

# OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

## Lesson 36 Part 2

### Jonah

#### Hebrew review *Aleph - Qoph*

I have always enjoyed going to baseball games. It is especially fun going when the home team has an overpowering pitcher who throws a lot of strikeouts. Our son enjoys scoring the games, and he writes a clear “K” in the box every time the



pitcher strikes out the batter.<sup>1</sup> When the home team has a pitcher who is throwing a lot of strikeouts, it is not uncommon to have fans in the stands post a big “K” near a scoreboard or clock so that it is clearly seen by all fans and players alike.

These “K’s” accumulate as the game goes on, each one placed neatly next to the preceding ones.

I am reminded of this because of part one in the study of Jonah. I introduced the prophet by confessing my mental block on calling Jonah, “Jonah.” For the last 31 years, at least, I have had a tendency to call Jonah, “Noah.” In the live presentation of last week’s lesson, I tried my best to keep Jonah in the divided kingdom, leaving Noah back in the pre-patriarchal age. While I was somewhat successful, my baseball umpire friend Mike Hudgins stayed in the back of class at the control booth mounting “N’s” each time I failed. To the right is what I saw from where I spoke. I used “Noah” three times rather than “Jonah.”



<sup>1</sup> It is unclear why the “K” is used. It comes from the end of the word “struck,” but whether it is because the “S” at the beginning of the word was being used for another abbreviation

Much of what we discussed last week was the historical background for Jonah and his day, with specific focus on Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. We also considered several basic themes of Jonah.

This week we explore several more themes, some particular details apparent in the Hebrew reading of the book, and the New Testament usages of Jonah, along with certain parallels found there.

## THEMES

As we consider these themes, some are throughout the book, others occur in clumps. Each theme deserves good prayerful study beyond this paper/lesson. This is a quick skim across the water to cover as much ground as practicable, still hoping to get at least some of the main thoughts across.

### *Fear*

The theme on “fear” is found in the first chapter of Jonah. The Hebrew word for fear (*yr’* – יָרָא) is used six times in just eleven verses:

- Jonah 1:5 – “Then the mariners were ***afraid***, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.”
- Jonah 1:9 – “And he [Jonah] said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I ***fear*** the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land.’”
- Jonah 1:10 – “Then the men were ***exceedingly afraid*** and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.” [*Yr’* is used twice in the Hebrew of this verse.]
- Jonah 1:16 – “Then the men ***feared*** the LORD ***exceedingly***, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.” [*Yr’* is also used twice in the Hebrew of this verse.]

If we focus first on the fear of the mariners, we can discern an increasing fear in the translation of the English Standard Version. In verse 5, the mariners were “afraid.” Then in verse 10, the men were “exceedingly afraid.” Finally in verse 16, the men “feared the LORD exceedingly.

The translators are trying to give significance to the way the Hebrew is written. In the Hebrew, the word for fear is combined and used in ways that give it an escalating emphasis as the story unfolds. In the Hebrew, we have a “growing

phrase” being used. In verse 5, the phrase is simply two words. In English, it takes two words for each Hebrew word, so we will put brackets around the Hebrew to see the two Hebrew words:

[The mariners] + [feared]

מִלְּחָמָה + יָרָא

Then when we get to verse 10, the Hebrew repeats the phrase of verse 5 (using “men” instead of “mariners,” but adds two more words to the phrase (hence the term “growing phrase”). Again we bracket the multiple English words above the basic Hebrew forms to show the growing fear:

[The men] + [feared] + [with a great] + [fear]

יָרָא + גָּדֹל + יָרָא + הָאֲנָשִׁים

Now do not get intimidated by this Hebrew; we will explain it more in a moment. But first, we need to get the final verse in (verse 16) and see the phrase get repeated word for word, but with a further addition:

[The men] + [feared] + [with a great] + [fear] + [the LORD]

יָרָא + יְהוָה + יָרָא + גָּדֹל + אֲנָשִׁים

This growing phrase shows a growing fear among the sailors. At first they were simply “afraid.” Even this simple fear was not small, however, for it caused each mariner to call out to his god and they were hurling cargo overboard to lighten the ship. The next time the phrase is used, it is with an addition of the men “fearing” their fear. That alone adds heightened fear, but the author does not leave it there. They were “fearing” with a “great fear.” This is because Jonah explained he was trying to flee from Yahweh, the God who made the sea (and dry land). The final usage comes after the men have thrown Jonah overboard. The sea has calmed and their ship is no longer in immediate danger of breaking apart and sinking, yet here their fear reaches its peak! The mariners are more afraid after seeing the immediate hand of God. They fear God more than they had feared their own death! Here the men change their god, change their behavior, and “offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows”!

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<sup>2</sup> I have re-ordered the Hebrew words in each of these verses so they make a little more sense to our English only readers. I have also used basic forms of each words and left out prefixes. If you consult a Hebrew Bible, the actual word order is apparent, and makes it even easier to see the growing phrase. A good explanation of this is also included in Magonet, Jonathan, *Form and Meaning, Studies in Literary Technique in the Book of Jonah*, (Sheffield Almond Press 1983) at 31-32. See also, Sasson, Jack, *The Anchor Bible: Jonah*

Now, having focused on the fear of the men, consider the fear of Jonah in verse 9. Jonah is fleeing from God, seeking to live apart from God's face/presence. Jonah has rejected his mission, and seems content to die. He sleeps the sleep of the dead (a deep sleep), while the ship threatened to break up.<sup>3</sup> Jonah fears Yahweh, but not with a fear that brings him to obedience or worship!

**Point for Home:** “*feared... feared exceedingly...*” (Jonah 1:5, 9, 10, 16).

Do you notice that the mariners have fear that drives them to Yahweh God in worship and dedication (vows)? A growing fear that comes from their circumstances evolves into a fear of God, finding out about his power and interest in them and their condition. The mariners respond in faith and commitment. Contrast Jonah. Jonah the prophet, a man entrusted with oracles from God, starts the story with fear of the LORD. Yet, Jonah's fear does not drive him to God, he is fleeing *from* God.

Fear is a powerful motivator. A tremendous amount of psychological research indicates the power of fear to motivate people individually and corporately. The question for us is, “In what direction do we let fear move us?” Do we allow fear to drive us from God or to God? We should always take our fears before God and let him be the source of our peace before the world, even as we fear or hold God in awe with worship. Let your fears drive you to God, not away from him!

### *The Ups and Downs of Jonah*

Our second theme to consider in this lesson centers on the ups and downs of this story. (To be more precise, we might wish to order that phrase as the “downs and ups” of Jonah!) The idea of “going up” and “going down” is found multiple times in Jonah, both with the actual Hebrew verbs that mean “go up” and “go down” and with pictures and images that convey the ideas. The core Hebrew verb used for “go up” is *alah* (עלה *‘lh*). The core Hebrew verb for “go down” is *yarad* (ירד *yrđ*).

These words and ideas are contrasted in Jonah multiple times. In the contrast we can see several important things. The contrast is set up at the very beginning of the story. Consider these early two verses:

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew here is fun. It turns the ship into a person (it “anthropomorphizes” the ship) and says the ship “threatened to be broken up” as if the ship was making a threat! The verb used is one of animate objects. Sasson points out that “Jonah's ship is granted the faculty to think.” Sasson at 97. This is why Jewish studies scholar Yvonne Sherwood translates this as the ship “becomes literally a nervous wreck.” Sherwood, Yvonne, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, (Cambridge 2000), at 251.

- Jonah 1:2 – “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has *come up* before me.”
- Jonah 1:3 – “But Jonah rose to flee from Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He *went down* to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and *went* on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.”

In verse 2, Jonah is called to “get up” or “arise” and “go” to Nineveh. Jonah is to get up and go because the evil of Nineveh has “come up” before the “face” (*pn*) of God. Rather than obey the instruction of God, Jonah got up to flee from God’s “face” (*pn*). He did so by “going down” to Joppa and then “going down” on board the boat (translated in English simply as “went,” even though it is our Hebrew verb for “going down”).

The image is one of Jonah getting the command of God to raise himself up to travel to Nineveh because the evil in Nineveh had risen before God’s face. Jonah was called to stand with God against the evil arising before God’s face/presence. Instead, Jonah rebelled. He got up, but not to stand with God against the evil of Nineveh. Jonah went down away from God. The author underscores this disobedience by using the verb “go down” twice in verse three, emphasizing that while the evil of Nineveh had come up before God’s face, Jonah was trying to flee God’s face.<sup>4</sup> Jonah wanted nothing to do with God and his mission!

In rapid succession, there are multiple references to Jonah going down, either directly using the Hebrew verb *yrd* or by using the picture image:

- Jonah 1:5 – “Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had *gone down* (*yrd*) into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.”
- Jonah 1:15, 17 – Not using the verb *yrd*, we still get a picture of Jonah going down as he is hurled overboard and sinks in the water, being then gobbled by a fish who swims down under the water.
- Jonah 2:5 – Again without the direct verb, the image is one of Jonah going down again as the waters “closed in over” him and the “deep surrounded” him.

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<sup>4</sup> In part one of this lesson we explored the idea of Jonah fleeing God’s presence. In that discussion, we pointed out that the Hebrew noun for God’s presence actually references his “face.” It is the same word used in contrast in these early two verses. The evil has come up before God’s face, while Jonah is seeking to flee God’s face.

- Jonah 2:6 – Here the verb is again used: “I *went down* (*yrd*) to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.”

Jonah in his rebellion sinks as low as anyone can. In his own imaging, he “hit rock bottom.” What he found, once he had sunk as low as he could, was Yahweh God. The reversal occurs here in chapter 2 verse 6; Jonah went down to the very roots of the mountains to the land under the sea, but there, God brought Jonah up!

- Jonah 2:6 – “yet you *brought up* (*alah*) my life from the pit, O LORD my God.”

The image is continued in 2:8 that as Jonah was going down and his life was ebbing away, Jonah’s prayer came up before God, so God brought Jonah up!

From this point on, Jonah does not go down any more, but he is still far from perfect. Jonah goes on to Nineveh and preaches God’s coming judgment. The people of Nineveh repent and God withholds his judgment for that time. Jonah then heads out to sit on the east side and pout. Here we find the last two verbs of “brought up”:

- Jonah 4:6 – “Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it *come up* (*alah*) over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort.”
- Jonah 4:7 – “But when dawn *came up* (*alah*) the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.”

The plant grows and by the hand of God comes up over Jonah. The next day we have the sun coming up, as it does each day!

Old Testament scholar and friend to our class, John Monson wrote in response to last week’s lesson,

Amazing how everyone and everything in the book is doing what it should do in response to Almighty God of Israel—except the Israelite prophet.

John makes an excellent point well illustrated by the contrast in this theme of going up and coming down. Evil arises to the face of God, as it should. Sailors sail, storms rage, fish swim, pagans are pagans, plants grow up, the sun rises. Everything and everyone seems to be doing what you expect except for Jonah. Jonah is the one in rebellion to his purpose. When he is to arise and stand with God, he goes down instead. He ventures down and down and down, to the lowest of the low. It is there the hand of God rescues him and lifts him up.

**Point for Home:** “Yet you *brought up* my life from the pit, O LORD my God” (Jonah 2:6).

How often have we heard it, “I didn’t turn around until I hit rock bottom.”? What is it about us that numbly refuses to be simply humble and obedient servants to the king? Are we afraid of him? Apparently not, if we are willing to run from him! I suspect for many, it is that we have more faith in ourselves than we do in our Lord. We are more confident that we will navigate a good course for our lives than God will. So often it is not until we drive ourselves into a deep pit of despair with no exit, that we finally relent and seek the saving Lord.

This week I was sent an email by a friend asking, “How does one turn over his life to God.” In my response, I told him that the process itself was relatively simple. The hardest part was accepting the *need* to turn your life over! Once we accept that we are insufficient, we are ready to turn to the all-sufficient Christ.

My cry to God is that I daily, moment by moment, seek to follow him rather than chart my own course. I do not want to find God from the depths. He has rescued me from many pits, and I want to have learned enough to seek him before the situation is so dire! I would rather be like the prophet Habakkuk *at the end of his book* (even he was quite the complainer at the start of his book!) where he proclaims that God, the Lord, is his strength. The Lord “makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Hab. 3:19). I want to walk with God leaping in the high places, not simply being lifted from the pits!

### *Death*

Among the many themes of Jonah, we consider one more before turning to the New Testament parallels and uses of the book. This is the image and theme of death.

In English we have a number of expressions that refer to death (the English teachers will call these “idioms”). We talk of being “six feet under” or we might reference the “big sleep.” Phrases like “bite the dust,” “breathe your last,” and “give up the ghost” pepper our language. We know what is meant when we say someone has gone to “meet their maker.”

Similarly in Hebrew, there are idiomatic expressions that reference and give images of death. A number of these are found in Jonah as he is in the belly of the fish. This part of the Jonah story is found in chapter two where Jonah “prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish” (Jonah 2:1). The prayer begins with Jonah crying out “of the belly of Sheol” (Jonah 2:2). “Sheol” was a Hebrew word for the underworld, the grave, or death.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the prophet Hosea, we read of the Lord ransoming his people from the “power of Sheol” as the prophet quizzes death, “O Sheol, where is your sting?” This is the reference point for Paul as

It may be said with certainty that in Hebrew thought the term referred to a place of the dead.... Sheol was used as an expression for being in the grave (Pss 18:6; 30:3; 49:14; Isa 28:15).<sup>6</sup>

Jonah is crying out from death in his prayer to God. Over and over the images of death are used:

- Jonah 2:3 – “You cast me into the deep...the flood surrounded me”
- Jonah 2:5 – “The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me.”
- Jonah 2:6 – “Weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.”
- Jonah 2:6 – “Yet you brought up my life from the pit...when my life was fainting away.”

For Jonah, the three days and nights in the belly of the fish were three days and nights where he wrote of himself as dead. In his rebellious flight from God’s face, he finally found himself away as far as might be found. He was as good as dead and considered himself beyond the land of the living. He had sought to flee from God by venturing to a foreign land, and he went further than even he planned! It was as if he went into death.

**Point for Home:** *“Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice”* (Jonah 2:2).

We do not need to consider this a treatise on death. Although he writes as if he were dead, Jonah is expressing himself as good as dead, or on death’s doorstep. Jonah experienced a deathbed conversion! In the process, God heard Jonah’s voice, and once Jonah returned to obedience, God rescued him. God was not through with Jonah because he still had something for Jonah to do! Jonah was still on mission with God to go to Nineveh.

God does not have a plan that is forced upon humanity. Jonah is a good example of “Plan B.” God had a mission for Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah fled to the point of death. Once there, Jonah relented and God put Jonah on a new plan to go to Nineveh—a Plan B! The story unfolds that Plan B worked quite well! Nineveh repented and God’s wrath was averted for that day.

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he translates “Sheol” into death writing to the Corinthians, “O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55).

<sup>6</sup> Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S., *Vol. 19B: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, (Broadman & Holman 2001), at 245.



Where are we on God's calling in our life? Have we refused his Plan A? Maybe even his Plan B? Do not despair. As long as there is a breath of life left, God is able to take a willing heart to His plan to accomplish His purposes. What we need to do is supply the willing heart!

It is to this death image that Jesus appeals in the New Testament. We turn now, therefore, to consider those parallels and references.

### NEW TESTAMENT ALLUSIONS TO JONAH

The New Testament gives us a number of references to Jonah and Nineveh, some clear, others more subtle. The clearest are passages like Matthew 12:38-41.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 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. 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. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

In this passage we see an obvious usage of the Jonah story by Jesus in replying to the request for a sign. While Jonah was figuratively dead (and literally dead to the world!), Jesus would truly be dead for three days and nights in the heart of the earth. This sign, of course, happened after the crucifixion with the resultant resurrection for Christ as he was "brought up" by God from the grave.

The illustration Christ gives goes a bit further though. Not only is Jesus similar to Jonah in the three-days-and-nights aspect, but Jesus is truly greater than Jonah, and so the people should consider Nineveh and repent! Jonah, the fugitive from God, who never really had God's heart for the foreign people, was effective nonetheless because the people of Nineveh repented. Jesus was not a fugitive from God. He was not recalcitrant in his mission. Jesus is *not* a parallel to Jonah (even though he would suffer death for three days as Jonah did figuratively). Jesus was fully on mission with God to preach to those whose sins had risen before the Almighty's face. Jesus was not simply preaching to Nineveh; he was laying down his own life *for* Nineveh. Yet even in this reality, the Ninevites were more responsive to God than many of the scribes and Pharisees hearing Jesus.

This same story is related in Luke 11:29-32. In the Luke account, Jesus speaks bluntly calling the generation before him “an evil generation.” “Evil” is a key word in the book of Jonah. The Jonah story begins with the “evil” of the Ninevites coming up before God (Jonah 1:2). Then “evil” comes upon the mariners because of Jonah (Jonah 1:7, 8). The ruler of Nineveh calls on each person to repent and “turn from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8). God sees them turn “from their evil way” and relents from the disaster he was bringing upon them (Jonah 3:10).

Jesus again brought up the sign of Jonah when probed for a sign by a group of Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16:1-4.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed.

Beyond these direct references to Jonah, there are a number of interesting and thought provoking matters to consider. First, as we referenced in the last lesson, Jesus the Galilean fit well as one to speak on Jonah. Jonah was from “Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25), which was also a town in Galilee, of the tribe of Zebulun (Josh. 19:13). Gath-Hepher was only about five miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

In reviewing the last lesson, John Monson (who is always geographically savvy) pointed out the New Testament references to Joppa that stand in contrast to the Jonah story. For Jonah, Joppa was the dropping off place. Jonah fled Galilee to go to non-Israelite Joppa, and catch a ship to avoid preaching to the pagans in Nineveh. Peter is in Joppa when Cornelius sends for him (Acts 10). Peter is not suspecting this call from Cornelius, who was the first Gentile convert to the church. Peter is prepared to preach to the Gentile only because God sent a vision to Peter while Peter was in Joppa. In the vision, Peter sees a sheet descending from heaven with all sorts of unclean animals. Peter is told to eat, and he recoils, explaining he has never eaten un-kosher food. Peter is reprimanded, being told, “What God has made clean, do not call common!” (Acts 10:15).

As well versed as Peter was in Scripture, and remembering no doubt Jesus’ lessons about Jonah, Peter must have chuckled over God having him in Jonah’s port city where Jonah fled from God, even as God was calling Peter to preach Jesus to the first Gentile converts. It explains why when Peter recounted the story, he was always quick to relate that it happened in Joppa! (Acts 11:5, 13).

**Point for Home:** “Jonah...went down to Joppa” (Jonah 1:3); “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision...” (Acts 11:5).

Whenever we read stories like Jonah, especially when we have allusions to the stories in other parts of the Bible, it is easy to find others and ourselves in the stories. Elements may illuminate and give us insight into ourselves and the stories, but we must be cautious when we do this, because any such approach can also produce diversions. For example, Jesus spoke of the sign of Jonah, but never claimed to **be** a Jonah.

Some scholars believe the Jonah story to be an illustration with Israel as Jonah and Nineveh as the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Israel was called to be a light to the nations, but was living in rebellion to God. The Gentiles were rebellious, living without direct revelation of God, but repented upon receipt of God’s word.

It is natural for us to see the types and images that relate to the things we see and study. We can use the principles in the text to help us better understand who we are and what God is doing. We just need to exercise caution in doing so.

SO>>> that said, who are you in the Jonah saga? Are you God’s co-worker? If so, when he says “Go,” are you a Peter who goes or a Jonah who flees? Do you have fear of the mariners that drives you to God or Jonah’s fear that drives him from God? Are you the Ninevites called to repentance who turn to God or Jonah who begrudgingly finally manages to do God’s will, but not without pouting and bringing on personal suffering in the process?

I suspect we can relate to most, if not all of these roles. The most important thing is to be moving in the right direction. God caused the plant to grow up over night, but most of us he grows up over a lifetime! (In fairness, he also protects us from the worms that would destroy us!) So we should take these lessons and teach them. We should seek to honor God in our actions, hear his voice, and respond in faith! Let us learn from the sign of Jonah and the Ninevites!

### **WANT MORE?**

Practice your Hebrew letters this week. See if you know the ones we have learned thus far. It is our goal to learn the last three letters in our lesson next week!

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Stek, J. H., “Biblical Typology Yesterday and Today,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5 (1970): 133-62.