



Jonah

A COMMENTARY OUTLINE

GOD'S GRACE TO ALL

BY CHESTER A. McCALLEY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Outline - A Bird's Eye View of Jonah.....	<i>i</i>
The Disobedient Prophet	1
The Obedient Prophet.....	11
The Doctrine of Monotheism.....	19

Outline

or “A Bird’s Eye View of Jonah”

THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET

or “God Said, ‘Go East’ So Jonah Went West” 1:1-2:10

- A. The Call of Jonah 1:1-3
 - 1. Its Source 1:1-2
 - 2. Its Rejection 1:3
- B. The Storm of Jonah 1:4-16
 - 1. Its Description—What Was It Like? 1:4-6
 - a. Its True Cause 1:4
 - b. Its Supposed Cause 1:5-6
 - 2. Its Interpretation—What Does It Mean? 1:7-10
 - a. The Lot Cast 1:7
 - b. The Questions Asked 1:8
 - c. The Answer Given 1:9
 - d. The Conclusion Reached 1:10
 - 3. Its Application—What Shall We Do? 1:11-16
 - a. The Sailors’ Question 1:11-12
 - b. The Sailors’ Evasion 1:13
 - c. The Sailors’ Prayer 1:14
 - d. The Sailors’ Action 1:15
 - e. The Sailors’ Respect 1:16
- C. The Protection of Jonah 1:17
- D. The Prayer of Jonah 2:1-9
- E. The Delivery of Jonah 2:10

THE OBEDIENT PROPHET

or "The Second Call to Nineveh" 3:1-4:11

A. The Salvation of Nineveh 3:1-10

1. The Message 3:1-4
2. The Response 3:5-9
 - a. Of the People 3:5
 - b. Of the King 3:6-9
 - (1) Fasting Was Practiced in Times of Mourning
 - (2) Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with Making Requests of God
 - (3) Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with Confession of Sin
 - (4) Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with an Official Feast
3. The Salvation 3:10

B. The Distress of Jonah 4:1-11

1. His Anger 4:1-4
2. His Lesson 4:5-11
 - a. His Move 4:5
 - b. His Experience 4:6-8
 - c. His Lesson 4:9-11

THE DOCTRINE OF MONOTHEISM

or "God Versus Gods"

The One True God Versus the Gods of the Ancient World

1. One True God Versus Gods Without Number
2. The Self-Revealing God of the Old Testament Versus the Silent Gods of Polytheism
3. The God Who Reveals and Explains Sin Versus the Gods of Moral Silence
4. The God Who Sends Suffering to Bring Blessing Versus the Gods Who Send Suffering to Buffet and Curse
5. The God of Discriminate Judgment Versus the Gods of Capricious Judgment
6. The God of the Old Testament Who Extends Help Versus the Gods of Polytheism Who Withhold Help
7. The God from Whom Forgiveness Is Obtained Versus the Gods Who Withhold Forgiveness
8. The Personal God of the Old Testament Versus the Impersonal Gods of Polytheism

The Disobedient Prophet

or “God Said, ‘Go East’ So Jonah Went West”

Jonah 1:1-2:10

THE CALL OF JONAH 1:1-3

ITS SOURCE 1:1-2

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ²‘Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.’ ”

There are interesting parallels between Jonah and the book of Acts. Both are missionary books—Jonah of the Old Testament and Acts of the New Testament. In chapter 1, God asked Jonah to do what no other Old Testament prophet had ever been asked—go to a gentile nation. Likewise, He asked Peter to do what no other apostle had been asked to do—go to the Gentiles (Acts 10:19-20).

Both Jonah and Peter were assigned their mission at Joppa, a city about thirty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean seacoast. This is the place from which Jonah fled his mission (Jonah 1:3), and it is the place from which Peter pursued his mission (Acts 10:5). Jonah took a journey of disobedience; Peter, a journey of obedience. Jonah is the only prophet in the Old Testament who refused to carry out his mission, though he eventually did so with great reluctance.

Nothing is known of Jonah other than what we discover in this book with one exception, II Kings 14:23-27. Here we find that in the days of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), Jonah prophesied that a certain part of Israel’s land would be recovered from Syria. It was a time when national privilege and possession were focal.

The prophets open with similar but slightly different wording. The distinction is more obvious in the Hebrew text. What is the significance of the two openings? Jonah and Hosea open with “the word of the Lord *came...*,” emphasizing the instructions to be followed. Others open with “the word of the Lord *that came...*,” emphasizing

the message to be delivered. Jonah resisted and fled the instructions given him by God.

Jonah is told to cry *against* Nineveh. The verb used here means *to call out, to read, to recite*. Jonah is to inform Nineveh of her wickedness.

Nineveh is first mentioned in Genesis 10:11 in connection with Nimrod. It was the ancient capital of Assyria, located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, and was destroyed by the Medes and Persians in 612 B.C. At the time of Jonah's preaching, Nineveh was in a life and death struggle with the mountain tribes of Urartu. This helps to explain the readiness of Nineveh to listen to Jonah.

Two conditions existed in Nineveh that made it a fitting object for the words of an Israelite prophet—first, the large population; second, the enormity of sin. Both the richness and the extensiveness of God's grace are ripe for display in Nineveh.

The expression *their wickedness has come up before Me* does not mean that God had been unaware of their sin until now. It does mean that their sin is pushing the limits of His patience and forbearance. The time for execution of justice is near.

ITS REJECTION 1:3

“But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”

Where is Tarshish? The word comes from a Semitic root meaning *to smelt*. Moving along the Mediterranean coast, one finds several cities that were involved in the mineral trade. The most likely seems to be Tartessus in Spain. It is also possible that Tarshish simply means the farthest place possible. As one has said, “Jonah was called to Nineveh and went to Timbuktu!” One thing is certain; Nineveh was east of Joppa, and Jonah boarded a boat going west.

Twice we find the expression *from the presence of the Lord*. *From the presence* appears as a single word in Hebrew. It is an expression used when a person had just had an official audience with a king as in Genesis 41:46. Jonah was not so foolish as to think he could go where God was not; Jonah understood the omnipresence of God. He was fleeing the instructions of the Lord and wished to abandon the obligation of service to Nineveh. He wanted to get as far as he could from the place where he received his calling.

Why is Jonah so bent on avoiding his mission to Nineveh? There are several aspects to the answer. First, perhaps he thought that the repentance of Nineveh would diminish the place of his own nation in the plan of God. The book of Jonah makes no reference to the nation of Israel at all. In the days of Jonah, there was enormous need for repentance and turning to the Lord in his own nation; why

should he not go to them before Nineveh? The book of Acts demonstrates a similar reticence of the Jews to see the word of God extend beyond their national frontiers. Second, Jonah may well have feared that the conversion of the Gentiles would detract from the privileges of Israel. Third, and by far the clearest explanation of his resistance, is found in Jonah 4:2. Jonah knew that God was kind, longsuffering, patient, and full of mercy; and He would withhold judgment if Nineveh repented. The love of God for the world is at the heart of the book of Jonah, and the prophet did not like it. Finally, Jonah feared that Assyria might be the scourge used by God to discipline his people (Hosea 9:3).

THE STORM OF JONAH 1:4-16

ITS DESCRIPTION—WHAT WAS IT LIKE? 1:4-6

Its True Cause 1:4

“And the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.”

In the Old Testament, God’s control of the sea is frequently used to stress His sovereignty over creation. See passages such as Psalm 24:2, 33:7, 74:13, 77:19, 89:9, 114:3, 5; Isaiah 51:10; Jeremiah 5:22.

Its Supposed Cause 1:5-6

“Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down, and fallen sound asleep. ⁶So the captain approached him and said, ‘How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.’ ”

In the Near East it was believed that the gods had brought about order by defeating the powers of chaos. These powers were believed to be controlled but not abolished and thus remained as threats. One of the primary embodiments of these powers was the sea, which no one could tame.

It was necessary to make constant appeal and appeasement to maintain control and order. The polytheistic context of Jonah 1 is seen by the reference to *his* god in verse 5, *your* god in verse 6, etc.

In a full blown polytheism, individuals tended to concentrate on favorite deities. The single individual did not have enough *connections* to approach a chief deity such as Marduk. He would therefore address his own reachable deity and ask that he pass the word on until the request reached the god who caused the storm.

In the midst of the storm, Jonah slept in the hold of the ship. What kind of sleep was Jonah experiencing? First, it might be taken as

the sleep of natural exhaustion. His resistance to God's instructions and the rush to find a ship headed for foreign shores could well have tired Jonah. Second, this could be a sleep of an insensitive conscience. Was Jonah sleeping in order to escape? Finally, this could be a sleep supernaturally imposed by God. The Hebrew word points in this direction. It is the word used when God caused sleep to fall on Adam so that He could create woman from his side (Genesis 2:21); it was a sleep imposed by God upon Abraham when assuring him that the covenant made with him was dependent entirely upon God for its fulfillment (Genesis 15:12).

Why would God put Jonah to sleep? Perhaps to allow all of the gods of polytheism to be implored so their impotency could be displayed. Then, with the casting of Jonah into the sea, the storm stops; and it becomes obvious that the sovereign of the sea is the God of Israel.

The captain's command to Jonah to pray reveals two things about pagan thinking. First, the amount of prayer is the important thing (Matthew 6:7). Second, one could never be sure which god of the many had been offended. It was logical, then, to address as many of the gods as one could. Perhaps Jonah prayed at this point; but whether he did or not, nothing happened.

ITS INTERPRETATION—WHAT DOES IT MEAN? 1:7-10

The Lot Cast 1:7

“And each man said to his mate, ‘Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.’ So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.”

The casting of lots was not contrary to the will of God in the Old Testament. This is demonstrated by the case of Achan (Joshua 7:14), the division of the land (Joshua 15:1), the words of Proverbs 16:33, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” The last casting of lots was in the choice of Matthias in Acts 1. There is no instance of such a practice after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The Questions Asked 1:8

“Then they said to him, ‘Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’ ”

Since the lot fell on Jonah, a barrage of questions came from the polytheists. The gods of paganism vented their wrath on those who knowingly offended them; but more than this, they punished those who unwittingly offended them as well. These five questions are intended to help Jonah narrow down the options on his assumed offense against his God.

The Answer Given 1:9

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

Jonah’s answer reveals the basic concept of God in the Old Testament—He is the creator God. There is no more fundamental concept in the Bible than that of a personal God who is above and sovereign over the created universe, not part of it as in pantheism, nor unconcerned about it as in deism, nor unrevealed as in agnosticism.

The Conclusion Reached 1:10

“Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, ‘How could you do this?’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.”

The extreme fright of the sailors may find its roots in Jonah’s statement that his God had *made the sea*. To have offended that god would have been of extreme gravity. The flavor of their words is, How dare you do such a thing to us!

ITS APPLICATION—WHAT SHALL WE DO? 1:11-16

The Sailors’ Question 1:11-12

“So they said to him, ‘What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?’—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. ¹²And he said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.’ ”

The sailors know they are not dealing with a criminal, nor with one who had accidentally offended one of the gods. They are dealing with one who was directly disobeying his God.

Jonah accepts the fact that the storm is not a natural phenomenon but is truly the hand of God upon them. Jonah knows that his God is just and will not punish all for the sin of one. He is confident that if he is thrown overboard, the sea will become calm and the sailors will be safe.

The Sailors’ Evasion 1:13

“However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.”

The soldiers believe that to throw Jonah into the sea is equivalent to murdering him. For this reason, they make every effort to reach safety without taking such a course of action. Their polytheistic views make it impossible for them to believe that Jonah’s God is truly the sovereign of the sea and can deliver His servant with ease if He so desires.

The Sailors' Prayer 1:14

“Then they called on the LORD and said, ‘We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased.’ ”

The sailors do not wish to perish for the sin of another, nor on the other hand, do they wish to be guilty of the shedding of innocent blood.

The Sailors' Action 1:15

“So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.”

With the cessation of the storm, the sailors are convinced that Jonah’s God is truly sovereign over the sea. The same verb is used three times in Jonah 1 to describe actions of God (1:4 *hurled*), of the sailors (1:5 *threw*), and of the crew (1:15 *threw*). God hurled the storm, the sailors hurled the cargo, and the whole crew hurled Jonah!

The Sailors' Respect 1:16

“Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”

The most common meaning of the word *fear* is not *fright*, but *respect*. This is doubtless the meaning here. It does not imply that the sailors rejected their polytheistic beliefs. Their respect for the Lord is demonstrated by their sacrifices made to Him.

THE PROTECTION OF JONAH 1:17

“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”

This verse is the most well-known part of the entire book. The appointment of a great fish needs to be seen in the context of three other appointments made by God. The verb translated *appointed* is *manah* and means *to ordain*. It is used four times in the book of Jonah, and in each case God is the subject of the action. God ordained a fish (1:17). God ordained a plant (4:6). God ordained a worm (4:7). Finally, God ordained a wind (4:8). This reveals the sovereignty of God behind the events that take place in the book of Jonah.

The ordination of a *great fish* is a miracle and provides problems only to those who live within a closed system that denies the possibility of the miraculous. Christ treated the event as historical (Matthew 12:38-41).

The obvious intent of the incident is to show how God protected Jonah. He did not do so by changing the qualities of the water nor did he make Jonah a champion swimmer. God did not provide Jonah with a piece of wreckage to float on. God could have done any of these things, but He did not. Why did God not choose one of these options—why the fish?

Matthew 12:39-40 provides the answer. The event is intended to be a sign and thus carries special spiritual significance. The fish that God ordained to swallow Jonah carries two significant lessons. The event carried a *historical lesson* for the sailors. In near east mythology, chaos is pictured as “Leviathan.” To control Leviathan is to be sovereign over the universe. Psalm 74:13-14 says of the Lord, “Thou didst divide the sea by Thy strength; Thou didst break the heads of the sea monsters in the waters. Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan; Thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.” Psalm 104:26 says Leviathan is God’s “plaything”! The sailors had a living demonstration of the sovereignty of the true God of Israel.

The swallowing of Jonah by the great fish also carried a *prophetic lesson*. It pictures the resurrection of Christ. This does not force us to conclude, as some do, that Jonah died in the belly of the fish. The narrative of chapter 2 leads to no such conclusion. The element seized upon by Jesus was the time element—the three day period that Jonah was in the fish parallels the time between Jesus’ death and resurrection.

THE PRAYER OF JONAH 2:1-9

“Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, ²and he said, ‘I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; Thou didst hear my voice. ³For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me. All Thy breakers and billows passed over me. ⁴So I said, “I have been expelled from Thy sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Thy holy temple.” ⁵Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. ⁶I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, but Thou hast brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. ⁷While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to Thee, into Thy holy temple. ⁸Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, ⁹but I will sacrifice to Thee with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the LORD.’ ”

It is instructive to note what is absent from Jonah’s prayer. There is no expression of distress over being swallowed. Jonah is in distress, but he does not say he is in distress over how he got there. There is no tone of, “Oh, if this only had not happened.”

There is no question or debate concerning what his fate might be nor is there a prayer for deliverance. The verb of verse 2 translated *I cried out for help* needs attention. The Hebrew word *shua* means to *cry out* without stating the reason. The words *for help* are strictly interpretive. The text says Jonah *cried out*; it does not say he *cried out for help*.

An important feature of Jonah's prayer is its use of the Psalms. The word of God was very much in the forefront of Jonah's mind as he prayed from the belly of the fish. His allusions to the Psalms are shown on the following chart.

JONAH	PSALMS
2:2a	3:4, 120:1
2:2b	18:4-5, 30:3
2:3a	88 :6-7
2:3b	42:7
2:4a	31:22
2:4b	5:7
2:5a	69: 1-2
2:6b	49:15, 56:13, 103:4
2:7a	107:5, 142:3
2:8a	31:6
2:9a	50: 14, 69:30, 107:22
2:9c	3:8, 37:39

The first two verses of Jonah's prayer emphasize the Lord's awareness of his situation. Sheol may refer to various things in the Old Testament. It may mean either *in the grave* or *close to the grave*. Psalm 18:4-6 is a good example of the latter meaning, which also fits Jonah's prayer. The expression *belly of Sheol* is a designation of what Jonah thought was going to happen to him. He thought the fish would be his grave. His basic comfort lies in the truth that the Lord knows and responds to his own children.

The theme of verses 3-6 is how the Lord consumes Jonah. He presents two "from peril to salvation" statements. The first is found in verses 3-4. Jonah combines the personal and impersonal aspect of his peril by speaking of *the current* and then *Thy breakers*. Jonah believed that the instrument of his death (the sea) was also God's instrument; he was able to see the personal involvement of God in all the circumstances of life. In Jonah 1:3 he *flees* God; in Jonah 2:4 he *seeks* God—the same man in each case. The second "from peril to salvation" statement is found in verses 5-6.

THE DELIVERY OF JONAH 2:10

“Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.”

We are not told precisely where the fish dropped Jonah off, but it seems reasonable to assume it was at Joppa. If this is true, it is like the conductor saying, “Let’s take it from the top one more time.” Jonah now knows in practice what he once knew in theory—salvation is of the Lord. It is ironic that the irrational creature such as the fish obeyed its Lord immediately, whereas the rational creature, Jonah, rebelled against the will of his Lord.

NOTES

NOTES

The Obedient Prophet

or “*The Second Call to Nineveh*”

Jonah 3:1-4:11

THE SALVATION OF NINEVEH 3:1-10

THE MESSAGE 3:1-4

“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,
²‘Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.’ ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk. ⁴Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ ”

The call of the Lord comes to Jonah the *second time*. Jonah had been disobedient the first time, and now he is given a second chance. The Lord did the same with Peter many years later (Luke 22:31-32). John Mark deserted Paul on his first journey but was given a second chance—he was commissioned by the Lord Himself to write what we know as the Gospel of Mark.

Nineveh is called a *great city*. The reference is probably to its population; it was a big city. Jonah 4:11 refers to 120,000 who dwell in the city. The interpretation of these figures is not as simple as it may appear. The problem is this: The 120,000 are defined as those *who do not know the difference between their right and left hand*. This is an expression used to define those who are inexperienced, such as children. It may mean that the 120,000 refers to children only and would push the population of the city to well over 500,000. The question is this: Does the 120,000 refer to the total population or the the number of children only?

As Jonah *arose and went to Nineveh*, he reversed his earlier persistence in disobedience. While we have captioned Jonah 3 and 4 “The Obedient Prophet,” we should remember that Jonah is still not pleased with his mission. His obedience is probably a matter of recognizing that no other course is open to him; joyous surrender to the will of God does not describe Jonah at any point. The refer-

ence to a *three days' walk* probably points to the time needed to complete his mission.

The English text gives us Jonah's message in eight words—*yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown*. Was this all Jonah had to say? If he said more, why is it not recorded? Wouldn't we expect that the Ninevites would have asked why this judgment was coming upon them? Would they not have inquired as to what they could do to avoid it?

To understand the Ninevite response, it is necessary to know something of their polytheistic beliefs. It is natural to expect others to respond as we would. Should someone arrive in Kansas City and tell us the city would be destroyed in forty days, we would have many questions. Who is going to destroy us? How do they intend to do it? Why are we to be destroyed? What can we do to avoid it? This would not, however, be the response the Ninevites of Assyria would give.

There are several aspects of the Ninevite view of their gods. First, in polytheism it was possible for a single act to please one god and anger another. Second, there was no way to tell what one might have done to offend one of many gods. One could only know that things were not going well, so some god must be offended.

Appeasement of the gods was primarily a physical matter. One could make a sacrifice, pour out a libation, make a donation to the temple, or perform a cultic act. Jonah would not be asked the reason for the announced judgment because they would assume he knew no more about that than they did.

In the *Bible Study Commentary*, the book of Jonah is expounded by John Walton. In describing polytheism, he quotes from two well-known sources. They are *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* by W. G. Lambert, and *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* edited by J. Pritchard. His quotations show clearly the beliefs of polytheism. The doctrinal readout found at the end of the outline / commentary on Jonah compares the God of the Old Testament with the gods of polytheism. This is important information for all of the Old Testament since Israel was the only representative of the one true God in ancient history. Israel represented monotheism, which existed in the ocean of polytheism that engulfed the entire ancient world.

An understanding of polytheistic belief shows how Nineveh would have responded to the preaching of Jonah that announced coming judgment. The message of Jonah is one of both judgment and grace. If Nineveh was truly ripe for judgment, why should God send a message at all? Further, if Nineveh fully deserved judgment, as she did, why should she be allowed forty days or, for that matter, even one day?

The answer lies in the character of God. God is patient, and His patience has purpose. II Peter 3:9 states the truth this way: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is

patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” The word translated *patient* is *makrothumeo* and means *to wait*. It is used in James 5:7 of a farmer waiting for his crops. In II Peter 3:9 it is a synonym for the word *slow*. God is slow to judge because He does not wish for men to perish and thus grants time in which repentance may come about. The *forty days* of Jonah is the time extended by God in which the Ninevites may repent and come to experience His forgiveness and avoid the announced judgment.

THE RESPONSE 3:5-9

Of the People 3:5

“Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.”

It is important to remember that Jonah himself was a sign to Nineveh. This is stated by Jesus in Luke 11:29-30 when he says, “For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites....” The word *sign* is found in the emphatic position three times in verse 29. In what way was Jonah a sign? First, Jonah was a contemporary sign of judgment, which he announced, and of delivery, which he experienced. Second, Jonah was a prophetic sign because his time in the fish pointed to the time between the death and resurrection of Jesus.

While the book of Jonah only records the message of judgment, it is also true that Jonah preached a message that demanded repentance. This is concluded from the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:41 where He tells us “they repented at the preaching of Jonah....”

Did the repentance of Nineveh mean they turned from polytheism to the one true God of Israel? Apparently not, for Jonah 3:5 says “they believed in God (*Elohim*, not *Yahweh*).”

Is there any special significance to the forty day period that was to precede judgment? If other passages are examined that involve forty days, one may conclude that it is used in Scripture for periods of intense divine dealings (Genesis 7:17, Exodus 24:18, I Kings 19:8, and Matthew 4:2).

Of the King 3:6-9

“When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and it said, ‘In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?’ ”

The king and the people were on the same level in terms of repentance—what was demanded of one was demanded of the other. What is the significance of fasting? Does it mean that God listens better to hungry people? Fasting was practiced in the Old Testament on at least four occasions.

Fasting Was Practiced in Times of Mourning

See passages such as I Samuel 31:13, II Samuel 1:12, I Chronicles 10:12, Psalm 35:13, and Daniel 10:3. This is probably the most common occasion for fasting—the mourning related to repentance or sorrow over judgment or disaster.

Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with Making Requests of God

II Samuel 12:16-23, II Chronicles 20:3, Ezra 8:23, Nehemiah 1:4, Esther 4:16, and Jeremiah 14:12 each show this.

Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with Confession of Sin

I Samuel 7:6 says, “And they gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah.”

Fasting Was Practiced in Connection with an Official Feast

See Jeremiah 36:1-10, Zechariah 7:5 and 8:19.

In each of the above instances, fasting indicated a time of intense spiritual concentration when the meeting of physical needs was dismissed from one’s mind. It was not some sort of meritorious act; it was the setting aside of a physical act in order to maintain the maximum spiritual concentration.

THE SALVATION 3:10

“When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.”

This verse is a fitting conclusion to the book. Judgment was announced by Jonah, the people repented, and now the judgment is suspended. What more need be said? Why do the words of chapter 4 need to be added? Are they not anticlimactic?

Jonah 4 is added to focus on two things. First, the narrowness of Jonah’s heart. This will be revealed by his reaction to the repentance of Nineveh and the forgiveness and compassion of God. Second, the last chapter is added to focus on the boundless greatness of God’s heart.

THE DISTRESS OF JONAH 4:1-11

HIS ANGER 4:1-4

“But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, ‘Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. ³Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.’ ⁴And the LORD said, ‘Do you have good reason to be angry?’ ”

The opening words of chapter 4 translated literally are, “But it was evil to Jonah with great evil.” Why was Jonah so angry? Rabbinic tradition answers this by referring to Deuteronomy 18:22 which says of a professed prophet, “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.” Jonah had announced the judgment of Nineveh in forty days; but God had relented and the prophecy did not occur. Would Jonah’s contemporaries therefore treat him as a false prophet? This is a feasible explanation of his anger, but it overlooks Jonah’s own explanation found in 4:2. A principle of God’s dealings found in the Old Testament was in the forefront of Jonah’s mind, and he did not like it. The principle was this: Divine judgment can be avoided by adequate repentance. The key passage that teaches this truth is Jeremiah 18:1-11. Jonah’s response to the repentance of Nineveh followed by divine forgiveness reveals an attitude that knows truth but does not necessarily love it. The words spoken by Jonah in verse 2 are essentially a quotation of Exodus 34:6-7. The truth of these verses is restated in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; and Joel 2:13.

HIS LESSON 4:5-11

His Move 4:5

“Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.”

The common interpretation of Jonah’s move to the east side of the city says Jonah went there to see if God might change His mind again and destroy the city. Perhaps, he thinks, the repentance was superficial, and the city will be destroyed after all.

It seems a better view to understand Jonah to be awaiting a fuller explanation of God’s ways with repentant men. Perhaps God will clear up issues that now befuddle, confuse, and anger him.

His Experience 4:6-8

“So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. ⁷But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered. ⁸And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, ‘Death is better to me than life.’ ”

The key to the object lesson is the correspondence between the protection God provided for Nineveh and the protection God provided for Jonah. The correspondence is obscured to the English reader because of the way a single Hebrew word is translated.

The word translated *calamity* in 3:10 is the same as the noun translated *discomfort* in 4:6. God had protected Nineveh from judgment (*calamity*), and now God is protecting Jonah from the heat of the sun (*discomfort*). The Ninevites had been the object of God’s mercy in a *spiritual* matter; and now Jonah is the object of God’s mercy in a *physical* matter. It is interesting to note that verse 6 records the only instance in the book of Jonah where the prophet is said to be happy over anything. Further, that happiness was derived from physical comfort.

Jonah’s anger over Nineveh focused on the mechanism by which they received mercy—repentance. Now Jonah is about to experience anger over the mechanism by which he received relief—the plant. In the case of Nineveh, Jonah was angry because the repentance worked; in the personal illustration directed to him by God, he is angry because the plant failed.

His Lesson 4:9-11

“Then God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?’ And he said, ‘I have good reason to be angry, even to death.’ ¹⁰Then the LORD said, ‘You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?’ ”

Verses 9-11 drive the lesson home. You had compassion on the plant, says the Lord, for physical reasons only—you are selfish! On the other hand, I had compassion on the people for spiritual reasons only—I am gracious! Jonah’s concern was physical and temporal; God’s was spiritual and eternal.

Two observations are in order. First, Jonah never gave God-pleasing obedience. Active rebellion is digging in one’s heels and saying no to the Lord. Passive rebellion is more subtle. It is doing the right thing with the wrong attitude. This is Jonah—he did what he was

told but did not like it. Second, the righteous God is more compassionate than the unrighteous sinner. Whom God would forgive, Jonah would judge.

NOTES

NOTES

The Doctrine of Monotheism

or “God Versus Gods”

THE ONE TRUE GOD VERSUS THE GODS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Old Testament Scriptures stand as the single revelation of YAHWEH, the one true God. All of the literature of the other nations reflects the polytheism of ancient history. The following chart shows the comparison of monotheism and polytheism.

THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT	THE GODS OF POLYTHEISM
Only one true God	Gods without number
Self-revealing	Silent
Sin revealed and explained	Sin unrevealed and unexplained
Suffering intended to bless	Suffering intended to curse
Discriminating judgment	Non-discriminating judgment
Help extended	Help withheld
Forgiveness obtained	Forgiveness sought
Personal relationship	Impersonal relationship

One True God Versus Gods Without Number

Deuteronomy 6:4 is known in Jewish tradition as the *Shama*. Its words are the fundamental monotheistic doctrine of the Old Testament. “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” The word LORD (all capital letters) translates the name YAHWEH, the name of the one true God who shares neither His name nor character with any other.

Exodus 15:11 asks the rhetorical question, “Who is like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” The answer to the question is “None!”

Psalms 135:5-6 reads, “For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.” The mythology of

the Near East recognized four spheres of authority with a chief god for each. God of the heavens was Anu; of the earth (land) was Dagon; of the sea, Maot; and of the deep, Yam. YAHWEH, however, is the one single true God who reigns supreme in every realm.

In Isaiah 41:21-24, YAHWEH challenges the “gods” of polytheism saying, “ ‘Present your case,’ the LORD says, ‘Bring forward your strong arguments,’ the King of Jacob says. Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former events, declare what they were, that we may consider them, and know their outcome; or announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together. Behold, you are of no account, and your work amounts to nothing; He who chooses you is an abomination.”

The challenge of YAHWEH is three-fold. First, YAHWEH says show that you can predict the future. Second, show your track record of fulfilled prediction. Finally, show anything that proves your divine nature. The gods of polytheism are so powerless that they become the object of ridicule in Psalm 135:15-18.

The Self-Revealing God of the Old Testament Versus the Silent Gods of Polytheism

Deuteronomy 18:9-20 is a key passage on how YAHWEH reveals Himself. Verses 9-13 show the pagan concepts of determining the will of the gods (witchcraft, sorcery, etc.). Verses 14-18 show the way the true God revealed Himself. It involved a divinely commissioned prophet (18:15) and a divinely revealed message (18:18) that came through the vehicle of human language.

In *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* we read, “I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to one’s god! Who is proper to oneself is an offense to one’s god, what in one’s own heart seems despicable is proper to one’s god. Who knows the will of the gods in heaven? Who understands the plans of the underworld gods? Where have mortals learnt the way of a god?”

The God Who Reveals and Explains Sin Versus the Gods of Moral Silence

One should note, especially in the Old Testament prophets, how God pleads with Israel, explaining her sin, pointing out her evil, defining her misdeeds, and pleading for her repentance.

The God Who Sends Suffering to Bring Blessing Versus the Gods Who Send Suffering to Buffet and Curse

Deuteronomy 8:1-3 explains Israel’s sufferings as those “that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” God’s good purpose in suffering sent is “that He might

humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end (Deuteronomy 8:16).”

The God of Discriminate Judgment Versus the Gods of Capricious Judgment

In every judgment of Scripture, the wicked were punished and the righteous were exempted. Everyone who believed Noah entered the ark and was saved; all others drowned. When the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, all who looked to it were healed; those who did not died.

The God of the Old Testament Who Extends Help Versus the Gods of Polytheism Who Withhold Help

Jonah spoke of the God who is the author of salvation, and the Psalms abound with praise to the God who hears and responds to the cries of His own.

The God from Whom Forgiveness Is Obtained Versus the Gods Who Withhold Forgiveness

In *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* we find “A Prayer to Every God.” One part says this: “Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand; when I weep, they do not come to my side. I utter laments, but no one hears me; I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I cannot see.”

Psalm 32:5 reads, “I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.” The response of the true God to the psalmist’s confession was immediate, free, and non-probationary.

The Personal God of the Old Testament Versus the Impersonal Gods of Polytheism

Psalm 23:1 speaks of the Lord as the believer’s shepherd. Every time we find the words *my God* or *our God*, we are reminded of the God with whom we may have a personal relationship.