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Jonah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The Book of Jonah is the fifth prophet in the Book of the Twelve, perhaps one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament. It is also one of the most surprising and rich, containing intertextual depths that few plumb. In the context of the Old Testament, the subject matter of the story is surprising.

It's a story of a prophet who goes to sea, and who also brings the word of the Lord to a foreign nation. Both of these things are rare within the Old Testament. The only other major boat story that we have in the Old Testament is the story of Noah and his ark.

And in looking through the Book of Jonah, we'll find further connections between these

two narratives. While the New Testament has stories of boats and fish on regular occasions, the Old Testament is dominated by land stories. The anomalous subject matter of the Book of Jonah is an indication of a shift that has occurred on other levels, a shift of the horizon beyond the immediacy of the land of Israel and Judah, as the word of the Lord goes out to a pagan nation.

We don't know a great deal about the character of Jonah, beside the fact that he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. We read something of Jonah's prophecies in a passage that gives us a sense of the historical background, in 2 Kings 14, verses 23-27. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.

He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Araba, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai the prophet, who was from Gath-hepha. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

Jonah would have been a contemporary or near-contemporary of Hosea and Amos, both of whom also addressed Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. In 796 BC, the Assyrians under Adad-nirari III had defeated Damascus. Prior to this defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, the Syrians, or Arameans, had greatly troubled Israel.

They had chipped away at its territory and caused them all sorts of other problems. Their woes continued after Adad-nirari's defeat of Damascus, and as a result they were greatly weakened in the period that followed. After the death of Adad-nirari, Assyria wasn't the same power either.

Their involvement and pressure upon the region was much diminished, and as a result the northern kingdom of Israel was in a position to regain much of its lost territory. Things would later change with the rise of Tiglath-par-lisa III. The story of Jonah, both on its immediate narrative level, but also on its deeper allegorical level, needs to be read against this historical background.

Israel dwelt in a region caught between southern and northern powers. The southern power was generally Egypt. The rising northern power at this time was Assyria, later to be succeeded by Babylonia.

Keeping the situation of Israel, and also the wider geopolitics in mind, we can also begin to understand the deeper levels of the story of Jonah. The clear structure of the story of Jonah is something that most commentators observe. Chapter 1 and 3 begin nearly identically, and as Uriel Siman observes, there is a common structural paradigm to be observed in the two scenes of the book.

There is, he argues, a parallel to be drawn between the sailors and the Ninevites. The ship is in danger of breaking up, and Nineveh is threatened to be overturned in forty days. The sailors pray to the Lord, and the Ninevites also seek God.

The sea stops raging, and the Lord also relents concerning the destruction of Nineveh. The sailors and the Ninevites provide a foil for understanding the Lord's dealings with Jonah. The Lord, in the first instance, pursues his prophet, and then Jonah refuses to pray to the Lord, and is cast into the sea instead.

In the second instance, the Lord's mercy causes Jonah to get angry, and then he protests against the Lord's mercy, and watches the city, hoping that it might be destroyed after all. Then there are parallels between the story of the fish and the story of the plant. In both cases, the Lord appoints these creatures to deal with his wayward prophet Jonah.

Chapter 1 begins with Jonah being sent to the city of Nineveh. However, rather than going to the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh, as he has been instructed, Jonah tries to flee from the presence of the Lord. He makes a journey down.

He goes down to Joppa, goes to a ship going to Tarshish, the identity of which is uncertain, and then goes down into the boat. His desire is to escape from the presence of the Lord. The Lord is especially present in Israel among his people, and so Jonah wants to get as far away from there as possible.

But his journey away from the Lord's presence is a descent. The story of Jonah is one in which the Lord is seen to be sovereign over all of creation's forces. The elements of creation itself really come to the foreground in the book of Jonah.

From the greatest, the waves of the sea, to the smallest, the worm in chapter 4. As the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea, a mighty tempest arises. Faced with the possibility that the ship is going to break up, the pagan mariners pray to their various gods. Jonah, however, is somehow asleep in the inner part of the boat.

As the crisis is beyond human power to respond to, divine help is sought. But the captain realizes that Jonah is not participating, and so he goes down into the ship and rouses Jonah, sharply charging him to join in the prayer. Perhaps Jonah's god will listen to them.

When, despite their prayers, the storm continues to rage, possibly a storm that is of such focused severity that they can only take it as a sign of divine wrath against someone on the ship, they decide to cast lots to determine who it might be. When the lot falls upon Jonah, they seek to establish his identity, and to determine what he has done to provoke the divine anger. Jonah's response, of course, has an irony to it.

He declares that the Lord is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land, and yet he is in the process of trying to escape from this God, trying to go away from his presence. As the psalmist in Psalm 139 points out, there is nowhere that you can flee

from such a God's presence. At this point, the storm is only getting more severe, and they realize that they are going to have to do something if they are going to survive.

Jonah, recognizing that he has brought the disaster upon them, says that they ought to throw him into the sea. And yet, they try and save his life. They row hard to get back to dry land, and yet they are not able to do so.

When their efforts to get back to dry land fail, they call out to the Lord in prayer. They pray that the Lord would not lay the blood of Jonah to their account. As the Lord himself seems to have brought this situation about, they trust that they will not be held guilty for shedding innocent blood.

Against the foil of their prayer here, and their subsequent sacrifice to the Lord, and their making of vows, the rebellion of the unfaithful prophet Jonah really stands out. As they cast Jonah into the sea, the sea is stilled, and the disaster is averted. Their response has all of the hallmarks of conversion.

Here we clearly see an anticipation of what will happen in Nineveh. The people of Nineveh will also call out to the Lord in the face of an imminent crisis. And as that crisis is averted, they will seek his face.

The chapter ends with the Lord appointing a great fish to swallow up Jonah. We're not told what type of fish it was, although historically many have speculated that it was a sperm whale. Jonah was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights.

When we step back from the immediacy of the narrative, we begin to notice some patterns in the story of Jonah. The name Jonah means dove, and among other things, at the beginning of this book, one of the questions is whether Jonah is going to get to dry land. In the story of the flood, the dove is sent out by Noah in search of dry land.

Here in the book of Jonah, a similar theme might be in play. The world of Israel and Judah is about to suffer a new deluge, and the big question is whether the nations will survive and be brought to dry land on the other side. Jonah himself reminds us of Israel.

He is an unfaithful prophet running away from the word of the Lord. Just as his nation Israel is, he's joined with pagans, just as Israel is joined with the pagan nations round about. And Israel's unfaithfulness will bring a storm of judgment upon the region, a storm that will threaten to overturn many nations beyond Israel itself.

Israel will have to be thrown into exile. But yet, as they are thrown into the sea of the Gentiles, the Lord will appoint a mighty sea monster to swallow them, and they'll be protected in its belly. This should help us to see that the sea monster here, the big fish, is not just a random miracle.

It is a sign. Jesus speaks about the sign of the prophet Jonah. It's important to recognize

that this sign of the prophet Jonah was already a sign even before Christ related it to his resurrection.

Jesus is taking up the meaning of this existing sign and relating it to something fuller within his own ministry. James Pajon has observed the theme of being swallowed by a great sea monster and then disgorged later on. In Jeremiah chapter 51, in verse 34 of that chapter, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me, he has crushed me, he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me like a monster, he has filled his stomach with my delicacies, he has rinsed me out.

And then in verses 44 to 45, And I will punish Bel in Babylon and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed. The nation shall no longer flow to him, the wall of Babylon has fallen. Go out of the midst of her, my people.

Let everyone save his life from the fierce anger of the Lord. Later on in that chapter we are told that Babylon would sink into the sea. Already then we can see that elements of the story of Jonah can be read as an allegory of the story of Israel.

The unfaithful prophetic nation that is bringing the storm upon the region is about to be thrown into the sea of the Gentiles where it will be swallowed up by the big fish of Babylon. Yet this big fish has been appointed by the Lord precisely in order to rescue the prophet and to bring it back and to set it on its mission once more. The story of Jonah then was already a sign but Jesus uses it as a sign of his own mission in Matthew chapter 12 verses 39 to 40.

But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Later on in Luke chapter 11 verse 30, For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

There Jesus suggests that Jonah was a sign not just to his own people but also to the people to whom he was sent in Nineveh. What might they have taken from his sign? Perhaps for them as for Israel, the sign of Jonah was a sign of the Lord's power over natural forces and also a symbol of his power over all of the nations. As the geopolitical order is thrown into a tempest the Lord is sovereign over that tempest and he can establish a power within that to rescue his people.

Jonah's sign is a symbol of exile and return but also a symbol of death and resurrection. In the life of the people of God this would take the form of exile and then being disgorged by Babylon and sent back to the land. In the case of Christ, Christ goes to the deeper exile of the grave itself and rises up from the grave overcoming that exile.

The Lord is God not just of the waves of the sea nor just of the powers of the nations but

over death and the grave themselves. In Matthew chapter 4 verses 36 to 39 we find a story of Jesus that clearly looks back to the story of Jonah and which also looks forward fittingly to the story of his death and resurrection and leaving the crowd they took him with them in the boat just as he was and other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose and the waves were breaking into the boat so that the boat was already filling but he was in the stern asleep on the cushion and they woke him and said to him teacher do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea peace be still and the wind ceased and there was a great calm.

The book of Jonah has also been associated with the day of atonement it is traditionally read on that day by the Jews. We might see already in this chapter some of the themes of the day of atonement in the casting of lots in which Jonah is selected and cast out of the ship for instance we might see a parallel with the scapegoat. In chapter 3 there will be mourning and confession of sins.

Shortly after Jonah will build a booth associated with the feast of tabernacles. James Bajon first brought these connections to my attention. A question to consider In Acts chapter 27 Paul sails for Rome and there is a storm followed by a shipwreck.

How does Luke's telling of the story of Paul's shipwreck in the book of Acts play upon the background of the story of Jonah? What can we learn from the similarities and the differences? When reading Jonah chapter 2 we might wonder how it fits into the larger narrative. There is no statement of repentance on Jonah's part and his prayer from the belly of the big fish has a number of elements that seem odd in its context. The prayer is framed on the one side by the big fish's swallowing of Jonah and on the other side with his vomiting of him out.

One of the things that will help us to understand this prayer is to consider some of the wells of symbolism that it is drawing upon. A clue to one aspect of this is seen in a very strange detail at the beginning of the account. At the end of chapter 1 the big fish was described as a male fish.

At the beginning of chapter 2 the word that's used is the word for a female fish. What accounts for the shift between the two? Perhaps the best way to understand this detail is to stand back from the text and to notice some of the symbolism that is taking place. James Bajon has observed the way that in Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 44 Bell in Babylon that swallows Israel is described using masculine language.

However Babylon itself later on in that chapter is described as feminine. As a predatory entity Babylon is male. As a place where Israel ends up it's female.

More interesting still is the way that Amy Erickson observes some of the symbolism of birth that's taking place here. She remarks upon the strangeness of the expression out of the womb of Sheol. She goes on to observe other language in verses 1 to 6 that is

elsewhere used in the context of birth.

She suggests that the person crying in distress might also make us think of birth pangs. The realm of Sheol here is described in a way that has connotations not just of death but also of birth and such connections are found elsewhere in scripture. The infant child is knit together in the lowest parts of the earth in Psalm 139 for instance.

Erickson argues that we should think of Jonah here as enwoomed. I have already noted the way that this story is one that evokes the events of exile and then return. The notion of such a movement being described as one of death and resurrection and also as one of birth fits well with the way that the events of the exodus are described.

The exodus is presented as a sort of birth from the belly of Egypt. Now there's going to be another birth from the belly of Babylon. On the subject of the exodus, Erickson notes over a dozen points of contact between the language of this passage and the language of the Song of the Sea in Exodus chapter 15 verses 1 to 19.

The term salvation, he threw them into the sea or threw me into the deep in Jonah. The red or red sea in the reference to the reed in verse 5. Two different terms for the deep or the deeps and then a reference to going down. The heart of the sea or the seas.

The earth as the underworld. Passing over, swallowing, loyalty. The Lord's holy abode or sanctuary.

Dry ground. Interestingly there is also a reference to three days journey immediately after the Song of the Sea in Exodus chapter 15 verse 22. We should also notice the way that this passage evokes the situation of Genesis chapter 1 at the very beginning of the creation prior to things being formed out of the great deep.

Jonah's being returned to this de-created state out of which he'll be brought forth once more. Throughout the book of Jonah there are many elements of the original creation. We have sea monsters, we have the deep, we have storms and great winds, we have beasts, we have the burning sun, we have a weed in this chapter and we have a gourd in chapter 4. The great drama of Jonah is taking place within the world of the most basic elements.

As in the story of Noah and the Ark, he's a man adrift in the deep. Like the dove in that story, he's seeking for dry land. We might also recognize the importance of the themes of dry land in the story of the Red Sea Crossing which is also alluded to here and the story of the original creation where the dry land is established on the third day.

One of the interesting things about Jonah's prayer is the way that it speaks about a former deliverance. I called out to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me. After the belly of Sheol I cried and you heard my voice.

It seems likely that he sees the big fishes swallowing of him as the first token or sign of the Lord's fuller deliverance. It's the sign that his prayers have been heard and he anticipates that the Lord will bring this salvation through to completion. He begins by speaking about the Lord in the third person.

I called out to the Lord and then shifts to the second person and you heard my voice. Describing his former situation to the Lord, he multiplies the different ways that he describes the waters of the deep. The deep, the waters, the billows, the flood, the waves, the heart of the seas.

Beyond the language of the deep, he also speaks about subterranean themes. The roots of the mountains going down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever. Descending into the pit, he is undertaking a passage into the realm of death, into the order that preceded the days of creation and also a sort of return to the womb.

The language of the Psalms is not far in the background of Jonah's prayer here. We might think of Psalm 120 verse 1. In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. Was Psalm 18 verses 4 to 6. The cords of death encompassed me, the torrents of destruction assailed me, the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called upon the Lord, to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice and my cry to him reached his ears. Jonah is making his own prayer here, but he's using the language of the Psalms in order to do so.

The reference to the reed at the end of verse 5 is a surprising one. Translated as weeds plural in most translations, the term is actually singular and it also relates to the language that's used of the Reed Sea or the Red Sea in the book of Exodus. Kevin Youngblood observes that this is another surprising detail of the text.

Reeds are not usually associated with the sea, they are more typically associated with fresh waters. He suggests that taken with a term that would typically translate as river in verse 3, there's a reference here to a river ordeal. He writes that the descent that Jonah is experiencing ends up at the same place, the river, where judgment by river ordeal takes place to confirm Jonah's guilt and the propriety of his being confined in Sheol.

The mention of the reeds enhances the imagery of the river ordeal as Jonah finds himself bound and yanked down by the entangling river plants. He also observes that language of being enclosed, enveloped and wrapped all evoke a process of Jonah being wrapped in grave clothes and buried in a tomb. The prayer of Jonah is a response of thanksgiving to deliverance.

From the deep, Jonah calls out to the Lord, seeking his holy temple. Verse 7 describes the Lord's hearing and answering of Jonah's prayer just as his life is fainting away. While there is no call to praise within this prayer of deliverance, it does move towards a

commitment to pay vows to the Lord and also to worship the Lord in his temple.

The Lord addresses the fish that he has appointed. We might think of the fish here as a sort of leviathan, a great and terrible sea monster who is nevertheless under the rule of the Lord. The fish vomits Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah, whose name means dove, moving from the engulfing chaos of the deep to the dry land at the end of chapter 2 does seem very fitting. One of the questions that the interpreter of Jonah chapter 2 will have to face is raised by verse 8. Jonah speaks of those who pay regard to vain idols forsaking their hope of steadfast love. About whom might he be speaking here? Is he thinking about the pagan sailors of chapter 1? That might invite us to compare and contrast their calling upon the Lord and Jonah's calling upon the Lord.

In light of such a comparison, many commentators do not have a favourable impression of Jonah's prayer here. A question to consider, what is your impression of Jonah's prayer? To what extent should it be regarded as sincere? Should we perceive a subtext in verse 8 either referring to the pagan sailors or to the pagans of the city of Nineveh? In Jonah chapter 3 we have the second sending of Jonah and now he goes directly to the city of Nineveh. The call of chapter 3 verse 2 is virtually identical to that of chapter 1 verse 2, only slight variations from cry out against to cry out to.

Perhaps we should take Jonah's compliance on this occasion as a sign of his repentance, although what happens later in chapter 4 may suggest that the situation is more complicated. The Lord describes Nineveh as that great city. We have already seen a great wind, a great fear, a great tempest, another great fear, and then a great fish, and later we will see a great evil and a great joy.

In verse 3 the description of the city slightly varies from the description of the Lord in verse 2. It is described as a great city to or for God or the gods. The point here may be to emphasise its size, as Walter Wolfe suggests a comparison between this description of the city of Nineveh and the description of Nimrod in Genesis chapter 10 verse 9, where Nimrod was described as a mighty hunter before the Lord. Fittingly, Nimrod is also the person who founded the city of Nineveh.

Alternatively, it may emphasise the city's importance to God or the gods. If the latter, then the presence of many shrines and temples within the city might be in view. If the former, then perhaps it is designed to set Nineveh apart from other cities.

Others have seen here a reference to God's possession of the city, the great city that belongs to God. God has rightful dominion over the city. The description of the city as a journey or visit of three days seems quite hyperbolic.

A single day of walking would probably take a person about 20 miles, and if they were

walking for three days, 60 miles. It stretches credulity, especially when we have archaeological evidence, to say that the city of Nineveh at that time would be anywhere remotely near 60 miles across. Indeed, from what we know of its historical size, it seems likely you would have been able to walk all the way across it in a single afternoon.

Others have suggested that this might refer to a walk around the periphery of the city, while less of an extreme claim. This still seems quite unrealistic. Many scholars see this as a fantastical and hyperbolic detail that is suggestive of a sort of fairy tale account.

Other commentators have suggested that what we have here is a metropolitan district, including a number of cities of which Nineveh was the chief. The whole area takes on the name of Nineveh and takes about three days to traverse. A further possibility is raised by Donald Wiseman in a Tyndale Biblical Archaeology lecture from 1977.

Douglas Stewart summarises this position. It's quite possible that the issue at hand is what Wiseman calls the ancient oriental practice of hospitality, whereby the first day is for arrival, the second for the primary purpose of the visit, and the third for return. Wiseman outlines the relevant Mesopotamian evidence for political as well as prophetic visits of men from one city-state entering another for specialist advice.

He concludes, there is therefore no difficulty in a prophet being received by the leaders of the city, though he would probably have had to establish his bona fides first. Accordingly, Nineveh was undoubtedly a place Jonah, like any other emissary, had to enter and leave according to accepted protocol. The story, of course, does not provide us with the details of how this was done, but we may assume that his first and third days involved meetings and explanations, perhaps even formal hearings.

He may even have presented gifts to city officials upon his arrival, as was the custom in the case of official state visits, though his contacts may have been less formal and less high level. If Stewart and Wiseman are right, then the next verse suggests that he got his mission straight underway in the first day of his visit. One of the important things that the three days journey would do is connect the city of Nineveh with the big fish of the preceding two chapters.

Jonah's message is that within 40 days, Nineveh shall be overthrown. It is also possible to read this as it will be transformed. Whichever it is, the status quo in Nineveh cannot continue.

The fact that the city received such an announcement with an attached window of time holds out the real possibility that the city is being given time to repent. For why would God tell them any of this if there was no way positively for them to respond and to avert at least some of the crisis? In Jeremiah chapter 18 verses 7 to 10, the Lord had said, If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will

relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

The words of the Lord are relational. They challenge people to respond. They are not just bare predictions of what will occur.

The response of the people of Nineveh is a remarkable one. They call for a fast and put on sackcloth, every single one of them. When the word reaches the king, he takes things even further.

Presumably Jonah had not met the king at this point, perhaps because he was just in the early stages of his visit. The king comes down from his throne, removes his royal robes, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes. And although the people of Nineveh had already independently committed themselves to a fast, he issues a proclamation to back it up and extends it even further.

In addition to a fast for all human beings, he includes every single animal. All cattle and all sheep must refrain from eating as well. Not just human beings, but animals must be clothed in sackcloth.

All of the people of Nineveh are instructed by the king to cry out to the Lord and to repent of their evil and of their violence. We might think back to the story of the flood here, to the violence and the corruption that was general and that led to the destruction of all human flesh. We might also think to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the violence that went up to the Lord and led to him coming down to destroy the city.

The question now is whether judgment will be able to be averted in this particular case. Verse 9 might be an amalgam of two different verses in the Old Testament. Exodus chapter 32 verse 12 Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

Moses' intercession for the people after their sin with the golden calf. And then 2 Samuel chapter 12 verse 22. David's words.

He said, While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. For I said, Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live? On this occasion, the city is indeed spared. The Lord relents of his anger and does not destroy the city as he said he would do.

Some commentators wonder whether part of Jonah's anger is that his prophecy did not come to pass, suggesting that he was a false prophet. This, however, does not seem to be the true reason. Far more significant, perhaps, is the fact that in sparing Nineveh, the Lord is sparing the ones who will destroy Israel in just a few decades' time.

Perhaps Israel was supposed to learn from the example of the Ninevites, who responded so readily to the message of Jonah. Prophets had been speaking to Israel for many years and yet they had not responded as they ought. We might think here of Jesus' statements in Luke chapter 11 verses 30 to 32.

For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

And behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. I've already noticed some of the parallels to the events of the flood and also of Exodus chapter 32 with Israel's sin concerning the golden calf and Moses' intercession for the people. Those two accounts are already connected.

And here we have a text that reflects upon the possibility of repentance in such a general judgment that is coming upon the people. As in those two accounts, there is a significant period of 40 days. The rain would come for 40 days and 40 nights upon the earth.

Moses was upon the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. There will be a direct reference to a verse given in the context of the story of the golden calf in Jonah chapter 4. One of the more interesting features of this chapter is the reference to the animals who are brought into the picture in a surprising way. Just as we don't usually have stories of ships at sea, as we do in chapter 1 of Jonah, there aren't many stories in the Old Testament where animals are so directly involved.

And their involvement here takes very surprising forms. They also have to refrain from eating. They also have to wear sackcloth and ashes.

They also have to cry out to God. In the reference to animals alongside human beings in the context of a general judgment, we should naturally think of the story of the flood. In many ways, this is a reversal of the flood narrative.

The evil and the violence of the city has gone up to the Lord. The city has been condemned to utter destruction. And yet the Lord relents after the people repent.

A question to consider, what lessons might Israel have learned from the story of the Ninevites? The Book of Jonah is a two-panelled book. Chapters 1 and 2 map on to chapters 3 and 4. There are two calls of Jonah, one in chapter 1 and one in chapter 3. Two cases of pagans repenting at his teaching, in chapter 1 with the pagan sailors and in

chapter 3 with the Ninevites. And then in chapters 2 and 4, Jonah speaks with the Lord.

As we read the Book of Jonah, there should be a number of questions that are in the back of our minds at this point, that have not yet been answered by the text. The big question at the beginning is, why does Jonah run away? What is he hoping to achieve by this? It seems to be a futile endeavour to flee from the Lord, who's the creator of the heavens and the earth. Various suggestions have been proposed for this.

Perhaps Jonah is a selfish nationalist and does not want to see the word of God going to a pagan nation. Perhaps he's worried that the pagan nation will show up his compatriots for their failure to respond to the prophetic word. Rabbi David Foreman makes the convincing argument that the real issue for Jonah is the apparent failure of the Lord's justice, something that comes to the foreground in verses 2 and 3. It's important here to notice the verses behind Jonah's statement.

In Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7, after the events with the golden calf, the Lord appeared to Moses and declared his name. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. We see this passage from Exodus chapter 34, also used in Nahum chapter 1 verses 2 to 3. We should here note the contrast between the statement that Jonah makes and the Lord's initial declaration, and also the differences between Jonah's statement and that of the book of Nahum.

While the original statement speaks of the Lord's faithfulness or truth, that element is dropped from Jonah's words. Furthermore, in Jonah's statement, the reference to God not clearing the guilty and visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children and the children's children is not mentioned. Instead, the Lord relents from disaster.

This again contrasts with Nahum's statement, where Nahum emphasizes those elements of the original statement that have to do with the Lord's justice and punishment. For Jonah, then, the problem seems to be a theological one. His issue seems to be that in holding out this possibility of easy repentance to this nation, after all of its violence, evil and cruelty, the Lord is simply jettisoning his justice.

Once we appreciate this, a number of the other elements of the book start to make more sense. Jonah in chapter 1 was not just fleeing his mission, he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. If God was going to offer repentance to this city of Nineveh, Jonah simply wasn't interested in being in a moral universe that operated according to such divine laws.

Where's the justice? As Rabbi Foreman observes, this helps us to understand Jonah's

actions. When he's fleeing, he's fleeing from the Lord's presence. He goes down into the inside of the boat and tries to fall asleep.

When he's singled out in the casting of lots, he's quite prepared to be cast into the sea. He's seeking to escape from God in any way that he can, whether that's running away from the realm of the Lord's special dealings, whether it's a matter of going into the insensibility of sleep, or even of going to death in being thrown into the water. Jonah simply isn't interested in operating in a world where there seems to be no justice.

Here we might think back to the reference to Jonah's prophecy in 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25, where Jonah prophesied about the extension of the territory of Israel during a time of incredible evil. As a prophet, Jonah seems to be doomed to deliver messages that lead to blessing upon wicked people. As we read the account of Jonah here, we should also be thinking about some of the other texts that lie in the background.

We've noted the story of the golden calf in Exodus chapter 32 to 34. There Moses intercedes for the people. Indeed, he goes so far as to offer to be blotted out of the Lord's book in order that the people might be saved.

The Lord there relents of the disaster that he was going to bring upon the people, even though they are still judged. There is a contrast that we can draw between Jonah and Moses. Moses wants to give up his life, but wants to give up his life to save the people.

He's interceding for the people in order that the Lord might relent from the disaster that he was going to bring upon them. Jonah also wants to give up his life, but he wants to give up his life because it seems to him that the Lord's justice has been extinguished for the sake of his compassion. He does not intercede for the city of Nineveh, hoping that the Lord might relent from the disaster that he was going to bring upon it.

Rather, he intercedes, as it were, that the Lord might relent from his relenting. Kevin Youngblood observes another significant set of parallels and contrasts in 1 Kings chapter 19 in the story of Elijah. There another prophet flees to the desert, sits under a tree, is despondent and seeks death, and the Lord asks him the same question twice, just as the Lord asks Jonah here about his anger.

There the Lord asks Elijah, what are you doing here, Elijah? And then as the Lord does to Jonah here, the Lord delivers a message to Elijah through nature. The contrast between Elijah and Jonah should stand out to us. Elijah laments his failure, Jonah his success.

Another curious intertext with the story of Jonah is found in Genesis chapter 4 in the story of Cain. In Jonah chapter 4, the Lord asked Jonah about his anger. The Lord does the same in the story of Cain.

When his brother Abel's sacrifice is accepted, but his is not, Cain's response is to be angry. The Lord speaks to Cain concerning this. Why are you angry and why has your

face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door.

Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. Cain, of course, ends up killing his brother and he is cursed from the ground as a result. The ground would no longer yield to Cain its strength, just as Jonah's gourd withered.

So Cain would find that his working of the ground was futile. Cain had gone away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden, in verse 16 of chapter 4 of Genesis. Like Cain, in chapter 1, Jonah had fled from the presence of the Lord and now he has gone out towards the east, much as Cain was a marked man by the Lord.

Jonah was a marked man by the Lord. Chapter 1 is a great pursuit narrative, the Lord chasing down the fleeing Jonah as his quarry. Perhaps in paralleling Jonah with Cain, the original murderer, we're seeing something of Jonah's willingness to take the lives of others into his own hands.

He wants to be the means of destruction upon the Ninevites and when the Lord relents from destroying them, he will intercede for their destruction. Apparently hoping that the Lord would register and act in terms of his displeasure at the sparing of the Ninevites, Jonah goes out towards the east of the city and makes a booth for himself, sitting there under a shade, hoping that the Lord would change his mind again and destroy the city. Perhaps we could see some similarity between Jonah's booth and the city that Cain builds when he leaves the presence of the Lord and goes towards the east.

The Lord does not give a direct verbal response to Jonah. Rather he gives him a sort of physical parable and a sign. The sign takes the form of a plant.

We don't know exactly the kind of plant but it's most likely a gourd. Jonah already had some shade in his booth but the plant gives him some shade outside. Rabbi Foreman draws our attention to the way that this gourd is described.

It is literally there to save him from his evil. Rabbi Foreman observes a chain of the uses of the word for evil throughout the book of Jonah. In chapter 1 verse 2, Nineveh's evil.

In chapter 1 verse 8, the evil of the storm. In chapter 3 verse 8, the repenting of Nineveh's evil ways. In chapter 3 verse 10, the Lord repenting of the evil that he was going to bring upon the city.

In chapter 4 verse 1, Jonah feels a terrible evil. The evil that he feels is seen in verse 2. The fact that the Lord renounced the evil that he was going to do to the city. And then in verse 6, the Lord grants Jonah this plant to save him from his evil.

While we can see the plant as just providing Jonah with shade, it's quite like there's

something more going on here. The plant is a lesson that's being given to Jonah. And it will be through that lesson that he'll be saved from his evil.

What is his evil? It's his sense of deep displeasure at the Lord's sparing of Nineveh. The Lord's relenting from the evil that he was about to bring upon the city. The plant seems to be almost miraculous.

It grows up very suddenly to the point that it's able to provide Jonah with ample shade. But at the arrival of the dawn the next day, a single worm attacks the plant and the whole plant withers. The whole narrative of Jonah seems to be set in the world of Genesis chapter 1 and 2 in particular.

There are elementary things. There's the winds. There's the waters.

There's the deep. Man and beast. The sea creatures.

The worm. And the Lord is sovereign over these forces. The Lord appoints the big fish.

The Lord appoints the plant. The Lord appoints the worm. And the Lord appoints the scorching east wind.

All of these forces, from the great force of the east wind, to the smallest creature like the worm, has an orchestrated part to play within the Lord's purpose. There are no rogue forces in God's universe. We might see the worm here perhaps as a sort of miniature serpent.

The worm eats the dust. The worm is a bringer of death. It's associated with the eating of dead bodies.

And of course, like the serpent, it crawls upon its belly. The east wind is used on a number of occasions in the prophetic literature as a symbol of destruction that comes upon people and nations. Hosea chapter 13 verse 15.

Though he may flourish among his brothers, the east wind, the wind of the Lord, shall come, rising from the wilderness, and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched, it shall strip his treasury of every precious thing. Ezekiel chapter 17 verse 10. Behold, it is planted.

Will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it? Wither away on the bed where it sprouted. Or chapter 19 verse 12. But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground.

The east wind dried up its fruit. They were stripped off and withered. As for its strong stem, fire consumed it.

People fainting under the scorching heat of the sun is also an image of the Lord's

judgment elsewhere in scripture. The connection of this with the sun rising and the dawn coming might also evoke some of the images of the day of the Lord as a day of judgment and destruction. The day of the Lord is, of course, a recurring image within the book of the Twelve.

One can imagine that Jonah would have taken the miraculous flourishing of the plant and its granting of shade to him as a sign of the Lord's favour towards him and the fact that maybe the Lord did see things his way and if he just waited long enough and the shade of the gourd would help him in this, he would see the destruction of the city, likely within the original timeline of 40 days. When the plant was suddenly destroyed, one can imagine his hopes being dashed. Once more, he expresses his desire to die.

It would be better for him to die than to live. The Lord here speaks to Jonah again and he asks him pretty much the same question as he asked back in verse 4. Do you do well to be angry for the plant? This creates a parallel between the plant and Nineveh. This provides a basis for the Lord teaching Jonah a lesson concerning his compassion and perhaps provides us with a way to reconcile the Lord's seemingly contrary attributes that are mentioned in Exodus chapter 34.

How can the Lord relent from evil and also be the one who does not spare the guilty and visits people's iniquity upon them? Jonah has been thinking in terms of justice. As Rabbi Forman observes, however, the plant does not have any right to its existence. By sheer justice, it will be removed from existence and when it is destroyed by the worm, on the grounds of justice, it would seem that no one has any right to complain.

The gourd is merely a gratuitous act of God's goodness, a creation out of nothing that gives the blessing of shade. Its existence is a good and positive thing, something for which Jonah himself is immensely grateful. Jonah has no claim over the plant.

He did not create it. He did not work for it. It is God's creature and he has the freedom to dispose of it as he wishes.

Nevertheless, Jonah rightly realizes that there is a goodness to its existence in its time. Jonah has been thinking in terms of strict justice, but now the Lord provides Jonah with a different way of looking at things, a way of looking at things in terms of the gratuity of their existence. As Rabbi Forman observes, from this perspective, the key question is not what are you entitled to, what consequences should you face for your acts? The question from this perspective is what could it become? What good could be realized through this creature? God is the God of justice, but he is also a God who sees things in categories beyond those of strict justice.

He sees his creatures in terms of their goodness in their time and what could be realized through them. Nineveh isn't merely a city filled with violence and evil. It is a city with more than 12 myriads of people who do not know their right hand from their left and

many cattle.

The final verse of the Book of Jonah is typically read as a rhetorical question, leaving Jonah and the hearer with a challenge to their typical way of viewing things, as if the Lord is inviting Jonah to see things from his perspective, to see the city of Nineveh, not so much in terms of its evil that it has done, but in terms of its sheer existence. Think a bit more carefully before wishing for such a great city to be snuffed out. More recently, however, a number of commentators have argued that the final verse of the Book of Jonah should not be read as a rhetorical question, but as a statement.

Amy Erickson translates it as follows, But as for me, I will not pity Nineveh, the great city, which has in it more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left and many animals. The message, then, would be symbolized by the gourd, just as the gourd was made to flourish for a time. So Nineveh was given time in which to flourish, and when its time was up, it would be destroyed.

This destruction of Nineveh is proclaimed in the books of Nahum and Zephaniah. Understood this way, the compassion of God is not denied. He really does spare Nineveh when it repents, but that compassion is not at the expense of his justice.

The time will come when Nineveh returns to its sins and it will be destroyed as the Lord had originally declared. It has had a stay of its execution. It has not escaped God's justice.

It seems to be a strange detail in the context. Although historically plausible, as the city of Nineveh was of that sort of size at the time, it is oddly specific. We can read in English the number as 120,000 persons.

The actual Hebrew, however, will be better translated as something like 12 myriads. Speaking of 12 myriads might make us think of Israel itself, and here we can see something more of the message that's being delivered through the gourd and through the events at Nineveh. This is not merely a story of the word of the Lord going to a pagan nation.

It's a story for Israel. Israel is supposed to recognize itself in this great city. Nineveh's 12 myriads should remind us of Israel's 12 tribes.

Through the message of Jonah, the Lord might be inviting his people to see in Nineveh a mirror of themselves. The Lord looks at them as he looks at Nineveh. He values their very existence.

Of course, Nineveh repented, but they did not. The other thing that we should recognize in this chapter is a symbol of the Lord's dealings with the forces of the geopolitical situation. The story provides a symbol for all of that.

There is an unfaithful Israelite prophet who's gone away from the presence of the Lord. He's in his booth, which we might think of as the city or perhaps the temple, and then the Lord causes this great gourd to spring up, a gourd that shades him from the heat of the sun. This gourd, as we have already seen, is associated with Nineveh and the Assyrians.

The Assyrians, as they rise up, are a means by which Israel is sheltered from the Arameans so that their territory could expand as it did according to the prophecy of Jonah during the reign of Jeroboam II. It is also a shelter from the burning heat of the sun in which James Bajon has suggested we should see the figure of Babylon. The scorching heat of Babylon would come upon the nation when the Assyrians were removed.

Babylon, of course, is also the big fish of chapter 1 and 2. The Lord appointed the big fish, the Lord appointed the plant, the Lord appointed the worm, and the Lord appoints the scorching east wind. The plant of Nineveh would be short-lived, but the Lord had a good purpose for it while it flourished. Just as the Lord pursued and taught his wayward prophet, so the Lord, through the message of the prophet, was going to pursue and to teach his wayward people Israel.

When thrown into the deep of the nations, or when facing the scorching east wind and the burning sun of Babylon, they should not be afraid. The Lord is the master of all of these forces. A question to consider.

How might reading the story of Jonah alongside the story of Noah and his ark help us to see even further lessons for Israel beyond those already mentioned?