israel and Judah needed to learn in the time of Jeroboam II in order to encourage them to trust fully in YHWH, turning from their idols and their own ways (the sailors turned from their idols, Jonah derided idolatry (2.8), the Assyrians turned from their idols), and to recognise that they could trust YHWH to deliver them from foreign enemies if only they would put their confidence in Him. After all, if He could influence the Assyrians and their king in such a way as to bring about their repentance, it was quite clear that they were not impervious to Him and that He could therefore certainly act in order to prevent their attacking His people. And such a prophecy would certainly have had a message for the mixture of nations who had come under Jeroboam's control, as a reminder of the power and compassion of YHWH towards all.

Other secondary messages include (1) the fact that Israel had a responsibility to the nations outside their own territory, as Isaiah would emphasise, (2) that we should be ready to show compassion even to our enemies, and (3) that there is no escaping God. But central to the prophecy is the idea of the power and responsiveness of YHWH to those who call on Him in repentance (chapters 1-3), while reserving a special place in His heart for His own remnant (chapter 4).

A further central message of the book, that would not have been apparent in Jonah's day, but was certainly emphasised by Jesus as a 'sign' to Israel, was that when God wanted to offer

mercy and forgiveness it would result from 'death' and 'resurrection'. The contrast between the disobedient Jonah, who had to 'die' and rise again before he was willing to follow the pathway of obedience, and even then with a certain amount of disgruntlement, contrasts sharply with the One Who came in the way of obedience praying 'Your will be done', but was still thrown overboard, and yet through death and resurrection brought about the opportunity of mercy for all. If we want to see the book of Jonah as an analogy, let it be this.

Was Jonah Really Swallowed By A Big Fish?

Unless we deny all Biblical miracles there really is no reason why we should deny the possibility that Jonah was swallowed by a big fish. There is no suggestion that this was a commonplace, regular event. It was specifically seen as 'miraculous'. But there is in fact no reason why, under exceptional circumstances, this could not have occurred.

We do not, of course, know what kind of a fish it was. It may have been a kind of large fish which is now extinct. But even if that is not so there is certainly evidence that sperm whales and certain species of large sharks can swallow objects the size of a man, and indeed have been known to do so. The problem would lie in the person receiving a sufficient supply of air in order to stay alive. It has thus been mooted that it may have been a genuine whale and that because it could not swallow Jonah through its narrow gullet, he was instead ingested into the great laryngeal pouch, which starts from below and in front of the larynx and runs down the front of the neck on to the chest. It has thick, elastic walls, and a cavity quite large enough to receive a human body, and would contain a plentiful supply of air for breathing. It might also explain why the whale's system, sensing interference in its lungs, finally ejected the object which was causing it annoyance.

A case was reported in the year 1758 when a sailor fell overboard from a frigate, in very stormy weather, into the Mediterranean Sea, and was immediately taken into the jaws of a shark, disappearing into its innards. The captain, however, ordered a gun, which was standing on the deck, to be discharged at the shark, and the cannon-ball struck it, with the result that it vomited the sailor whom it had swallowed up again. The sailor was then taken up alive into the boat which had been lowered in order to rescue him, and was very little hurt. Being a naval frigate the details would have been officially recorded in the ship's log. The problem, of course, with all such stories is that they improved in the telling, but the fact that they did keep appearing demonstrates that there is some truth behind them. Even those that were invented, or considerably enhanced, gained credibility from those which had a genuine core of truth within them.

Would The Ninevites Have Repented At The Preaching Of Jonah?

It has often been questioned as to whether the Ninevites would have repented at the preaching of a Jewish prophet. It is very much a theoretical question for it is difficult for us even to begin to appreciate what the effect would be of the appearance of a man proclaiming a new message from a God Who had a certain reputation even abroad, to a nation bowed down with political crises, whose own religious beliefs and activities had been turned upside down by a reforming king. And we must at the same time remember that we are speaking of people from an excitable part of the world, who lived over two and a half thousand years ago, and who worshipped a number of exotic gods. This would especially have been so if Jonah's visage had taken on an unearthly appearance as a result of his incarceration in the large fish.

Furthermore if the Assyrians actually learned that this strange 'prophet' who had come among them had been regurgitated by a large fish in order to come to them, it may well have caused a popular reaction that resulted in a response to his warnings. It should be noted that nothing is said about their being converted to Yahwism. Rather they are seen to have repented of sin, and to have expressed genuine repentance towards 'God' (Elohim). Compare Romans 2.14-16.

If this occurred late on in the latter part of the reign of Adad-Nirari III, or in the reign of Assurdan III who followed him and whose reign took place at a time of great weakness and trouble for the Assyrian empire, when plagues swept the empire and Urartu was continually threatening on its northern border, it may make it much more understandable that both king and people might respond to a strange prophet who had come among them out of the sea describing a powerful God Who could save or destroy. Adad-Nirari III had himself instituted religious reform, concentrating worship on the god Nebo, which in itself demonstrated his deep religious feeling, and we can perhaps understand why in such changing religious circumstances, with the old gods sidelined, the people might have seen Jonah as appearing as (from their viewpoint) a messenger from the gods, and as a great prophet sent by the gods, and have responded accordingly. And this would especially be so if God did reveal His presence at the time in an unusually vivid manner as He has sometimes done in the past. For if God could respond to the repentance of an Ahab so as to delay judgment until after he was dead (1 Kings 21.29), why should He not also do a similar thing for a repentant Nineveh who were just as genuine as Ahab, in order to offer them an opportunity to seek Him further should they be willing to do so? To suggest that it could not happen is to ignore how often through the ages, even humanly speaking, large numbers of people have been swayed in the most unlikely way by great orators and great religious movements. Thus it should not seem unlikely that this could happen with a man sent from God in the most unusual circumstances.

The Names Of God.

The use in the prophecy of the names of God is instructive. Mainly when Jonah alone is involved the covenant Name YHWH is used (1.1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 17; 2.1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10; 3.1, 3; 4.2, 3, 4, 6, 10). Otherwise YHWH is only used among the mariners after they have learned that it was YHWH Who was involved in what was happening, thus in 1.10, 14, 16 they seek to have direct dealings with YHWH, first as the One Who could stop what He had started, and secondly as the One Who had done so.

‘YHWH God’ is used when YHWH wanted to comfort His servant by divine provision acting on nature (4.6), and possibly as an indication that he was putting Jonah on a par with ‘foreigners’ for illustrative purposes (see commentary). ‘YHWH the God of Heaven’ is used by Jonah when communicating with foreigners - 1.9); ‘YHWH his/my God’ is used when Jonah was in the large fish, and is emphasising YHWH’s special care of him as His God (2.1, 6).

At all other times ‘God Elohim’ is used. Thus it is used when dealing with the mariners before they have learned about YHWH’s interest in matters (1.5, 6), and is used by or of the Ninevites (3.5, 8, 9, 10). It is used on its own in connection with Jonah only in a section when chastening and natural activity is involved, and possibly when Jonah is being treated as ‘a foreigner’ for illustrative purposes (4.7, 8, 9). It is also used by Jonah as a general title for God when defining Him in general terms (4.2).

Especially interesting is the usage in 4.4, 9. In the first YHWH is speaking to Jonah as his covenant God in response to Jonah’s grumble, and asks him, ‘Do you well to be angry?’ about a matter that concerns God’s mercy for the Assyrians. It is speaking within the covenant relationship. In 4.9 God is speaking to Jonah after chastening him when He is speaking severely as God over all Who has just acted in relation to ‘natural events’, or as the God Who is the God of all men, seeing Jonah at that stage as similar to the foreigners previously dealt with. Then He also asks him, ‘Do you well to be angry - for the gourd?’ (thus having compassion on it), linking these verses with what He has been saying in verse 4. Here He is speaking either as God over all and responsible for all when dealing with a matter that concerns ‘nature’, which is not Jonah’s sphere of responsibility, or alternately is comparing Jonah with Assyria, asking Jonah whether he is angry that God’s act of mercy towards him has been taken away. Once, however, matters turn back to the question of God’s mercy, it is

once again as YHWH (4.10).

Note that both in dealing with the mariners and dealing with the Assyrians their 'evil situation' is in mind (1.7; 1.8; 1.2; 3.10). And at that stage He is 'God' to them. But in both cases once He has acted in mercy He becomes YHWH to them. And in the same way Jonah has been in an 'evil situation' (4.6) and also receives mercy, although in his case from 'YHWH God', because his situation is being compared with that of the others, but as one who is within the covenant. In all cases, however, their judgments, or proposed judgements, are from God, while the final consequence of mercy is depicted as connected with YHWH (1.14-16; 4.6, 10). The message is clear. The strong should have compassion on the weak, and it is God's desire to show mercy and turn all men to YHWH.

COMMENTARY.

The content of Jonah's prophecy, which is described in the usual terms of 'the word of YHWH', is depicted as being that YHWH wanted the wickedness of Nineveh to be brought to the attention of its people. We learn later that this was because He intended to destroy it (3.2, 4), but was giving prior warning so that they might have an opportunity to consider their ways. This is typical of a God Who would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah without giving it its opportunity, even sending angelic messengers among them in order to give them a chance to discover the truth (Genesis 18-19); Who delayed judgment on the Canaanites for 'four generations' in order to see if they would turn from their ways (Genesis 15.16), and Who gave Egypt every opportunity to escape judgment if only they would release His people. Every plague, until the final ones, was a new offer of mercy.

But the working out of the whole prophecy demonstrates that YHWH is ready to show mercy on all who truly repent, whether they be foreign mariners, a disobedient prophet or a sinful Nineveh. And in the final chapter the reasonableness of this is underlined. It is the main purpose of the prophecy to bring out this message.

Analysis of 1.1-17.

- a Now the word of YHWH came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness is come up before me" (1.1-2).
- b But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH, and he went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid its fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH (1.3).
- c But YHWH cast a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was likely to be broken (1.4).
- d Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man to his god, and they cast overboard the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the ship, and he lay, and was fast asleep.'
- e So the shipmaster came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, O sleeper? Arise, call on your God, if so be that God will think on us, so that we perish not" (1.6).
- f And they said every one to his fellow, "Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is on us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, we pray you, for whose cause this evil is on us. What is your occupation, and from where do you come? What is your country, and of what people are you?" (1.7-8).
- g And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear YHWH, the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land" (1.9).
- h Then the men were hugely afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of YHWH, because he had told them (1.10).

- g Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may be calm for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous (1.11).
- f And he said to them, “Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea, so will the sea be calm for you, for I know that for my sake this great tempest is on you.” ’
- e Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get themselves back to the land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them (1.13).
- d For which reason they cried to YHWH, and said, “We beseech you, O YHWH, we beseech you, do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not lay on us innocent blood, for you, O YHWH, have done as it pleased you” (1.14).
- c So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging (1.15).
- b Then the men feared YHWH greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to YHWH, and made vows (1.16).
- a And YHWH prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights (1.17).

Note that in ‘a’ YHWH called Jonah to go to Nineveh, and in the parallel because he did not go YHWH caused a great fish to swallow him. In ‘b’ Jonah, instead of fearing YHWH, took ship to get away from him and paid his fare for the very purpose, and in the parallel the mariners did fear YHWH and approached YHWH and paid Him with their sacrifices and vows. In ‘c’ YHWH threw the wind on the sea, and in the parallel Jonah was thrown on the sea. In ‘d’ the mariners cried to their gods, and in the parallel they cried to YHWH. In ‘e’ the captain was trying every method to save the ship, and in the parallel the mariners made every effort to save the ship. In ‘f’ Jonah was picked out as the villain of the piece, and in the parallel he calls on them to cast him into the sea. In ‘g’ he told them that he served YHWH the God of heaven who had made the sea, and in the parallel they asked him what they could do in order to calm the sea. Centrally in ‘h’ we are faced with the real reason for the problem that they all faced.

1.1 ‘Now the word of YHWH came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,’

As a prophet of YHWH Jonah received ‘the word of YHWH’. We are rarely given any explanation of how the word of YHWH was given and we are not justified in most cases in assuming that the prophet went into a state of ecstasy. Indeed it could be argued that among Hebrew prophets that was so rare an occurrence that it was only when it did happen that it was described in depth. Many have received the word of God since that day in the quietness of prayer and meditation, and there is no real reason for seeing the genuine prophets of YHWH as receiving it in any other way, except in exceptional circumstances. Elijah (e.g. 1 Kings 17.11-14) and Elisha (2 Kings 4.27) certainly expected that the word of YHWH would often come to them without any fuss. We have only to compare the approach of Elijah in contrast with the prophets of Baal to recognise that not all prophets functioned in the same way (1 Kings 18.26, 28-29, 31-38).

All that we know of Jonah, apart from what is in this prophecy, is found in 2 Kings 14.25, where we learn that Jeroboam II ‘restored the border of Israel from Libo-Hamath to the sea of the Arabah (the Dead Sea) according to the word of YHWH, the God of Israel, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet who was of Gath-hepher.’ We thus know that he was seen as an authentic prophet in the early 8th century BC who received ‘the word of YHWH’, and probably had the ear of the king. But in view of the fact that so little was known about him it would be difficult to see why this story should be written about him if it did not have a basis in fact. Why select a prophet connected with the outwardly successful reign of Jeroboam II for such a story when the point could be got over better by choosing a prophet from another time who would have had a good cause to fear (or to object to) going to Nineveh? Thus while attempts have been made to find such a reason, they have not been considered successful.

1.2 ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness is come up before me.’

YHWH’s command was that Jonah should go to Nineveh to proclaim His word there, because He was aware of their ‘wickedness’, or alternatively ‘the evil that had come upon them’. In fact both meanings might have been seen as reflected in the word. As well as indicating moral wickedness the word used can also indicate ‘evil’ in the sense of ‘afflictions’ or ‘natural evils’ But Jonah’s message to it was to be such (3.2, 4) that it is made clear that it was his view that YHWH certainly had their wickedness in mind, even if He was also aware of their misfortunes. As the largest city within the purview of Jonah it would necessarily have been seen with some justification as the home of much villainy and vice, to say nothing of extremities of pleasure, of a kind which both Jonah and YHWH would certainly have frowned on (1 John 2.15-17). Scripture always sees large cities outside of Israel/Judah as centres of all kinds of evil (which in fact they were) so that Isaiah, for example, portrays the world’s sinfulness in terms of ‘a city’ (e.g. Isaiah 24.10-12).

‘That great city’ was probably indicating Greater Nineveh which was made up of four large cities seen as forming one. Nimrod was said to have ‘built Nineveh and Rehoboth-Ir, and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah, the same is the great city’ (Genesis 10.11-12). It was seemingly this conurbation that YHWH is presented as having in mind. It was probably the ruling centre of Assyria (compare how the king of Assyria was known as ‘the Great King’).

It should be noted that intrinsic in this command is that Nineveh is responsible to YHWH and can be called into account by Him, and furthermore that its future fate depends on YHWH. He is thus revealed as the God of the whole of creation, as He will now make apparent. This is not a new teaching. It was the message of Genesis 1-11, and was made apparent by God’s activities in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in Canaan. It was also made apparent in the activities of Elijah and Elisha.

This opportunity being given to Nineveh and its king in its time of weakness can be seen as God’s final attempt to prevent Assyria from going into the excesses of which it will shortly be guilty. Had they listened and responded permanently how different their future might have been. As it was they would finally be destroyed, and that within two hundred years.

1.3 ‘But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH, and he went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid its fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH.’

But Jonah was unwilling to go to Nineveh and sought to evade YHWH’s call by fleeing in the opposite direction to Nineveh. He did this by taking ship for Tarshish (possibly Sardinia or Spain). Tarshish (possibly meaning ‘smeltery’) was the name given to a number of areas which mined the silver, tin, iron and lead carried by the ‘ships of Tarshish’ (ships that carried ore, large cargo ships). Others see Tarshish as meaning ‘the open sea’, with ships of Tarshish being those large enough to cope with the open sea as opposed to sailing near land.

‘He went down to Joppa.’ Joppa, or Yepu in the Amarna letters and Yapu in neo-Assyrian inscriptions, was a small port on the coast and was not in Israel or Judah. It was Jonah’s first step in his attempt to get away from God. In Joppa no one would blame him for wanting to get away from Israel’s influence, and from the influence of Israel’s God.

This does not necessarily mean that Jonah actually thought that he could escape the presence of YHWH, only that he thought that if he abdicated his responsibilities as a prophet and left the country of his calling he would be freed from his responsibilities. YHWH’s earthly dwellingplace was in Jerusalem, and Israel was YHWH’s inheritance, and he presumably considered that by cutting himself off from YHWH’s inheritance, the land of Israel, he could be freed from his calling as a prophet and from any responsibility to YHWH. He would no

longer be responsible as YHWH's servant.

We are not told why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. He may well have been afraid of what they might do to a Hebrew prophet. Or he may have felt that they were foreigners, and therefore not suitable people to receive a revelation from YHWH. Or he may simply have hated Assyria because of what it had already in the past done to his people, and have felt that he wanted no part in offering them the possibility of repentance. It may be that to him they were beyond the pale. Perhaps his own family had been affected by previous Assyrian invasions. But none of these are the reasons which are made clear in the prophecy. Indeed Jonah's argument was that it was because he was afraid that he would be too successful (4.2-3), and that YHWH might then spare the Assyrians. That would mean that his ability to prophesy the truth might then be called in question. And he emphasises that he had already made this clear to YHWH before he fled from Israel. He did not think that YHWH was being fair to him as a prophet. He could not bear to think that after prophesying the destruction of Nineveh it might not happen. What would people think about his prophetic ability then? He might even be seen as being a false prophet because what he had prophesied had not happened (Deuteronomy 18.22).

Note the threefold emphases in the verbs. He 'rose up to flee to Tarshish', 'went down to Joppa' and 'found a ship going to Tarshish' (which was what he was looking for). So he 'paid his fare', 'went down into it', in order to 'go to Tarshish'. In both cases what is being emphasised is his set purpose. Note also that Tarshish is mentioned three times in order to emphasise his specific destination. To most people Tarshish was the remotest spot on earth.

1.4 'But YHWH sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was likely to be broken.'

But YHWH was not going to let Jonah off so easily. Jonah was His servant and He never just cast off His servants however badly they behaved. He was as concerned to show mercy to Jonah, as He was to the sailors and to Nineveh. So He sent a great wind on the sea, and aroused a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the probability was that the ship would be broken in pieces. It does not sound like an act of love, but it was. How often He also break up our foundations so that we might learn to walk in His ways and trust and obey Him.

1.5 'Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man to his god, and they cast overboard the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the ship, and he lay, and was fast asleep.'

It may well be that Jonah was the only passenger aboard. Thus when the storm came he got himself out of the way and left things in the hands of those who were more capable. The fact that he fell asleep suggests merely that he had little experience of the sea and was confident in both the ship and its crew, and he was very tired. How often God's people think that all is well when really it is not so.

Meanwhile the mariners, who did know the sea, and had never experienced a storm like this, were terrified. And each of them cried to his own god. And at the same time, in order too demonstrate the faith that they had in them, they lightened the ship of everything that could be thrown overboard, which was basically the cargo of trading goods. What were profits when life was at stake?

1.6 'So the shipmaster came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, O sleeper? Arise, call on your God, if so be that God will think on us, so that we perish not." '

The shipmaster was concerned to see that while his mariners were doing all that they could to persuade their gods to rescue the ship, their passenger did not appear to be interested. And he woke him up and asked him what he meant by sleeping at such a time. Then he called on him to 'arise, call on your God', just in case his God might think on their predicament so that they

did not perish. It is clear that to him this was a last desperate venture, in which he did not put much hope, but was prepared to try because of the circumstances.

1.7 ‘And they said every one to his fellow, “Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is on us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.”

Then in desperation, when things did not improve, the mariners decided to cast lots in order to find out who among them had angered the gods so much that it had resulted in this evil coming on them. The word for ‘evil’ is the same one mentioned with regard to the Ninevites in 1.2. But here it signifies ‘evil events’, that is, catastrophes. And when they did cast lots, the lot fell on Jonah. YHWH had ‘disposed of’ the lot in order to indicate the culprit (Proverbs 16.33).

1.8 ‘Then they said to him, “Tell us, we pray you, for whose cause this evil is on us. What is your occupation, and from where do you come? What is your country, and of what people are you?”

Convinced that they had now found the culprit they asked him to explain why this evil had come upon them, and in doing so asked him for details of his occupation, nationality and native land. They wanted to know what kind of a God they were dealing with..

1.9 ‘And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear YHWH, the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land.” ’

Jonah answered in terms that they could understand. ‘Hebrew’ was the description used by outsiders of Israelites. It had originally arisen because they were a nomadic people with no permanent ties to the land in which they lived. Habiru was originally a name given to landless and stateless people (e.g. Israel, both in Egypt and when they arrived in Canaan, Abraham ‘the Hebrew’, and so on), and had eventually become attached to Israelites as a kind of nickname.

Jonah then explained that he revered and worshipped YHWH the God of heaven, Who had made the sea and the dry land. He was admitting that these rough seas could well have been the handiwork of his God.

1.10 ‘Then the men were hugely afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of YHWH, because he had told them.’

When the men heard that YHWH was a God of the sea they were terrified, and knowing from what he had said earlier that he was fleeing from ‘the presence of YHWH’, they asked him to consider what he had done. It was now clear to them that it was because of Jonah that all this was coming on them.

To flee from the presence of YHWH did not mean that Jonah actually thought that he could get away from God. It rather indicated that he had left the land which belonged to YHWH and in which He dwelt in His temple, so that he could no longer be called into His presence (compare Genesis 4.14).

1.11 ‘Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may be calm for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.’

Then they asked him, as one who would know his God’s requirements, what they could do to pacify Him so that the sea would become calm, for the storm was getting worse and worse.

1.12 ‘And he said to them, “Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea, so will the sea be calm for you, for I know that for my sake this great tempest is on you.” ’

As a prophet his reply was that, recognising that this great storm had arisen because of him (for his sake), they must throw him into the sea as a kind of appeasement offering to YHWH. Then the sea would become calm for them. he had made the decision that he was ready to die

to save the ship and the crew.

1.13 ‘Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get themselves back to the land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.’

However, to the men’s credit, they were loath to offer him as a human sacrifice, and began to put in every effort to row the ship to the shoreline, probably hoping to disembark Jonah and thus satisfy the gods. In those days ships would often hug the coast, precisely in case of such a storm as this. But it was all in vain, for the storm merely got worse and was clearly acting against them.

1.14 ‘For which reason they cried to YHWH, and said, “We beseech you, O YHWH, we beseech you, do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not lay on us innocent blood, for you, O YHWH, have done as it pleased you.” ’

When all proved vain they recognised that they were left with little alternative, and began to cry to YHWH, as Jonah’s offended God, not to cause them to perish because of what this man had done, and because He wanted to take Jonah’s life. And they begged that they might not be seen as murderers for what they were about to do, because they were simply doing it because it was YHWH’s requirement, and because they were seeking to conciliate Him. It was man’s typical, ‘its not my fault God, its yours’. But what they were really planning was murder.

1.15 ‘So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.’

Then they took up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and no doubt to their great astonishment, discovered that the sea immediately began to quieten down and eventually ceased from its raging. Here was evidence of the mercy of YHWH, for He had heard their cry and had done what they asked, revealing that YHWH was not only the God of Israel but the God of all men, and was the answerer of prayer to all who truly called on Him. This is the first example in the book of God’s willingness to respond in mercy to whoever calls on Him, and is the prime message of the book.

1.16 ‘Then the men feared YHWH greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to YHWH, and made vows.’

And the result was that the men recognised in YHWH a God Who had to be taken into account, and they paid Him due awed reverence, and offered a sacrifice to Him, and made vows, presumably vowing to continue to honour Him in the future. This would no doubt be done once they had landed, possibly by a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Thus Jonah, who had fled because he did not want to take the message of YHWH to foreigners, had by his actions done precisely that. Whether the men continued in the fear of YHWH we do not know. But at least they had had their opportunity.

1.17 ‘And YHWH prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly (innards) of the fish three days and three nights.’

Meanwhile YHWH had not forgotten YHWH and as God of land and sea had already made provision for Jonah by arranging for a large fish to be in the area, so that as Jonah began to drown in the turbulent seas, the fish might swallow him. And when it did he was inside the fish for ‘three days and three nights’, which in Israelite terminology indicated ‘a day or two’. (A ‘day and a night’ could refer to part of a day, seeing it as part of the day and night cycle. Compare Esther 4.16 with 5.1). He had not deserted His prophet, but had arranged for his rescue. The word for ‘belly’ simply means the innards, and is not necessarily specifically referring to the whale’s stomach. They did not know the physiology of whales.

Jonah, who had found himself drowning in the sea, and being dragged down into the depths, was, once he found himself alive and well and able to breathe in what appeared as some kind of chamber, grateful to God, and the psalm in chapter 2 expresses his gratitude. He probably

did not quite know what had happened to him, or where he was (he would find that out later), but he knew that he was alive and was therefore confident that if he repented God intended to spare his life. Ironically he found himself in the same position as the Ninevites to whom he had refused to go, as one who was under sentence and deserving of death, but with an opportunity of repentance. The Psalm adequately expresses this position, and is a necessary part of the story. Without it there would be no indication of Jonah's repentance.

Jonah's Prayer Of Repentance And Gratitude (2.1-10).

Finding himself rescued from drowning, Jonah expressed his gratitude to God, and, probably puzzled as to where he was, called on God for restitution to His favour, 'I am cast out from your sight, yet will I look again towards your holy Temple', and again, 'Those who regard lying vanities (Jonah in his flight), forsake their own mercy, but I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving, I will pay what I have vowed.' It is apparent that while in the sea he had made certain vows to YHWH.

The prayer is necessary in order to demonstrate that God's mercy was revealed towards Jonah, as it had been towards the sailors, and would be towards Nineveh. It draws attention to his repentance, and prepares for what follows. There is nothing in it which requires a late date, and its ideas are similar to what we view as mainly early Psalms. It suggests that Jonah was very familiar with Temple worship, or with similar worship in Israel. The parallels are not such, however, as to suggest direct borrowing. For examples of such parallels see the introduction.

To those who ask whether Jonah was likely to compose a Psalm while in the innards of the great fish our reply is, what else was he likely to do. He had to have something to occupy his time. For a prophet composing a prophetic psalm would be ideal.

His description of nearly drowning is vivid, even though his experience must only have lasted two or three minutes. At such times the thoughts are very much concentrated. It did, however, give him the opportunity to review what he had done and to repent in his heart. And then quite by a miracle he had found himself seized, and he had found himself enveloped by something he knew not what, and that he was able to breathe. And now here he was, able to thank God for deliverance from drowning and to confirm his repentance, and wait on God for further deliverance. His mind would naturally turn to composing a psalm of thanksgiving.

Analysis of 2.1-10.

- a Then Jonah prayed to YHWH his God out of the fish's innards (2.1).
- b "I called by reason of my affliction to YHWH, and he answered me, out of the belly of Sheol I cried, you heard my voice" (2.2).
- c "For you cast me into the depth, in the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me, all your waves and your billows passed over me" (2.3).
- d "And I said, 'I am cast out from before your eyes, yet I will look again towards your holy temple'" (2.4).
- e "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul, the deep was round about me, the weeds were wrapped about my head" (2.5).
- f "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains, the earth with its bars closed on me for ever, yet have you brought up my life from the pit, O YHWH my God" (2.6).
- e "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered YHWH" (2.7a).
- d "And my prayer came in to you, into your holy temple" (2.7b).
- c "Those who regard lying vanities, forsake their own mercy" (2.8a).
- b "But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving, I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of YHWH" (2.9b-9).
- a And YHWH spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land (2.10).

Note that in 'a' Jonah spoke to YHWH from the fish, and in the parallel YHWH spoke to the fish about Jonah. In 'b' he cried to YHWH from the very belly of Sheol, and in the parallel he gives thanks that God heard him and delivered him. In 'c' we find Jonah seemingly treated without mercy, and in the parallel the consequence of Jonah's lying vanities, will be that he has forsaken his own mercy. In 'd' he looks towards YHWH's holy Temple, and in the parallel he prays towards YHWH's holy Temple. In 'e' the waters surrounded his soul, and in the parallel his soul fainted within hi. Centrally in 'f' he reached the lowest depths only to find deliverance.

2.1 'Then Jonah prayed to YHWH his God out of the fish's innards.'

All Jonah probably knew was that he was somewhere safe where he could breathe and pray. It would only be later that he discovered that he was in the innards of a large fish. And knowing that he had been saved from certain death he was no doubt confident that God would sort everything out.

2.2 'And he said,

**"I called by reason of my affliction to YHWH,
And he answered me,
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
You heard my voice."**

As he sank into the sea after being hurled from the deck Jonah had felt that he was sinking into the belly of Sheol (the grave). He had felt that he was about to die. But he had cried to YHWH in his affliction and he now knew that YHWH had heard his voice and answered him, for here he was alive and able to pray and offer thanks.

For the thought of someone being in the belly of Sheol see Isaiah 5.14, 'Sheol has enlarged herself and opened her mouth without measure, and their glory, and their plenty, and their pomp, and the one who rejoices among them will descend into it'. But in Jonah's case his meaning is brought out in verse 3. His experience was like being in the belly of Sheol because he was engulfed in water. Compare Psalm 18.5, 'the cords of Sheol were round about me, the snares of death came on me.'

2.3

**"For you cast me into the depth,
In the heart of the seas,
And the flood was round about me,
All your waves and your billows passed over me."**

His remembrance of his experience was vivid. He had been cast into the heart of the sea, and had felt as though he was being swallowed up by the sea, almost as though he had been in his grave, with the waters sweeping over him. Note his emphasis on the fact that it was YHWH Who had done this to him, and that it was His waves and billows which passed over him. YHWH had been with him in all that had happened.

2.4

**"And I said, 'I am cast out from before your eyes,
Yet I will look again towards your holy temple.'"**

And his first thoughts as he viewed approaching death was that he had been cast out from before YHWH's eyes. He was a reject. But his automatic impulse had been to look towards the Temple of YHWH in his mind, even though he had recognised that he was a castaway. It was an instantaneous admission of guilt and a plea for acceptance. He who had refused mercy towards others was now seeking it for himself.

2.5

"The waters compassed me about,

Even to the soul,
The deep was round about me,
The weeds were wrapped about my head.”

But his awful experience had gone on. (God does not always step in immediately until we have learned our lesson). He had felt as though the waters had entered into his very soul. The depths of the sea had been all around him, and he had felt weeds wrapping round his head. He had known that he was drowning, which was of course what he had anticipated. Rescue had been far from his mind.

For the whole idea compare Psalm 69.1-2. Save Me, O God, for the waters are come into my soul, -- I am come into deep waters where the floods overflow me’. But in the case of Jonah the experience had been a literal one.

2.6

“I went down to the bottoms of the mountains,
The earth with its bars closed on me for ever,
Yet have you brought up my life from the pit,
O YHWH my God.”

He had felt himself sinking lower and lower, into the very depths. ‘The bottom of the mountains’ indicates the sea floor, for as men stood on the shore they saw the slope of the mountains going down into the seas and realised that at the bottom of the slope was a valley, the sea floor. As the boat was clearly not far from shore, the bottom of the sea would not have been at any great depth. And he had felt as though he was excluded from the earth by bars which prevented his returning, and which would hold him for ever. But then he had found himself remarkably delivered and he had been lifted out of the pit, and he had thus recognised that it was the action of YHWH His God.

2.7

“When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered YHWH,
And my prayer came in to you,
Into your holy temple.

In his desperation he had remembered YHWH, and he had prayed to YHWH towards His holy Temple. And he knew that in that moment YHWH had answered, so that here he was, safe, even though he knew not where.

2.8-9

Those who regard lying vanities,
Forsake their own mercy,
But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving,
I will pay what I have vowed.
Salvation is of YHWH.”

But he acknowledged that he had been clinging on to deceitful vanities as though he was an idolater (for the phrase compare Psalm 31.6 where it probably refers to idolatry). He had actually believed that he could resign his position as the servant of YHWH and simply walk out on Him, as though YHWH was just an idol. And it had caused him forsake the mercy that was available to him from YHWH. He could hardly believe it of himself. But now all that was past. He was restored to his obedience to YHWH, and once he was in a position to do so he would offer his thanksgiving offering with gratitude, and would pay what he had vowed while he was drowning. For now he recognised in a way that he had not before, that Salvation was of YHWH, totally undeserved and freely given. It had to be for he had just experienced it in that way himself.

‘Salvation is of YHWH.’ This is the message of the whole prophecy. It is God Who saves and God alone. And He does it to whomever He will. No one, not even Jonah, could interfere. Once he had learned that lesson he was free to go.

2.10 ‘And YHWH spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land.’

Then the large fish approached land, no doubt under God’s direction, and YHWH then spoke to it and it vomited Jonah out on the dry land. Now at last Jonah knew where he had been, in the innards of a large fish.

The message was clear to all. Whether it was a matter of the sea, or of the denizens of the deep, YHWH was in full control of His creation, which did what He bid.

A Changed Jonah Obeys God And Goes To Nineveh Proclaiming Its Overthrow Within Forty Days, With The Result That (To Jonah’s Chagrin) Nineveh Repents (3.1-10).

Jonah was no longer rebellious. He had learned his lesson. So when YHWH came to him again and told him to go to Nineveh to proclaim His word, Jonah did as he was bid. Unlike the seas and the fish he did it by free choice. And the consequence of his preaching was that the people of Nineveh repented deeply, and sought and found mercy from God.

Analysis of 3.1-10.

- **a And the word of YHWH came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the preaching that I bid you” (3.1-2).**
- **b So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of YHWH. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, of three days’ journey, and Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3.3-4).**
- **c And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them (3.5).**
- **d And the news reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes (3.6).**
- **c And he made proclamation and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed, nor drink water, but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast, and let them cry mightily to God, yes, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands” (3.7-8).**
- **b “Who knows whether God will not turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?” (3.9).**
- **a And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil which he said he would do to them; and he did not do it (3.10).**

Note that in ‘a’ Jonah is to preach to Nineveh what YHWH tells him, and in the parallel the Ninevites have listened to what YHWH had said. In ‘b’ he proclaimed that in forty days Nineveh would be overthrown, and in the parallel the hope is that he will show mercy. In ‘c’ the people proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth, and in the parallel they are called on by their king to fast and be covered in sackcloth. Centrally in ‘d’ the king himself covered himself with sackcloth and mourned over his sin.

3.1 ‘And the word of YHWH came to Jonah the second time, saying,’

In the mercy of God Jonah was being given a second chance. God is gracious with His servants. And so ‘the word of YHWH’ came to Jonah a second time.

3.2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the preaching that I bid you,”

It was the same word as before, that he should go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the words that

YHWH gave to him. As we have seen earlier (1.2) ‘the great city’ was a conurbation made up of four sister-cities in Assyria.

3.3 ‘So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of YHWH. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, of three days’ journey.’

Jonah, now obedient to YHWH, arose and went to Nineveh in accordance with His word. If ‘three days journey is the correct translation we are then told of the size of Nineveh. It was a ‘three days journey’, presumably in width. ‘Three days journey’ is a set phrase that indicates a relatively short journey in contrast with a longer one of ‘seven days journey’ (compare the usage in Genesis). It theoretically represented the distance the average person could travel in a relatively short period (‘three days’ regularly means a short period). Some would take longer, others would do it in less. It is simply an approximate indicator of size. Taking into account the four sister-cities the description is quite reasonable, even if necessarily inexact.

It is, however possible that we should translate as ‘for a three day visit’, with the indication being that visiting Nineveh could not be done in a day. It required following the accepted protocol. In Nehemiah 2.6 the word used here certainly means ‘visit’ (the king was not interested in the literal length of his journey, but rather in the length of his visit).

‘An exceedingly great (or important) city.’ or more strictly, ‘a city great/important to God’. In other words even God saw it as a large one, or even God saw it as important (possibly because it contained a large number of people - 4.11).

3.4 ‘And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ’

Jonah entered the city, presumably Nineveh itself, and walked a short distance into it. ‘A day’s journey’ simply indicates a few miles in contrast with a ‘three days journey’. He would walk this while he was looking for a suitable place to preach. Or it may simply indicate ‘a quick visit’. And there he began to preach what YHWH had told him, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.” It was a simple message of judgment.

The details of how he went about it are, however, not considered important and the emphasis is all on his message. We do not thus know whether he sought formal permission to preach, or whether he simply gathered a crowd as a result of his strange clothing and appearance, and the rumour spreading around that he was a Hebrew prophet.

3.5 ‘And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.’

But the impact of the message was huge, for the people responded to ‘God’ with all their hearts. Note the change from ‘YHWH to ‘God’. They were responding to Jonah’s God. They knew nothing of the covenant with YHWH. We do not know what humanly speaking had prepared their hearts for this message. Perhaps it was the recent plagues (which certainly occurred around this time). Perhaps it was bad news with respect to their war with Urartu, their northern neighbour, causing great fear among the populace. But whatever it was it was kick-started by Jonah’s preaching, taking him totally by surprise. It would not have taken God by surprise. He had known what the situation was.

The impact may have been made all the greater by Jonah’s ‘unearthly’ appearance caused by his sojourn in the large fish, and have been backed up by rumours which were going around of how this strange prophet had come out of a large fish. In a superstitious age such factors would be very telling, and if war was looming it would have had an even greater impact. But, of course, in the end it was all due to YHWH. ‘Salvation is of YHWH.’

The result was that the people proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, both of which were common evidences of mourning in the area. And it is stressed that this was done by the whole people. They were convicted of sin, and were seeking mercy.

3.6 ‘And the news reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.’

The news of their response reached the king of Nineveh. The fact that the news had taken some time to reach him may suggest that he was in one of the other sister-cities at the time. And on hearing what had happened, and no doubt Jonah’s message, he too responded, rose from his throne, and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. If the forces of Urartu were at present in the ascendancy we can appreciate why such a message as Jonah’s might cause such a stir. The idea that Nineveh might be overthrown could well have been seen as a real possibility. An appeal to the gods would then be seen as their only hope. But we are not given the reason, only the result.

The description ‘king of Nineveh’ does not conflict with the fact that he was also king of Assyria. To speak of a king in terms of a principal city was common practise (see e.g. 1 Kings 21.1; Deuteronomy 4.2, 23, with 1.4; 3.2; 4.46; Judges 4.17 with 4.2, 23). In this case it emphasised his close relationship with Nineveh.

3.7-8 ‘And he made proclamation and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed, nor drink water, but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast, and let them cry mightily to God, yes, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands.”

The king issued an official proclamation calling on the people, along with their domestic animals, to fast and cover themselves with sackcloth. Both man and beast would suffer if the city was overthrown and so both man and beast were called on to take part in the ritual acts. This inclusion of animals in a ritual of mourning is mentioned among others by Herodotus.

And they were then to ‘call mightily on God (Elohim)’ and ‘turn from their evil ways’, and especially from violent behaviour. There was a recognition in this, no doubt resulting from Jonah’s preaching, that Jonah’s God was a moral God Who was concerned about man’s moral behaviour. Thus the call was both for them to turn to God and for them to genuinely repent of their sins.

3.9 “Who knows whether God will not turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”

The hope then was that God (Elohim) would also ‘turn and repent’ in His attitude towards them, in other words would view them in a totally different way because of their change of heart. Note the emphasis all the way through on ‘God’ rather than ‘YHWH’. There is no thought that they had come to a full knowledge of YHWH. Only that they had been faced with the reality of the living God, and had therefore been given the opportunity to seek further into the truth. Sadly most probably later slipped back into a state of contentment with their idols. But it was real while it lasted.

3.10 ‘And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil which he said he would do to them; and he did not do it.’

And when God saw their change in behaviour, in that they turned from their evil ways, He ‘repented’ (altered His approach because they were now changed people) of the evil things that He had intended to bring on them, and did not allow them to happen. In other words He showed mercy towards them because of their repentance.

It is, of course, impossible to say how long their repentance lasted. For some perhaps it was permanent. For others it would be comparatively short-lived (compare the parable of the sower). But there was no doubt that for a period at least they had experienced a real change of heart that Jesus said might well stand them in good stead when they appeared before God for judgment (Matthew 12.41). What, however, was more important was that the seed had been

sown in their hearts of the need to seek to the God of Israel. It would be up to them how they responded.

YHWH Uses An Illustration In Order to Demonstrate To Jonah The Reasonableness Of His Mercy (4.1-11).

The mercy of YHWH having been revealed in chapter 1 to the mariners, in chapter 2 to Jonah, and in chapter 3 to the Ninevites, His mercy is now underlined as God seeks to teach Jonah a lesson in mercy. Jonah was clearly still very angry that YHWH should show mercy to the Assyrians. This may have been because of what they had done to his family when they had previously invaded northern Israel, so that he was unable to forgive them, or it may have been because he felt that the sparing of the Assyrians after he had proclaimed judgment against them demeaned him as a genuine prophet. But his very words to YHWH prove that he had all along seen it as a good possibility that YHWH would spare the Ninevites. After all, why else should He send Jonah to speak against them whilst giving them a forty day period of probation? He thus did not see YHWH as exclusivist.

The way in which YHWH got over His point to Jonah was by initially providing him with genuine shelter from the burning sun, and then causing that shelter to be removed by means of the destructive activity of a worm. When Jonah was angry at the injustice of what had happened to the gourd which had sheltered him, YHWH pointed out to him that if he could have compassion on a mere gourd, which he had had no part in producing, how much more should YHWH, Whom he himself had declared to be merciful, slow to anger and abundant in compassion, have mercy on a whole city of people whom He had created, numbering over one hundred and twenty thousand people, not forgetting their domestic animals.

Analysis of 4.1-11.

- a But it displeased Jonah greatly, and he was angry, and he prayed to YHWH, and said, “I pray you, O YHWH, was not this what I said when I was yet in my own country? Therefore I rushed to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness, and repent yourself of the evil” (4.1-2).
- b “Therefore now, O YHWH, take, I beg you, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (4.3).
- c And YHWH said, “Do you do well to be angry?” (4.4).
- d Then Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made for himself a shelter, and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city (4.5).
- e And YHWH God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, in order that it might be a shade over his head, to deliver him from his evil situation (4.6a).
- f So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the gourd (4.6b).
- e But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd, that it withered (4.7).
- d And it came about, when the sun arose, that God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat Jonah’s head so that he fainted, and requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live” (4.8).
- c And God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the gourd?” (4.9a).
- b And he said, “I do well to be angry, even to death” (4.9b).
- a And YHWH said, “You have had regard for the gourd, for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night, and should not I have regard for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?” (4.10-11).

Note that in 'a' Jonah reveals his chagrin and outlines the wonder of the mercy of God, and in the parallel YHWH points to that mercy as the reason why He has spared Nineveh. In 'b' Jonah asks to die, and in the parallel declares that such an appeal is justified. In 'c' YHWH asks him whether he does well to be angry, and in the parallel whether he does well to be angry with the gourd. In 'd' Jonah sought to avoid the heat of the sun by making a shelter, and in the parallel he was exhausted by the sun because his shelter does not fulfil its purpose. In 'e' YHWH God prepared a gourd to shelter Jonah, and in the parallel God prepared a worm to destroy the gourd. Centrally in 'f' Jonah was delighted with the gourd, which was a picture of God's sheltering mercy.

4.1 'But it displeased Jonah greatly, and he was angry.'

Jonah was not at all pleased that God had had mercy on the Ninevites, indeed he was more than displeased he was very angry. The greatness of his anger is stressed by the repeating of the idea. But why was he so angry? There are a number of possibilities:

- Firstly it may have been because he considered that it made a mockery of his prophetic ability. He had prophesied the destruction of Nineveh but it had not happened. And the consequence of that was that he could well have been described by some as a 'false prophet'. He may have felt that God had made a fool of him.
- Secondly it may have been because he did not believe that YHWH's mercy should be available to non-Israelites. However, as he had clearly expected YHWH to have mercy on the mariners, and had himself been willing to die to make it possible for them to be spared, this seems not to be a likely option.
- Thirdly it may have been because the Assyrians had at some stage performed atrocities in northern Israel which had affected Jonah's family so that he did not like the idea of Assyrians being forgiven. But as he will now tell YHWH that he knew all the time that He would forgive the Assyrians that may be seen as weakening this idea, although as his thinking was clearly not too rational (he knew that he was opposing YHWH) it may be that he was simply irrationally angry at being connected with the forgiving of Assyrians.

The truth is that we are given no clue as to why Jonah was angry so that it is difficult to dogmatically determine between the options. That therefore makes it clear that that was not the issue that the prophecy was strictly concerned with. Indeed, as we have seen, the issue that is emphasised in the prophecy is that of the fact that God will show His mercy to all who are truly repentant. This is what is emphasised in all four chapters. Jonah's anger only had to be mentioned because it led up to emphasising that fact. The silence would, however, be strange if the point of the prophecy was as a polemic against Jewish exclusivism.

4.2-3 'And he prayed to YHWH, and said, "I pray you, O YHWH, was not this what I said when I was yet in my own country? Therefore I rushed to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness, and repent yourself of the evil. Therefore now, O YHWH, take, I beg you, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

So in his anger Jonah prayed that YHWH would take his life from him because he felt it better to die than to live. That may have been because he felt that he had been discredited as a prophet, or because he could not bear to think of Assyrians as having been forgiven. What is certain is that it was because he regretted having been involved in what had happened. And he pointed out that the reason why he had been in such a hurry to flee to Tarshish was because, being aware of YHWH's propensity for mercy, he had wanted to avoid having anything to do with YHWH's plans.

We should note the reason that Jonah gives for his anger. It was because he had known that if he preached in Nineveh and declared their destruction within forty days, God, with His soft

heart, would inevitably spare them thus making a fool of Jonah. And he said that he knew this because God was gracious and merciful slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and so much so that if the Ninevites repented He would change His attitude towards them and be gracious to them.

This then was Jonah's picture of what YHWH basically was, and is one of the points being underlined in the prophecy. That YHWH is merciful to all who call on Him in repentance and faith.

4.4 'And YHWH said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

YHWH then asked him if he really thought that he was doing well by being angry. This is leading up to the main message of the book, that what is right is for the strong to have compassion on the weak, and it is thus right for the strong to be forgiving and merciful, and for Him to have mercy on ignorant man. (As verse 10 brings out, it is not all Assyrians who are in mind as such, but those who are helpless and weak, although that might indicate all religiously).

4.5 'Then Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made for himself a shelter, and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.'

Perhaps Jonah had taken YHWH's words as signifying that maybe he was being too impatient when in fact YHWH had plans to deal with Nineveh after all. This is really the only thing that can explain why Jonah went out to a mountain on the east of Nineveh in order to 'see what would become of the city'. And because it was very hot he made himself a shelter of boughs and leaves, and sat under its shade awaiting events.

4.6a 'And YHWH God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, in order that it might be a shade over his head, to deliver him from his evil situation.'

The shelter had clearly failed to protect Jonah as the ship had failed to protect the mariners, and their own religion had failed to protect the Assyrians. So 'YHWH God', Jonah's covenant God and the One Who was God over all things, (or alternately the God of foreigners as depicted in chapters 1 & 3), had been busy preparing a gourd in order more effectively to shelter Jonah from 'his evil situation' (i.e. the hot sun). The purpose of this was clearly because of the insufficiency of his own provision. It represented the mercy of God.

Various suggestions have been made as to what this gourd was, for it was clearly quick-growing and provided good shelter. One suggestion is that it was a castor oil plant. This is a rapidly growing plant that provides adequate shelter from the sun and yet withers easily if manhandled. Another suggestion which some consider fits the context better is the bottle gourd. It may already have been partly grown (it had been 'prepared by YHWH') with the quick growth that made it provide direct shade for Jonah then occurring rapidly. Castor oil plants grow very rapidly. The expression 'son of a night' (verse 10) may only indicate the extra growth which became apparent in the morning, with it being unnoticed until then. Whatever it was, it provided Jonah with the necessary shade which his shelter had clearly failed to provide. It was God's merciful provision for his need. This was in order to deliver him from the heat of the sun.

It is significant that Jonah was suffering here from an 'evil situation', as he and the mariners had suffered under an 'evil situation' in 1.7, 8, and as the Assyrians were suffering under an 'evil situation' in 1.1; 3.10. This is a prophecy about delivery from 'evil situations'. And in each case God's mercy was required in order to remedy it.

4.6b 'So Jonah was extremely glad because of the gourd.'

We are told that Jonah was extremely glad because of the gourd. It had made his wait much more comfortable, and in the mercy of God had relieved him from his 'evil situation'.

4.7 ‘But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd, so that it withered.’

However, next morning a worm ‘prepared by God’ chewed away at the gourd with the result that it withered and died, thus providing no more shade. Jonah now had no protection from his evil situation. The mercy of YHWH had been withdrawn. This is the first use of ‘God’ on its own in relation to Jonah. This may have been because He was now not acting as his covenant God (compare ‘YHWH his God’ in 2.1) but as God over nature, either in an act of chastening, or because He was now treating Jonah as a foreigner for illustrative purposes. In the latter case the withering of the gourd and the subsequent result might be being compared with the ‘evil situation’ of the Assyrians (and previously the mariners) when they were without the shelter of the mercy of God.

4.8 ‘And it came about, when the sun arose, that God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat Jonah’s head so that he fainted, and requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

Furthermore when the sun arose He prepared a sultry east wind which increased the heat levels so that the burning sun beat down on Jonah’s head even more devastatingly, making him faint. Indeed he found it so uncomfortable that he prayed that he might die, saying that, without the protection that had been provided by God’s mercy it was better for him to die than to live. Whether he meant it seriously we do not know, but in the mood that Jonah was in anything was possible. Perhaps he had Elijah’s request to God in mind, but if so he had far less excuse than Elijah who was being pursued by determined enemies and felt that all had failed. Jonah’s problem was that he had succeeded too well for his own good.

4.9 ‘And God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the gourd?” And he said, “I do well to be angry, even to death.”

God knew that the reason for Jonah’s request was that he was angry that the gourd had been destroyed or because it had been removed from protecting him, and He therefore asked him whether that was so, and if so whether he thought that a reasonable thing. A disgruntled Jonah basically replied, ‘Yes, and I do well to be angry even if it means my death (or ‘even until I die’).’ In other words he saw the removal of the gourd as possibly leading to his own destruction because of the excessive heat.

Note the continued use of ‘God’. This time God was speaking to Jonah as the One Who alone has authority in natural affairs, and as still acting in severity, or as the One Who was responsible for whatever judgments came on all men. As we saw in the introduction, the usage of terminology in respect of God in 4.4, 9 is interesting. In 4.4 YHWH is speaking to Jonah as his covenant God in response to Jonah’s grumble, and asks him, ‘Do you well to be angry?’ about a matter that concerns God’s mercy, and a desired removal of His protection from the Assyrians. It is a matter that is within the covenant relationship because Jonah is His prophet. In 4.9 God is speaking to Jonah after chastening him when He is speaking severely as God over all Who has just acted in relation to ‘natural events’, possibly also illustrating His activity with regard to all mankind, including the Assyrians. So He again asks him, ‘Do you well to be angry?’ But this time it is ‘for the gourd?’. This parallels what has happened to the gourd with what He was saying in verse 4 (‘do you well to be angry that I have not moved my protection and mercy from the Assyrians?’). He is speaking as God over all and as the One Who is responsible for all, when dealing with a matter that concerns ‘nature’ and ‘the whole world’, but which is not directly Jonah’s sphere of responsibility. Why should he be angry over what is after all a natural event? And the point is undoubtedly being underlined that Jonah can get so het up about the fate of a gourd which was of such little significance to him (how easily we get upset about little things), and yet not get het up about the fate of the inhabitants of a large city for which as a prophet he should have shared responsibility with YHWH its Creator. It was an indication that Jonah was totally out of line with God’s (and

YHWH's) way of thinking. Once, however, matters turn back to the question of God's mercy in verse 10 it will once again be as YHWH.

4.10-11 'And YHWH said, "You have had regard for the gourd, for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night, and should not I have regard for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?"'

YHWH then applies the object lesson that He has been building up to. He pointed out to Jonah that he had become so grateful for the helpless gourd and what it had done for him, that he had become greatly concerned for it, even though it was only a weak, natural object and one which Jonah had not even laboured over or caused to grow. Its destruction had moved him to compassion. (It is often strange what human beings can become over-fond of). Was it not then reasonable that He, YHWH, Who had created the weak Assyrians and their animals, and had caused them to grow, should be equally concerned for them, especially when he considered how much they depended on Him. For if Jonah would but consider the situation he would recognise that Nineveh contained over one hundred and twenty thousand people who could not discern their right hand from their left, in other words who were rather ignorant and helpless people, at least religiously speaking, (or possibly children under a certain age), on whom he should have pity because of their helplessness and need, as well as being a city which had a large number of helpless cattle. The mention of the cattle emphasises the weakness of what He is referring to. And they were 'natural' things like the gourd which Jonah had had compassion on. And it was these who were benefiting by God's mercy and compassion. Was that then so wrong? Thus His rebuke of Jonah was because he had no concern for the weak and needy. He who had had compassion on a mere gourd, was lacking in compassion and mercy when it came to men and women (even if they were Assyrians).

Thus the central message of the prophecy of Jonah is precisely this, that God is of such a nature that He has mercy on all who are weak and admit their weakness, (whoever they are), when they truly turn from sin and seek Him in repentance and faith, a situation which all should be concerned to bring about. This was a vitally important message in 8th century BC Israel for in that land were many Canaanites and followers of false religions (such as Baalism) who needed to know that God had a welcome for them if only they would repent, turn from sin and seek His face.

Indeed the fact is often overlooked that the existence of a prophet like Jonah (and Elijah and Elisha) was proof positive that in the northern kingdom true worship was being continued apart from the Temple at altars presumably set up by the prophets. That was why Elijah had been able to 'repair the altar of YHWH that had fallen down' (1 Kings 18.30) and had spoken of other altars wrongly destroyed by the Baalists (1 Kings 19.10). We may assume that they were altars set up under the provisions of Exodus 20.24-26. It was partly in order to win adherents to the worship at these altars that the prophecy of Jonah was written, with a promise that anyone of any nation could come and find acceptance if they came in repentance and faith, in the same way as the mariners and the Assyrians had.