JONAH & NAHUM: ENGLISH BIBLE

by

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Selected Bibliography


Part 1: Jonah

I. Introduction

Our introduction will examine issues that are normally discussed under the subject of special introduction, isagogics. These items will include a brief presentation concerning the title, date and authorship, literary composition, historical background, message, canonicity, and text.

A. Title

MT: יּוֹנָה, Yônâ, “dove”
LXX: Ἰώνας, Yōnas, “Jonas”
V: Ἰῶνα, “Jonah”

B. Date and Authorship

Though Jonah carried on his prophetic ministry in the eighth century B.C. (see 2 Kgs 14:25), there is some uncertainty about the book’s date and authorship. This is due to the fact that neither this book nor any other book in Scripture gives any details about either item. We will briefly look at each of these.

1. Date

The dates for the composition of this book range anywhere from 800 to 200 B.C. Earlier critics such as Bewer dated the work between 400–200 B.C. (p. 13). Since the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus refers to the “twelve prophets” in 49:10, it is clear that the book cannot be any later than this, even for more radical critical scholars. Many current critical scholars prefer a date today after the exile in the fifth or fourth centuries B.C. Four items generally support this date in the fifth or fourth centuries B.C.

a. Aramaic features

The book contains a number of Aramaisms that suggests a late date. “When scholars turn to Jonah’s language to secure a date for the book, they invariably assess idioms and terminology that are judged typical of ‘late’ Hebrew and assemble evidence for Aramaic influence on it” (Sasson, p. 22). Sasson lists seven Aramaic linguistic items that have been used to support a late date (ibid., pp. 22–23).

In response to the use of Aramaisms, Stuart has correctly noted that the “‘Aramaisms’ have increasingly disappeared, to be replaced by ‘Northwest Semitisms.’ That is, the vast majority of words and phrases once thought to be native only to Imperial Aramaic (and therefore, when found in the OT, proof of a date later than 587 B.C.) have now been found to belong to a far wider provenance in date and language grouping. So many ‘Aramaisms’ have turned up in Ugaritic texts—which cannot be later than 1200 B.C.—that the arguments from silence on which such identifications are made can now be dismissed as spurious. Indeed, none of the total of seven Aramaisms variously identified in the book fits for certain the criteria necessary to constitute a ‘genuine’ Aramaism” (Stuart, pp. 432–33).

b. Exaggerations

The book of Jonah supposedly contains a number of exaggerations that have been
accounted for as a result of the lapse of time after Nineveh had fallen in 612 B.C. This period of time is when these historical inaccuracies about the city developed. Four of these are the following.

1) The size of Nineveh is of legendary proportions, it is a “three days journey” (3:3). If a day’s journey is approximately twenty miles, then this means that the city’s size was sixty miles in circumference. In the early eighth century when Jonah was preaching, the size of the city was about three miles. During the reign of Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.), he boasts how he enlarged Nineveh. With this expansion, the city’s size was approximately 7 miles (see Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 56). If this data has been used accurately, the size of Jonah’s Nineveh appears to be inaccurate.

In response to this, Wiseman has noted that, when Nineveh is referred to as being a “three days journey” in 3:3, this is best taken as including not only the city proper but also the districts of Assur, Calah, and Dur-Sharrukin (pp. 38–39).

2) Nineveh’s population is of legendary size. In 4:11 there are supposedly 120,000 children. This would mean that the population within Nineveh would be about 600,000. For a city only three miles wide, it could not contain this many people.

However, it is debatable whether 4:11 refers to only children. This interpretation has been assumed since the inhabitants of Nineveh are described as not knowing their right hand from their left. Since the 120,000 are referred to as ’ādām, it seems to me that we are describing people generically. We still must ask ourselves if 120,000 people could fit in the metropolitan area of Nineveh, 3 miles in width? This would seem unlikely. Wiseman estimates that about 18,000 people would have lived in the walled city of Nineveh (pp. 41–42). Where then did the 120,000 people live? If the book of Jonah is looking at “Greater Nineveh” which would have included Assur, Calah, and Dur-Sharrukin, then the population is that which inhabited the entire area (Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 58–59).

3) In 3:3 the text indicates that “Nineveh was a great city.” The implication is that it is no longer a great city after the days of Jonah.

At best, this is a tenuous argument, as many critical scholars realize (Sasson, p. 22). The clause in 3:3 is a disjunctive clause providing explanatory information. As such, the so-called past tense is not the clause’s emphasis. The point of the clause is to say that, when Jonah went to Nineveh to preach, Nineveh at that time was a great city.

4) It is historically inaccurate to refer to the king of Nineveh as such. The expression “king of Nineveh” (3:6) is never used as such in the extant Mesopotamian documents. If we are referring to the Assyrian monarch, he is normally referred to as the king of Assyria in Mesopotamian and biblical documents. According to this argument, the expression “king of Nineveh” was apparently invented later in time.

Alexander has correctly noted the weaknesses of this argument. “If, assuming a
late date of composition, the author of Jonah drew upon the book of Kings for his choice of prophet (cf. 2 Ki. 14:15), is it not strange that he did not likewise draw upon this same work for information concerning the Assyrians (i.e. 2 Ki. 15–20)? Alternatively, however, the designation ‘king of Nineveh’ may reflect accurately the political situation which existed at the time of Jonah’s mission: at this state the Assyrian king exercised absolute control over a very limited region centred on Nineveh—hence the designation ‘king of Nineveh.’ It was only towards the end of the eighth century BC that the Assyrian Empire re-emerged as a major world power” (“Jonah,” p. 60).

c. Literary borrowing
Some have argued that the book of Jonah is dependent on either Joel, Jeremiah, some Psalms, or Ezekiel. Many comparisons have been made between Jonah and Jeremiah 18:7–8 or Jonah 4:2 and 3:9 with Joel 2:13, 14, respectively.

The rational supporting this type of comparison is not very convincing (for a listing of other similar passages, see Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 62, n. 1). Why could not Jeremiah or Joel have borrowed from Jonah? Why does Jonah have to be dependent upon them? Or why could the Jonah material and the other two sources have been derived from another common source? It would seem that there is a difference between sharing concepts and a literary dependency. The similarity of the material is “far more cogently attributable to the univocal nature of divine revelation throughout Scripture than to borrowing” (Stuart, p. 433).

d. Audience
It has been assumed that Jonah was written to meet a particular need of his community. In this regard scholars will look for a historical setting which would explain the details of a source. If the book is dealing with showing God’s concern for Gentiles, it has often been assumed that the author of Jonah is seeking to correct some of the extremes towards sectarianism represented by Ezra and Nehemiah.

This approach is very subjective when it comes to the book of Jonah. If it is dealing with God’s love for Gentiles, has this not been demonstrated in earlier revelation such as the book of Ruth? However, this interpretation of the message of the book is not necessarily the best understanding of its message.

e. Conclusion
Since none of these items are convincing and they also can just as easily fit an eighth century B.C. date, it would seem that we are better off to maintain that setting.

2. Authorship

a. In keeping with an eighth century date, there is no reason why we cannot maintain that either Jonah or one of his fellow prophets wrote the book of Jonah. If Jonah wrote it, this helps preserve the accuracy of the material.

b. The prophet Jonah of 1:1 is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. He is from Gath-hepher,
a town located in Zebulon in lower Galilee. As such he was a prophet to the northern kingdom. According to the passage in Kings, Jonah prophesied under Jeroboam II (793–53 B.C.) that Israel would regain its ancient boundaries.

C. Literary Composition

We will briefly examine four literary aspects of this book, its unity, structure, literary features, and genre.

1. Unity

Though many modern scholars accept the unity of the book of Jonah, some who take the work as a fictional composition maintain that 2:2–9 was a secondary interpolation. Our understanding of the psalm is that it is a genuine part of the book and its placement contributes to the author’s development of his message. There are four reasons for this.

a. This psalm’s placement contributes to the writer’s plot development. “A straightforward reading of ch. 2 indicates that the psalm was meant as praise for deliverance not from the fish but from drowning. A number of scholars have perceived that the fish was not a means of punishing Jonah but a means of deliverance. ‘It is a beneficent device to return Jonah to the land where he had previously abandoned his commission.’ It is in fact more than this: the sailors in 1:13 could have done this just as well, but were deliberately foiled. Jonah deserved to die, and the fish is Yahweh’s last-minute device to save him from merited death by drowning. The charge of irrelevance to its context is the creation of those who level it. It reflects a failure to read the account as it stands. The sea is the enemy, the bearer of death; the fish is Jonah’s ally by divine provision” (Allen, pp. 184–85).

b. If we removed this psalm of thanksgiving from its placement in the book, “there is no reason to suppose that Jonah’s initial attitude to God’s call has changed following his expulsion from the ship. Yet the book’s plot requires an explanation as to why Jonah should be willing to go to Nineveh in chapter 3. The statement of Jonah’s gratitude to God for deliverance from death is an essential link between chapters 1 and 3” (Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 66–67).

c. There are overlapping concepts shared between this psalm and other parts of the book. For example, the “going down” motif is found in 1:3, 5; and 2:6. In 2:6 we see its reversal where Jonah is brought up from near death. In addition, we should notice how both the sailors and Jonah respond to Yahweh’s deliverance by offering sacrifices and vows, 1:16, 2:9 (Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 67–68). Furthermore, Jonah’s introduction to his psalm in 2:1, “Jonah prayed to Yahweh and said,” is essentially the same as 4:2 (for a greater development of the similarities between sections, see Christensen, “The Song of Jonah,” pp. 229–31).

d. Without this psalm the book of Jonah looses its symmetry. A number of studies have been done that demonstrate the symmetrical nature of the book (see Fretheim, p. 55). This will be elaborated on in the following discussion of the book’s structure.
2. Structure

Most studies of Jonah have recognized that Yahweh’s call to Jonah in 1:1–3 is paralleled by His second call in 3:1–3. This suggests that this is a good dividing point in this work. Following Magonet’s study, the structure of the book is like this (Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 68):

A   The first call—flight, sailors; 1:1–16
B   Transition; 1:17
C   Prayer—discussion with God; 2:1–10

A₁ The second call—obedience, Nineveh; 3:1–10
B₁ Transition; 4:1
C₁ Prayer—discussion with God; 4:2–11

Not only do parts A and A₁ contain similar introductions but they also have similar responses by the sailors and Ninevites. Sections C and C₁ focus on Jonah’s responses to God’s work. However, “the gratitude which he expresses for his own deliverance in chapter 2 contrasts sharply with the abhorrence which he feels in chapter 4 as a result of God’s willingness to forgive Nineveh” (ibid.). By correlating this structural arrangement with the content of the book of Jonah, we could outline Jonah in this fashion:

A. God retrieves his recalcitrant prophet, 1:1–2:10.
   1. God’s command is disobeyed by the prophet, 1:1–16.
      a. God gives Jonah a command and Jonah responds in disobedience, vv. 1–3.
      b. God sends a storm to chasten Jonah with a consequence that the sailors acknowledge Lord’s power, vv. 4–16.
   2. God’s deliverance of the prophet results in an expression of his gratitude, 1:17–2:10.
      a. The Lord rescues Jonah from the sea, 1:17.
      c. The Lord returns Jonah to the land, 2:10.
B. God sends his reluctant prophet to Nineveh, 3:1–4:11.
   1. The Ninevites respond to Jonah’s message of judgment, 3:1–10.
      a. The proclamation of the message reflects that judgment is coming, vv. 1–4.
      b. The response to the message of judgment is one of repentance, vv. 5–9.
      c. The consequence from their response to the message of judgment is God’s deliverance of Nineveh, v. 10.
   2. Jonah is corrected for his reaction to God’s postponed judgment on Nineveh, 4:1–11.
      a. Jonah’s complaint is questioned by God, vv. 1–4.
      b. The lesson focuses on God’s sovereign right in showing compassion, vv. 5–11.

3. Literary Features

Most of Jonah is written in a narrative style. The exception to this is 2:2–9 which is written in a poetic style as a song of individual thanksgiving. In the past many literary critics took chapter two as a latter addition because it was poetical as opposed to the bulk of the book. As noted earlier this conclusion has been largely abandoned. Some recent works have demonstrated that poetry and prose have much that overlap as far as
rhetorical features are concerned (Christensen, “Jonah,” pp. 217–31). There are a number of these literary features used in Jonah. One of these is the author’s use of word repetitions. Some of the terms repeated are the Hebrew terms translated as “go down” (1:3, 5; 2:6), “great” (1:2, 4 [twice], 10, 12, 16, 17; 3:2, 3, 5, 7; 4:1, 10, 11), “appointing” (1:17; 4:6, 7, 8), “evil (or calamity)” (1:2, 7, 8; 3:8, 10; 4:1). Another is ironic inversion. For example, the sailors response to Yahweh is the opposite of what we expect from the heathen and Jonah’s callousness is the opposite of what we expect from a prophet of God. The response of the Ninevites to Jonah’s preaching is the opposite of what we expect; and Jonah’s response to God’s compassion toward the Ninevites is the opposite of what we expect from a prophet of Yahweh (for more on this, see ABD, s.v. “Jonah,” 3:938–40).

4. Genre

There has been much discussion about the literary category of Jonah. It has long been recognized that Jonah is different than the other prophetic works. The Minor Prophets generally are collections of a prophet’s oracles; however, Jonah deals with the events surrounding his mission to Nineveh with a very brief prophetic oracle in 3:4. Consequently, we struggle with what type of book this is. How did Jonah expect his audience to interpret his work? In attempting to identify the type of work that Jonah is, all the interpretations of Jonah’s genre break down into two basic categories, fiction or history (for a more thorough presentation of this, see Alexander, “Jonah and Genre,” pp. 35–59).

a. Fiction

Many different suggestions have been made in attempting to classify the book of Jonah. Some of these have been the following: allegory (G. A. Smith, Hauser), midrash (Brockington), parable (Bewer, Smart), prophetic parable (Eissfeldt), novelle (Landes), satire (Burrows), and a satirical, didactic, short story (Fretheim). What these suggestions have in common is that the book of Jonah is a fictional composition. Four justifications of this are normally given.

1) The book contains many items that are historically improbable. Some of these are the following: Jonah’s deliverance by the fish, Nineveh’s repentance, the sudden growth of the plant, and the destruction of the plant in the night. Since these are not ordinary occurrences in life and it seems unlikely that anyone could experience so many of these, this is highly unlikely (see Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 71).

These items are only historically improbable if one does not accept the supernatural intervention of God. Most of these items we would have to classify as part of the miraculous. Therefore, this is improbable only if one does not accept the miraculous.

2) The author uses hyperbole quite often in his work. Jonah presents items such as the fish being great as well as the population being great. These were conscious items that the author used to cause his audience to identify this work as fictional.

This is not without problems. “A careful analysis of the text suggests that events are not exaggerated but rather reflect accurately the situation described. For
example, it is only to be expected that a fish capable of swallowing a man should be designated ‘big’ (1:17). Moreover, the author, if anything, actually plays down the miraculous nature of the various extraordinary events recorded in the narrative. Thus his description of Jonah being swallowed by the great fish is told in a very matter-of-fact manner, with no attempt being made to embellish the account with extravagant details. This seems remarkable, especially when we are asked to believe that the author is fond of hyperbole. Whereas many modern expositions of Jonah tend to dramatize the events in a most unrealistic manner, the same is not true of the Hebrew original” (ibid., p. 73).

3) The symmetrical arrangement of the book also reflects a fictional account. Fretheim has made this observation: “The carefully worked out structures in the book suggest a non-historical intention on the author’s part. Such a concern for structure and symmetry is not as characteristic of straightforward historical writings and is more suggestive of an imaginative product” (Jonah, p. 66).

This is an oversimplification. Why is it not possible that an author who is seeking to preserve historical truth would choose to use a symmetrical structure where the facts of the event permitted this? It would seem quite apparent that all biblical history was written selectively, that is not all the details were given. When we understand this, it allows the biblical author a certain amount of freedom in arranging his material to communicate a message. This freedom was never used at the expense of historical accuracy. This would suggest that two items were used in controlling the arrangement of an author’s material: the historical event and the author’s theological purpose.

4) Jonah has a didactic thrust and fits more properly with fiction than history. “It is argued that the book was not written with the intention of recording actual events, but rather was designed to convey particular ideas. Some writers would even go so far as to say that the didactic nature of the book is perhaps the most compelling reason for viewing it as fictional” (Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 74).

This creates a false dichotomy between historical and didactic works. Why cannot this work be both historical and didactic? Alexander has correctly observed, “there is no reason why the book of Jonah may not be both didactic and historical. The fact that the author of Jonah communicates to his readers a particular message does not exclude the possibility that his account is based on historical happenings. Indeed, it is the very reality of these events which adds significance to the teaching of the book” (ibid.).

b. Didactic historical book

There are four reasons why we must conclude that Jonah took an extended historical event from his life in which he learned a significant lesson about the compassionate nature of his God.

1) The human participant in the book is a historical figure. Jonah the son of Amittai is identified through 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet who preached during the reign of Jeroboam II. He accurately prophesied that Israel’s territory would expand during
the reign of Jeroboam II.

2) The introduction to the book of Jonah (1:1) is comparable to other historical works such as 1 Kings 17:8–9, “The word of Yahweh came to…."

3) A close parallel in biblical literature to Jonah is the Elijah pericope in 1 Kings 17–19. If we agree that there is a historical basis for Elijah narratives, then we would also have to say the same for Jonah.

4) Though carrying less weight, we should observe that this is the traditional understanding of the book. The fictional approach to Jonah is a relatively recent development (Alexander, “Jonah and Genre,” p. 58).

D. Historical Background

Like his fellow prophets, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and Amos, Jonah carried on his prophetic ministry during the eighth century B.C. (see the following charts). He carried on his ministry under the leadership of Jeroboam II in Israel (793–53 B.C.). During the eighth century, both Israel and Judah had risen to tremendous economic heights and had extended their borders so that their combined territory was almost equivalent to what it was during the reigns of David and Solomon. Under Jeroboam II Israel’s borders were restored as far north as Hamath (2 Kgs 14:25). The Assyrian nation was in a weakened state during the eighth century.

E. Message

Since Jonah is a didactic work, we should ask what lesson is the author advocating? There have been many different suggestions regarding the book’s purpose. Alexander has conveniently outlined these into four different categories with a number of subcategories for each. We will follow his basic outline in giving an overview of this (“Jonah,” pp. 81–90; the following abbreviation of Alexander is taken from Walton, “The Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5–7,” p. 50).

1. The message focuses upon repentance.
   a. encourage repentance by the Jews
   b. demonstrate that repentance is possible
   c. show that repentance is an appropriate response to prophecy

2. The book’s primary lesson was to deal with unfulfilled prophecy.
   a. emphasize the conditional nature of prophecy even when the conditions are not stated
   b. offer a justification for unfulfilled prophecy
   c. deal with the issue of conditional versus unconditional prophecy
Chronological Chart for the United and Divided Monarchy
3. Jonah wanted to correct Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles.
   The purpose of this was to
   a. stimulate missionary concern
   b. to condemn the exclusivism of the Jews
   c. to condemn Jewish resentment toward God for forgiving Gentiles

4. Jonah’s message deals with the issue of Theodicy.
   This advocates
   a. God’s freedom in acting graciously
   b. an exploration of the relationship between mercy and justice

The problem with the first category’s focus on repentance is that it ignores the object lesson in chapter 4. Though the book does deal with an unfulfilled prophecy about God not fulfilling Jonah’s message against Nineveh, is Jonah’s concern simply about lack of fulfillment, as the second category reflects? This second category also has some liabilities. The most dominant understanding of the book has revolved around category 3. Against this understanding, we should note that Jonah does not appear to have an incorrect attitude toward the sailors in chapter 1. Another problem with this third category is that it only encourages missionary activity toward Assyrians and not toward the broad spectrum of Gentiles. At best, missionary activity toward a broad group of non-Jews can only be drawn by implication. Like the problem associated with the first category, a final problem for this category is that it does not give an adequate explanation for the object lesson in chapter 4. Consequently, this third category is also questionable.

It would seem to me that the message of the book is best seen as revolving around category 4. This most adequately explains the object lesson in chapter 4. In this chapter God is challenging Jonah that he does not have the right to be angry. In doing this God has placed Jonah in the place of the Ninevites. A key in explaining this understanding is the Hebrew term rā'ā. It is used in reference to Nineveh’s impending calamity in 3:10 and it is used in reference to Jonah’s impending calamity from the heat in 4:6. For Nineveh to hopefully solve its problem, its citizens go through a ritual of repentance; and Jonah builds a hut to solve his problem with the heat. God’s compassion prevents the calamity from coming upon Nineveh and His compassion sends a plant to protect Jonah. However, the difference between the two situations is that God allows His compassion to continue towards the Ninevites but He does not let it continue toward Jonah for twenty-four hours later he sends a parasite to kill the plant with Jonah being exposed to the full force of his calamity. It appears as if God has put Jonah in the shoes of Nineveh to show him that God has the right to extend His compassion toward the people of Nineveh (Walton, “Object Lesson,” p. 49).

I would summarize the message of the book in this way: God instructs His people that as sovereign Creator, He has the right to show His compassion and, consequently, His servants must submit obediently to Him.

F. Canonicity
   When I discuss canonicity, I understand the term to be referring to the proper list of books and by consequence the collection of books. This is how the term has been used since the fourth century A.D. (Beckwith, *OT Canon*, p. 1).
1. Proper List of Books

In reference to an actual listing, if we follow Beckwith’s approach, it is clear that the threefold structure of this list as is found in our Hebrew Bibles today was completed in the second century B.C. Based on Daniel 9:2, 11, 13 and 2 Maccabees 2:13, he has shown that there was an earlier twofold division that dated back to as early as the sixth century B.C. (ibid., pp. 149–51). This reflects that there was a closed division of the canon, Mosaic writings, and an open division of the canon, non-Mosaic writings. Since Jeremiah had been completed and regarded as a part of the canon, Daniel 9:2, then the same is true of Isaiah.

2. Collection of Books

When we are talking about canonicity prior to the final listing, we should consider, how did a book become added to the collection of works being stored in the Temple? When was Jonah added to this collection? In light of Ecclesiasticus’s listing of canonical books in chapters 44–50, it is quite clear that Jonah was being referred to in Ecclesiasticus 49:10 with the reference to the Twelve [Minor] Prophets. This makes it clear that Jonah had already been added to the list of canonical books by the second century B.C. This is also clearly established by Qumran. It appears as if books that were clear products of prophets were quickly added to the list unless a prophet’s work was completed during the times of an apostate king, such as might have been the case with Manasseh on the throne. However, it would appear that its addition did not carry on for centuries since historically there have not been any major questions about its canonicity.

3. Position in the Canon

In the Hebrew Canon, Jonah is listed as the fifth book of the Twelve Prophets. It is preceded by Obadiah and followed by Micah. In the order preserved by the Septuagint tradition, it is the sixth book in the collection of the Twelve. It is preceded by Obadiah and followed by Nahum.

G. Text

The Hebrew text is very well preserved and has very few variants. The Greek, Syriac, Latin, and Aramaic versions also attest to the preservation of the Hebrew text. In our classes we use *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* which uses Codex B 19\(^3\) (A.D. 1008) as its model text.

II. Exegetical Analysis

In keeping with the broad structural arrangement set forth earlier, we will divide the book into two basic sections: God retrieves His recalcitrant prophet (1:1–2:10) and God sends His reluctant prophet to Nineveh (3:1–4:11).

A. God Retrieves His Recalcitrant Prophet, 1:1–2:10

In these two chapters we see that God’s command is disobeyed by the prophet (1:1–16) and God’s deliverance of the prophet results in an expression of his gratitude (1:17–2:10).


   In vv. 1–3 God issues a command to Jonah to which he disobediently responds by fleeing in a different direction. In order to chasten Jonah, Yahweh sends a storm which
also results in the sailors doing homage to Yahweh, vv. 4–16.

a. God gives Jonah a command and Jonah responds in disobedience, vv. 1–3.

1) Yahweh’s command, vv. 1–2
Yahweh speaks directly to Jonah commanding him to go to Nineveh in order to preach against their wicked ways.

“The word of the LORD came,” v. 1—this expression is used over a hundred times in the Old Testament. What generally follows this is the message (Joel 1:1, Mic 1:1, Hag 1:1, Mal 1:1) or specific instructions (2 Sam 7:4; 1 Kgs 17:2) as here. Reception of “the word of the LORD” was an authentication of a true prophet, as in 1 Samuel 3:21 (Baldwin, p. 552).

“Jonah son of Amittai,” v. 1—as mentioned above, this is a prophet who ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II.

“Go,” v. 2—the command to “go” is a translation of two imperatives in Hebrew. The Hebrew could literally be translated as “Arise, go.” “Arise” is a translation of the Hebrew verb qûm. Often this verb literally means to arise; however, there are contexts where it is used in connection with a verb denoting some type of movement. In these contexts, qûm functions with an inceptive force or one of immediacy (see Baldwin, p. 552). For example, in Genesis 19:14, Lot says to his sons-in-law, “arise, get out of this place.” The point of “arise” does not necessarily mean to literally arise. It appears to modify the verb meaning to “get out” by adding a sense of immediacy, “Hurry up, get out of this place.” In v. 15, the angels tell Lot, “Arise, take your wife.” The point once again appears to be, “Hurry, take your wife.” In this type of linguistic context, qûm appears to denote the need for an immediate response. The same is true of the command to Jonah, “Immediately, go to Nineveh.”

“To the great city of Nineveh”—the destination of Jonah’s preaching excursion is Nineveh. This was the last capital of the Assyrian empire, prior to 612 B.C. The name Nineveh is derived from the Assyrian Ninua, a word derived from an earlier Sumerian name for the female goddess, Nina, Ishtar (Wiseman, “Jonah’s Nineveh,” p. 35).

“Preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before Me”—God’s point here is not that He has just simply become aware of the Ninevites wickedness but He has determined that now is the time that some corrective on His part needs to be taken.

2) Jonah’s response, v. 3
Rather than immediately going to Nineveh as we expect from one of Yahweh’s prophets (cf. 1 Kgs 17:8–10), Jonah immediately heads in the opposite direction.

“Headed for Tarshish”—since Jonah went to Joppa, it would appear that Jonah is headed west on the Mediterranean. Tarshish has been identified with Tartessos, a
Phoenician colony located in southwestern Spain at the mouth of Guadalquivir River. It is also renowned for its silver, tin, lead, and iron (Jer 10:9). Though there are a few other alternatives, this is the leading identification of Tarshish’s location (Allen, pp. 204–5, n. 10). Whether one accepts this location, the writer’s point is clear, Jonah immediately went in the opposite direction that Yahweh wanted.

“Joppa”—is located on the Mediterranean coast, about 30 miles west of Jerusalem.

“When the LORD”—On a superficial level we might conclude that Jonah thought he could get away from the omnipresent God; however, this is highly unlikely, for in 1:9 he admits to the sailors that he fears the God of the heaven who made the sea and dry land. I would also think that a prophet would have been very conversant with passages such as Psalm 139:7–10 which describes Yahweh’s omnipresence. Then what does this prepositional phrase mean? “When the LORD” is a translation of the Hebrew compound prepositional phrase, millipnê YHWH, “from the presence of Yahweh.” This prepositional phrase may be taken in two basic ways. First, it may be equivalent to a similar concept used of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1, “in whose presence I stand.” The NIV translates this “whom I serve.” Jonah may perhaps be saying, “I will no longer serve Yahweh.” Second, this is used at times to denote a person who has left from having an official audience with someone. This is used in Genesis 41:46 to describe Joseph going out “from the presence of Pharaoh.” It is also used in Genesis 4:16 where Cain went out “from the presence of Yahweh.” This apparently reflects that Cain had a personal audience with a visible manifestation of Yahweh. In 2 Kings 6:32 a messenger went out “from the presence of” the king of Israel to take Elisha captive. In each of these cases, this compound preposition, millipnê, denotes one leaving from having a personal audience with someone (see also Lev 10:2; 16:12; Num 16:46; 17:9; 20:9). Jonah apparently had a personal audience with Yahweh, perhaps at the Temple, where Yahweh had commanded him to go to Nineveh (Walton, “Jonah,” p. 14). With this understanding, Jonah is also disobedient but the point seems to be that he is attempting to get as far away from the place where Yahweh spoke to him as possible. This may have been to avoid being re-commissioned to go to Nineveh. This would seem to be the best option.

b. God sends a storm to chasten Jonah with a consequence that the sailors acknowledge Yahweh’s power, vv. 4–16.

Jonah’s lack of submission to God’s revealed will has severe consequences. This is what is developed in these verses. This section reflects a high degree of literary skill by Jonah (see the presentation of these by Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 106–9). A modified form of Alexander’s structure is this:
A  The storm begins with consequential fear, vv. 4–5a

B  The storm continues with failed attempts to get relief, vv. 5b–6

C  The sailors seek the responsible party, v. 7

D  The sailors question Jonah, v. 8

E  Jonah’s fear, v. 9

E1 The sailors’ fear, v. 10

D1 The sailors question Jonah, v. 11

C1 Jonah’s admission of responsibility, v. 12

B1 The storm continues with failed attempts to get relief, vv. 13–14

A1 The storm ends with consequential fear, vv. 15–16

The parallel nature between A and A1 as well as B and B1 is obvious. The heart of this unit is vv. 7–12 where the sailors seek to discover the person responsible for the storm at sea. The apex of this unit is vv. 9–10 where Jonah acknowledges his fear of Yahweh and the sailors are also terrified. The following fivefold breakdown is based on this structure:

1) The storm begins with consequential fear, vv. 4–5a.
   Yahweh sends a storm that threatens to break apart the ship, v. 4. In response to this, the sailors were terrified. In order to bring relief they began to cry out to their gods and to lighten the ship’s load, v. 5a.

   “The ship threatened to break up,” v. 4—in Hebrew this could be literally translated: “The ship thought to break up.” This is the only place that the verb thinking is used with an inanimate subject. Because of this some have wanted to emend the Hebrew text (for the various suggestions, see Allen, p. 207, n. 21). Rather than requiring emendation, we understand that the author of Jonah has artistically used personification (“thinking” for “threatening”) to communicate the profound nature of the storm’s impact upon the ship. The author’s poetic flare is further demonstrated by his use of assonance (ḥiššēḇâ, “threatened,” and ḫiššāḇēr, “to break up”). Through these rhetorical features, our author heightens the dramatic impact of this section. Though Jonah was not tuned in to following Yahweh’s revealed will, the ship was precisely tuned in to doing God’s bidding. As Page has stated it: “In contrast to the disobedient prophet, the wind, the sea, and even the ship were tuned in to the Lord’s purposes” (p. 229).

   “All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god,” v. 5—the subject of the sailors fear has a prominent place at the beginning (v. 5), the center (v. 10), and the end of this pericope (v. 16). As we see the development of the sailors’ fear motif, there is a movement from their polytheism to some form of fear of Yahweh. Verse 5 clearly reflects the sailors’ polytheism. By the nature of being sailors, these men had undoubtedly experienced storms at sea prior to this. What about this storm provoked this response of fear? These sailors may have experienced a vague uneasiness about the suddenness of the storm and this may have suggested that they were experiencing the wrath of a god(s) over some sort of sin. However, as the text reflects, their prayers went unanswered. “The ancient Near East’s religious environment included devotion to a multitude of ‘protecting spirits, patron deities,
lower echelon gods and goddesses and senior member of the Pantheon,’ which gave rise to an extremely confusing situation. Perhaps the sailors felt that they had not reached their god or had gone through the wrong ‘channels’ to contact their particular deity” (Page, p. 230). Whatever the case may have been, the sailors will need to do something to get relief from the storm.

2) The storm continues with failed attempts to get relief, vv. 5b–6.
This portion has a contrast. As the sailors are working diligently to save the ship and themselves, Jonah is below the ship’s deck fast asleep, v. 5. When the captain sees this (v. 6), he asks Jonah how he could sleep. He then tells Jonah to pray to his God with the hope that his God would respond. Apparently, the captain and his crew figured the more gods, the merrier. It is ironic that the genuine prophet of God sleeps while the pagans pray to their false gods.

3) The storm continues with search for culprit, vv. 7–12.
In the midst of the storm, the sailors realize their need to find the person responsible for the worsening storm. These verses focus in on their search.

a) The sailors seek the responsible party, v. 7.
In discovering the guilty party, the sailors cast lots to uncover this information. The casting of lots was a common practice in the ancient Near East. Though we are uncertain what was exactly involved with this, marked stones or sticks were probably drawn from a receptacle. Since Jonah won the lottery, does this mean that the sailors viewed him as the guilty party? This is the way most commentators take it. However, this may also mean, as Walton suggests, that Jonah went first in telling what possible sins he might have been responsible for. After he gave his story, then the second place winner of the lotto went next (“Jonah,” pp. 19–26). The point of the lots was not to determine who was guilty but the order that was to be followed to determine who had incurred the wrath of his god. This understanding harmonizes well with the following verse.

b) The sailors question Jonah, v. 8.
In order to determine what act Jonah, one of his family members, fellow tribe members, etc. might have committed, the sailors asked Jonah a series of questions in v. 8. The point of this is to help the sailors in their attempt at exploring all pertinent avenues in their fact-finding quest.

c) Jonah’s fear, v. 9
Jonah only partially answers the sailors’ questions. First, he identifies himself as a Hebrew. Second, Jonah identifies his relationship with his God with the clause, “I worship Yahweh.” “Worship” is a translation of the Hebrew verb denoting “fear.” It is often with the resultant idea of one who genuinely worships Yahweh. Since Jonah was a true prophet, it is safe to assume that he is a real believer. Third, he identifies Yahweh as the “God of heaven.” By describing Him further as the one “who made the sea and the land,” Jonah leaves little doubt in the sailors’ minds that he is the culprit.
d) The sailors’ fear, v. 10
The response by the pagan sailors is one of fear since they realize that Jonah was running away from his God who made sea and, therefore, was almost certainly responsible for their distressing situation.

e) The sailors question Jonah, v. 11.
Since the storm was increasing in severity, the sea was becoming increasingly harmful for the ship. The sailors needed to know what would appease Jonah’s God so they questioned him about this.

f) Jonah’s admission of responsibility, v. 12
Jonah tells them to throw him into sea because he knows that he is responsible for the storm. He reassures the sailors that when they do the sea will become calm.

4) The storm continues with failed attempts to get relief, vv. 13–14.
At this point, we would expect the sailors to cast Jonah overboard, but they show more compassion than Jonah does. However, in the ancient Near East where there were deities at conflict with one another, they probably did not want to appease one god and then find themselves with that very act sinning against another. Perhaps, Jonah’s God had commanded the sea to do His will, but He had not commanded the sailors (Stuart, p. 463). As they try to row harder to get to land, the storm becomes more severe (v. 13).

In desperation, the sailors finally acquiesce to Jonah’s suggestion. In v. 14 they recognize that Yahweh is sovereign in this situation. They ask Yahweh to not hold them responsible for killing an innocent man. Why should they fear this when Jonah has told them exactly what to do. Can one have genuine confidence in a deceptive prophet? “So they pray to Yahweh themselves, beseeching him to accept their role in Jonah’s death. What they are afraid of is bloodguilt. In the ancient Semitic world, people could not be put to death without a trial and a determination of guilt, any more than would be possible in modern times. The sailors plead that they might not perish. They already fear perishing from the storm. Now they must also fear perishing from sin. They are acting in desperation, without giving Jonah a trial” (Stuart, p. 463).

5) The storm ends with consequential fear, vv. 15–16.
Having hurled Jonah into the sea, the storm ceased (v. 15). The sailors wanted to take no chances of the God of the sea striking again so they demonstrated their fear to Yahweh by offering sacrifices and making vows to Jonah’s God. In some sense, God used Jonah in spite of his disobedience.

2. God’s Deliverance of the Prophet Results in an Expression of His Gratitude, 1:17–2:10.
It is readily apparent that a new section is found here. The scene has changed. No longer is Jonah on board a ship in the midst of the storm with sailors questioning him. The scene has now shifted to Jonah in the process of drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. God rescues Jonah from drowning with a divinely chosen vehicle, “a great fish.” He moves to a dark container having been swallowed alive by the fish. As he may have
moved in and out of consciousness, he is now alone with his thoughts about God and how He has rescued him. The structure of this unit is an A–B–A\textsuperscript{1} construction. Part A is a narrative introduction in 1:17. Part B is the poem, 2:1–9, and part A\textsuperscript{1} is the narrative conclusion, 2:10. This can be outlined in this fashion: Yahweh rescues Jonah from the sea, 1:17; Jonah expresses his gratitude to Yahweh, 2:1–9; and Yahweh returns Jonah to the land, 2:10.


The focus of v. 16 has been on the sailors. We have briefly lost sight of Jonah. The sailors undoubtedly thought that Jonah had drowned; however, God was not finished with Jonah so He ordained a great fish to rescue Jonah from a watery grave (v. 17). There are three aspects of this deliverance that we should notice in this verse: the source of deliverance, the means of deliverance, and the duration of deliverance.

1) The source of deliverance
The text indicates that the source of deliverance is the LORD. We should notice here that the NIV indicates that the LORD “provided” a fish. This Hebrew verb, mānā, is also translated as “prepared” in the KJV and “appointed” in NASB. This Hebrew verb is also used for God’s providing the “gourd”/“vine” in 4:6, the “worm” in 4:7, and the strong east wind in 4:8. In light of these uses, this term is most appropriately taken as “ordained” and appears to reflect God’s intervention. This fits the context quite well since the point is that the Sovereign God is the One who has accomplished all these items.

2) The means of deliverance
The means of deliverance is the great fish. The Hebrew term, dāg, is used 19 times in the OT and is usually translated as fish. However, the Hebrew term is broad enough to include a whale but it does not demand this understanding. This passage is cited in Matthew 12:39 and the Greek term used for this is κῆτος, “sea monster” (BDAG). The Greek term is not of much help. Since the issue cannot be definitively decided, it is best to take this as a “great fish” which would allow either possibility. Though it is impossible for us to be certain, some have suggested that this may have been a big shark, *squalua carcharias glaucus*, which is about 20 to 23 feet in length and is known to have swallowed men whole (*Fauna and Flora of the Bible*, p. 29).

It is not very modern to deride the story of Jonah and the great fish. For example, Lucian in the second century A.D. derided the story of Jonah and the great fish. In the midst of some of his writings Augustine who lived in the fifth century describes how in some of his audiences, people began to mock when he described Jonah and the great fish. In modern times there have been some interesting explanations of this. For example some say that Jonah fell overboard and ended up on a great carcass. Others have said that Jonah fell overboard and as he was swimming around, a ship with a figure of a big fish on it saved Jonah. Others say that Jonah was dreaming.

As we can see many have stumbled over the issue of Jonah being swallowed and preserved for three days and three nights by a great fish. However, to make this
account more acceptable conservatives have sought to produce evidence supporting the possibility that a fish could swallow a man and survive this ordeal. There are some examples of this. In the early part of the twentieth century there was an exhibit in the London Museum that was advertised as “The Jonah of the Twentieth Century.” An English sailor while attempting to harpoon a Rhinodon shark in the English Channel had been thrown off his vessel and swallowed by the shark. His fellow sailors made such a disturbance that the shark was frightened and attempted to flee from the sailors. The ship followed the shark and two days later they killed the shark with harpoons. They cut the shark open to remove the sailor so that they could bury him. When they found the man, he was unconscious but alive. They took him to the hospital where he was found to be suffering from shock. A few hours later he left the hospital on his own power (see Harry Rimmer, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, pp. 188–89; A. J. Wilson, “The Sign of the Prophet Jonah,” *Princeton Theological Review* 25 [January 1927], 630–42; G. Macloskie, “How to Test the Story of Jonah,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 72 [April 1915]: 334–38; and Freeman, p. 168).

Though this data is intriguing, it has no great consequence for our exegesis since this fish is a result of God’s intervention. If God saved Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace in Daniel 3, then the LORD could certainly have preserved Jonah in the fish for a period of time.

3) The duration of deliverance
This lasted for three days and three nights. In God’s providential arrangement of history, God would use this to serve as a prefigurement of Jesus’ death and resurrection three days later (Matt 12:39–41). Some have taken Jesus’ statement in Matthew 12:40 to mean that Jonah died. This verse reads: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” The comparison made by Jesus is between the three days and three nights Jonah spent in the fish’s belly but He does not state that Jonah was in its belly dead.

Earlier commentators have understood the great fish as God’s judgment on His disobedient prophet. However, when we interpret Jonah being swallowed by the fish (v. 16) and that he prays from the fish (2:1), it seems more likely that the great fish is a vessel of deliverance; i.e., it saved Jonah from watery grave.

Lest we be mislead, Jonah did not write this while he was in the belly of the fish. He undoubtedly wrote this after all the events recorded in this book were completed. He has expressed his thoughts about the Lord’s deliverance in poetic form. The poem is found in vv. 2–9. The type of poem that we have here is known as an Individual Hymn of Thanksgiving. This type of psalm recounts how God has delivered someone from a past distress and how God is to be praised for this. This type of psalm has a fivefold structure as Stuart reflects (p. 472) and can be graphically viewed in this manner:
**Structure of Thanksgiving Psalm**  
*Jonah 2*

Introduction to the psalm  
v. 2 (Heb. v. 3)

Description of past distress  
vv. 3–6a (4–7a)

Appeal to God for help  
v. 7 (8)

Reference to the rescue God provided  
v. 6b (7b)

Vow of praise and/or testimonial  
vv. 8–9 (9–10)

Because of the reversal of v. 7 and v. 6b, we will combine these into one item. As such, we can break this psalms down into four units: introductory summary, v. 2; review of the distress, vv. 3–6a; report of deliverance, vv. 6b–7; and finally a promise of praise in worship and obedience, vv. 8–9. Since v. 1 is a narrative introduction, it is not part of the poem itself.

1) **Narrative introduction, v. 1**

   According to this verse, Jonah prays from the belly of the fish. The hithpael verb,  
Pālal, is also used in only one other place in Jonah, 4:2. In this latter context the term is not used to show intercession but to show a conversing with God. In light of the following poem, Jonah is not praying to be delivered from “the belly of the fish,” but he is thanking God for delivering him from “the womb of Sheol,” v. 2, via the fish (Kohlenberger, 45).

2) **Introductory summary, v. 2**

   In this verse Jonah summarizes the deliverance for which he is praising God.

   Since this is poetry, we should expect the ideas to overlap as the following reflects (Kohlenberger, p. 47):

   ```
   In my distress // from the depths of the grave (=Sheol)
   I called to Yahweh // I called for help
   and He answered me // and you listened to my cry
   ```

   By this quick comparison we should notice that “in my distress” is tantamount to being delivered “from the depths of the grave.” The term grave is a translation of the Hebrew word Sheol which in this context is best taken with the NIV as “grave” as opposed to the KJV’s “hell.” A parallel text with this is Psalm 18:5-6, especially with the use of “distress” in v. 6. Some have taken this to mean that Jonah died and was resurrected in light of Matthew 12:40; however, all Matthew 12:40 demands is that Jonah was in the belly of the fish 3 days and 3 nights. In our text in Jonah the parallelism indicates that Jonah was close to death. Whether we want to take this as “grave” where the bodies are buried or as “Sheol” where the dead continuously exist, “Jonah’s point is that he was saved from certain death” (Kohlenberger, p. 48).

3) **Review of the distress, vv. 3–6a**

   In these verses Jonah looks back over the distress from which Yahweh had delivered him.

   a) Verse 3 shows that Jonah was at the point of death while he was in the sea. We
should notice that Jonah recognized that Yahweh was ultimately responsible for this: “You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.” Jonah apparently comes to grips with his God who is the author of life by acknowledging Yahweh’s sovereign control. Jonah does not say “the sailors hurled him into the sea,” but that “Yahweh hurled me into the deep.” In a similar vein, Martin Luther said: “Jonah does not say the waves and the billows of the sea went over me; but thy waves and thy billows, because he felt in his conscience that the sea with its waves and billows was the servant of God and of His wrath, to punish sin” (cited by Keil, The Minor Prophets, 2:401).

In this verse “the deep” is parallel with “the heart of the seas.” We should also notice how this picture is intensified for the “currents,” parallel with “waves and breakers,” swarmed over Jonah.

b) Verse 4 reflects Jonah’s hope in the midst of a desperate situation: “I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.’” Jonah was almost a goner; however, “yet I” in the middle of the verse reflects a turning point. In the midst of his distress Jonah was confident that Yahweh would deliver him. His saying that he would again look on the Temple in Jerusalem expresses this. Though we see the depth of Jonah’s despair, we convincingly see the height of his hope (Page, p. 247). As such, this verse reflects some type of change in Jonah’s attitude, as Allen reflects with this: “He is soon to demonstrate a willing spirit by accepting the commission he formerly had rejected. In line with this change of heart, even now in this testimony to God’s grace he looks forward to seeking the special presence of God to offer his praise” (Jonah, p. 217).

c) Verses 5–6 give greater detail of Jonah drowning at sea. Verse 5 even describes how seaweed was wrapped about his head. Verse 6 has a downward spiral. This pictures Jonah sinking deep into the water. Through poetic language such as going down to the bottoms of the mountains, he is saying I could not go any lower than this. In v. 6 “the roots of the mountains” appear to be a reference to the base of the mountains. Though this is only used here in the Old Testament, it is used in a manner consistent with this in Ecclesiasticus 16:19.

A more difficult phrase to interpret is “the earth beneath barred me in forever.” The Hebrew term “earth” is used here in connection with “the underworld.” Jonah pictures the underworld as an Israelite city “having a gate which was locked secure by bolts and bars: there could be no escaping from it. Once in Sheol, Jonah would be imprisoned there for ever” (Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 116). The point is that Jonah has gone as close to death as possible and when he “can sink no lower, the Lord intervenes and raises him upward” (ibid.).

4) Report of Deliverance, vv. 6b–7

“But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. 7 When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” The “but” that begins v. 6b marks a contrast with preceding material:
The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever.” As Jonah was losing consciousness in the water, he prayed to the Lord and not to any other god. Although Jonah had disobeyed God, he had not turned to another god, but rather reflects a strong confidence that his God would respond to his prayer.

5) Promise of Praise in Worship and Obedience, vv. 8–9

a) A promise of praise in worship, vv. 8–9a
   Two facts are involved in vv. 8–9 about Jonah’s worship.
   
i) Though disobedient, Jonah remained loyal to Yahweh, v. 8.
   He did not turn away to another god, “worthless idols.” This expression literally translated “lying vanities” is used to denote idols in Deuteronomy 32:21.

   ii) When Jonah was delivered out of his predicament, he would worship the LORD with a sacrifice and a song of thanksgiving, v. 9a.

b) A promise of obedience, v. 9b
   Jonah will preach to Nineveh.

c) Concluding praise, v. 9c
   God’s deliverance of Jonah.

c. Yahweh Returns Jonah to the Land, 2:10
   When Yahweh commands the fish to release Jonah, he vomited Jonah on dry land. This may have been Palestine. Some have conjectured that Jonah was returned close to Joppa; but whatever the case may be, this is one of the highlights for Jonah, at least from this episode of his life.

B. God Sends His Reluctant Prophet to Nineveh, 3:1–4:11
   As was noted earlier, the last two chapters of Jonah are parallel with the first two. This can be divided into two sections: the Ninevites respond to Jonah’s message, 3:1–10, and Jonah is corrected for his reaction to God’s postponed judgment on Nineveh, 4:1–11.

   In chapter 3 we will look at the proclamation of the message of judgment (vv. 1–4), the response to the message of judgment (vv. 5–9), and the consequence from their response to the message of judgment (v. 10).

      In these four verses, we will divide this into three units: the preacher of the message, vv. 1–2; the recipients of the message, v. 3; and the content of the message, v. 4.
1) The preacher of the message, vv. 1–2
    Jonah is recommissioned for the second time to go and preach to Nineveh.

2) The recipients of the message, v. 3
    The recipients are the inhabitants of Nineveh. Jonah gives us some information about the size of the city. There are two aspects of this verse that we need to consider.

a) Nineveh was an important city from God’s perspective.
   NIV: “a visit that required three days”
   NASB: “an exceedingly great city”
   KJV: “an exceeding great city”

   The word “exceeding” is a translation of a Hebrew expression לֶלֹהִים, “to God.” The term for God is sometimes translated as an adjective, as in Genesis 23:6, 30:8. However, here, there is a difference since the preposition ל, “to,” is placed before God. The idea in this verse is that Nineveh is a great city “in God’s estimation” (so Walton, *Jonah*, pp. 36–37); and, perhaps, in this sense, it is an “exceeding” great city.

b) Nineveh was an important city from the size of the city.
   NIV: “a visit required three days”
   NASB: “three days’ walk”
   KJV: “three days’ journey”

   Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.) wrote how he enlarged Nineveh’s circumference from 3 miles to 7 miles. This was half a century to a century after Jonah’s time. This is certainly not a three days’ journey. How do we explain this?

i) NIV hints at a different solution, viz., it would take Jonah three days to go all the way through the city. This means that Jonah would take three days in his preaching assignment. If this suggestion is correct, Jonah probably went to Nineveh’s 12 or 14 gates, to the palace, and the temple court and at each spot delivered his message. This has also been supported by Nehemiah 2:6 (see Walton, *Jonah*, p. 39). The problem with this understanding in Jonah 3:3 is that it is a reference to the size of the city and not to the time it would take to carry on a preaching itinerary (Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 57).

ii) If this includes the suburbs, as Wiseman suggests, then this is about a fifty-five mile trip (which would include Assur, Kalah, and Dur-Sharruken, see Wiseman’s survey [“Jonah’s Nineveh,” pp. 29–51). A reference to Nineveh in Genesis 10:11–12 may support this interpretation (Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 57–58).

3) The content of the message, v. 4
    Within 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed. We should notice that the message is brief and if this is an accurate summation, then he does not announce any hope of deliverance.
b. The Response to the Message of Judgment Is One of Repentance, vv. 5–9.

There are two responses we need to notice here: the people’s, v. 5, and the king’s, vv. 6–9.

1) The People’s Response, v. 5

a) They believed God.

This may reflect that they were genuinely saved or that they genuinely believed that God was going to destroy Nineveh. To more fully appreciate this tension, we need to consider what does it mean to believe God? In the Hebrew text, this may be translated as “they believed God” (so NIV, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV) or “they believed in God” (so NASB and NASB ’95). According to Walton, the translation in NASB may suggest that the translators understood that the Ninevites had genuine saving faith (see Walton, Jonah, p. 47). However, the translation of most versions (“they believed God”) suggests that they accepted the content of Jonah’s message (ibid.). For example, it is used in Genesis 15:6 (“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness”). In this context, Abraham believes the content of the message God gave about the Abrahamic Covenant; however, Abraham had “believed in God” when he left Ur of the Chaldeans (see Heb 11). However, since some take that this passage, as reflecting Abraham’s genuine saving faith, we need to look at some other passages. With our examination of these passages, let me confess that I am not fully convinced that the differences between “believed in God” and “believed God,” are as clearly defined as Walton suggests. However, his skepticism about the Ninevites having genuine saving faith is valid. I am convinced that by looking at the context of a few passages we can establish that he has a valid skepticism about the Ninevites.

Exodus 14:31: “when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant”—this context indicates that Israel believed God in response to His miraculous show of might when they crossed the Red Sea. We might conclude that they were genuinely saved at this point. However, please notice

Numbers 14:11: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?’”—this context indicates that they did not savingly believe in God. Which is it? Were they saved or were they not? Let’s look at a New Testament commentary.

Jude 5: “Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe”—the Israelites who left Egypt were not genuinely saved. They are placed in a context with the fallen angels and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.
Therefore, we can only tell if faith is unto salvation from the context, so let’s notice the remainder of this verse where…

b) They proclaimed a fast.

Apparently all the people of Nineveh were involved with this fast.

We might initially conclude that this means that they were genuinely saved since it is often incorrectly assumed that the use of sackcloth and ashes denotes a genuine repentance unto salvation. Let’s look at 1 Kings 21:21–27:

[Elijah answered with the LORD’s word.] “I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. 22 I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.”

And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: “Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.”

24 Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country.

25 (There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. 26 He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)

27 When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

God had announced how Ahab would be judged. In response to this, Ahab goes through a ritual of repentance in v. 27 and God spares him as vv. 28–29 indicate.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 29 “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.”

Does this mean that Ahab was saved? Verses 25–26 suggest that Ahab was not saved, since these verses are the editorial remarks by the author of Kings. In addition, notice how he responds to the prophecy of Micaiah in 22:26–28.

The king of Israel [Ahab] then ordered, “Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king’s son 27 and say, ‘This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.’” 28Micaiah declared, “If you ever return safely, the LORD has not spoken through me.” Then he added, “Mark my words, all you people!”
Ahab was not a saved man! So an outward display of repentance does not necessarily show genuine salvation.

Let me give you three reasons why I am skeptical about declaring this a great evangelistic campaign.

i) Lack of content. We can only tell genuine salvation from the content of a passage. The emphasis here is on judgment. We do not know that he preached or someone else preached turn to the God of the Hebrews. Some will point to Matthew 12:41 and say that the use of the Greek term for repentance, μετανοεῖν, demands repentance unto salvation. I do not know that Jesus’ words demand this. I do agree that the people exhibited a genuine repentance, they set aside their wickedness to avoid judgment; but the issue is this: did they express an unreserved trust in the one and only God of the universe? I do not feel that we have enough information to say that this was genuine repentance unto salvation.

ii) Historically. We have an extensive set of records known as Assyrian eponym list. These records were kept at the request and dictation of the king and his leaders. What is interesting is that there is no record from the middle of eight century expressing that they change to serving the God of Hebrews. Some archaeologists have suggested that there is a swing to monotheism in some archaeological evidence. I was able to find the text that this is based on. Here is how it reads: “Trust in Nabu, only trust in him.” To me this is not necessarily a swing to monotheism but it could also represent henotheism; however, more than this, we have the wrong god! So historically this is questionable.

iii) Theologically. It is my understanding of the Old Testament at this time that the expression of one’s faith was intricately tied to the Jewish sacrificial system. Is it not strange that neither in the Bible nor the Assyrian eponym list that we see any records of the Ninevites coming to Palestine for purposes of worship? Furthermore, this fits in well with the period that Israel was living. In about 30 to 40 years God was going to eliminate the Northern Kingdom of Israel to whom Jonah was a prophet. The theological point is that if Nineveh showed this real concern to deliver them from God’s judgment, should not Israel do likewise! If Israel had done this, God would have spared them.

2) The King’s Response, vv. 6–9
The response of the king as well as of his nobles reflects that he took Jonah’s message seriously. This is shown by his act of humiliation (v. 6) and his giving a decree for the citizens of Nineveh to do likewise (vv. 7–9).

a) He humbled himself, v. 6.
The king of Nineveh was probably either Shalmaneser IV (783/82–773/72) or Ashurdan III (772/71–755/54) (see Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 78). “Though Nineveh did not become capital of the Assyrian Empire until some time in the reign of Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.), some of her kings did reside there”
(Hannah, “Jonah,” p. 1469). At this time Assyria was in a weakened state. They had decreased the number of military campaigns against foreign nations and the Assyrian Empire had a number of internal rebellions (Alexander, “Jonah,” p. 80). Thus, “the designation ‘king of Nineveh’ may reflect accurately the political situation which existed at the time of Jonah’s mission: at this stage the Assyrian king exercised absolute control over a very limited region centred on Nineveh—hence the designation ‘king of Nineveh’” (ibid., p. 60).

The king of Nineveh went through a ritual of repentance by putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes.

b) He issued a decree, vv. 7–9.
The king and his nobles issued a decree that everyone including animals were to put on outward symbols of repentance, sackcloth and ashes. They were also commanded to forsake their evil ways.

c. The Consequence from their Response to the Message of Judgment Is God’s Deliverance of Nineveh, v. 10.
When Yahweh sees their deeds, he relents concerning his announced destruction. The KJV translates the Hebrew verb nāḥēm as “repent.” Since Numbers 23:19 indicates that God cannot change His mind (“God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?”), it is probably better to translate this as “relent” or “have compassion.” God never changes His will but His will may include changes (see Erickson, Systematic Theology, 1:279).

2. Jonah Is Corrected for His Reaction to God’s Postponed Judgment on Nineveh, 4:1–11.
As we noted above, this last chapter corresponds to chapter 2. Chapter 4 represents an ironic turn, however. Jonah was glad about his deliverance in chapter 2 but in this chapter he is angry because of Nineveh’s deliverance.

In these four verses, we will divide this into two units: the complaint is stated in Jonah’s prayer in vv. 1–3 and the complaint is challenged by God’s question in v. 4.

1) The Complaint Is Reflected by Jonah’s Angry Prayer, vv. 1–3.
In these three verses, we should notice, Jonah’s anger in v. 1 and his prayer reflecting anger in vv. 2–3.

a) Jonah’s Anger, v. 1
In this verse Jonah’s anger is clearly stated.

b) Jonah’s Prayer Reflecting Anger, vv. 2–3

i) His prayer describes God and his situation, v. 2.
This verse reflects that Jonah is upset because he knew that God would spare Nineveh if they repented. The wording of this passage is very similar to Exodus 34:6–7, “And he [Yahweh] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming,
‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.’” An abbreviated form of this is given in Numbers 14:18 where Moses prays on behalf of rebellious Israel. What is significant here is that Jonah knew these theological affirmations about God’s compassion since this had been demonstrated to his Israelite ancestors.

Why should it bother Jonah so much if God spares Nineveh? Possibly Jonah is upset because they were Assyrians. Jonah was familiar with the extreme cruelty for which the Assyrians had become well known. In this regard, perhaps some prophecies have already been given orally dealing with how Assyria was going to attack and destroy Israel (though written a little latter than Jonah, see Hosea 9:3; 10:6). He may have also been upset because he preached judgment and God was not going to bring that to pass. He may also have been upset because he knew that they were not going to become genuine monotheist. They would never make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to genuinely worship the true God of heaven and earth.

ii) His prayer contains a request to God, v. 3.
Jonah is so distressed, he requests that God take his life. This same request he makes again in v. 8 over the loss of his gourd. This is somewhat reminiscent of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4 where he preferred death to life.

God questions Jonah about his right to this type of prayer. God is challenging Jonah’s anger. When Jonah expresses this same type of anger in v. 8 over the loss of his gourd, God repeats this same question in v. 9, “Have you any right to be angry?”

b. The Lesson Focuses on God’s Sovereign Right in Showing Compassion, vv. 5–11.
This can be divided in a twofold manner: the object lesson, vv. 5–8 and its application, vv. 9–11.

1) The Object Lesson, vv. 5–8
We will initially examine this object lesson in a verse by verse fashion. This will then be followed by an examination of significance of the object lesson.

a) Jonah moves east of the city to observe what happens, v. 5.
During this period of time he built a shelter to protect him from the heat. The term translated as “shelter” is used of the temporary shelters that the Israelites built when they were being instructed by Yahweh in the wilderness (Lev 23:42–43).

b) Yahweh provides a vine to give Jonah relief from the heat, v. 6.
The term translated as “vine,” qîqâyôn, has been variously interpreted. It has been taken as “vine,” “ivy,” “castor-oil plant,” “plant,” or “gourd” (Alexander, “Jonah,” pp. 128–29). “Of these various alternatives, the weight of evidence
seems to favor a climbing plant, probably a type of gourd. When the leaves on Jonah’s shelter withered in the hot sun, a climbing gourd would have provided a fresh covering leaves, giving him renewed protection. The fact that the qâdâyôn was destroyed by a worm suggests that the stem of the plant must have been supple, that of a gourd” (ibid., p. 129).

c) At dawn the following day, Yahweh ordained a worm to eat the climbing gourd, v. 7.
The gourd had given Jonah one day of relief; it was just enough for him to appreciate the deliverance it provided.

d) When the sun rose, God appointed a strong east wind, v. 8.
Not only would Jonah have to face the heat; but also God ordained a strong east wind. “This wind may have been that sort called elsewhere the sirocco, i.e., constant hot air so full of positive ions that it affects the levels of serotonin and other brain neurotransmitters, causing exhaustion, depression, feelings of unreality, and, occasionally, bizarre behavior. In some Moslem countries, the punishment for a crime committed while the sirocco is blowing may be reduced at judicial discretion, so strongly does the prolonged hot wind affect thinking and actions” (Stuart, pp. 505–6).

e) To assist in understanding the significance of this object lesson, Walton has noted these comparisons (“Object Lesson,” p. 49).

i) The word translated as “discomfort” in v. 6 is the same Hebrew term translated as “destruction” in 3:10, rāâ. In 3:10 Nineveh’s “destruction” (rāâ) was the coming judgment and in this verse Jonah’s “discomfort” (rāâ) was the heat.

ii) For protection from judgment Nineveh repented and for his protection Jonah built a hut. Neither of these provided sufficient enough protection from the rāâ.

iii) For sufficient protection God had to respond to Nineveh by withholding their judgment; for Jonah to have adequate protection it was necessary for Yahweh to provide Jonah with a gourd.

iv) This is where God makes His point to Jonah with the object lesson. God did not continue to honor Jonah’s divinely provided protection, He removed the plant in a night. From Jonah’s perspective, he thought this was unfair since he states that he had the right to be angry. Jonah’s perspective is not the issue; it is God’s perspective that is the issue. God is stressing that it is His right as the Sovereign who has created and sustains everything to show compassion on whomever He chooses. This is part of God’s freedom as God.

We should notice here how God has created a situation in which to place Jonah to parallel that of Nineveh.
2) The Application, vv. 9–11
In these verses, God questions Jonah (v. 9a) and to this Jonah responds (v. 9b). God finally makes the application in vv. 10–11.

a) God’s question, v. 9a
God questions Jonah as to whether or not he had the right to be angry. This is basically the same question that God had asked Jonah in v. 4.

b) Jonah’s response, v. 9b
Jonah emphatically responds that he has the right to be angry even unto death. This is the same basic response that Jonah had in v. 3.

c) God’s application, vv. 10–11
To see the point about God’s freedom in showing “concern,” or “compassion,” we should notice the double use of "עָנָּא", to show “compassion” or “concern,” in vv. 10–11.

But the LORD said, “You have been concerned (עָנָּא) about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned (עָנָּא) about that great city?”

In these two verses, God drives home His point. Jonah had “concern”/”compassion” on a gourd over which he did not work. He thought it was unfair to remove God’s gracious provision. Should he not feel the same way toward Nineveh if God did not withhold judgment? We should notice Jonah’s inconsistency at this point. God had raised up and used the gourd to protect Jonah and when God took it away then Jonah became angry. If God would not graciously continue His protection of Nineveh from judgment, would Jonah become angry with that?

God has established in the OT that he responds to repentance over judgment. He did with Ahab in 1 Kings 21:21–27. By implication this may have been an example for the Northern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom was going to be judged about 30 to 40 years from Jonah’s time. If God had spared, had compassion toward (עָנָּא), a pagan nation when they repented at a message of judgment, how much more so would he not respond to Israel if they would repent. God wanted to use this as an example of how He responds to repentance. God’s freedom in showing compassion was His right as the Sovereign Creator.

III. Theological Analysis of the Book of Jonah

Three areas of Biblical Theology need to be briefly presented.

A. Understanding Biblical Theology
Before we discuss the biblical theology of the book of Jonah, we initially need to be introduced to this subject. With this introduction, we will look at biblical theology’s
definition, method, and center.

1. Definition of Biblical Theology

Biblical Theology is that discipline which seeks to systematically present the message of the books of the Bible as given by the original authors in their historical milieu.

a. Biblical Theology is a descriptive discipline.

Since it is descriptive, its rubrics are derived from the biblical material that it is treating. Systematic Theology presents its material in certain prescribed categories such as Bibliology, Eschatology, etc. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with this approach since it is a vital part of theological education. However, by the descriptive nature of Biblical Theology, the rubrics are derived from the biblical material under consideration.

b. Biblical Theology presents divine truth in a systematic form.

This is not the same as Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology gathers all the truth contained in the Bible on a given subject and presents this material in an organized manner. The biblical theologian gathers all the material on a given subject from a given period or from a given writer and then presents it in an organized manner.

c. Biblical Theology is a historical discipline.

Biblical Theology deals with examining and classifying the inspired writings from a given period of time or from a specific biblical author. By the nature of being historical, it will treat historical issues that generated a book, historical conditions that the author faced, etc. Because of its historical perspective, it will also attempt to treat Scripture from the perspective of progressive revelation. This is to say that it is a diachronic approach.

2. The Method of Biblical Theology

There are two ways that I feel comfortable with when we approach the methodology for doing Biblical Theology in the Old Testament.

a. Broad Old Testament Rubrics

From the material of the Old Testament itself we could set up certain OT categories such as God, man, God’s relationship to man, etc. With these topics we could then trace the development of each of these in a progressive fashion. This is essentially the approach of J. Barton Payne.

b. Progressive Periods of Revelation

The Old Testament could also be examined from the perspective of the progressive periods of revelation found in the Bible. This could include the following periods: Pre-Mosaic, Mosaic, Premonarchical, United Monarchy, Disrupted Monarchy, Eighth Century Prophecy, Seventh Century Prophecy, Exilic, and Postexilic. In each of these periods, one would then seek to synthesize the biblical material found in that era. Vos made an attempt to do this and Kaiser attempted to trace his promise theme through this diachronic approach. One could also look at the progressive nature of revelation.
in three rubrics: Law, Prophets (this would included the Former and Latter prophets), and Wisdom. This was the approach of Oehler.

3. The Mitte of Biblical Theology

When one attempts to set forth what is the center of Biblical Theology, he is moving into a highly debated field. The reason for this is that many attempts are so general that they can apply to any religious body of material. These include suggestions such as God, God and Man. Others are too myopic such as promise, God’s covenant, and God’s sovereignty. One must have a statement that is comprehensive enough to cover the whole canon, yet precise enough that we do not lose sight of the message of our canon. In agreement with other dispensational theologians, I would define the center of biblical theology in this fashion: God’s purpose in creation is to glorify Himself by establishing His kingdom or rule over all that He has created, thus bringing all His creation, through the work of His Son, into absolute submission to His sovereign rule.

B. Summation of the Message of the Book of Jonah

God instructs His people that as sovereign Creator, He has the right to show His compassion by delivering those who repent in response to His message of judgment and, consequently, His servants must submit obediently to Him.

C. The Biblical Theology of the Book of Jonah

In this brief synopsis of Jonah’s theology, we will consider what Jonah had to say about God, God’s word, sin, and man’s response to God.

1. God

The center of Jonah’s theology is Yahweh. Jonah presents Yahweh as being a sovereign ruler of the world. Yahweh is further presented as becoming angry on account of sin and as being gracious and compassionate.

a. Yahweh is presented in Jonah as being a sovereign ruler of the world. This is reflected when Jonah informs the sailors that God made the sea and dry land (1:9–10). God’s role as Creator is also implied in 4:10–11 when He informs Jonah that He has a right to have compassion on Nineveh. God also created the storm at sea (1:4) and also calmed it (1:15). He ordained the fish (1:17), climbing gourd (4:6), worm (4:7), and strong east wind (4:8). His sovereign design relates to even the mightiest of pagan cities (3:3).

b. Yahweh’s anger over Nineveh’s sin results in the prophetic oracle of judgment (1:2, 3:4).

c. Jonah recognizes that Yahweh is a compassionate God (4:2). Yahweh’s compassionate nature is expressed in His positive response to Nineveh’s repentance (4:5–7; 10–11). Not only was God’s compassion extended to Nineveh, but it was also demonstrated to the sailors (1:15) and to Jonah (2:9). God’s freedom to act in compassion appears to be the major theological emphasis of Jonah. As omnipotent, God is free to do whatever He chooses. However, God is not powerful enough to make a choice to sin. God’s use of power is always consistent with His being and
plan. Since God has no deficiencies, there is nothing external to Him that can influence Him to do anything. Scripture teaches that God chooses to do everything according to His good pleasure (Eph 1:5, 9; Phil 2:13). In Nineveh’s situation, God chose to spare Nineveh because this was what He was pleased to do, irrespective of Jonah’s desires.

2. God’s Word
When Jonah mentions, “the word of Yahweh came” to him (1:1; 3:1), this is a way of saying that God communicated his word, revelation, to Jonah. His book is God’s word, special revelation from God, as a result of divine inspiration.

3. Sin
The reason why God is prepared act as judge in Jonah is Nineveh’s wickedness (1:2). Jonah’s sinful actions are also deserving of divine wrath.

4. Man’s Response to God
This book also teaches how man should respond to God. With Yahweh’s display of might in chapter 1, the pagan sailors did homage to Yahweh. Though the Ninevites may not have been genuinely saved, we do see that their repentance was enough to postpone judgment.

As far as believers are concerned, Jonah does reflect the type of responses that believers should avoid. When God’s will is clear, we should not run away from this. Jonah disobeyed Yahweh and it almost cost him his life. In fact, the final chapter of Jonah also reflects that we should have a willing acceptance of what God does even when it is not what we want. If Jonah is responsible for this book, we should assume that he got this point. We must obediently submit to God.
Appendix 1: A Great Evangelistic Meeting or a Great God: The Message of Jonah

The book of Jonah is one of the more memorable books of the Old Testament. But what is it about this book that makes it so memorable? For some, Jonah is memorable because the story of a fish swallowing a Jewish prophet and then regurgitating this acidic prophet alive three days later is incredulous. According to this interpretative pattern, this type of “fish story” shows that the book of Jonah is fictional. However, because Christ connects his own death and resurrection with Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, those with a high view of Scripture find these types of interpretations unacceptable. In contrast to any type of fictitious fish, others find Jonah memorable because Jonah “is the great missionary book of the Old Testament.” As a “missionary” book, Jonah is, on a popular level, considered to present “the greatest evangelistic harvest in history.” This type of interpretation is expressed in a devotional source with surprising detail: “Everyone in Nineveh believed in God. If there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents...then how much joy was there when 500,000 or more repented that day in Nineveh? What a wonderful, joyous day that was in Heaven...as it was in Nineveh.”

Does the overall message of Jonah primarily focus on “the greatest evangelistic harvest in history”?

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1This is my paper from the Mid-America Conference on Preaching (October 17–18, 2002), pp. 191–203


6Alexander (Jonah, pp. 81–91) has classified the various interpretative slants dealing with the major purpose of the book of Jonah into these four categories: a message about repentance, unfulfilled prophecy, Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles and theodicy. He has classified the missionary approach as a sub-category of the message about Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles (pp. 85–88).


8This devotional may be accessed over the internet at this address: http://www.ebread.org/Free_email_lessons_A_free_of/Archived_lessons/Jonah_4/jonah_4.html, par. 2; another devotional has Jonah’s title as “Responsible Evangelism” and theme as “learning the proper motive for evangelism,” available at http://members.tripod.com/mikelunabeard/Bible/OldTestament/introduction_to_the_minor_prophets.html#Themes, see chart entitled Themes of the Minor Prophets.
history”? If this is an accurate assessment of Jonah’s message, why was Jonah 4 used as the conclusion to this book? A conclusion at the end of Jonah 3 would have well served any of Jonah’s reputed evangelistic concerns. With this approach, Jonah 4 is an unnecessary appendix. Anyone familiar with exegetical commentaries written in the last century should recognize that the type of observation made by Wiersbe and others is somewhat “evangelistic!” Looking past this type of overstatement, a more palatable assessment has been the correlation of this evangelistic assessment with a broader understanding of the book’s message that has provided some level of compatibility with Jonah 4. Based on Alexander’s classification, this type of evangelistic view of Jonah is a sub-category of a broader category that focuses on correcting Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles—more broadly described as a “missionary or universalistic” view. With this missionary category, Jonah is typically understood as representing a bigoted Jewish attitude toward God’s missionary program for Gentiles. The point of the book is then to correct Jonah and this type of Jewish hostility toward Gentiles by fulfilling God’s program for missions. However, this missionary view does not adequately explain Jonah’s desire to spare the Gentile sailors in chapter 1, as contrasted with his hostility toward the Ninevites in Jonah 4. Furthermore, as we read the book it is readily apparent from 4:2 that Jonah on a general level does not object to God being a merciful and forgiving God; rather, his objection is to the specific recipients of God’s mercy, the Ninevites. Furthermore, this view does not clearly explain God’s correction of Jonah in chapter 4. Consequently, the missionary category, along with its evangelistic sub-category, cannot correlate all the details of the book of Jonah.

A perusal of the entire book reveals that the real object of the book is God. More specifically, because the climactic point of this book is found in 4:1–11 with its focus on God’s compassion, the theological emphasis of the book is on the sovereign freedom of our great God in showing his compassion to whomever he pleases. Initially we will begin by looking at Jonah’s presentation of God as sovereign.

**GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH**

The word sovereign describes one who has supreme power or authority, as would be the case with a monarch or ruler. In contrast to human rulers with their finite limitations, a ruler who is infinite (not being subject to any external limitation) has absolute supremacy over all his created realm. In simplified form, divine sovereignty focuses on “God’s rule and authority over all things.” God’s sovereignty is explicitly and implicitly taught in the book of Jonah. In 1:2

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and 4:10–11 the Lord had the opening and closing words in this book. According to Jonah in 1:9–10, the God of heaven created the sea and dry land. God’s creation of the world informs mankind that He is their absolute sovereign ruler. In Jonah 1:1–2 and 3:1–2, it was the Lord who delivered his message to Jonah. It was the Lord, in 1:4, who sent the violent storm at sea. With all their options for survival cut off, the sailors affirm God’s absolute sovereignty in 1:14: “for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased.” While the sailors threw Jonah overboard (1:15), Jonah attributes the same thing to the Lord in 2:3: “For You had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me.” In response to God’s command, the great fish in 2:10 regurgitates the bitter-tasting prophet onto dry land. It was also the LORD who “appointed” (manah) the great fish in 1:17, a “plant” in 4:6, a “worm” in 4:7, and a “scorching east wind” in 4:8. God’s sovereignty includes his right to judge the mightiest of pagan cities in 3:4 and it is also his sovereign right to have mercy in 4:9–11. His sovereign control over Nineveh in 4:10–11 also implies his providential rule over all. God’s sovereignty is clearly taught throughout the entire book of Jonah.

GOD’S SOVEREIGN FREEDOM IN SHOWING COMPASSION

God’s sovereign freedom in demonstrating compassion is the major emphasis of this book. Jonah recognized in 4:2 the goodness of God in demonstrating his compassion: Jonah “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 You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.’” The fact that God sent a prophet to warn Nineveh of its coming judgment in 3:1–4 is an element of his compassion. The LORD’s compassion is further expressed in His positive response to Nineveh’s repentance (4:5–7; 10–11). Not only was God’s compassion extended to Nineveh, but it was also demonstrated to the sailors (1:15) and to Jonah (2:9).

With a focal point in Jonah being on the Ninevites, God’s compassion is demonstrated by

15All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 1995 edition of NASB.


17For a fuller discussion of God’s sovereignty in the Old Testament, see my other paper from this conference: “The emboldening effects of God’s sovereignty on Old Testament messengers.”

18On divine and human freedom, see John M. Frame, The Doctrine of God (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), pp. 233–36; pp. 61–64, 135–38; and Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 216; pp. 330–31, 497–98. In the perfections of being and predestination, the God of the Bible is not in any sense contingent on anything external to the triune God. Freedom refers to one’s ability to choose and carry out his inclinations. God has always planned and acted in accordance with the perfections of his nature and plan. Nothing external to God inclines or influences his will. In a createdly sense, man, like God, chooses according to his plans and desires. However, man’s freedom has and always will be limited because it is the freedom of a creature and not the Creator. From Gen 3 onward, human freedom has also been radically corrupted because of the Fall. Therefore, there can be no such thing as absolute autonomous freedom for mankind. Humanity always chooses according to their own createdly and radically corrupt inclinations; however, the triune God always chooses according to his infinite perfections and plan. Furthermore, unlike God, man in his freedom cannot consistently accomplish his plans and desires. God in his sovereign freedom has and always will carry out his perfections and plans.
his delivering those who repented in response to his message of judgment. According to Jonah 4, God’s display of compassion on the Ninevites was his sovereign right and ultimately had nothing to do with any of his creature’s desires. This is the point of the object lesson in 4:5–8. To elucidate this point, we should note that 4:5–8 does not compare Jonah to Israel—as the missionary model requires, but rather compares Jonah to the Ninevites. These four verses reflect three points of comparison between Jonah and Nineveh, along with a significant contrast between Jonah and Nineveh. We will briefly develop these four items.

First, in the object lesson of 4:5–8, Jonah, like the Ninevites, is placed in a calamitous situation. The object lesson of these four verses is set up in 4:2–4. Based upon Exodus 34:6–7, Jonah recites a list of God’s attributes revolving around God’s compassionate and merciful nature. Jonah states in v. 2 that, because he knew God was a compassionate God, he originally fled to Tarshish.19 Jonah then prays in v. 3 that God would take his life: “Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” In response to this death wish, God asked Jonah, in v. 4, if he had a right to be angry about God’s compassion to Nineveh: “Do you have a right to be angry?”20 In order to show Jonah that he does not have a genuine right, “good reason,” to be angry, God places this reluctant prophet in a somewhat parallel position to the Ninevites. According to v. 5, Jonah traveled east of Nineveh and built a shelter to protect himself from the heat of the sun. Apparently, he was watching during the forty day period he had given the Ninevites to see if his announced destruction in 3:4 would be divinely executed against them. The heat was so intense that Jonah’s “shelter” was not sufficient enough to provide adequate protection. In v. 6 God appointed a plant to grow over Jonah to relieve him from the discomfort produced by the sun: “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 [ra’ah]. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.”

Second, Jonah had a response to his calamitous situation comparable to the Ninevites. For his protection Jonah built a shelter in 4:5: “There [east of Nineveh] he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.” For Nineveh’s protection from their calamity, they went through a rigorous ritual of repentance (3:5–8). So Jonah built a hut to protect himself from his calamity of heat and the Ninevites went through a ritual of repentance to protect themselves from their calamity of announced destruction. In each case, Jonah and the people of Nineveh actively responded to their respective calamities.22

Third, Jonah and Nineveh received comparable divine grace. In grace, God raised up a “vine” (4:6) as a source of protection for Jonah from his calamitous situation of heat, and God

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20I have modified NASB’s translation to clarify the thought of the Hebrew text.


graciously protected Nineveh by withholding their announced and rightfully deserved destruction. Both the vine and the withheld destruction are expressions of God’s compassionate provisions. Whether God in sovereign grace raises up a plant or in gracious mercy withholds judgment, God was at work in His gracious provisions.\(^{23}\)

Fourth, the analogous situation between Jonah and Nineveh is divinely aborted in 4:7–8: “But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up 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.’” With these two verses, God removes his gracious provision of the “plant” by appointing some sort of parasite, “worm,” to come up on the following day to destroy the plant. Furthermore, to guarantee that Jonah comprehends the removal of this form of divine grace from him, God sends a strong east wind to intensify Jonah’s misery from the heat. Because of the intensity of the heat, Jonah again expresses another death wish in v. 8. Jonah has now returned to the same state of mind as he had in v. 3; that is, he prays again for death because of his strong resentment to God’s display of his compassion. In v. 3 Jonah’s death wish related to God’s display of compassion toward the Ninevites; however, in v. 8 Jonah’s foolish prayer for death relates to God removing the compassion of his divinely appointed “plant.” The object lesson was sovereignly engineered to put Jonah into the proverbial sandals of the Ninevites. When God removed his compassionate plant from Jonah, he strongly resented it. However, this was exactly what Jonah wanted God to do when he desired that God immediately destroy Nineveh, rather than graciously witholding his destruction. In effect, “Jonah then received the very treatment he desired God to show Nineveh. Jonah wanted to negate the compassionate act of God’s grace toward Nineveh, so that is how God treated him.”\(^{24}\)

Thus, we have seen in 4:5–8 that God placed Jonah in an analogous situation to the people of Nineveh in order to demonstrate to Jonah that he did not have the right to be angry about the Ninevites as the recipients of God’s compassion (4:2–4). Jonah has reflected that he loves God’s compassion when he was able to choose its recipients, but he resents it when God sovereignly made the choice with which Jonah disagreed. How then does this interpretation of the object lesson equating Jonah with Nineveh correlate with the final three verses of this book?

**SUBMISSION TO GOD’S DISPLAY OF COMPASSION**

With almost identical wording as in 4:4, God returns to essentially the same question in v. 9: “Do you have a right to be angry about the plant?” God astutely questions Jonah “as to the rightness of the prophet’s anger, which in v. 4 clashed with Jonah’s conviction by inviting a negative reply, now cunningly elicits a positive reply”\(^{25}\) in v. 9b: “Yes, I have the right to be angry enough to die!”\(^{26}\)

Having elicited a clear expression of Jonah’s self-righteous anger, God resonantly

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\(^{23}\)Ibid.


\(^{26}\)As in 4:4, I have taken the liberty to translate this to communicate clearly that the issue in Jonah focuses on what properly belongs to God character as opposed to what does not legitimately belong to Jonah.
corrects Jonah in vv. 10–11: “Then the LORD said, ‘You had compassion [hus] on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion [hus] 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?’” In these verses God draws Jonah’s attention to an indisputable fact: Jonah neither raised the plant nor removed it. From the flow of the context, God unequivocally suggests that he, and not Jonah, was completely responsible for the plant. Therefore, Jonah had absolutely no right to be angry about God’s removal of his compassion—the plant. God in his grace raised up the plant just like in his gracious providence he was ultimately responsible for the existence of Nineveh. It was within God’s sovereign freedom to show compassion on a prophet by graciously raising up a plant to protect him, and it was also God’s sovereign right to show compassion on Nineveh by graciously withholding the prophesied judgment against them.

Since the book of Jonah ends in such an anticlimactic manner with no explicit statement about how Jonah responded to God’s message in 4:4–11, one might naively think that Jonah may not have gotten the point about God’s sovereign rights in showing compassion. If the message of the book of Jonah was to declare God’s sovereign freedom in showing compassion on whomever and whatever he pleases, then, Jonah, the one responsible for writing the book, had to understand the impact of 4:4–11. If he did not get the point, then authorial intent becomes irrelevant as a hermeneutical axiom. Though his various responses to God’s direct command to go to Nineveh reflect his struggle with accepting God’s sovereign freedom in displaying his compassion, Jonah eventually got the message and preserved it as inscripturated revelation. At the end of the day, Jonah submitted himself to God’s absolute sovereign rights in extending his compassion to whomever he desires.

THE RECIPIENTS OF GOD’S SOVEREIGN COMPASSION

If the overall message of Jonah is to demonstrate God’s sovereign freedom in showing compassion, then God’s compassion must be extended to more beneficiaries than simply the people of Nineveh since they only occupy the last half of Jonah. How then is God’s sovereign compassion distributed throughout the book of Jonah? Who then are the various recipients of God’s compassion in Jonah?

In Jonah 1:1–16, the pagan sailors were the recipients of God’s free display of compassion. In response to God’s command to go to Nineveh and to preach against the city in 1:2, Jonah’s initial response was one of direct disobedience. Rather than traveling toward Nineveh, Jonah chose to travel in the opposite direction to Tarshish. In a desire to extricate himself from his prophetic commitment, Jonah boarded a ship at Joppa that was headed west on the Mediterranean Sea. In the course of his voyage, God providentially sent an inescapable storm to encompass the boat on which Jonah was traveling. As the storm’s intensity increased, the sailors’ interrogation of Jonah led to his confession that he was culpable for this divinely-sent storm (1:6–12). Yet in the midst of Jonah’s disobedience, God used Jonah to extend the message about the majesty of his divine nature and work to a group of pagan sailors through the proclamation of his disobedient prophet in 1:9: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” During the tumultuous storm, the sailors were confronted by Jonah with a theological affirmation that his LORD, the God of heaven, created the

sea and dry land. Rather than Jonah’s God being a localized tribal deity residing in Jerusalem, Jonah’s theological declaration of God’s sovereign rule over all overwhelmed the “seasick” sailors with fear (1:10). When the storm had reached a climactic point and the sailors had no other escape from destruction, they accepted the recommendation of the disobedient prophet. Into the sea they threw him and “the sea stopped its raging” (1:15). The result of God’s undeniable display of omnipotent compassion was that the sailors worshiped the Lord (1:16). Thus, God used Jonah in his disobedience to powerfully display God’s sovereign freedom in demonstrating his compassion to pagan sailors.

There are two clear examples where God manifest his compassionate nature to Jonah. We have mentioned one example in 4:6. In this context, God demonstrated his compassion to Jonah by generating a “plant” designed to provide Jonah with “twenty-four hour” protection from the heat. The second example of God’s display of compassion toward Jonah is found in 1:17–2:10. Jonah’s thanksgiving hymn in 2:2–9 indicates that Jonah in some sense recognized God’s compassion toward him. When Jonah had been thrown overboard by the sailors and was in the process of drowning, a divinely appointed fish (1:17) swallowed Jonah, rescuing him from certain death. Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish during his three day and three night stay has been preserved in summary form in 2:2–9. Jonah’s prayer reviewed how God had delivered him from drowning (2:2–7) and expressed confidence that he would again worship the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem (2:4, 7). The fact that Jonah’s prayer has been preserved in the form of a thanksgiving poem indicates that Jonah at the minimum was thankful for being delivered from drowning and implies that he had some level of remorse for his disobedience. However, we should not think that Jonah’s thanksgiving poem indicated that he completely repented of his disobedience. Apparently, Jonah had some sorrow for not fulfilling his prophetic obligations, but he did not repent for his incorrect views about God’s sovereign freedom in showing compassion. While Jonah was thankful to be alive and learned that it was fruitless to run away from his prophetic commission, he resigned himself to this fact: “He was going to Nineveh one way or the other.”

While God had compassion on Jonah, it was not because Jonah deserved it but because God in his sovereign freedom showed compassion on a less than fully repentant prophet. In fact, from the beginning until the end of this book, Jonah himself is the major beneficiary of God’s sovereign compassion. Ortlund has well stated this very point: “Jonah is a marked man. God is after him. God loves him and intends to win him. The drama of the book consists primarily in God’s saving pursuit of Jonah. And Jonah must first experience his own disobedience and God’s salvation, in chapters 1–2, to give the Lord’s actions and arguments in chapters 3–4, especially his gracious persistence with Jonah, morally persuasive force.”

In this regard, God’s compassion with Jonah communicates something of his sovereign compassion toward his chosen people as he works salvifically in initiating, sustaining, and ultimately bringing his people to glorification.

Interpreters generally agree that the Ninevites play a key role as recipients of God’s sovereign display of compassion. If the point of the book of Jonah is to demonstrate God’s sovereign freedom in showing compassion to whomever he pleases, does this suggest that the Ninevites were genuinely converted in 3:5? It is my understanding that the object lesson of 4:5–8 indicates that the overall message of Jonah is not focused on what constitutes salvific repentance

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and faith. The focus of the book is on God’s right to show compassion to whomever and in whatever way he pleases, as he had done to pagan sailors in Jonah 1 and a disobedient prophet in Jonah 2 as well as briefly in 4:6. To state the issue in a question format: Is the divine compassion shown to Nineveh of a salvific and efficacious nature with eternal benefits? Or, is God’s compassion of a non-salvific and general nature with immediate temporal benefits? In my opinion, God’s compassion shown to the Ninevites is of a non-salvific and general nature that involves God withholding of the immediate destruction of Nineveh. Perhaps, as Walton argues, the analogy between Jonah’s constructed “shelter” in 4:5 and Nineveh’s repentance in 3:6–9 implies that God’s compassion was of a temporal nature.30 However, there is other evidence that should give some pause in declaring that Jonah 3:5 constitutes “the greatest evangelistic harvest in history.”

According to Jonah 3:5, “the people of Nineveh believed in God.”31 However, if we compare NASB’s translation (so also the 1978 edition of NASB and NET Bible) with the KJV, we should notice that the preposition “in” has been omitted: “the people of Nineveh believed God.” The NIV, NKJV, ESV, NLT, RSV, and NRSV are in agreement with the KJV. Why does KJV, NIV, NKJV, ESV, NLT, RSV, and NRSV omit the preposition “in,” while both editions of NASB and the NET Bible include it? This is a case where a literal translation as found in both editions of NASB and the NET Bible may obscure a point of Hebrew syntax. In Hebrew the verb, “believed” (he’emin), may govern its object, such as in this verse with “God,” with the preposition b (which at times is not translated and functions somewhat like a direct object marker; and at other times it is translated as “in” or with another English preposition). Whether b is translated as a preposition in English or is not translated depends on the context. As a general guideline, when a translation understands that this grammatical construction (the verb “believed” (he’emin) governing its object, “God,” or an equivalent, with the preposition b) may denote initial saving faith, this grammatical construction may be translated as “believed in God.” If the immediate context, or parallel contexts, suggest that this is believing (accepting as true) the content of a divine message, and not initiatory faith, it is preferable to translate this clause as “believed God.”

To demonstrate that this grammatical construction (when it is not describing initiatory faith) should not be translated with “in,” there are some examples we should note. Numbers 20:12 reads: “But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’” In Hebrew, the verb, “believed,” governs its object, “Me” [God], with the preposition b. Because the context is clear that Moses and Aaron did not take the message of God seriously, the preposition b is not translated. Another example is Exodus 14:31: “When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.” This context indicates that Israel believed God in response to His miraculous show of might when they crossed the Red Sea. The construction in this passage reflects that Israel had some form of genuine faith, just not genuine saving faith. However, in light of other biblical texts, Scripture is clear that their faith was not of a salvific and efficacious nature with eternal benefits. Therefore, I am convinced that it is preferable to translate this as “they believed the LORD.”

How do we know that these Israelites were not saved? Numbers 14:11 informs us about their unbelief: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long


31 In the next few paragraphs, the use of bold print is for my emphasis.
will they **not believe in Me**, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?*** In this context, God clearly indicates that they did not have a genuine salvific belief in Him, so NASB correctly translates its as “not believe in Me.” This interpretation about their unbelief is confirmed by Jude 5: “Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who **did not believe.**” As this context indicates, the Israelites who left Egypt were not genuinely saved, for they are placed in a context with the fallen angels and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah! How can Jude 5 and Exodus 14:31 be harmonized? In Exodus 14:31 the Israelites did have a genuine faith; that is, it was a non-salvific and general faith with only temporal benefits. Using Scripture as its own interpreter, it is clear that the faith of these Israelites was not of a salvific and efficacious nature with eternal benefits. As such, the collective group of Israelites who left Egypt, even those who placed “blood on their doorposts” to protect them from the angel of death, has been clearly described in other portions of Scripture as a group of unbelievers. Exodus 14:31 was one of those “Kodak” moments for advocates of easy believism.

Returning to the issue of Jonah 3:5, should we translate it “the people of Nineveh believed in God”? Or render it as, “the people of Nineveh believed God?” The issue comes down to whether or not Scripture clearly teaches that they were genuinely saved. Since I am questioning whether the Ninevites had genuine saving faith, I would prefer to translate Jonah 3:5 as “they believed God.”

However, there is another issue that must be addressed about their repentance. In Jonah 3:6–9 the Ninevites went through an elaborate ritual of repentance. All the citizens of Nineveh, along with their animals, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes, while they fasted. Furthermore, they put aside their wicked deeds and prayed to God for a merciful deliverance from their announced destruction. In my understanding, this is genuine repentance. However, someone can genuinely repent without being converted. In 1 Kings 21:20–29, Ahab is an example of someone who genuinely repented without being converted.

Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” And he answered, “I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the LORD.” 21‘Behold, I [the LORD’s word represented through Elijah] will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel; 22I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked Me to anger, and **because** you have made Israel sin.’”

23“Of Jezebel also has the LORD spoken, saying, ‘The dogs will eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel. 24The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs will eat, and the one who dies in the field the birds of heaven will eat.’”

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32For other statements of Israel’s unbelief, see Psalm 95:7–11 and its use in Hebrews 3:7–19. The Hebrews warning passage is explicit about Israel’s unbelief.

33In our current form of historic fundamentalism, we are saturated with pervasive form of easy believism that makes the path to heaven broad and the path to hell narrow. If our movement continues to reject an informed and militant position on issues such as total depravity, lordship salvation, perseverance of the saints, etc., we will show that our faith was no better than the faith of the Israelites who came out of Egypt. Ultimately, we may sell our birthright “in the faith” for “a single meal!”

(Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. He acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel.)

It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently.

God had announced how Ahab would be severely judged. In response to this, Ahab went through a ritual of repentance in v. 27. While some might contend that Ahab could not have genuinely repented because of his great wickedness, this would be a myopic understanding for God in some sense is moved by Ahab’s repentance, as vv. 28–29 indicate:

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

"Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days."

Because of what God says in vv. 28–29, I am convinced that we must say that Ahab reflected a genuine repentance over the message of judgment that Elijah preached. However, the writer of Kings’ remarks indicate that Ahab was unregenerate. To be sure, there are many examples in the Bible of genuine salvific repentance; however, there are also examples of genuine, non-salvific repentance. Thus Ahab had a genuine, non-salvific repentance, and the revelatory remarks by the author of Kings in vv. 25–26 suggests that Ahab’s repentance was not a repentance reflecting conversion. This assessment is further confirmed by Ahab’s response to the prophecy of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:26–28: “Then the king of Israel [Ahab] said, ‘Take Micaiah and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king’s son; and say, ‘Thus says the king: Put this man in prison and feed him sparingly with bread and water until I return safely.’”

Micaiah said, ‘If you indeed return safely the LORD has not spoken by me.’ And he said, ‘Listen, all you people.’” Ahab was not a saved man! Yet it is clear in 1 Kings 21:20–29, he did genuinely repent, but his was not a genuine repentance of conversion.

As we evaluate the significance Ahab’s genuine, non-salvific repentance with Nineveh’s repentance as well as what the overall message of Jonah demands, and more importantly, what it does not demand, the supposed mass evangelism campaign appears to be a superficial understanding of Jonah. There are three additional reasons for questioning that Nineveh reflected a genuine salvific repentance.

First, there is no incontrovertible Scriptural evidence to suggest that the Ninevites were genuinely converted. We can only tell genuine salvific repentance and faith by the immediate context of a passage and by using the classical hermeneutical axiom known as the analogia fidei, Scripture interprets Scripture. There are two items that we should note from the immediate context of Jonah 3. Jonah preached a message of judgment in 3:4 (“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”). If this is an accurate summation, there is no reason to assume that he preached about repentance, monotheism, the necessity of some form of sacrificial atonement for sin. Furthermore, in light of Jonah’s self-righteous testimony in 4:2, it is hard to conceive of him preaching about God’s wonderful grace for fallen Ninevites. The emphasis in Jonah 3 is on the coming physical destruction of the city of Nineveh. All that can be established from his prayer is that he is praying that God would immediately destroy the city of Nineveh. In addition, God emphasizes in 3:10 that he withheld his immediate wrath because he saw the works of repentance performed by the Ninevites: “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
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upon them. And He did not do it.”

In looking at the overall context of Scripture, there are no explicit statements affirming that they were genuine believers. However, on the surface, Matthew 12:41 may create a tension for this assessment. When Jesus refers to the Ninevites who “repented at the preaching of Jonah,” does his reference to their repentance suggest that this was a salvific repentance since the Ninevites are going to rise up in the judgment to condemn Jesus’ audience? Jesus’ next example in 12:42 is the Queen of the South. According to Jesus’ argument, she will also rise up to condemn Jesus’ audience in the judgment. Since interpreters do not bring her into the “household of faith” and she is tightly intertwined with the Ninevites in Jesus’ argument, it is a strained theological argument to insist that the Ninevites were genuinely saved based on Matthew 12:41. Thus, all that Matthew 12:41 explicitly demands is that the Ninevites genuinely repented. In the final analysis, there is no indisputable evidence in Scripture demanding that the Ninevites demonstrated a genuine repentance unto salvation.

Second, from a historical perspective, we have a fairly complete set of records from this period in Assyrian history, the Assyrian eponym list. These records were kept at the request and dictation of Assyrian kings and their leaders. What is interesting is that there are no records from the middle of the eighth century expressing that Ninevites changed their system of belief to monotheism. Some biblical scholars suggested that there is archaeological evidence justifying Nineveh’s swing to monotheism. The evidence for this shift is a text that reads: “Trust in Nabu, only trust in him.” It is only through strained circumlocution that this text can be used even to hint at a swing toward monotheism. Though this text may allow for henotheism, it, nevertheless, has the wrong god! So historically we have no explicit records from the Assyrians that, even remotely, express any sort of hope in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Third, from a theological perspective, it is my understanding of the Old Testament at this time that the expression of one’s faith was intricately tied to the Jewish sacrificial system. If there is any substance to perseverance in the faith, it is theologically strange that neither the Bible nor the Assyrian eponym list even imply that a leading Ninevite or two made a pilgrimage

35Perhaps, some Ninevites had more special revelation than we realize. If this is the case, then some Ninevites may have genuinely been converted. There is something of a tension with this type of disclaimer since there is no place in Scripture or Assyrian records that hint at any other special revelation being circulated in Nineveh.


37Jesus’ use of the Greek term, metanoeo (“repented”), in Matthew 12:41 reflects that the Ninevites had a genuine repentance; however, this argument has at times been pressed beyond this to mean that the Ninevites had a genuine salvific repentance. Unfortunately, it cannot be lexically sustained, at least with any consistency, that metanoeo or its cognate forms have an exclusive semantic range that focuses only on “salvific repentance.” Between its use in the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament, it can be demonstrated that this word generally means genuine repentance. This term has been used about God withholding judgment, as in the Septuagint’s rendering of Jonah 3:10. However one may want to describe the so-called “repentance” of God, would any Bible-believing Christian be blasphemous enough to say that God had genuine salvific repentance. If one is going to use the term repentance in reference to God, as the KJV does, it is better to say that God genuinely relented/repented, rather than salvifically repented. In addition, metanoeo is occasionally used in the Bible to describe a genuine repentance or remorse (Luke 17:3, 4; 2 Cor 7:9) (see BAGD, p. 640). In reference to theological descriptions of the “repentance” of God, see Grudem, Systematic Theology, pp. 164–65; and Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 304–5.

to Palestine, even on one occasion, for purposes of worship. Clements has made this same point: “God’s mercy which is extended to the people of Nineveh after their repentance and fasting is nowhere related to their embracing of the torah, their rejection of idolatry, their acceptance of circumcision, nor even to so basic a feature as a confession that Yahweh the God of Israel is the only true God.”

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Was the purpose of Jonah to describe a great evangelistic, or even a missionary, endeavor? The argument in this paper has been that the overall message of Jonah as well as the overall tenor of Scripture suggests otherwise. I have argued that the focus of the book of Jonah is on God’s sovereign freedom in showing compassion to whomever he pleases. The book of Jonah reflects that Jonah assumed that what he loved, God should also love. As Jonah’s book highlights key events from this episode in his life, it emphasizes Jonah’s struggle to fully embrace what God in his sovereign freedom loved, at least when it came in conflict with his own desires. Since Jonah is responsible for the inscripturation of this book, it seems apparent that he eventually understand the message and embraced what God in his sovereign freedom loved. As Jonah developed his message, he distributed throughout this book various beneficiaries and circumstances displaying God’s compassion. God displayed his compassion to pagan sailors through a disobedient prophet’s message and by calming a raging storm. God also reflected his gracious nature by withholding his prophesied judgment on man and beast in Nineveh. More than the sailors and the Ninevites, God showed sovereign compassion as he savingly worked to bring Jonah’s thoughts into conformity with God’s sovereign rights. In synthesizing the revelatory content of Jonah’s book, I would summarize the message of Jonah like this: As Sovereign LORD over all, God in his sovereign freedom has the right to display his compassion on whatever he pleases, and his servants, as those who experience God’s saving compassion, must embrace whatever God in his own sovereign freedom loves.

Does this understanding of Jonah’s message rule out any applicative value of this book for missionary and evangelistic efforts? Absolutely not! While a proper understanding of God’s sovereign freedom places some parameters on redemptive activities, it is, nevertheless, foundational for all God-honoring evangelistic activities. If God was not gracious and merciful, based upon Christ’s atonement, the execution of his holy wrath against sin would have immediately cast Adam and Eve into Hell when they ate the forbidden fruit. It is only because of God’s compassionate nature that we exist. Jonah reminds us that God in his sovereign freedom extends his compassion as he pleases, and it is our obligation and privilege to embrace whatever God in his special revelation has communicated about his desired will.

In keeping with this, the book of Jonah had applicative value in the Old Testament. Though Jonah does not explicitly address the problems in Northern Kingdom of Israel, to whom Jonah was called to prophecy (2 Kings 14:25), this book was applicable them. In less than 50 years from the time when Jonah went to Nineveh, God was going to eliminate the Northern Kingdom of Israel. If Nineveh showed this type of city-wide repentance and God withheld judgment on them, how much more so would He have done the same for his covenant people if

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they had repented.

The message of Jonah is also valuable for application in the New Testament church. A proper doctrinal understanding of God’s compassion is foundational for the spread of gospel and our motivation for spreading the gospel. It is because of God’s compassion on us, through the atonement of Christ, that we today freely proclaim the gospel message and its call to fallen and condemned humanity to humble themselves under the Sovereign LORD who freely displays compassion.
Part 2: Nahum

I. Introduction

Our introduction will examine issues that are normally discussed under the subject of special introduction. These items will include a brief presentation concerning the title, authorship and date, literary composition, historical background, purpose, canonicity, and text.

A. Title

MT: נָחוּם, Nāhūm, “comfort”
LXX: Ναοῦμ, Naoum, “Nahum”
V: Naum, “Nahum”

B. Authorship and Date

1. Authorship

a. As with many other OT books, the superscription of the book denotes its author, “Nahum, the Elkoshite.” This is the only information in the Canon that we have concerning this prophet.

b. The reference to Nahum being an “Elkoshite” points to his home. Contrary to Jerome who saw this as a reference to his father, the nature of the ī ending on this term in Hebrew (hā’elqōśī) points to either an ethnic or geographic significance. This is comparable to our “ite” termination in English. We have the same thing in Micah 1:1 when Micah is called “the Morashite.” This means that Micah was an inhabitant of Moresheth. Accordingly, Nahum is an inhabitant of Elkosh. Unfortunately, the exact location of this place is unknown. There have been four different suggestions concerning the location of Elkosh.

1) On the Tigris River. This is north Mosul, which is near Nineveh in Assyria. This Islamic tradition locates Nahum’s grave in this area. Ewald and Lange hold this view. Nahum was supposedly a descendant of a northern Israelite family who had been carried into captivity in 722 B.C. This explains why he was so familiar with Nineveh. Since this tradition dates back only to the sixteenth century A.D., some of its force is weakened.

2) In Galilee. This city has also been identified with modern El Kauze. If this is correct, Nahum was a descendant of one of the families that had been left behind when the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom and taken captives in 722 B.C. This was the view taken by Jerome. Against this, it should be noted that Nahum never refers to this event and he does refer to Assyria’s domination of Judah in 1:12–15.

3) Elkosh identified with Capernaum. Capernaum meaning “village of Nahum” was originally Elkosh and it was renamed in honor of its famous citizen. Support for this has been drawn from the mention of Carmel, Lebanon, and Bashan in 1:4.
4) In the southern part of Judah. Elkosh has been identified with Elcesei. This was a village in the territory of Simeon near Bet Gabre. Because of the concern for Judah in the book of Nahum (1:12–15), this has been generally favored. By the nature of the lack of clear information, a precise conclusion cannot be drawn.

2. Date
Though some liberal scholars would date this work in the Maccabean period, the date for this work is generally considered to revolve around two poles: the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. (see 3:8) and the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. We will briefly consider some of the various proposals.

a. Maccabean period, 175–165 B.C.
With this view the enemy in this book were the Greeks and not the Assyrians. Haupt and Happel have defended this.

b. Immediately after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.
Paul Haupt was the first to propose that this was a liturgy and not a prophecy. Paul Humbert and Ernst Sellin who used this to argue that Nahum was written shortly after the fall of Nineveh subsequently adopted this. This was written for the Israelites to celebrate as a New Year liturgy.

c. Shortly before the fall of Nineveh, 614–612 B.C.
This is the view held among the majority of OT scholars such as Davidson, J. M. P. Smith, van Selms, Watts, and others. This date is advocated because the book of Nahum portrays the fall of Nineveh as being imminent. It also portrays Judah in a favorable light, which would be true after Josiah’s reforms in 621 B.C.

d. About the time of Ashurbanipal’s death, c. 627 B.C.
Eybers, Keller, Rudolph, Gary Smith, and Van Hoonacker support this view. This is asserted because Assyria was militarily strong (see 3:1) until Ashurbanipal’s death. However, Nineveh was under attack (see 2:3–12; 3:2–13) during the latter part of the reign of Ashurbanipal. This would explain the imminent nature of the prophecy.

e. Shortly after the fall of Thebes, 668–654 B.C.
This is the view advocated by Archer, Freeman, Johnson, Maier, van der Woude, Verhoef, and von Orelli. Most modern day supporters of this view have based their argumentation on Maier’s work. This view is supported by the nature of Judah being under Assyrian bondage (1:13, 15). This is more applicable during Manasseh’s reign (697–642 B.C.) than Josiah’s reign (640–609 B.C.), especially after 621. Maier’s key argument is that Thebes (see 3:8–10) fell in 668 (most OT scholars date this at 663 B.C.) and it was restored in 654 B.C.

f. Conclusion
The Maccabean hypothesis has no force at all today because of the discovery of the Nahum Pesher at Qumran. The dating just prior to 612 B.C. does not seem to harmonize well with the Assyrian bondage on Judah that 1:13, 15 reflect. A date somewhere between Ashurbanipal’s death and the fall of Thebes is more feasible. I
feel more satisfied with Maier’s argumentation so I would prefer to opt for an earlier date.

C. Literary Composition
We will briefly examine four literary aspects of this book, its unity, structure, literary features, and genre.

1. Unity

a. The unity of Nahum was not questioned until 1893 by Gunkel. He has been followed by a host of critical scholars. The book’s unity has been questioned because of the so-called acrostic poem in chapter one that is different than the style found in the remainder of the book. According to this view, the argument is developed that an acrostic poem is very artificial and mechanical, but the style of chapters two through three reflect an author who was spontaneous and free. When the two contrasting styles represented by chapter one and chapters two through three were dissected, it was superficially concluded that two different authors had to be responsible for these sections (see J. M. P. Smith, pp. 268–70).

However, we are not convinced that the apparent stylistic differences demand two different authors. Even if these two sections, chapter 1 and chapters 2–3, show some stylistic dissimilarity, this does not necessarily indicate that they come from two different authors. Perhaps, in the first chapter he focuses on God himself and in the remaining two chapters he develops his prophecy. What is more significant in maintaining a single author for all three chapters is that the two sections are bound together by thematic similarities (so Armerding, “Nahum,” 7:451–52). Furthermore, it is questionable as to whether we have a consistent alphabetic acrostic in Nahum 1. What then may be said about the acrostic in Nahum 1?

1) The actual details of Nahum 1 reflect that it is not a consistent alphabetic acrostic. Notice the following scheme (taken from Bullock, p. 219):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Hebrew Letter</th>
<th>Order in Alphabet</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>aleph</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b</td>
<td>nun</td>
<td>14th</td>
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<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>yod</td>
<td>10th</td>
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<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>beth</td>
<td>2nd</td>
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<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>gimel</td>
<td>3rd</td>
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<tr>
<td>4b</td>
<td>aleph</td>
<td>1st</td>
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<td>5a</td>
<td>he</td>
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<td>5b</td>
<td>waw</td>
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<td>6a</td>
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<td>12th</td>
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<td>6b</td>
<td>heth</td>
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<td>7a</td>
<td>teth</td>
<td>9th</td>
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<td>7b</td>
<td>yod</td>
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<td>8a</td>
<td>beth</td>
<td>2nd</td>
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<td>8b</td>
<td>kaph</td>
<td>11th</td>
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<tr>
<td>9a</td>
<td>mem</td>
<td>13th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9b</td>
<td>lamed</td>
<td>12th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whatever else we may say about chapter one as it is in the Hebrew text, it is not a full alphabetic acrostic. Only through rearrangement of vv. 2–14 can it be made to conform to an acrostic pattern. If we do this, have we not then made the writer to be whatever we want him to be?

If we assume for argument’s sake that Nahum 1 is an acrostic, it does not follow that Nahum could not have written this as well as the other two chapters. He may have chosen to use an acrostic poem to emphasize theology proper before he gave his prophecy of Nineveh’s destruction.

2) An alternate position to a full alphabetic acrostic is the partial alphabetic acrostic recently defended by Longman. He argues that Nahum used a partial alphabetic acrostic in 1:2–8, allowing for a few adaptations by Nahum (“Nahum,” pp. 773–75). Since Longman sees this partial acrostic as part of the original work of Nahum, this presents no difficulty for us. We would recognize that there is some conformity in vv. 2–8 with the first eleven characters of the Hebrew alphabet. Following Longman’s view, we might say that Nahum has adapted this acrostic to communicate his own theological purposes in vv. 2–8. Whether we accept this as a partial alphabetic acrostic or not, vv. 2–8 are a hymn celebrating God’s role in bringing deliverance from Judah’s enemy, Nineveh (see Longman, “Nahum,” p. 788).

b. Armerding has noted a number of thematic and stylistic similarities found in this book that would tend to support its unity. For example, Nineveh’s wickedness toward Judah and Yahweh is found in 1:2–3, 8–9, 11, 13, 15; this is expressed in terms of worldwide cruelty in 2:11–3:1, 4, 19. Furthermore, Yahweh’s opposition to Nineveh is stated in 1:2–6, 8–9, 14; 2:13; 3:5 (for more details on this, see Armerding, “Nahum,” 7:451).

2. Structure

Following Chisholm’s discussion of Nahum’s structure (The Minor Prophets, pp. 165–67), we will divide the book of Nahum into two major sections: 1:2–11 and 1:12–3:19. These will be briefly examined.
a. 1:2–11
This pericope has two parallel parts: vv. 2–6 and 7–11. Each of these stanzas are begun by an affirmation of Yahweh’s character.

1) 1:2–6—These verses have been composed in a hymnic fashion describing Yahweh’s majestic appearance in a theophanic form to bring judgment on His adversaries (Chisholm, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 166).

2) 1:7–11—Verses 7–8 begin in a similar descriptive manner but change to a direct address. “Judgment is announced directly to Nineveh and its inhabitants, specified as the addressees by the heading of the book (1:1) and by the following context (2:8; 3:7). The second- and third-person plural forms in the Hebrew text of verses 9–10 indicate the residents of Nineveh are in view there, while the second-person singular feminine form at the beginning of verse 11 (‘from you’) suggests personified Nineveh is addressed at that point (note NIV’s explanatory addition ‘O Nineveh’)” (Chisholm, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 166).

b. 1:12–3:19
Nahum introduces this section in 1:12 with the formula, “This is what the LORD says.” Nahum’s introduction to this section is in 1:12–15 and is thematically parallel with his conclusion, 3:18–19. These form an inclusio structure for 2:1–3:17. This section is arranged in a concentric chiasm. Chisholm has set forth the structure of this in the following manner (*The Minor Prophets*, pp. 166–67):

Introduction: An appeal to celebrate the fall of Nineveh and its king, 1:12–15
A  Call to Alarm, 2:1–10
   B  Taunt, 2:11–12
      C  Announcement of Judgment, 2:13
         D  Woe Oracle, 3:1–4
            C1 Announcement of Judgment, 3:5–7
               B1 Taunt, 3:8–13
                  A1 Call to Alarm, 3:14–17
Conclusion: Everyone who hears of the fall of Nineveh and its king will celebrate, 3:18–19

3. Literary Features
As with most of the other prophetic books Nahum has written his prophetic oracle in a poetic style. As such this book will be characterized by the use of parallelism and vivid imagery. To emphasize his message Nahum uses items such as metaphors, repetition, assonance, irony, etc. In 1:10 Nahum uses the metaphor of chaff burning in a fire and in 3:17 of locusts stripping a field. He repeats three times in 1:2 the Hebrew term for “avenging.” In 1:9, 11, “plot” is repeated to emphasize Nineveh’s plotting against Yahweh which deserves Yahweh’s judgment. He uses assonance in 1:2, 1:10, 2:1 (Heb 2:2), etc. In 2:1 (Heb 2:2), 3:14 Nahum ironically challenges Nineveh to make preparations for their defense. These are a few examples of some of the book’s literary features (see Johnston, pp. 47–50).
4. Genre

When I am discussing form, I am using the term to discuss the various types of literature used in a book; however, when I use the term genre, I am using it to describe the type of literature a book is as a whole.

a. Nahum’s Use of Various Forms

Nahum predominantly used the following literary forms in compiling his book (ibid., pp. 30–42, 53):

1) Descriptive psalm of praise, 1:2–8
2) Prophetic judgment speeches
   a) Accusation speech against Nineveh, 1:9–11
   b) Announcement of judgment against king of Nineveh, 1:14
   c) Prophetic “summons to alert,” 2:1–10 (Heb 2:2–11); 3:14–17
   d) Prophetic taunt, 2:11–12 (Heb 2:12–13); 3:8–13
   e) Oracle of judgment, 2:13 (Heb 2:14); 3:5–7
   f) Woe oracle, 3:1–4
3) Announcement of salvation to Judah, 1:12–13; 1:15 (Heb 2:1)

b. The Genre of Nahum

Some of the prophetic works such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Malachi have various segments of prophetic speeches begun with the Hebrew term maššā’, “oracle.” The book of Nahum is also begun with this same term that introduces its various prophetic speeches. By looking at the various forms, we would have to note that the primary thrust of Nahum is a prophetic oracle of judgment against Nineveh. Various formulas are used indicating that the prophet Nahum received special revelation from Yahweh. Consequently, Nahum has used various literary forms to compile a prophetic oracle with a primary emphasis on judgment which was intended to bring encouragement to Judah.

D. Historical Background

The background for Nahum’s prophecy is found in the long oppression of Israel and Judah by Assyria. As early as the ninth century, Shalmaneser III (858–24 B.C.) had exacted tribute from Jehu (for a chronological chart on the kings of Israel and Judah, see above). In 722 the Assyrians destroyed Israel and deported its population. After this the Northern Kingdom no longer existed as a separate entity. Under Sargon II (721–705), the Southern Kingdom faced further oppression by their Assyrian foes (for a chart of the kings of Israel and Judah, see our introduction). When Hezekiah became king, he rejected Ahaz’s pro-Assyrian policies and had to face the wrath of Sennacherib (704–681). In 701 Sennacherib invaded Judah and conquered many of its cities. After threatening Jerusalem, the angel of Yahweh destroyed a host of its military and consequently forced the Assyrians to return home.

In the seventh century Nineveh was made the capital of Assyria. During this century Esarhaddon (681–669) and his son Ashurbanipal (668–627) continued to dominate Judah. By 639 Ashurbanipal had conducted successful military campaigns from Egypt to Elam. Assyria was at the height of its power. The last part of Ashurbanipal’s reign is marked by obscurity. During the seventh century the Babylonians and Medes began to rise with
prominent military strength and with the climax of Ashurbanipal’s reign and subsequent weak kings (Ashur-etil-ilani and Sin-shur-ishkun and Ashur-uballit), they were in a position to conquer the Assyrians (see Longman, “Nahum,” pp. 767–68).

E. Purpose
The book of Nahum is a prophetic oracle announcing that the sovereign LORD would destroy the capital of the Assyrian nation Nineveh and consequently to encourage Judah with the knowledge of the LORD’s sovereign control.

F. Canonicity
Since we have already discussed some of the issues related to this in our introduction, we will briefly look at its position in the canon. In the Hebrew and Greek Canon, Nahum is listed as the seventh book and in each it is followed by Habakkuk. However, it does differ in that it follows different books. In the Hebrew Canon it follows Micah. This tradition is followed by the Syriac, Vulgate, and modern translations. In the Greek Canon it follows Jonah.

G. Text
The Hebrew text has been well preserved. The Greek and Syriac versions follow the Hebrew text closely (see Harrison, OTI, p. 930).

II. Exegetical Analysis
A. Superscription, 1:1
Like many introductory verses in the Latter Prophets, this superscription provides information about the author of this specific book. Unlike the other prophetic works, Nahum uniquely identifies his work as both a “burden” or “oracle” (maššā’), including the recipients of God’s judgment (“Nineveh), and a “vision” (term ḥāzôn), more precisely “the book of the vision of Nahum” (šēper maššā’ nahûm) (see Patterson, Nahum, p. 19).

1. A Classification of Nahum’s Prophecy
The NIV translates the Hebrew word maššā’ as “oracle.” This Hebrew word is used 28 times in the OT (2 Kgs 9:25; 2 Chr 24:27 Prov 30:1; 31:1; Isa 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6; Jer 23:33, 34, 36, 38 (3 times); Lam 2:14; Ezek 12:10; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; and Mal 1:1). Early interpreters were divided concerning how this term should be rendered. It has been understood as either a “burden” (so KJV and NKJV) or an “oracle” (so NASB and NIV). The former rendering has been historically supported by the Targum of Jonathan, Aquilla, and the Syriac version and the latter rendering in the Septuagint. We will briefly look at the more cogent arguments supporting each of these.

a. “Burden”
The translation maššā’ as a “burden” is usually correlated with the Hebrew verb nāšā’ which means to “lift, bear, carry” and as such, it is a burden, a message that is difficult to carry. There are a number of arguments that support this (see “נָשָׁא” TWOT, 2:602 by Walter C. Kaiser; in this article, Kaiser relies heavily on Hengstenberg’s discussion at Zechariah 9:1 in the unabridged edition of Christology.
of the Old Testament; for a more up-to-date support of this idea see P. A. H. de Boer, An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Term Maššā’ [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1948]).

1) In every context where maššā’ appears, the concept of judgment is apparently found. This term exclusively denotes a burden, a message that is hard to carry because it is consumed with judgement.

2) According to this view, the noun maššā’ has no other cognate nouns that are used in the sense of “oracle” or “utterance.” Connected with this, it is often pointed out that the verbal root associated with maššā’, nāšā’, is never used in the sense of speaking (so Keil [The Minor Prophets, 2:8]).

b. “Oracle”

With the translation of maššā’ as “oracle,” maššā’ is correlated with the Hebrew verb nāšā’ which may be used in the sense of to lift up such as a voice (qôl) or an oracle māšāl. As such, maššā’ has the idea of an utterance, a prophetic pronouncement or an oracle. This is the meaning assigned to it by BDB, p. 672, KB, p. 570, and CHAL, p. (see Kenneth Barker, “Zechariah,” in vol 7 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, p. 657; and Cathcart’s work).

1) Though the majority of the contexts where this term is used is denoting judgment, there are a few notable exceptions such as 2 Chronicles 24:27 and Zechariah 9:1 and 12:1. With these last two references, a number of scholars have noted that these contexts include judgment. This point must be conceded; however, the significance of the overall context is a future hope of Israel; this is to say, the contexts are a mixture: salvation and judgment oracles. (9:1–11:17 focuses on the advent and rejection of Israel’s Messiah and 12:1–13:9 focuses on His advent and reception, see Barker.) Therefore, my point is that since this term does not exclusively denote judgment, why not translate it on a more general level?

2) It should also be conceded that maššā’ has no other cognate nouns that are used in the sense of “oracle” or “utterance.” However, not all of the cognates mean “burden”; for example, 1. nāš (I) meaning “one lifted up, i.e., a chief prince” (BDB, p. 672); 2. nāš (II), “rising mist, vapour” (ibid.); 3. nāšā’, “the uplifted (cloud)” (ibid., p. 673); 4. š’ēt, “exaltation, dignity,” “swelling,” “uprising” (ibid.). There are two cognates that are used many times as a burden: 1. maššā’ (a homonym of our word under discussion), meaning “load, burden, lifting, bearing, tribute,” however, it is not always negative at times it has a positive such as an “uplifting” (ibid., p. 672); and 2. mašā’ēt, “uprising” or “burden, portion” (ibid., p. 673). We should also consider its verbal use. The verb nāš‘ not only means to “carry,” but it also means to “lift up.” For example one may lift up his voice as in Judges 9:7 and Isaiah 52:8. Quite significant is its use in Numbers 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23 where Balaam lifts up an oracle, a māšāl. Therefore, maššā’ may refer to lifting up one’s voice, i.e., to utter an oracle (Barker, “Zechariah,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 7:657).
c. Conclusion

I think at this point it is better to understand this term in the sense that the standard Hebrew lexicons take it. As such I would understand *maššâ‘* to have a general meaning, a prophetic oracle. This prophetic oracle often involves judgment but not always. In our context in Nahum, the judgment idea is clearly involved in this prophetic oracle.

2. The Recipients of Nahum’s Oracle

The recipients of Nahum’s oracle are the people of “Nineveh,” the capital of Assyria. The Assyrian nation and its capital Nineveh were known for their cruelty. “About 700 B.C. King Sennacherib made Nineveh the capital of the Assyrian empire, and it remained the capital until it was destroyed in 612” (G. Herbert Livingston and Kenneth L. Barker, Introduction to “Nahum” in the *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1380). As such, Nineveh was the focal point of the Assyrian nation which was known for its cruelty, “their kings often being depicted as gloating over the gruesome punishments inflicted on conquered peoples. They conducted their wars with shocking ferocity, uprooted whole populations as state policy and deported them to other parts of their empire. The leaders of conquered cities were tortured and horribly mutilated before being executed. No wonder the dread of Assyria fell on all her neighbors!” (ibid.).

Nineveh had become a prominent city under the reign of Sennacherib (705–681). He was responsible for building a “canal and dam on the River Gomel, north of Nineveh, to control the waters of the Khasr River, which flowed through Nineveh. With the Tigris as a natural ‘moat’ to the west and the Khasr to provide water, Nineveh was confident of her unassailable position” (Kohlenberger, p. 88).

3. The Preservation of Nahum’s Oracle in Written Form

Nahum’s vision was preserved in a “book” (*sēper*). The book of Nahum is the only prophetic book that claims to be written down (Bailey, *Nahum*, 161), though undoubtedly all the other canonical prophetic books were reduced to written form. A book was a written document, probably a scroll. In light of this word, Keil maintained that the book of Nahum was originally written down and was not delivered orally (*The Minor Prophets*, 2:9). This may be an overstatement. Whether or not this was delivered orally, the superscription clearly indicates that this visionary material was communicated in the form of a written document, inscripturated special revelation (Patterson, *Nahum*, p. 21).

4. A Further Classification of Nahum’s Oracle

Nahum’s oracle is also labeled as a “vision,” *hāzôn*. This term is related to a verb *hāzā*, which means to see, to receive a vision, to receive special revelation. What our writer is referring to here is the special revelation that he received from God concerning the judgment on Nineveh.

5. The Author of this Prophecy.

The author of this short book is identified as “Nahum, the Elkoshite” (see above).

B. The Wrath of Yahweh, 1:2–11

As pointed out earlier, there are two parallel sections in this pericope: vv. 2–6 and vv. 7–
11. In the first stanza Yahweh is pictured as the avenging God and in the second as the protector of His people.

1. Yahweh the Avenging God of His People, vv. 2–6

In this opening theophanic hymn, Nahum asserts that Yahweh is a God who takes vengeance (vv. 2–3a). He also explicitly describes the terrifying appearance of Yahweh and the resultant cosmic response (vv. 3b–6).

a. Yahweh’s Character As an Avenger, vv. 2–3a

We will highlight from vv. 2–3a four theological affirmations about Yahweh’s character as an avenger.

1) Yahweh is a jealous and avenging God, v. 2a.

In describing Yahweh as a jealous God, the word translated as “jealously” (qannô’) may picture a positive attribute, such as “jealous” or “zealous,” or a negative characteristic, such as “envy.” When this word or its cognates are used to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, this relationship is based on God’s covenant with Israel. When this word is used in covenant contexts, we see the marriage metaphor often used to picture God’s covenant relationship with Israel. In this type of Old Testament setting, God is described as a jealous husband when Israel played the harlot (on the ramifications of spiritual adultery, cf. Exod 20:4–5:34:14; Deut 4:23–24; 5:8–9 with Jer 2:1–3:5; Ezek 1:35–42; 23:25). God’s jealousy is not governed by the petty concerns that we see among fallen humanity. The first two commands of the Decalogue require absolute loyalty from Israel for their covenant God. “Exclusivity of worship is the explicit motivation behind God describing his name as ‘Jealous,’” Exodus 34:14 (Longman, “Nahum,” p. 788). Because Israel would not show exclusivity in worship, her jealous divine husband would bring the covenant curses on his disobedient wife. “Indeed, a jealous God’s righteous wrath would one day effect an apostate people’s judgment and exile from the land (cf. Deut. 6:13–15; Josh 24:19–25; Ps 79:5). In all of this, however, God’s jealous wrath is also maintained for action on behalf of His own, particularly after they have repented and so been restored to His favor (Isa 59:17; Ezek 5:13; 36:6–7; 38:17–23; 39:25–29; Zeph 3:8–17; Zech 8:2–3)” (Patterson, Nahum, p. 22). In light of this, Nahum’s description of Yahweh as a “jealous God” is consistent with the Old Testament marriage motif. God’s jealously for his wife will rouse his anger against Israel’s adversary, Nineveh.

Three different times in v. 2 Yahweh is described as one who “takes vengeance,” or “avenging,” (nōqēm). The NIV translates v. 2 in this manner: “The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies.” I have emphasized NIV’s three translation values of nōqēm, a qal active participle, with bold print. In the first clause nōqēm is used an attributive adjective, “avenging God.” With the last two uses of nōqēm, this participle functions as a finite verb. Since the participle (nōqēm), which generally has a durative quality, describes Yahweh three times in this verse, it places a strong emphasis on Yahweh’s character. “This sets the tone for the entire book, emphasizing Yahweh’s jealous protection of His people by the destruction of those who oppress them”
This may intimate that “in the same manner that Yahweh had historically intervened in vengeance to protect His people from their enemies when they had no possible means of self-help, He would zealously protect them from the Assyrians by fighting against them” (ibid.). See passages such as Number 31:2; Deuteronomy 32:35–43; Judges 11:36; Psalms 58:10; 79:10; 94:1; Isaiah 1:24; 34:8; 35:4.

2) Yahweh takes vengeance and is full of wrath, v. 2b.
We could literally translate v. 2b in this way: “Yahweh takes vengeance and is the Lord of wrath.” An item to consider is the NIV’s translation of the last clause, “is the Lord of wrath,” as “is filled with wrath.” Other translations include “wrathful” (NASB, NASB ’95, RSV, and NRSV), “furious” (KJV, NKJV), “filled with…wrath” (NLT), and “exceedingly angry” (Longman, “Nahum,” p. 788). The Hebrew for this clause, “the Lord [ba’al] of wrath [ḥēmā],” is idiomatic. The word “lord” is also transliterated in the Old Testament as “Baal” and may also be translated as “husband.” When ba’al is used in close relationship with a word that immediately follows it, a construct-genitive relationship, as is the case here ba’al ḥēmā (“the lord of wrath”), it has a more generic use as “one who is characterized by.” In this regard, ba’al functions like the Akkadian bēlu, “lord.” When it is found in a compound relationship with other words, it may have the sense of one who is the “holder of, responsible for, entitled to” whatever the following word depicts (Longman, “Nahum,” p. 788; see HALOT, 1:143). In this context, “the lord of wrath,” probably has reference to the God of the covenant being characterized by wrath.

3) Yahweh holds in reserve His wrath against His enemies until He determines to execute them, v. 2c.
Yahweh’s wrath is unlike our uncontrolled outbreaks of anger. Yahweh holds his wrath in reserve until the time is right to execute his vengeance against the wicked. In our immediate context, God’s enemies are the Assyrians. This verse suggests that God’s “judicial wrath is not always immediate. At times He holds in reserve His wrath against His foes until the proper occasion. God’s government, including His judicial processes, is on schedule, even though to an awaiting mankind His timing may seem to lag” (Patterson, Nahum, p. 25).

4) Yahweh is slow to anger and great in power, v. 3a.
The expression “slow to anger” is literally “long of nostril” or “long of anger.” There is a connection in Hebrew thought between the “nose” and “anger,” whatever that connection may be. “Long of anger” means slow to become angry. When “slow of anger” is used of Yahweh, it is normally followed by “abounding in love,” as is the case in Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; and Jonah 4:2. The traditional theological confession reflected in these verses correlates God’s patience with His forgiveness. In v. 3 of our text this has been followed by “great in power.” This expression is usually used to denote God’s supernatural power (e.g., Deut 4:37; 2 Kgs 17:36; Jer 27:5; 32:17). This great power according to the next clause of this verse, “the LORD will certainly not leave the guilty unpunished,” correlates God’s patience with God’s might as used to judge the sinful Ninevites rather than with His forgiveness. The
point in this verse is that God has been patient with Nineveh (consider the message of Jonah) but His patience has been exhausted. This makes Nineveh’s judgment certain.

b. Yahweh’s Action As a Judge, vv. 3b–5

In these three verses Nahum continues his theophanic hymn. Here showing how Yahweh has control over the forces of nature emphasizes Yahweh’s role as Judge. His control is shown in four areas.

1) Yahweh’s Ability to Act As Judge Is Supported by the Use of His Power in Controlling the Whirlwind and Storm, v. 3b.

Yahweh manifests His ways in the whirlwind and storm; the clouds form the dust that his feet walk on. This verse and vv. 4–5 are filled with images. Chisholm has taken these to refer to Yahweh as divine warrior (The Minor Prophets, pp. 168–69), as does Longman (“Nahum,” p. 789). This is drawn by a comparison of some of the images as they are used in other ancient Near Eastern literature. For example, in the Enuma Elish (a well-known creation epic), Marduk in his battle against Tiamat uses the storm as his weapon in defeating the waters of chaos. The same is also true in the Ugaritic epic where Baal battles Yam (see Johnston, p. 58). This has been more recently developed by Longman (“Nahum,” pp. 776–77, 789; see also his “The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif, WTJ 44 (1982): 290–307). While Longman makes a case for this being a reference to Yahweh as the divine warrior, the force of the text is not lost if one does not accept Longman’s interpretation. The point of the text is to demonstrate that Yahweh is a sovereign who effectively brings judgment (see Bruckner, Jonah, Nahum, pp. 145–49).

The images of the “whirlwind,” “storm,” and “clouds” picture God in His activity between heaven and earth. The “whirlwind” and “storm” are elements that are beyond man’s control. They strike here and then there. In Psalm 83:15 and Isaiah 29:6, these two terms are used as expressions of judgment. “These mighty forces are dwarfed in the presence of the Lord, whom the highest heavens cannot contain; the tempest is but the disturbance caused as he marches by, and the dark storm clouds are merely dust stirred up by his feet (cf. 1 Kings 19:11–13; cf. Hab 3:8)” (Armerding, “Nahum,” 7:462).

2) Yahweh’s Ability to Act as Judge Is Supported by the Use of His Power in Drying up the Sea and the Rivers, v. 4a.

Nahum apparently drawing from Yahweh’s great rebuke of the Red Sea at the Exodus, which He also used to bring judgment on the Egyptian army, describes God’s absolute sovereign control over the sea. Nahum’s reference to “rivers” includes what Yahweh accomplished when Israel crossed the Jordan and He brought them into the land of Canaan (Josh 3; Ps 114:3–4). Rivers and seas were created to hold water. If the omnipotent God so chooses, he may dry up the sea and the rivers. Nineveh was especially vulnerable at this point. Assyria represented a major part of Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Nineveh was proud that they had harnessed the Khoser River” (Bailey, p. 175).
3) Yahweh’s Ability to Act as Judge Is Supported by the Use of His Power in Drying up Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon, v. 4b.
Bashan is an area located in Transjordan and it extends from the brook of Jabbok in the south to Mt. Hermon in the north. The area is famous for its fertile pastures. In the northern part of Israel was Carmel. It was known as fertile mountain that stretched to the Mediterranean. Lebanon is north of Israel. Very probably the “blossoms” refer to the cedars for which they were well known. What is the point of this reference to these fertile areas of Israel as it relates to Assyria? Just this, if God did this to the most fertile areas in the land of His chosen people, how much more certain that He would carry out His decreed will on Assyria.

4) Yahweh’s Ability to Act as Judge Is Supported by the Use of His Power in Controlling the Mountains and Hills, v. 5.
With God’s theophanic appearance at Mount Sinai, the mountain shook (Exod 19:18). Perhaps drawing upon this background, Nahum may have reference to Yahweh’s presence in a theophany. “Mountains quaking and the earth trembling occur frequently in the theophanies. Both parallel parts of the verse speak of the presence of the Lord. Mountains quake ‘from him.’ The earth trembles ‘at his presence.’ This image of the earthquake is the most terrifying sign of divine power because the most firmly established thing in our experience is suddenly and unexpectedly shaken from its mooring, changing the landscape in a second” (Bailey, Nahum, pp. 175–76).

c. Summation, v. 6
Nahum brings his theophanic hymn to a conclusion with this summary verse. Notice how the subject of divine wrath is drawn upon here as it was in v. 2. This forms an envelope (also called an *inclusio*) construction. This literary device points to the parameters of a unit.

“Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?”—these two questions are rhetorical questions. This type of question is not designed to solicit information. Rather, it forces its recipients to become actively involved (this is used again in 2:11; 3:7–8). As Nahum used this question he brought his audience into his discussion and they should have been responding by saying that no one can withstand Yahweh’s indignation.

“Like fire”—this reference to fire may point back to Exodus 19:18 where the mountains smoked and the rocks broke up at Yahweh’s theophanic appearance. At the minimum this may be included, however, this may go beyond this, for wrath being compared to fire is a common OT image denoting Yahweh’s judgment (see 2 Chr 34:25; Jer 7:20; 44:6; Lam 2:4). In any event, Nahum is communicating that God was going to judge Assyria just as He has effectively judged in the past.

2. Yahweh the Protector of His People, vv. 7–11
This stanza is mixed with salvific and judgment motifs. Because of Yahweh’s loyalty to his covenant, which includes his covenant people, Yahweh will judge Nineveh (vv. 7, 9).

a. Yahweh’s Faithfulness to His Covenant, vv. 7–8
1) Affirmation of Yahweh’s Care for His Covenant People, v. 7

“The LORD is good”—the adjective “good” is a translation of the Hebrew term ṭôb. This term is often parallel with the Hebrew term ḥesed, “covenant loyalty,” “faithfulness,” or “love” (see 2 Chr 5:13; 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Pss 106:1, etc.). Thus Yahweh’s faithfulness to those who participate in His covenant is emphasized by the term “good.” This goodness is clearly defined by the next clause, “a refuge in times of trouble,” this is to say, Yahweh demonstrates His covenant goodness by defending His people from the Assyrians.

“He cares for those who trust in him”—the verb “cares for” is a translation of the Hebrew verb yāda’. This Hebrew term is often translated as “know.” Thus Adam’s knowing (yāda’) Eve in Genesis 4:1 is an intimate knowledge, sexual relations. This term as such denotes intimate knowledge and is very fitting for covenant contexts. For example, a treaty was made between the Hittite king Muwattallis and Alaksandus from western Asia Minor. In this document the Hittite king assures his vassal Alaksandus that if he is attacked that Muwattallis would do this: “As he is an enemy to you, even so is he an enemy to the Sun; I [the Sun], will know only you” (see Herbert Huffmon “The Treaty Background of Hebrew YADA’,” BASOR 181 [February 1966], p. 32). This term is used in the same manner in Amos 3:2 (“You only have I chosen [yāda’] of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins”) where the prophet proclaims that Yahweh has known Israel. Obviously this denotes something more than mere cognitive knowledge since Yahweh has that concerning every nation; here it must denote some type of intimate knowledge that includes both Yahweh’s choosing and caring for (also see Jer 1:5 [“Before I formed you in the womb I knew (yāda’) you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations”]). Here Yahweh takes care of those who trust or seek refuge in Him.

While vv. 2–6 have reflected God’s role as judge, v. 7 reflects an aspect of His divine goodness as a God who saves His people, as Patterson has observed. “Verse 7 stresses the positive aspect. Like those within a fortress on the day of siege, so those who trust in God’s goodness and loving concern for them may rest secure. The verse provides a dramatic contrast with v. 6 in that Nahum moves from the subject of wrath to that of compassion. God is compared metaphorically to a refuge (cf. Ps. 37:37–40), and the effect is to make Israel a literary foil to Nineveh. Thus, in the midst of a context emphasizing vast destruction, a picture that will quickly be applied to Nineveh, the scene takes a momentary shift to assure God’s people of His goodness and protection. The practical result will be to place in contrast Israel’s blessedness and Nineveh’s defenselessness before God’s all-consuming wrath” (Nahum, p. 37).

2) The Result of Yahweh’s Care for His Covenant People, v. 8

How was Yahweh going to take care of His covenant people? This verse provides the answer. Yahweh’s judgment is directed against those who refuse to submit to Him and this is further reflected by their oppression of His people. Here Yahweh’s judgment is expressed as an “overwhelming flood,” which reflects on v. 3 where Yahweh’s ways are in the whirlwind and storm. This flood results in Nineveh
being cast into “darkness,” an apparent reference to their death.

“He will make an end of <Nineveh>.” NASB literally translates this as “He will make a complete end of its site.” NASB’s translation allows for ambiguity. However, the translation in the NIV removes the ambiguity by suppling “Nineveh.” Both the NIV and NASB follow the reading of the MT. It appears in the argument that the drastic judgment described by Nahum is “directed against a shadowy antagonist specified by ‘her place.’” Both the feminine suffix and the noun denoting a locality confirm the NIV’s interpretation (‘[Nineveh],’ cities being feminine in Hebrew; cf. 2:1, 7, 10, 13; 3:5–8, 11–17)” (Armerding, p. 465). In contrast to following the MT, the LXX may suggest an alternate reading: “those who rise against him.” The whole clause may be translated “He will make an end to those who rise against him” (so Longman, “Nahum,” pp. 787, 793; and Patterson, Nahum, pp. 37, 40). Though Longman and Patterson make a good case for following a form of the LXX, sense can also be made out of the MT. In the final analysis, those rising against God are the Ninevites.

b. Yahweh’s Judgment Speech against Nineveh, vv. 9–11

These three verses display the structure of a prophetic judgment speech. There is the initial announcement of judgment, vv. 9–10, followed by the accusation in v. 11 (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, p. 172).

1) Announcement of Judgment, vv. 9–10

Nahum initially informs Nineveh that Yahweh would bring their plot to ruin, v. 9. He then uses figurative language to describe their destruction, v. 10.

Verse 9—this passage, like many in Nahum, uses personal pronouns without necessarily explicit antecedents. Longman has a helpful discussion about Nahum’s use of personal pronouns (“Nahum,” p. 795):

There is another difficulty in this passage. It is the frequent use of personal pronouns that lack clear antecedents. This problem also has a literary solution. Some versions (note the NIV) ease this problem by inserting ‘Nineveh’ and ‘Judah’ where the words do not occur in the Hebrew. From a literary standpoint this use of pronouns without apparent antecedents lends and element of suspense to the prophecy. That Nineveh is not mentioned by name until 2:9 [8] and that God’s people are not mentioned until the beginning of chapter 2 (note ‘Judah’ in 2:1 [1:15]) gives interest to the story and opens up the book too much broader application. The pronouns may be ambiguous, but they are not difficult to understand. The most frequent pronoun is the second-person feminine singular, which virtually always refers to Judah or Nineveh. The only deviation from this pattern occurs in 1:14, where the context requires the referent of the second-person masculine singular suffix to refer to the king of Assyria.

The opening hymn presents a picture of God as a warrior who saves his people and destroys those who stand against him. It is not surprising then that there should emerge from the opening hymn a series of alternating oracles of salvation and judgment. What is surprising is the use of unspecified pronouns to refer to the objects of salvation and judgment. This indefiniteness builds
suspense for the reader. Who is the object of salvation? Who is the object of judgment?

For the first time in this chapter, Nahum’s rhetorical form addresses the enemy, without precisely identifying them as the Ninevities: “What do you plot against Yahweh?” My translation reflects that the finite verb is 2nd person, masculine, plural form, as opposed to the NIV’s 3rd person, plural form, “they” (“Whatever they plot against the LORD”), perhaps an attempt to smooth out the flow of the context (the alternate translation is given in the NIV’s footnote). While it is possible that the referent of “you” is Judah (so Maier, pp. 184, 186–88 and Robertson, Nahum, pp. 71–73), the immediate context would more readily harmonize with Nineveh (so Longman, “Nahum,” pp. 795–96). In the middle of the seventh century, we know from historical records that the Assyrians “plotted” the destruction of Judah. Historically the Assyrians were not able to bring the “plot” to completion: “Trouble will not come a second time.” After the destruction of Nineveh, Judah would never again be troubled by their Assyrian foes.

Verse 10—As many commentators have recognized, this may be the most difficult verse to exegete in the entire book of Nahum. While this verse has some textual difficulties, there is no better alternative text than the MT. The MT uses two similes, one concerning drunkenness and the second concerning thorns. Longman has translated v. 10 with this (“Nahum,” p. 794):

For by the entangled thorns
they are like drunkards stinking of drink.
They will be fully consumed like dry stubble.

As the three lines of this translation reflect, there are three colons. While the first two colons of v. 10 are difficult to interpret, Longman has effectively communicated its thought (for a fuller discussion, see ibid., p. 796). The third and final colon of v. 10 is clearly a picture of judgment on the Assyrians. To assist in understanding some of the difficulties associated with this verse, Longman suggests that the motifs in this verse be formatted in an ABA structure. I could simplistically represent it like this: judgment-character-judgment. “The first colon apparently locates the subjects of this verse near a tangled thorn bush. The next colon describes them as intoxicated. The third colon is a pronouncement of judgment. They will be consumed like stubble. This last colon answers to the first colon in the ABA structure. The first colon, with its reference to thorns, may also be a judgment-saying. Thorns are a frequent image of judgment in the Old Testament (Isa. 33:11–12)” (ibid.).

The character of the Assyrians is described in the second colon, the “B” in the ABA structure. “After informing God’s enemies of the futility of their plotting, Nahum addresses his Judean audience and describes the enemies in uncomplimentary terms. They are likened to drunkards who are totally besotted. The motif of drunkenness, connected with judgment here and in 3:11, is a common prophetic theme. God’s enemies drink the cup of wrath to its dregs” (ibid.). This motif is developed in Isaiah 19:14, 51:17. The final colon of this verse, like the
first colon, pictures God’s judgment on his enemies. God “will completely destroy these drunkards just as stubble is consumed when it is set on fire” (ibid., p. 797). Like so many of Nahum’s other images, this image has been used a number of other times in Isaiah, such as 5:24; 33:11–12; 47:14.

2) Accusation, v. 11

In this verse the prophet returns to direct address: “From you, O Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness.” Who is the one counseling the wickedness? The expression “counsels wickedness” is an idiomatic translation of “son of Belial.” Nahum is the only prophet to use this expression here and in 1:15 (Hebrew, 2:1). Because 2 Kings 18:32–35 portrays Sennacherib as one who was set against Yahweh, he could rightly be considered a son of Belial. Thus, some see this as a reference to him (see Armerding, p. 466). Yahweh brought defeat to Sennacherib’s army in 701 B.C. However, a number of other options have been suggested such as AŠšurbanipal or Manasseh. Aššurbanipal was the last great king of Nineveh who led in conquering Egypt and requiring Manasseh to become his vassal. Manasseh was renown for his wickedness as a Judean king.

Longman has made another suggestion. He suggests that the personal pronoun “he” is a reference to Yahweh, introduced in v. 9, and the “you” is a reference to Nineveh. He supports this by noting that the Hebrew verb to “depart,” yāšā’, is used a number of times in the Old Testament to describe God’s abandoning a city (“Nahum,” p. 797). He translates v. 11 in this fashion: “He [Yahweh] departs from you, you who plan evil concerning the LORD, you who counsel wickedness” (ibid., p. 794). I have reservations about this understanding. The juxtaposition of the prepositional phrase and the verb do not easily fit into Longman’s interpretation. The Hebrew text literally reads: “From you, he goes forth [yāšā’] who plots evil against Yahweh, who counsels wickedness.” The qualifying phrases, “who plots evil against Yahweh” and “who counsels wickedness,” more naturally appear to qualify the subject of the verb, “he.” However, the problem still remains as to the identity of the one counseling wickedness. The text is ambiguous at this point and many kings of Nineveh counseled wickedness. It appears unlikely that Nahum is addressing a Judean king. Consequently, one of the options from the Assyrian kings would be preferable. This could possibly be Sennacherib or Aššurbanipal. If it were Sennacherib, the verb yāšā’ would need to be translated with a past tense, since his 701 B.C. defeat was prior to Nahum. However, if it is Aššurbanipal, it could be translated as a present or future tense.

C. Yahweh’s Destruction of Nineveh, 1:12–3:19


While the personal pronouns have an ambiguity in this section, the NIV makes good sense of the development of thought. Verses 12–13 appear to be an oracle of salvation addressed to Judah. Verse 14 abruptly shifts to an announcement of judgment directed to the king of Nineveh. In 1:15 (Heb 2:1), Yahweh exhorts Judah to rejoice over the certain fall of her adversary.
a. Announcement of Salvation to Judah, vv. 12–13

Verse 12—this verse is begun with the typical prophetic formula, “This is what the LORD says.” This prophetic formula is used to announce a message that the prophet had received directly from Yahweh. This is the only place that Nahum uses this introductory formula. This is a guarantee that what Nahum has predicted will definitely be fulfilled. Though for many years Nineveh had been well protected by its walls, many allies, and numerous inhabitants, God promised Judah that He would permanently cut them off. The term translated as “allies” (šēlēmîm) in the NIV has been interpreted in a number of different ways. The word šēlēmîm is cognate with šālôm, “peace,” “prosperity,” “whole,” “complete.” The immediate use šēlēmîm has been rendered as “full [strength]” (NASB, NASB '95, NRSV), “strong” (RSV), “complete” (Robertson, Nahum, p. 76), “quiet” (KJV), “safe” (NKJV), “intact” (Longman, Nahum, pp. 797–98), and “allies” (NIV, NLT, Patterson, Nahum, p. 48; the key article supporting this is by D. J. Wiseman, “‘Is it Peace?’ Covenant and Diplomacy,” Vetus Testamentum 32 [1982]: 311–26). While I think there is good support for the rendering in the NIV, the specific rendering does not alter the overall sense of this unit, though I would concede there are variations in the semantics of each possible rendering. The overall point is that, though the Assyrian has allies (or is powerful) and is numerous, Yahweh would cut them off fully and they will disappear. This is a message to encourage Judah with a note of deliverance as the last half of the verse indicates: “Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more.”

Verse 13—Yahweh continues his oracle of salvation to Judah: “Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.” The adverb “now” implies that this affliction had gone on for some time. Prior to this, God had used Assyria to afflict the Southern Kingdom. He had used Sennacherib’s attack in 701 B.C. to afflict Judah. During much of Manasseh’s reign Judah had to pay tribute to Assyria. Assyria had even taken Manasseh captive (2 Chr 33:11). But the Assyrian oppression described with “yoke” and “shackles” would now be permanently brought to an end (Johnson, p. 1499).

The NLT clearly reflects the thought of these two verses; “This is what the LORD says: ‘Even though the Assyrians have many allies, they will be destroyed and disappear. O my people, I have already punished you once, and I will not do it again. 13 Now I will break your chains and release you from Assyrian oppression.’”

b. Announcement of Judgment against Nineveh’s King, v. 14

“The LORD has given a command concerning you” is placed between two announcements of salvation (vv. 12–13 and v. 15). The clause strongly emphasizes the certainty of this sentence of judgment on the King of Nineveh. The object suffix on the preposition is a second masculine singular personal pronoun. This masculine pronoun should be contrasted with the fact that cities are generally referred to in the feminine, possibly this indicates that the NIV would have been better to interpret this as “the King of Nineveh” instead of “Nineveh.” However, it should be noted that the king is chosen out as a representative of the city.
“You will have no descendants to bear your name.” The Hebrew of this verse could be literally translated, “It will no longer be sown from your name again.” The possessive pronoun “your” is a second masculine singular pronoun. As noted in the preceding paragraph, this possessive pronoun points in the direction of this being the king of Nineveh. “The ‘name’ of a population represented its living identity, perpetuated in its ‘descendants’; to be destitute of descendants therefore represented obliteration of identity and of life itself (cf. Deut 7:24; 9:14; 1 Sam 24:21; et al.). The root underlying ‘descendants’ is used of physical and particularly dynastic succession. It implies the eradication of Nineveh’s dynastic rule” (Armerding, p. 468).

“I will destroy the carved images and cast idols.” The Assyrian monarchs claimed that they ruled by divine authority, that is by “their ‘gods,’ whom they honored accordingly. Ashurbanipal, on a single cylinder, paid profuse homage to seventeen of the principal gods of the Assyrian pantheon….The judgment of Nineveh’s king therefore demanded the destruction of the idolatrous religion on which his authority was founded. This was centralized in the ‘temple,’ which housed the ‘carved images’ and ‘cast idols’ within which its particular deity resided. These idols were normally made of precious wood plated with gold or of molten metal such as gold that had been poured into a mold. They would be shaped in human form, even in the likeness of the reigning king such as Sennacherib (IDB, 1:299). An elaborate ritual was required to endow them with life, sight, and purity, after which they would be clothed in sumptuous garments and placed on a pedestal in their inner sanctuary, or cella. In keeping with their human likeness, they would be fed three times a day and their clothes would be changed periodically (IDB, 1:298–99)” (Armerding, pp. 468–69). The temple of his gods referred to either the temple of Nabu or Ishtar. Yahweh was about to destroy this pagan form of worship.

“I will prepare your grave” reflects that the king of Nineveh along with his city was about to be destroyed and buried in his grave.

c. Call to Praise with Salvation Announcement, v. 15 (Heb. 2:1)

As a result of Nineveh’s fall, Judah would be free from Assyrian domination. The certainty of this destruction is reflected by Nahum speaking as if this is happening before him, “Look there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!” This allows Judah the freedom to celebrate her religious feast in an uninhibited manner that should allow Judah to express her gratitude to Yahweh. The text appears to reflect that Nineveh would never be rebuilt. “So complete was its destruction that when Xenophon passed by the site about 200 years later, he thought the mounds were the ruins of some other city. And Alexander the Great, fighting in a battle nearby, did not realize that he was near the ruins of Nineveh” (Johnson, p. 1499).

2. The Invasion of Nineveh, 2:1–10 (Heb. 2:2–11)

For his rhetorical purposes in this pericope, Nahum assumes the role of a watchman as he watches from the walls of Nineveh and prophetically describes the fall of Nineveh. In vv. 1–2 Nahum provides a warning and promise followed by the description of Nineveh’s fall in vv. 3–10.
a. Warning and Promise, vv. 1–2 (Heb. 2–3)

These two verses appear to be transitional.

1) Warning of Judgment, v. 1 (Heb. 2)

Again there is a subtle change in the subject being addressed from Judah (1:15) to Nineveh: “An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength.” The word translated as “an attacker” (mēpîṣ) comes from a Hebrew term that could be translated as “one who scatters,” or an equivalent (NASB, NASB '95, KJV, NKJV). This is a common figure for a conquering king (see Isa 24:1 and Jer 52:8).

The second colon of this verse is a reaction to this “attacker.” In his literary function as Nineveh’s watchman, Nahum makes a fourfold appeal to the Ninevites:

a) “Guard the fortress”
b) “Watch the road”
c) “Brace yourselves”
d) “Marshall all your strength”

Obviously Nahum’s point is not to assist the Ninevites; rather he mockingly calls on the Assyrians to prepare for action. This is a very effective way to communicate that Nineveh would soon fall. This message should be understood in light of the background of Nineveh’s virtually impregnable position. It was built to withstand invasions and sieges. Sennacherib had spent six years building up its armory. This is the city that Yahweh was about to overthrow.

Nahum does not clearly identify the attacker. The ultimate cause behind the attacker is clearly defined in the book as Yahweh (Longman leaves open the possibility that Yahweh is the attacker [Nahum, p. 801]). However, the specific agent, “the attacker,” is not precisely identified in this book (Bruckner, Jonah, Nahum, p. 166), While Nahum does not identify the name of the nations that would defeat Nineveh, we do know from history that this was carried out by the Babylonians and the Medes. It is interesting to note how the prophecy of the book was fulfilled. “Nineveh was attacked in 614 B.C. by Cyaraxes, king of the Medes (c. 625–585; IDB, 3:320). A sector of the suburbs was captured but the city was not taken, the Medes diverting their energies to the overthrow of Ashur. However, a subsequent alliance of Cyaraxes with the Babylonian Nabopolassar led to their concerted attack on Nineveh in 612, apparently accompanied by Scythians (Umman Manda?), a battle recorded in detail by the Babylonian Chronicle” (Armerding, p. 472; for a description of this, see ANET, pp. 304–5).

2) Promise of Deliverance, v. 2 (Heb. 3)

“Splendor” (2 times)—this is a translation of the Hebrew term gēʾôn, “majesty” (BDB, p. 144). This term may be used negatively in the sense of “pride” or positively as “majesty,” “excellence,” or as in the NIV’s “splendor.” Here it is probably used in reference to Jacob’s power and dominion as a nation dwelling in the land of Canaan as distinct from other nations.
“Splendor of Jacob…like the splendor of Israel”—this verse in its immediate context seems to indicate that as a result of Yahweh’s destruction of Nineveh, Jacob would be restored to the same status as Israel had. Jacob and Israel are often used synonymously to refer to the twelve tribes that descended from their father Jacob/Israel (Pss 22:23; 78:5; 105:10; 147:19; Ezek 20:5; Mic 1:1, 5, 13–14; 3:1, 9–12). With the division of the kingdom in 931 B.C., these names are generally applied to the Northern Kingdom; however, with the fall of the Samaria in 722 B.C., the titles are used to refer to Judah and an anticipated restored United Kingdom (Isa 9:1–8; 11:10–16). If Judah is in view, this refers to a restoration that would only come after the Babylonian exile; however, if the nation as a whole is in view, this may not be realized until the millennial kingdom. This verse appears to be teaching Yahweh would restore Jacob fully like in the days of the United Kingdom Israel. This restoration is complete in that it includes the restoration in the land to one of power and dominion. This appears to include restoring the mainstay of Israel’s economy, viz., their grapevines (this is often used to denote their life and identity [Isa 5:1–7]). These facets of the Northern Kingdom had been wiped out in 722 B.C. but only threatened in the south. Because of this, I would suggest that the prophet is saying that the defeat of Nineveh is foundational for Israel’s (the 12 tribes as a whole) future restoration (see Armerding, p. 472 and Johnson, p. 1500).

b. Description of Nineveh’s Fall, vv. 3–10 (Heb. 4–11)

1) The Enemy’s Advance on Nineveh, vv. 3–5 (Heb. 4–6)

“His soldiers,” v. 3 (Heb 4)—the antecedent of the possessive pronoun “his” appears to be the “attacker” of v. 1. The use of the military language in both vv. 1, 3 also support this understanding. With v. 3 Nahum is returning to the battle scenario by describing “the swift and relentless advance of the attacker (vv. 3–5). The enemy soldiers carried red shields and wore scarlet clothing, the foreboding color suggesting the bloodshed about to overtake the city” (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, p. 174). The shields used by the attackers were either rectangular or round. The rectangular shields were intended to be a protection for a large portion of either the spearmen or archers’ bodies as they attacked the city when it was under siege. These shields may have been made of wickerwork or wood with leather covering it. This may have been dyed with red (Armerding, p. 474).

“The chariots,” vv. 3b–4 (Heb 4b–5)—Nahum gives greater detail to describing these. In v. 3 they are described as being covered with metal so that the chariot was virtually impenetrable. Soldiers carrying spears drove them. In the progression of Nahum’s thought, the city has not yet fallen so where are they driving about like lightning? Robertson has described v. 4 in this fashion: “But where is it that these vehicles of devastation are rushing about like flashes of lightning? The breach of the wall has not yet occurred, so they are not careening about inside the city. Most likely the imagery tends to depict the intermediate step of the approach of the assault force. Having been dreaded at a distance when the approaching hoard’s brilliant uniforms first came into view, they can now be observed more closely.
They have laid claim to all the territory immediately outside the city walls. Suburban roadways and intersections crisscrossing on the way to the various gates of the city are fully under occupation now. The last resistance has retreated behind the safety of the city’s walls, and the fearful chariots of the enemy rushes about securing every possible escape route” (Robertson, p. 89).

“The streets,” v. 4 (Heb 5)—following the interpretation just presented, the “streets” probably refer to “the avenues and suburban highways about Nineveh and leading to the city, for the context describes an attack that gradually leads to the city’s walls” (Maier, p. 243).

“The squares,” v. 4 (Heb 5)—this refers to the wide-open places within a city; here this is probably referring to the squares in the suburban cities leading up to the defense walls of Nineveh. “According to the fragmentary information of the Babylonian Chronicle, three battles may have been fought during the three months of intense siege before the city fell (ANET, p. 303ff.; Maier, pp. 112–13). Indeed, the historian Diodorus Siculus (c. 20 B.C.), quoting earlier sources of varying authenticity, claimed that the Assyrians were victorious in the early stages of the conflict; as a result they became overconfident and were decisively defeated while their soldiers were feasting and drinking (cf. 1:10; Dan 5) (Maier, pp. 109–10, 192)” (Armerding, p. 475).

“He summons,” v. 5 (Heb 6)—the issue with this verse relates to identifying the antecedent of the personal pronoun “he.” There are three possible antecedents:

a) God—this is the view of Maier. He understands that God “remembers” (NIV has “summons”) the mighty ones/the heroes of v. 4 (NIV has “picked troops”) who are attacking the city of Nineveh. There are so many heroes that they stumble over each, i.e., they knock each other over in their attempt to hurry to the walls of Nineveh in order to take the city. Maier points out that the verb translated as “summons” is usually translated as “remembers.” Thus Yahweh is taking care of His special instruments of war (the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians) as He did with Noah and those who were to go with him into the ark, Genesis 8:1 (pp. 246–47). Support for this antecedent can be drawn from v. 2. This interpretation has not been accepted by many. Though the point of the book is that Yahweh is the One who decreed judgment on Nineveh, this does not fit in with the flow of thought in vv. 3–4.

b) The king of Nineveh—this view is supported mainly by the verb to “stumble.” It seems to best fit with the weakness of the troops. It consequently fits better with the Ninevites rather than the enemy of Nineveh. This is the view of Bruckner (p. 167), Feinberg (p. 194), Henderson (p. 281), Johnson (p. 1500), Robertson (pp. 89–90), and Ralph Smith (pp. 82–83). A problem with this view is that the King of Assyria/Nineveh has not been mentioned in the immediate context of this chapter, though this may be neutralized by Nahum’s ambiguous rhetorical style in the book.

c) The attacker of v. 1 (Heb 2)—this view would defend that the antecedent of
“he” as well as “his [picked troops]” is the same as the antecedent of “his [soldiers]” in v. 3, viz., the “attacker” identified in v. 1. This is the view of Armerding (p. 475), Baker (p. 34), Chisholm (The Minor Prophets, p. 174), and John M. P. Smith (pp. 316–17). The advantage of this view is that it more readily harmonizes with the immediate context. In addition, if the Septuagint and the Vulgate’s interpretation of the “protective shields” are correct, this fits in better with this view. Their rendering points to some type of device used to protect soldiers as they sought to besiege a city; however, it must be recognized that since this Hebrew term is only used here, this is not necessarily a guaranteed interpretation. How then do we explain the verb “stumble”? With Armerding and Chisholm, it is easiest to see the enemy stumbling over the Assyrian corpses as they besiege the city. It should also be noted that the adverb translated as “yet” is not in the Hebrew text.

2) The Enemy’s Destruction of Nineveh, vv. 6–10 (Heb. 7–11)

The NIV translates v. 6: “The gates of the rivers are opened, and the palace is dissolved.” As this translation reflects the “gates of the rivers” has a correlation with the fall of the city (see picture on following page, taken from IBD, 2:1091). “The gates of the rivers” have been interpreted in two significant ways.

a) Gates of the city that were near the Tigris River—the Tigris River flowed near Nineveh’s walls on the northwestern end of the city proper, a tributary, the Khosr River, flowed through Nineveh itself, and a moat was around the southwestern and southern portion of the city. This interpretation understands that the gates “refer to access easily gained through the defenses of the city that naturally would be the most difficult to assault. If this interpretation is correct, then those particular gates opening to the moat about portions of the city somehow would become the very route by which this invading army would breach the wall. The point of the strongest defense would become the place of greatest weakness” (Robertson, p. 90).

b) Floodgates for the Khosr River that flowed through Nineveh—this view understands the gates to be sluices that control the flow of water rather than giving immediate access to the city. As such, the invaders could have closed these gates in order to permit the water to backup. After the waters backed up sufficiently, they could have opened them in order to cause the waters to flood the city. “This interpretation corresponds essentially with the testimony of Diodorus Siculus, an ancient Greek historian, who indicates that in the fall of Nineveh a series of heavy rains swelled the Euphrates (an error for Tigris), flooded parts of the city, and overthrew the wall for a length of about two miles” (ibid.).

Verses 7–10 (Heb 8–11)—Nahum describes in these verses how once the walls of Nineveh have been toppled, the enemy gain access to the city proper and plunder its tremendous wealth. “The city’s inhabitants reacted in consternation and panic (v. 10b). Slave girls wept bitterly (v. 7b), while others fled like water draining from a pool (v. 8). To heighten the emotional impact of the scene and lend vividness to his description, Nahum included the actual words of some of
the participants (vv. 8-9). Amid the confusion and din of the massacre one can hear the shout ‘Stop! Stop!’ directed to the fleeing Ninevites, and the excited cry ‘Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold!’ spoken by the wide-eyed conquerors. The statement ‘She is pillaged, plundered, stripped!’ (v. 10a), highlighted in Hebrew by the similarity in sound between the words used emphasizes the totality of Nineveh’s destruction” (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, pp. 174–75).

Verse 10—the fourfold characterization of Nineveh’s reaction should be noted.

a) “Hearts melt”
b) “Knees give way”
c) “Bodies tremble”
d) “Every face grows pale”

When this is compared with v. 1, this forms an inclusio structure. This “draws attention to the reversal in Nineveh’s situation. The phrases translated ‘brace yourselves’ (v. 1; lit. ‘strengthen the loins’) and ‘bodies tremble’ (v. 10; lit. ‘anguish in all the loins’) correspond. At the beginning of the speech there was still time to ‘strengthen the loins,’ but by its conclusion fear has overtaken ‘all the loins,’ as panic sweeps away resolve” (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, p. 175).

3. Yahweh’s Opposition to Nineveh, 2:11–13 (Heb. 2:12–14)

a. The Taunt, vv. 11–12 (Heb. 12–13)

In anticipation of Nineveh’s demise, Nahum uses a taunt song to communicate his message that Nineveh was going to experience divine retribution for her cruelty and rapaciousness. Nahum’s use of the lion motif is especially apropos for Assyrian kings who compared themselves to lions and decorated their palaces with various forms depicting the lion. Having completed his description of Nineveh’s picturesque demise, Nahum asks the question, “‘Where?’ The mighty lion of the nations (Assyria) used to proceed at will from its impenetrable lair (Nineveh) to return its prey to its pride (the citizens of Nineveh). Where is all of that now? Once Nineveh bulged with the bounteous booty that her kings had brought within its walls. The annals of the Assyrian kings repeatedly report the ravenous rapacity of the Assyrian conquerors and the barbaric cruelty with which they acquired their ill-gotten gain” (Patterson, Nahum, p. 75). For example, when Ashurbanipal subjugated Akkad, he boastfully stated this:

As for those men…I slit their (v., tongues) and brought them low. The rest of the people, alive, by the colossi, between which they had cut down Sennacherib, the father of the father who begot me,—at that time, I cut down those people there, as an offering to his shade. Their dismembered bodies (lit. flesh) I fed to the dogs, swine, wolves, and eagles, to the birds of heaven and the fish of the deep (cited by Patterson, Nahum, p. 75, from Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia, 2:304).
Plan of Nineveh
From the Annals of Ashurbanipal we see a further example of cruelty:

The people of Said, Pindidi, Si’nu, and other cities, as many as had joined themselves to them (and) planned evil, large and small, they laid them low with their weapons. They left not a single man among them alive. They suspended their corpses from poles, tore their skin off, and affixed it to the city walls (as cited by Maier, p. 281).

Even more hideous is this:

At the command of Assur and Ninlil I bored through his jaw with my cutting dagger (?), pulled a rope through his cheek and the sides of his face (?), and attached a dog chain to him, and let him guard the cage at the east gate of Nineveh (ibid., 282; he gives provides a number of other examples from the Annals of Ashurbanipal, pp. 281–83).

This type of data reflects the cruelty and rapaciousness of the Assyrian Empire. In this light, this taunt seems most appropriate.

b. Announcement of Yahweh’s Judgment, v. 13 (Heb. 14)

In v. 13 Yahweh makes it clear that this destruction was coming about because of Him.

“The LORD Almighty”—the NASB has “the LORD of hosts.” Both of these are a translation of the Hebrew YHWH š’bā’ôt. This could be rendered as either “the LORD of Hosts” or “the LORD Almighty.” YHWH š’bā’ôt is found approximately 300 times in the OT with 247 of these occurring in the prophetic books. For example, it is found 53 times in Zechariah, 24 times in Malachi, 14 times in Haggai, twice in Zephaniah (2:9, 10), twice in Nahum (2:13 and 3:5), and once in Habakkuk (2:13). The primary meaning of š’bā’ôt is “army.” The translation in the Vulgate of this as Dominus exercituum, “LORD of armies,” certainly reflects this understanding. It has generally been understood that this has reference to God being in control of an angelic army. However, it is the contention of many that this is too specific an understanding of this term since it occurs in many contexts where there is no reference to a heavenly host. The first occurrence of this expression is in 1 Samuel 1:3 where Elkanah goes to worship and sacrifice to YHWH š’bā’ôt. It is again used in Hannah's prayer in 1:11 and is used in description of the ark in 4:4. From David's time onward, there are some uses where it is connected with the city of Jerusalem (Ps 48:8). In Isaiah 45:12–13, the Creator is identified as YHWH š’bā’ôt. Because of these various uses, it is best to use YHWH š’bā’ôt in a manner that is broad enough to include its various uses. Along this line of seeing a broader translation, it should be noted that the Septuagint translator of the Psalms and the translator of the Greek Qumran scroll of Zechariah translated this as ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ΤΩΝ ΔΥΝΑΜΕΩΝ, “LORD of the powers [of heaven]”; the Septuagint translator of Haggai and Zechariah translated this with the more general rendering ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ΠΑΝΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ, “Almighty LORD.” In light of this, it is best to translate this as the translators of the NIV “the LORD Almighty.” As such, rather than seeing a genitive relationship between YHWH and š’bā’ôt, it is better to see š’bā’ôt as being in apposition to YHWH. The ending on š’bā’ôt would be understood as a plural
of majesty.

No matter how we are going to render this, as either “the LORD Almighty” or “the LORD of Hosts,” the expression is referring to the LORD’s rulership. This is made quite clear by Isaiah 6:5 and Psalm 84:3.

This understanding of YHWH ṣḇāʾōt is quite significant in the book of Nahum in that it pictures Yahweh as a military leader par excellence. The General of generals leads his forces victoriously into battle.

4. An Oracle of Woe: Nineveh’s Wages for Sin, 3:1–4

The term ḥōy, “woe,” stands at the head of this verse. Ḥōy may introduce a section known as a “woe oracle.” The form that ḥōy introduces is used a number of times in prophetic literature (other examples include these: Isa 5:8–10, 11–17, 18–30; 10:1–3; 28:1–4; 29:1–4; 30:1–3; 31:1–3; Jer 22:13–23; Amos 5:18–20; 6:1–7; Mic 2:1–4; Hab 2:15–17). Ḥōy may be translated according to HALOT (1:242) and BDB (pp. 222–23) as “ah, alas, ha.” According to BDB ḥōy is not equivalent to ʻōy, ḥōy, therefore, cannot distinctively mean “woe!” (ibid.). Though the point of our discussion in Nahum is not to contest BDB’s understanding of ḥōy, I am persuaded that BDB’s recommendation that ḥōy cannot mean “woe” is imprecise; and, in fact, the semantic range of ḥōy suggests that there are specific contexts where it is preferably translated as “woe” (for support, see Richard J. Clifford, “The Use of Ḥōy in the Prophets,” CBQ 28 [October 1966]: 459-60).

The primary issue with this term relates to its provenance. Is this a vestige of an antiquated covenant curse form as we see in Isaiah and Deuteronomy 27 (so Claus Westermann, Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech, trans. Hugh Clayton White [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967], pp. 192-93)? Or is this as Erhard Gerstenberger has argued that it derives from a sages reflections about the world’s state (“The Woe-Orcles of the Prophets,” JBL 81 (September 1962): 259-61)? Or does this emanate from a funeral song (so Clifford and James G. Williams, “The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets,” HUCA 38 [1967]: 75-91)? Clifford’s discussion provides a helpful summary of ḥōy use in the Prophets. He suggests three uses of ḥōy in the OT: (1) a description of genuine funeral laments that would be translated “alas”; (2) a cry to gain attention that could be translated “ho!” “ah!” (see Isa 55:1); and (3) a term used by the prophets to introduce a message of doom which may be translated “woe to” (ibid., p. 458). Though we do not have clear data about the provenance of ḥōy, Clifford’s summation of the uses of ḥōy is helpful. Based upon his study, ḥōy is used in our immediate context with the nuance of “woe to,” as it is rendered by virtually all translations: KJV, NKJV, ESV, ASV, NASB, NET Bible and NIV, though there are a few exceptions such as the NLT with “how terrible,” and NRSV with “ah” (see NIDOTTE, s.v. “Particles,” by Allan Harman, 4:1032). In light of this, we should understand that this is a woe oracle that announces the coming judgment on the Ninevites.

Ḥōy is generally used to begin a new section of material. The woe oracle form is used to criticize one’s action or to announce judgment as it does here. In light of our structural arrangement of Nahum (see above), this occupies a focal point in the book (for more information on this, see Johnston, p. 38)
a. The Reasons for Nineveh’s Judgment, vv. 1, 4

1) Verse 1—In a woe oracle, the prophet begins his oracle with hôy which is then followed by the accusations as is the case here in v. 1. These accusations state the reasons for the announcement being made. “Through violence and deceit (note ‘blood’ and ‘lies’) the Assyrians had filled Nineveh with plunder (v. 1). The reference to ‘victims’ continues the lion imagery of 2:11–13, where the same Hebrew word is translated ‘prey’” (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, p. 176).

2) Verse 4—This verse returns to the reasons for this oracle. Here the prophet uses the extremely graphic metaphor of a harlot, “the practices of the harlot were done by the harlot.” The language of Nahum is extremely strong in this context, he is essentially saying that Nineveh is a “whore of the whores.” Nineveh is a further pictured as a sorceress. Since cities in the ancient Near East are often likened to women, these are metaphors ancient people would have readily understood. In light of strong moral injunctions in the Old Testament against harlotry and sorcery, Nahum makes a strong taunt against Nineveh. Chisholm has correctly stated this about v. 4: “Nineveh was like a seductive harlot who used her charms to exploit others for personal profit (v. 4). The imagery may allude to Assyria’s ability to exploit nations through its deceitful promises of economic prosperity (cf. Isa. 36:16–17; Hos. 5:13). Once these nations were committed to her by treaty, Assyria systematically drained them of their wealth (cf. 2 Kings 15:19–20; 16:8; 18:14–16)” (The Minor Prophets, p. 176).

b. The Description of Nineveh’s Judgment, vv. 2–3

Because of her sins, Nineveh would be destroyed. These verses are a resumption of 2:3–5. The poetic style here reflects a vivid progression of military movement. Initially we hear “the sharp crack of the whip and the distant rumble of the chariot wheels is heard. Then sight joins with sound as the rearing steed and lurching chariot appear. Finally the shape of the individual horseman charging with flashing sword and glittering spear come into focus” (Robertson, p. 105). With Robertson, we could outline this passage to reflect this progression in this manner:

2a The crack
   b of whip
      a the clatter
         b of wheels
            a horses
               b galloping
                  a chariots
                     b jolting
3 a Cavalry
   b charging
      c with swords
         d flashing
            c with spears
               d glittering
Like we saw in 2:3–10, “the defenders are annihilated by the attack: four times—using three different words—the verse refers to the corpses left in the wake of the invading army. Possibly the ‘people stumbling’ are the fugitives; in view of the repetition of this verb (kāšal) in 2:5, they are more likely to be the victors, impeded by the sheer mass of bodies” (Armerding, p. 480).

5. The Humiliating Destruction of Nineveh, 3:5–13

In a similar manner to the pericope in 2:11–13, Nahum delivers a judgment oracle in vv. 5–7 followed by his taunt in vv. 8–13.

a. Announcement of Yahweh’s Judgment, vv. 5–7

Chisholm has summarized the thought of this unit with this: “Once again the Lord Himself spoke directly to Nineveh in His role as Lord of Armies, emphasizing His personal involvement in her destruction (vv. 5–7; cf. 2:13). Drawing on the imagery of the previous verse, He announced He would publicly expose Nineveh’s nakedness (v. 5a) and subject her to the grossest forms of humiliation (v. 6). Public exposure was a typical punishment for a prostitute or an adulteress (cf. Jer. 13:26; Ezek. 16:37; 23:10; Hos. 2:10). Appropriately the nations who had been exploited by Nineveh (cf. 3:4) would look upon her shame (v. 5b). Her appearance would be so repulsive that all who see her would rush away in horror (v. 7a; cf. Ps. 31:11). Of course, the reality behind this imagery is Nineveh’s destruction which no one would mourn (v. 7b)” (The Minor Prophets, p. 177).

b. The Taunt, vv. 8–13

Though this taunt is directly addressed to Nineveh, its thrust was to encourage Judah. As a taunt this mocks Nineveh and its source of confidence, refuge can only be found in the God of Judah.

1) The Destruction of Powerful Thebes, vv. 8–10

Maier has summarized the flow of thought in these verses in this manner: “In this [v. 8] and the following two verses the prophet taunts those who may have questioned his prediction of the Assyrian capital’s inevitable end, by calling attention to the startling devastation which had recently swept over one of the most advantageously situated, best-fortified cities in the world of that day. By contrast he then implies that Nineveh’s defense against the coming attack is far inferior, hence its capitulation the more certain” (p. 314).

a) The strategic location of Thebes, v. 8
“Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her?”—Nahum uses this rhetorical question to begin this section. The implied answer is “no, you not are any better than Thebes” (for a picture of Thebes, see the following page, taken from IBD, 3:1555).

“Thebes”—our translation in the NIV is from the Hebrew Noʿāmōn. This has been transliterated in the NASB as “No-ʿāmōn.” The identification of Thebes with No-Amon finds support in an Egyptian text where Thebes is referred to as niwt, “the City,” or niwt ʾImn, “the city of Amon.” In Jeremiah 46:25 and Ezekiel 30:14–16, Thebes is referred to simply as No. Therefore, No, with or without Amon, appears to be a Hebraized form of the Egyptian niwt ʾImn, “the city of Amon” (see IDB, s.v. “Thebes,” by T. O. Lambdin, 4:615–17; Maier, pp. 112–15).

“Thebes was at the site of modern-day Karnak and Luxor, 400 miles south of Cairo. The city was built on the eastern bank of the Nile River but its suburbs were on both shores. One strength of Thebes was her strategic location. Water was all around her, that is, moats, canals, and water channels flowed throughout much of the city. These helped defend the city as enemy soldiers would find it difficult to cross numerous canals to get to the heart of the city. The waters were thus like a wall. In this way Nineveh and Thebes were similar (cf. Nahum 2:8)” (Johnson, pp. 1502–3).

b) The proximity of Thebes’ allies, v. 9
Not only did Thebes have a strategically strong location, but she was also supported by militarily strong surrounding cities. “Thebes was the most prominent city in Cush, the region of the upper Nile River, which corresponds to present-day southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia. The lower Nile region was known as Egypt, and at that time this territory was subjugated by Cush. While Put is sometimes identified as Libya, the mention of both here favors a location for Put on the coast of the Red Sea as far south as present-day Somaliland. The Libyans inhabited the territory west of Egypt. So Thebes’ allies were south, north, east, and west of her. Yet their combined help was unable to defend her against Nineveh” (Johnson, p. 1503).

c) The brutal destruction of Thebes, v. 10
In this verse Nahum makes note of how Assyria treated Thebes as well as her other victims. Assyria did not simply defeat the city; she humiliated the city and took captives. Assyria also took care of the cities future generations by dashing the children to pieces. A couple of quotes from ANET should reflect the historical setting of Ashurbanipal’s defeat of Thebes. With the first quote we see how Ashurbanipal forced his allies to assist him.

“I [Ashurbanipal] . . . took the shortest road to Egypt and Nubia. During my march 22 kings . . . [including] Manasseh king of Judah . . . brought heavy gifts to me and kissed my feet. I made these kings accompany my army over the land—as well as over the sea-route with their armed forces and their ships” (ANET, p. 294).
With this second quote we see Ashurbanipal’s assault on Egypt.

“In my [Ashurbanipal’s] second campaign I marched directly against Egypt (Musur) and Nubia. Urdamane [the son of Pharaoh Tirhakah’s sister] heard of the approach of my expedition (only when) I had (already) set foot on Egyptian territory. He left Memphis and fled into Thebes to save his life. The kings, governors, and regents whom I had installed in Egypt came to meet me and kissed my feet. I followed Urdamane (and) went as far as Thebes, his fortress. He saw my mighty battle array approaching, left Thebes and fled to Kipkipi. Upon a trust (inspiring) oracle of Ashur and Ishtar I, myself, conquered this town completely. From Thebes I carried away booty, heavy and beyond counting: silver, gold, precious stones, his entire personal possessions, linen garments with multicolored trimmings, fine horses, (certain) inhabitants, male and female. I pulled two high obelisks, cast of shining zahalu-bronze, the weight of which was 2,500 talents, standing at the door of the temple, out of their bases and took (them) to Assyria. (Thus) I carried off from Thebes heavy booty, beyond counting. I made Egypt (Musur) and Nubia feel my weapons bitterly and celebrated my triumph. With full hands and safely, I returned to Nineveh, the city (where I exercise) my rule” (ANET, p. 295).

2) The Certain Destruction of Nineveh, vv. 11–13
If Thebes, a city superior to Nineveh, fell, how much more certainly would Nineveh fall. In these verses Nahum makes five comparisons demonstrating how easily Nineveh would fall.

a) Nineveh is compared to a drunkard, v. 11a. As a drunkard is helpless before his enemy, so is Nineveh helpless before her enemy.

b) Nineveh is like a fearful refugee, v. 11b. Though Nineveh had once dominated the world like a bully, it would now run in retreat. “Like a bully in retreat, this brute of a nation shall cower and cringe as it searches some hole for hiding. In reality, the disintegration of the kingdom of Assyria shows the nation cowering and cringing as one blow after another destroys its shrinking remnant. First the ancient capital of Asshur fell in 614 B.C. Then the combined forces of the Medes and Babylonians assaulted Nineveh in 612 B.C. The city collapsed and was burned after a three-month siege. Retreating toward the west, a remnant of loyal Assyrians established a new king and capital in Harran, approximately 250 miles toward the west. Two years later in 610 B.C., the remaining Assyrian forces were defeated again by Babylon. Although a combined Egyptian and Assyrian force retained some presence in the area for a while, the decisive battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. eliminated the last vestiges of Assyrian presence in the Fertile Crescent. Just as Nahum had predicted, they sought refuge like a retreating fugitive. But they found none” (Robertson, pp. 118–19).
c) Nineveh is compared to a shaking fig tree, v. 12. The fortified parts of Nineveh will be of no consequence in self-defense against the enemy. Nineveh was ripe for the assault.

d) Nineveh is like a feeble woman, v. 13a. Nineveh’s military forces are compared to women. When they are finally assaulted, her warriors will run like helpless women.

e) Nineveh is compared to a city with open gates, v. 13. The enemy will be free to come in and plunder the city.

6. Satirical Warning for Nineveh to Prepare for a Siege, 3:14–17
Nahum once again assumes his role as Nineveh’s watchman as he observes the city from its walls. In a taunting fashion, Nahum urged the Ninevites to make hasty preparations for the imminent siege (v. 14). Since the city was to be destroyed as a locust plague, their efforts would be in vain. “In verse 15b Nahum applied the locust imagery, used of Nineveh’s enemies in the first half of the verse, to the city itself. He sarcastically challenged the city to multiply like locusts. Verses 16–17 suggest he was alluding to Nineveh’s numerous merchants, guards, and officials. All of these groups, symbols of Nineveh’s wealth and importance, would desert the city in the Day of Judgment. Like locusts that strip the land and then fly away, the merchants, having exploited the ill-fated city’s economic possibilities to the maximum, would move on to greener pastures. The guards and officials, whose sense of security in Nineveh’s prosperity is compared to locusts’ settling ‘in the walls on a cold day,’ would also disappear” (Chisholm, The Minor Prophets, p. 178).

7. Rejoicing over Nineveh’s Destruction, 3:18–19
Nahum brings his book to a conclusion with an address to the king of Assyria. He likens the Assyrian leader to shepherd who had fallen asleep with the result that their sheep are scattered on the mountains with no one to deliver them from their enemy. Sleep here probably denotes death and the scattering pictures people being taken into exile. Nahum has a shift of imagery in v. 19 where the Assyrian king is likened to a man with a mortal wound. Because of Nineveh’s wickedness and cruelty, her victims will rejoice when Nineveh falls.

III. Theological Analysis of the Book of Nahum

A. Summation of the Message of the Book of Nahum
The book of Nahum is a prophetic oracle announcing that the sovereign LORD would destroy the capital of the Assyrian nation Nineveh and consequently to encourage Judah with the knowledge of the LORD’s sovereign control.

B. The Biblical Theology of the Book of Nahum
In this brief synopsis of Nahum’s theology, we will consider what Nahum had to say about God, special revelation, sin, salvation, and the kingdom.
1. God

The center of Nahum’s theology is Yahweh executing judgment on the sinful Ninevites. Nahum presents Yahweh as being a sovereign ruler of the world. An outgrowth of this is Yahweh’s role as judge. He also controls history and is faithful to His promises.

a. Yahweh is presented in Nahum as being a sovereign ruler over the universe.

Nahum’s opening theophanic hymn pictures Yahweh as controlling nature and nations (1:2–6). He uses the storm for His purposes (1:3). He can also dry up the sea, rivers, and fertile pasture lands (1:4). The mountains quake before Him (1:5). The whole earth and all its inhabitants are under His control (1:5). With His control of nations, Yahweh must also judge when justice is demanded (1:6).

b. As Sovereign of the universe, Yahweh has the obligation to judge the wicked nation of Assyria.

Yahweh’s role as judge is illustrated in 1:2 where Nahum announces three times that Yahweh takes vengeance on His enemies, which in the context of this book is Nineveh. The point of the book of Nahum is that Yahweh was going to judge Nineveh for her extreme wickedness and cruelty (1:9–11; 2:1–10; 3:1–7, 11–19). This judgment was also upon the king of Nineveh (1:14–15). An aspect of Nahum’s portrayal of God as judge is the divine warrior motif in 1:3–6. We should also notice how Yahweh had used the Assyrians to judge Judah (1:12).

c. Yahweh is also pictured as controlling and being present in history.

This is theologically known as the immanence of God. We can see this developed with Yahweh’s use of Assyria to afflict Judah (1:12b). We can also see this through God’s use of an “attacker” (2:1) who headed up the united forces of the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians. Though each nation was responsible for their sinful actions, Yahweh was working in the midst of this to accomplish His intended pleasure. Yahweh’s destruction of Nineveh is a key link in Yahweh’s future restoration of Israel (2:2). This is the time when Yahweh will set up His theocratic rule upon the earth during the millennial kingdom.

d. Yahweh’s faithfulness is reflected in His promise of providing for those trusting in Him and a restored Israel.

Because of God’s character, His promises are necessarily accomplished. His promises include provisions for genuine believers and the restoration of Israel.

1) Nahum announced that Yahweh is good in 1:7. He takes care of His own. In Nahum God does this with the complete destruction of Nineveh.

2) God promised Abraham in Genesis 17:8 that his descendants would permanently dwell in the land of Canaan. This is reaffirmed in Nahum 2:2 for He will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel. In light of other prophetic literature, this will be accomplished when the northern Israelite kingdom and the southern Judean kingdom will be reunited (see Amos 9:11).
2. The Word of God
The prophet Nahum strongly affirms that what he communicated was not simply his words but Yahweh’s. In the superscription to his book, Nahum announces that he received an oracle concerning Nineveh. The oracle is a prophetic pronouncement that originated with Yahweh. This is reflected through the use of term ḥāzōn, which denotes receiving a revelatory vision, one having a supernatural origination. This is further reflected by the messenger formula “this is what Yahweh says” (1:12).

3. Sin
The reason why God must act as judge against Nineveh is their sin. Judah’s sin is also alluded to.

a. The Sins of Judah
Yahweh had stated in 1:12 that though He had afflicted Judah, He would afflict them no longer. Yahweh was about to eliminate His vehicle of judgment on Judah, the Assyrians. In 1:13 Assyria had subjugated Judah. This subjugation was a result of Judah’s disloyalty to the Mosaic Covenant (see Lev 26; Deut 28; Isa 10:5–6).

b. The Sins of the Ninevites
Yahweh must judge Nineveh because of their wickedness and cruelty in war. The classic example of the war crimes is the atrocities that they inflicted upon Thebes. Not only did they take exiles from Thebes but also they also cruelly murdered their infants (3:8–10). Assyria had also excessively oppressed Judah (1:13, 15). Their atrocities did not stop here for the concluding verse of this book seems to reflect that they were known on an international level for their crimes. This explains why Yahweh pronounce a woe oracle on “the city of blood, full of plunder, never without victims” (3:1).

4. Salvation
Not much is stated in this book about individual salvation in the seventh century B.C. In Old Testament thought, people were justified by having a submissive trust in the covenant keeping God (see Oehler, p. 459). The only reference to this kind of trust is in 1:7. More is stated about national deliverance (1:12–13, 15).

5. Kingdom
Yahweh’s goal with His judgment of Nineveh was to eliminate Judah’s antagonist. This elimination of Assyria was an act that reflects God’s goodness (1:7) and appears to be a key link in Judah’s progression to the kingdom program (2:2).