

Jonah

1

Summary: *Jonah 1 opens with a divine commission that the prophet immediately refuses. God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against its wickedness, but Jonah flees in the opposite direction — boarding a ship bound for Tarshish (the western edge of the known world). God hurls a great storm upon the sea. The terrified sailors cast lots to discover who has brought this calamity; the lot falls on Jonah. He confesses his flight from the LORD and instructs them to throw him overboard. After exhausting every alternative, the sailors comply, and the sea grows calm. The chapter closes with the sailors offering sacrifices and vows to the LORD, while God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter's most striking feature is the inversion of prophetic narrative: pagan sailors prove more pious than God's own prophet. While Jonah sleeps below deck, the sailors each cry out to their own gods. When they discover the source of the storm, they resist throwing Jonah overboard — trying to row back to shore first. They even pray to the LORD before casting Jonah into the sea, asking not to be held guilty for innocent blood. Meanwhile, Jonah — the one who 'fears the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' — runs from that God's direct command. The Hebrew verb yarad ('to go down') tracks Jonah's descent: he goes down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the inner hold, and will soon go down into the sea and into the fish. The name Jonah (Yonah, 'dove') may evoke Hosea 7:11 where Ephraim is called a 'senseless dove' that flees to Assyria and Egypt.*

Translation Friction: *The verb hitel (from tul, 'to hurl') in verse 4 describes God hurling the storm, using the same root that describes the sailors hurling cargo (v. 5) and eventually hurling Jonah (v. 15). This deliberate repetition was preserved by using 'hurled' consistently. The phrase lifnei YHWH ('from the presence of the LORD') in verses 3 and 10 is theologically loaded — Jonah is attempting to flee God's active presence, not merely His geographic territory. The sailors' question in verse 8 uses four interrogative clauses in rapid succession, reflecting their panic. The verb charash ('to be silent, to cease') in verse 11 describes the sea 'ceasing' or 'becoming silent' rather than merely calming.*

Connections: *Jonah's commission echoes prophetic call narratives throughout the Hebrew Bible, but uniquely features outright refusal. The storm-at-sea motif connects to Psalm 107:23-30. The lot-casting connects to Proverbs 16:33 ('The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD'). The sailors' conversion anticipates the book's central theme — God's mercy extending beyond Israel to the nations. Jonah's descent into the sea and the fish prefigures Jesus's three days in the tomb (Matthew 12:40).*

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²"Get up! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has risen before me." ³But Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship heading to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to travel with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. ⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and a violent storm arose on the sea so that the ship threatened to break apart. ⁵The sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest part of the vessel, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶The captain approached him and said, "What are you doing asleep? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps your god will take notice of us so that we do not perish." ⁷Then they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots so we may find out on whose account this disaster has come upon us." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸They said to him, "Tell us — on whose account has this disaster come upon us? What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And from what people are you?" ⁹He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰The men were overcome with fear and said to him, "What have you done?" — for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ¹¹They said to him, "What should we do with you so the sea will calm down for us?" — for the sea was growing more and more violent. ¹²He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea, and the sea will calm down for you, for I know that this great storm has come upon you because of me." ¹³Instead, the men rowed hard to reach the shore, but they could not, for the sea was growing more and more violent against them. ¹⁴Then they called out to the LORD and said, "Please, LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life, and do not hold us guilty of innocent blood, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased." ¹⁵They picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶The men feared the LORD with great fear, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The standard prophetic reception formula. Jonah ben Amittai is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet from Gath-hepher in the northern kingdom who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (8th century BCE). The name Yonah means 'dove,' and Amittai means 'my truth' or 'truthful' — ironic given Jonah's flight from his commission.
2. The double imperative *qum lekh* ('arise, go') conveys urgency. We rendered *qum* as 'Get up' to capture its colloquial force — this is not a polite request but a direct command. The phrase 'risen before me' (*aletah ra'atam lefanai*) uses the verb *alah* ('to go up, to ascend'), indicating that Nineveh's wickedness has ascended to God's attention like smoke rising. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the empire that would destroy the northern kingdom of Israel — making this commission personally and nationally threatening for an Israelite prophet.
3. The verb *yarad* ('to go down') appears twice — Jonah went down to Joppa and down into the ship — beginning a descent motif that continues through the chapter. The phrase *millifnei YHWH* ('from the presence of the LORD') is repeated twice in this single verse, emphasizing the futility and deliberateness of Jonah's flight. Tarshish is generally identified with a location in the far western Mediterranean (possibly Tartessus in Spain), representing the opposite direction from Nineveh, which lay to the east. Joppa (modern Jaffa/Yafo) was the main port on the Mediterranean coast of Israel.
4. The verb *hetil* (from *tul*, 'to hurl, to cast') is more forceful than merely 'sending' a wind — God physically hurls the storm. The same root recurs in verses 5, 12, and 15, creating a chain: God hurls the storm, the sailors hurl the cargo, and finally they hurl Jonah. The phrase 'the ship threatened to break apart' renders the vivid Hebrew idiom *ha'oniyah chishvah leshiver* — literally, 'the ship thought to be broken,' personifying the vessel as if it were terrified. This anthropomorphism of the ship contrasts with Jonah's unnatural calm below deck.
5. The verb *vatilu* ('they hurled') uses the same root as God's hurling of the storm in verse 4 — the sailors mirror God's action. The contrast between the sailors' frantic prayers and Jonah's deep sleep (*vayyeradam*, a word suggesting heavy, death-like sleep — the same root used of Adam's deep sleep in Genesis 2:21 and Sisera's fatal slumber in Judges 4:21) is deeply ironic. The sailors are more spiritually responsive than the prophet. *Yarketei hasefinah* ('the innermost parts of the vessel') indicates the hold or lower deck — Jonah has descended yet again, continuing the *yarad* motif.
6. The captain's command *qum qera* ('get up, call out') echoes God's own command to Jonah in verse 2 (*qum lekh... uqra*) — a pagan sailor unwittingly mirrors the divine commission. The verb *yit'ashshet* ('will think upon, will take notice') is rare, appearing only here in the Hebrew Bible. It may derive from a root meaning 'to be bright' or 'to shine,' suggesting divine attention or deliberation. The irony is sharp: a foreign captain urges Jonah to do what God commanded him to do — cry out.
7. The casting of lots (*goralot*) was a common ancient Near Eastern practice for discerning divine will. The wordplay on *nafal* ('to fall') — they 'cast' (lit. 'made fall') the lots and the lot 'fell' on Jonah — underscores that the outcome is divinely directed, not random. The word *ra'ah* here means 'disaster,'

calamity' rather than 'evil' in a moral sense — the sailors want to know who caused this crisis, not who among them is wicked.

8. The rapid succession of four questions (occupation, origin, country, people) reflects the sailors' desperation to understand who this man is and why the storm pursues him. The Hebrew stacks interrogatives with minimal connectives, creating a breathless interrogation. The questions move from the personal (your work) to the ethnic and national (your people), seeking any information that might explain the divine anger.
9. Jonah's confession is deeply ironic: he claims to 'fear' (yare) the LORD who made the sea — yet he is fleeing from that very God across that very sea. The term 'Hebrew' (Ivri) is used here as an ethnic identifier recognizable to foreigners, rather than 'Israelite,' which carried more covenantal and religious connotations. By identifying God as the maker of 'the sea and the dry land,' Jonah unwittingly condemns his own flight — there is no corner of creation beyond this God's reach.
10. The phrase *yir'ah gedolah* ('great fear') is a cognate accusative construction — literally, 'they feared a great fear.' The sailors' terror deepens when they learn the storm is not from a minor deity but from the God who made the sea itself. Their question 'What have you done?' is not a request for information (he has already told them) but an exclamation of horror — the same phrase used of sin and its consequences elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 3:13, 12:18).
11. The verb *yishtoq* means 'to be silent, to be still' — they are asking for the sea to fall silent, a more vivid image than mere calming. The phrase *holekh veso'er* ('going and storming') is a Hebrew construction indicating progressive intensification — the storm is not holding steady but actively worsening. This escalation forces the decision that follows.
12. Jonah uses the same verb *hatilu* ('hurl') that described God's hurling of the storm (v. 4) and the sailors' hurling of cargo (v. 5). The wordplay is deliberate: the solution to God's hurling is to hurl Jonah. Jonah's willingness to be thrown overboard is ambiguous — is it repentance, resignation, or a preference for death over obedience? The text leaves this open. He still does not say he will go to Nineveh.
13. The verb *vayachteru* ('they dug') literally means to dig or bore through — a vivid metaphor for the sailors straining at the oars as if digging through the waves. Rather than immediately throwing Jonah overboard, the pagan sailors first try to save him by rowing to shore. Their compassion for the prophet contrasts sharply with Jonah's later resentment toward Nineveh. The repeated phrase *holekh veso'er* ('going and storming') from verse 11 emphasizes the storm's relentless intensification.
14. The sailors now cry to YHWH specifically — not to their own gods as in verse 5. They have moved from polytheistic panic to direct address of Israel's God. Their prayer shows remarkable theological awareness: they acknowledge that YHWH acts according to His own will (*ka'asher chafatsta asita*, 'as you pleased, you have done'), and they fear the guilt of shedding innocent blood (*dam naqi*). The phrase 'innocent blood' echoes Deuteronomy 21:8-9, suggesting awareness (however imperfect) of Israel's God's moral demands.
15. The verb *vatilluhu* ('they hurled him') completes the hurl-chain begun in verse 4 (God hurled the storm) and continued in verse 5 (they hurled the cargo). Now the ultimate cargo — the disobedient prophet — is hurled overboard. The verb *va'ya'amod* ('stood still') literally means 'to stand' — the sea stood still from its fury (*mizza'po*). The contrast between the raging storm and the sudden stillness is dramatically abrupt in the Hebrew.
16. The phrase *yir'ah gedolah* ('great fear') appeared in verse 10 directed at the storm; here the same phrase is directed at YHWH — their fear has been redirected from the chaotic sea to the sovereign God. Their response — sacrifice and vows — constitutes genuine worship. The irony is complete: Jonah's disobedience has resulted in the conversion of pagan sailors. The verb *yare* ('to fear') used here echoes Jonah's own claim in verse 9 ('I fear the LORD'), but the sailors demonstrate the fear Jonah only professed.
17. The verb *vayeman* ('appointed') is distinctive to Jonah — it appears four times in this short book (here, 4:6, 4:7, 4:8), each time describing God sovereignly deploying elements of creation (a fish, a plant, a worm, a wind) as instruments of His purpose. It conveys purposeful commissioning rather than mere creation. The text says *dag gadol* ('a great fish'), not a whale — the species is unspecified. Jesus references this verse directly in Matthew 12:40, calling the fish a *ketos* (Greek for 'sea creature'). The 'three days and three nights' represents a complete period of time in ancient Near Eastern reckoning.

2

Summary: Jonah 2 contains the prophet's prayer from inside the great fish — a psalm of thanksgiving structured around descent into death and divine rescue. The poem is not a petition for future deliverance but a thanksgiving for deliverance already experienced: Jonah speaks as one who has already been saved from drowning. The imagery draws on deep mythological resonance — the waters of chaos, the belly of Sheol, the cosmic deep (tehom) — casting Jonah's experience as a passage through death itself. The chapter ends with Jonah's vow of thanksgiving and the fish vomiting him onto dry land.

What Makes This Remarkable: This prayer is rendered as poetry, preserving the parallelism and rhythm of Hebrew verse. The psalm is remarkably similar in structure and vocabulary to Psalms 18, 42, 69, and 120 — suggesting that Jonah prays using the liturgical language of Israel's worship tradition. The descent motif reaches its deepest point: Jonah descends to the roots of the mountains, to the bars

of the earth, to the very gates of Sheol. Yet precisely at the nadir, he declares 'you brought my life up from the pit.' The prayer conspicuously lacks any mention of Nineveh, repentance for his disobedience, or commitment to obey. Jonah thanks God for saving his life but does not address the mission he fled from.

Translation Friction: The verb qara ('to call, to cry out') in verse 2 echoes the same verb God used in commissioning Jonah (1:2) — Jonah finally 'calls out,' but to God for himself rather than to Nineveh on God's behalf. The word Sheol (v. 2) is left untranslated as the proper name of the realm of the dead rather than rendered as 'hell' or 'grave,' which carry connotations foreign to the Hebrew concept. The phrase 'the bars of the earth' (berichei ha'aretz, v. 6) envisions the underworld as a gated fortress — once inside, one cannot escape. The closing statement that the fish 'vomited' Jonah (vayaqe, v. 10) is deliberately undignified — the Hebrew verb is visceral and unrefined.

Connections: The psalm echoes Psalm 18:4-6 (distress and divine hearing), Psalm 42:7 (waves and breakers), Psalm 69:1-2 (waters up to the neck), and Psalm 120:1 (calling from distress). The descent-and-ascent pattern prefigures Christ's death, descent, and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). The phrase 'salvation belongs to the LORD' (v. 9) anticipates the book's climax — if salvation belongs to the LORD alone, He is free to extend it even to Nineveh.

¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish.

²He said:

"I called out to the LORD from my distress,
and he answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried for help,
and you heard my voice.

³You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the current surrounded me.
All your breakers and your waves
swept over me.

⁴I said, 'I have been driven away
from your sight.'
Yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.

⁵The waters closed in around me
up to my neck;
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶I sank down to the roots of the mountains;
the earth barred its gates against me forever.
But you brought my life up from the pit,
O LORD my God.

⁷When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.

⁸Those who cling to worthless idols
abandon their hope of faithful love.

⁹But I, with a voice of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will fulfill.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word dagah here is the feminine form of dag ('fish'), whereas chapter 1:17 used the masculine dag. Some scholars see this as a scribal variation; others suggest two different fish. Most likely it is simply a stylistic variation with no narrative significance. The phrase 'his God' (Elohav) is significant — despite his flight, Jonah has not abandoned his relationship with YHWH.
2. The psalm begins with the standard thanksgiving pattern: past distress, cry, divine response. The verb qara ('I called out') uses the same root God commanded in 1:2 — Jonah calls, but to God for rescue rather than to Nineveh for repentance. 'Belly of Sheol' (beten She'ol) equates the fish's belly with the realm of the dead. Sheol is the Hebrew concept of the underworld — the abode of the dead, not equivalent to the Christian concept of hell. We retain 'Sheol' as a proper noun. The shift from third person ('he answered me') to second person ('you heard') is characteristic of Hebrew psalms.
3. Jonah attributes his casting into the sea to God ('you cast me'), not to the sailors — theologically, the sailors were instruments of divine action. The phrase bilvav yammim ('in the heart of the seas') uses levav ('heart'), placing Jonah at the very center of the chaotic waters. The possessive 'your breakers and your waves' (mishbarekha vegalekha) identifies the storm waves as belonging to God — echoing Psalm 42:7 almost verbatim. The word nahar ('river, current') alongside yam ('sea') evokes the cosmic waters of ancient Near Eastern mythology.
4. The verb nigrashti ('I have been driven away') is passive — Jonah sees himself as expelled from God's presence, echoing his deliberate flight millifnei YHWH ('from the presence of the LORD') in chapter 1. The turning point akh ('yet, surely') introduces hope: despite being driven from God's sight, Jonah expresses confidence in seeing the temple again. The 'holy temple' (hekhal qodshekha) refers to the Jerusalem temple, the locus of God's visible presence on earth. The temple represents the opposite of Sheol — the place where one can stand in God's presence.
5. The phrase ad nephesh ('up to the soul/life/neck') means the water reached a life-threatening level — nephesh here carries its physical sense of 'throat, neck' rather than 'soul.' We render 'up to my neck' for clarity. Tehom ('the deep') is the primordial deep of Genesis 1:2, the chaotic waters that God subdued at creation — Jonah has sunk into the pre-creation abyss. The seaweed (suf) wrapped around his head is a vivid concrete detail amid the mythological imagery. The word suf may also evoke Yam Suf ('Sea of Reeds' — the Red Sea), connecting Jonah's experience to the Exodus.
6. This verse marks the nadir and the turning point. The 'roots of the mountains' (qitsvei harim) locates Jonah at the very foundation of the earth — the deepest possible point. The phrase bericheiha ba'adi le'olam ('its bars were against me forever') envisions the underworld as a fortress whose gates lock behind the dead. Yet precisely here, at the absolute bottom, comes the reversal: 'you brought my life up from the pit' (shachat). The Hebrew shachat means 'pit, destruction, corruption' — it is another name for Sheol, the grave. The verb ta'al ('brought up') is the exact opposite of yarad ('went down'), reversing the descent motif that began in chapter 1.
7. The verb hit'atef ('to grow faint, to be wrapped in darkness') describes Jonah's consciousness fading — his life-force (nephesh) growing dim. At the moment of near-death, he 'remembered' (zakharti) the LORD. In Hebrew, 'remembering' is not passive recollection but active turning — to remember God is to re-engage with Him. His prayer travels from the depths of the sea to God's holy temple, bridging the maximum distance between Sheol and heaven. This recalls Jonah's hope in verse 4 to look toward the temple again.
8. This verse contrasts idol-worshippers with those who turn to the LORD. The phrase havlei shav ('worthless idols' or 'empty vanities') uses hevel ('breath, vapor, vanity') — the same word that dominates Ecclesiastes. Those who worship emptiness 'abandon their chesed' — here chesed likely refers to God's faithful love that would otherwise be available to them. There is an implicit contrast with the sailors of chapter 1, who abandoned their own gods and turned to the LORD. The verse may be Jonah's self-justification — he, unlike idol-worshippers, has remembered the LORD.
9. Jonah's concluding declaration — yeshu'atah laYHWH ('salvation belongs to the LORD') — is the theological hinge of the entire book. If salvation belongs to the LORD alone, then He is sovereign over who receives it. This statement, intended as Jonah's personal praise, will be tested in chapters 3-4 when God extends that very salvation to Nineveh. The word todah ('thanksgiving') refers specifically to the thanksgiving offering — a sacrifice made in response to deliverance. The vow (neder) echoes the vows made by the sailors in 1:16.
10. The verb vayaqe ('it vomited') is deliberately unrefined — the Hebrew does not use a dignified word for Jonah's expulsion. The prophet is not gently deposited but forcibly ejected. The phrase 'dry land' (yabbashah) contrasts with the sea that has dominated the narrative — Jonah is restored to the realm of the living. That God 'spoke' to the fish (vayomer, the same verb used for God's speech to Jonah in 1:1) places the fish in the role of obedient servant — unlike Jonah, the fish does exactly what God commands.

3

Summary: *Jonah 3 records the most spectacularly successful prophetic mission in the Hebrew Bible. God's word comes to Jonah a second time, and this time he obeys. He enters Nineveh — described as a city of three days' journey — and delivers the shortest prophetic oracle on record: 'In forty days, Nineveh will be overturned.' The entire city responds with immediate, total repentance: from the greatest to the least, they fast and put on sackcloth, and the king himself descends from his throne, removes his royal robes, and sits in ashes. The king issues a decree extending the fast even to animals. God sees their repentance and relents from the disaster He had planned.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter's brevity is itself remarkable — the greatest revival in biblical history is told in ten verses. Jonah's oracle is only five Hebrew words (arba'im yom veNineveh nehpakhet). The verb nehpakhet ('overturned') is the same word used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25), yet it also means 'transformed, turned around' — creating a deliberate double meaning: Nineveh will be either destroyed or transformed. As it turns out, both meanings come true: Nineveh is not destroyed but is 'overturned' through repentance. The response of the animals — covered in sackcloth, denied food and water — borders on the absurd, yet serves to emphasize the totality and sincerity of Nineveh's turning. The verb nacham ('to relent') used of God in verse 10 is the same verb that describes human repentance — God and Nineveh mirror each other's turning.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase 'a city great to God' (ir gedolah l'Elohim) in verse 3 is an unusual superlative construction — we render it as 'an exceedingly great city' with a note on the Hebrew. The verb nehpakhet in verse 4 is deliberately left as 'overturned' to preserve the ambiguity between destruction and transformation. The phrase vayya'aminu anshei Nineveh b'Elohim ('the people of Nineveh believed God') in verse 5 uses the verb he'emin, which implies trust and reliance, not mere intellectual assent. God's 'relenting' (nacham) in verse 10 raises theological questions about divine immutability that we handle through the translator note rather than by softening the verb.*

Connections: *Jesus references Nineveh's repentance as a rebuke to His own generation (Matthew 12:41, Luke 11:32): 'The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah — and now something greater than Jonah is here.' The forty-day period connects to other biblical testing periods (the flood, Moses on Sinai, Jesus in the wilderness). God's relenting connects to the principle stated in Jeremiah 18:7-8: if a nation turns from evil, God will relent from the disaster He planned.*

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²"Get up! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city — a three-day journey across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, a day's journey in, and he proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned!" ⁵The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷He issued a proclamation throughout Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No person or animal — no cattle or sheep — is to eat anything. They must not graze, and they must not drink water. ⁸Both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth. Everyone must cry out to God with urgency. Each person must turn from their wicked way and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent. He may turn from his burning anger so that we do not perish." ¹⁰God saw their actions — that they had turned from their wicked way — and God relented from the disaster that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word shenit ('a second time') is theologically significant — God recommissions the prophet rather than replacing him. The repetition of the prophetic reception formula from 1:1 creates a literary reset, as if the flight, the storm, and the fish were a parenthesis. God's word returns to its starting point, but Jonah has been through the depths and back.

2. The commission is nearly identical to 1:2 but with a crucial change: instead of 'cry out against it' (qera aleha), God now says 'proclaim to it the proclamation that I tell you' (qera eleha et haqeri'ah). The preposition shifts from 'against' to 'to,' and the content is now explicitly defined by God's own words. The cognate accusative construction (qera... qeri'ah, 'proclaim... the proclamation') emphasizes that Jonah must deliver God's exact message, not his own.
3. The phrase ir gedolah l'Elohim (literally, 'a city great to God') uses the divine name as an intensifier — a superlative construction meaning 'extraordinarily great.' Archaeological evidence suggests Nineveh proper had a circumference of about 8 miles, but the 'three-day journey' likely refers to the greater metropolitan area (including suburbs like Calah and Rehoboth-Ir mentioned in Genesis 10:11-12) or to the time needed to traverse and proclaim throughout the city. Jonah's obedience here — vayaqom... vayelexh ('he got up and went') — mirrors the exact verbs of his disobedience in 1:3 (vayaqom livroach, 'he got up to flee').
4. Jonah's oracle is only five words in Hebrew — the shortest prophetic message in the Bible. The verb nehpakhet ('overturned') is the same word used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:21, 25; Deuteronomy 29:23), but it also carries the meaning 'transformed, changed, turned around.' This double meaning is central to the chapter: Nineveh will indeed be 'overturned' — not by fire but by repentance. The forty-day period echoes other biblical periods of testing and transformation (Genesis 7:4, Exodus 24:18, 1 Kings 19:8). Notably, the oracle contains no conditional clause ('unless you repent') — yet the Ninevites infer the possibility of mercy anyway.
5. The verb vayya'aminu ('they believed') comes from the root aleph-mem-nun, the same root as 'amen' and emunah ('faithfulness'). It implies not mere intellectual assent but active trust — the Ninevites trusted God's word enough to act on it. The phrase 'from the greatest to the least' (migidolam ve'ad qetannam) indicates universal participation across all social classes. The response is immediate — there is no debate, no resistance, no committee. This stands in sharp contrast to Israel's repeated rejection of prophetic warnings throughout the Hebrew Bible. The word Elohim ('God') rather than YHWH is used — the Ninevites believe in God generically, not specifically in Israel's covenant God.
6. The king's response is described in a sequence of descending actions: he rises from his throne (the highest seat in the kingdom), removes his royal robe (addarto, a word for a magnificent garment), covers himself with sackcloth (the garment of mourning and penitence), and sits in ashes — the lowest possible position. This is a deliberate reversal of royal status, mirroring the descent motif that tracked Jonah in chapter 1. The king's self-humiliation contrasts sharply with Jonah's self-pity in chapter 4.
7. The decree extends to animals — cattle and sheep must fast and abstain from water alongside the human population. This extraordinary detail serves the narrative's emphasis on the totality of Nineveh's repentance. In the ancient Near East, animals were sometimes included in mourning rituals (Herodotus reports that the Persians shaved their pack animals during mourning). The phrase mita'am hammelekh ugedolav ('by decree of the king and his nobles') indicates this is an official royal proclamation, not a voluntary religious observance.
8. The decree requires three actions: covering with sackcloth (external mourning), crying out to God (prayer), and turning from wickedness and violence (behavioral change). The word chamas ('violence') is the same word used in Genesis 6:11 to describe the pre-flood world — the Ninevites' violence echoes the violence that prompted the first great judgment. The verb yashuvu ('let them turn') is the Hebrew concept of repentance (teshuvah) — a physical turning away from one direction and toward another. The king does not merely ask for ritual mourning but demands genuine moral transformation.
9. The phrase mi yodea ('who knows?') expresses hope without presumption — the king does not claim certainty of divine mercy but acknowledges its possibility. This same phrase appears in 2 Samuel 12:22 (David hoping for his child's life) and Joel 2:14. The verb nicham ('relent, be moved to compassion') when applied to God does not imply that God made a mistake but that He responds to changed circumstances — a principle explicitly stated in Jeremiah 18:7-8. The verb shav ('turn') is used of both God and the people — Nineveh turns from evil, and God turns from anger. The reciprocity is the key theological point.
10. The verb vayyar ('God saw') echoes Genesis 1 ('God saw that it was good') — but here God sees not creation but repentance, and it is good enough to stay His hand. The verb vayyinnachem ('he relented') is the Niphal of nacham, the same root as 'comfort' and 'compassion.' When used of God, it describes a genuine divine response to changed human behavior, not a change in God's character. The word ra'ah appears twice with different meanings: the Ninevites turned from their 'evil way' (ra'ah as moral wickedness), and God relented from the 'disaster' (ra'ah as calamity). The double use creates a direct link: when human evil ceases, divine judgment ceases.

4

Summary: *Jonah 4 is the theological climax of the book. God's mercy toward Nineveh infuriates Jonah, who reveals that this was precisely why he fled in the first place — he knew God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in faithful love, and would relent from sending disaster. Jonah asks to die rather than witness Nineveh's survival. God responds not with rebuke but with a question ('Is it right for you to be angry?') and then with an object lesson: He appoints a plant to shade Jonah, then a worm to destroy it, then a scorching east wind. When Jonah is angry enough to die over the plant, God delivers the book's final word: 'You cared about the plant, which you did not labor for or grow. Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left — and many animals as well?'*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter contains the only place in the Hebrew Bible where a prophet is angry that his prophecy succeeded. Jonah quotes the great divine self-revelation of Exodus 34:6-7 — the central creedal statement of Israel's faith — but weaponizes it as a complaint. He knows God is gracious, and he resents it. The book ends with a divine question left unanswered, making the reader the one who must respond. God's final argument includes the animals of Nineveh — the same animals dressed in sackcloth in 3:8 — extending divine compassion to all living creatures. The verb manah ('appointed') appears three more times (plant, worm, wind), echoing the appointed fish of 1:17 and establishing a four-fold pattern of divine sovereignty over creation deployed for Jonah's instruction.*

Translation Friction: *Jonah's quotation of Exodus 34:6-7 in verse 2 omits the final clause about God 'not clearing the guilty' — either because Jonah only cares about the mercy side of the formula, or because the narrator signals that Jonah has a selective view of God's character. The qiqayon plant (v. 6) is traditionally rendered 'gourd' but its identification is uncertain — possibly the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*). We render it as 'plant' with a note. The final phrase in verse 11, 'who cannot tell their right hand from their left,' is variously interpreted as referring to small children, to moral ignorance, or to the spiritual naivety of pagans. We preserve the ambiguity. The book's ending with a question — no answer from Jonah, no resolution — is one of the most striking literary choices in the Hebrew Bible.*

Connections: *Jonah's quotation of Exodus 34:6-7 connects to Joel 2:13, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Nehemiah 9:17, and Nahum 1:3 — all passages that echo this foundational creed. The divine question 'Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?' anticipates Jesus's parables of God's extravagant mercy (the Prodigal Son, the Laborers in the Vineyard). Jonah's death wish echoes Elijah's request to die under a broom tree (1 Kings 19:4), creating a parallel between two prophets overwhelmed by their missions. The appointed plant, worm, and wind continue the pattern from 1:17, showing God deploying all of creation — animate and inanimate — as pedagogical instruments.*

1But this was deeply wrong in Jonah's eyes, and he burned with anger. 2He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, LORD — was this not what I said while I was still in my own land? That is why I fled to Tarshish first, because I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster. 3Now, LORD, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4The LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5Jonah left the city and sat down east of it. He made himself a shelter there and sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would happen to the city. 6The LORD God appointed a plant and made it grow up over Jonah to provide shade over his head and to rescue him from his misery. Jonah was overjoyed about the plant. 7But God appointed a worm at dawn the next day, and it attacked the plant so that it withered. 8When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wished for death and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" He said, "It is right for me to be angry — angry enough to die." 10The LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over or grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. 11Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left — and many animals as well?"

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The phrase *vayyera el Yonah ra'ah gedolah* uses the same word *ra'ah* ('evil, wrong, bad') that described Nineveh's wickedness (1:2) and God's planned disaster (3:10). For Jonah, God's mercy is itself a *ra'ah* — a great wrong. The verb *charah* ('to burn') describes the heat of Jonah's anger, the same verb used for God's 'burning anger' in 3:9. The irony is pointed: Jonah is angry that God is not angry. The cognate accusative construction (*ra'ah gedolah*, 'a great evil/wrong') mirrors the 'great fear' of the sailors (1:10, 16) and the 'great city' of Nineveh (1:2, 3:2) — everything in Jonah is 'great.'
2. This verse reveals Jonah's motivation for his flight in chapter 1 — he was not afraid of Nineveh but afraid that God would be merciful. He quotes the foundational creed of Exodus 34:6-7, the most frequently cited divine self-description in the Hebrew Bible. However, Jonah omits the final clause of the Exodus creed ('who will by no means clear the guilty') — he cites only the mercy side because that is what offends him. The phrase *erekh appayim* ('slow to anger,' literally 'long of nostrils') describes God's patience, and *rav chesed* ('rich in faithful love') is the covenantal abundance of divine loyalty. The verb *nicham* ('relents') is the same word used in 3:10 for God's response to Nineveh's repentance.
3. Jonah's death wish echoes Elijah's prayer in 1 Kings 19:4 ('Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors'), but the motivations are opposite: Elijah despairs because Israel will not repent; Jonah despairs because Nineveh has repented. The phrase *tov moti mechayai* ('better my death than my life') expresses a preference for death over living in a world where God shows mercy to Israel's enemies. This is the second time Jonah has preferred death to obedience — the first was his instruction to be thrown into the sea (1:12).
4. God's response is a question, not a rebuke — *haheitev charah lakh* literally asks 'Is it good that it burns for you?' or 'Does burning serve you well?' The Hiphil infinitive *heitev* ('doing well, being right') asks Jonah to evaluate his own anger. God does not argue or defend His decision; He invites Jonah to self-examination. This question will be repeated in verse 9 with a slight variation, framing the entire object lesson of the plant.
5. Jonah stations himself east of the city — the direction from which judgment typically came in ancient Near Eastern imagery — and builds a *sukkah* ('shelter, booth'), the same word used for the temporary shelters of the Festival of Booths. He is still hoping for Nineveh's destruction. The phrase 'waiting to see what would happen to the city' reveals that Jonah has not accepted God's verdict; he sits like a spectator expecting (or hoping for) a reversal.
6. The verb *vayeman* ('appointed') appears for the second time (after 1:17's appointed fish), continuing the pattern of God deploying creation as instruments of His purpose. The *qiqayon* plant is traditionally rendered 'gourd' but its exact identification is debated — the most common scholarly identification is the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), known for rapid growth and large, shade-giving leaves. The phrase *lehatsil lo mera'ato* ('to rescue him from his misery') uses the same word *ra'ah* that has appeared throughout the book with shifting meanings (wickedness, disaster, displeasure). Here it means Jonah's personal distress. The phrase *simchah gedolah* ('great joy') is another 'great' descriptor in a book full of them — and it is focused on a plant, not on God's salvation of 120,000 people.
7. The verb *vayeman* ('appointed') appears for the third time — God appoints a worm (*tola'at*) to destroy the plant He had just appointed to grow. The timing is precise: *ba'alot hashachar* ('at the rising of the dawn'), at the very moment when Jonah would begin needing the shade. The verb *vatakh* ('it attacked, it struck') is surprisingly violent for a worm eating a plant — the same verb is used for military attacks elsewhere. The rapid sequence — plant grows, worm destroys, plant withers — mirrors the rapid sequence of Jonah's emotional states.
8. The verb *vayeman* ('appointed') appears for the fourth and final time — the series is complete: fish (1:17), plant (4:6), worm (4:7), wind (4:8). God has appointed one creature from each domain (sea, land-vegetation, earth-creature, air) to serve His purposes. The *ruach qadim charishit* ('scorching east wind') is the *sirocco* — the hot, dry wind from the eastern desert, dreaded throughout the ancient Near East. The adjective *charishit* is rare and debated; it may mean 'silent' (from *charash*, 'to be silent') or 'cutting, fierce.' We follow the contextual sense of 'scorching.' Jonah repeats his death wish from verse 3 verbatim — but now his reason has shifted from theological protest to physical discomfort over a plant.
9. God repeats the question from verse 4 but now adds 'about the plant' (*al haqiqayon*), narrowing the focus to the specific object lesson. Jonah's response is defiant: *heitev charah li ad mavet* — 'I am rightly angry, to the point of death.' He doubles down, insisting his rage is justified. The repetition of *heitev* ('rightly, well') creates a deliberate echo — God asks if anger is 'right,' and Jonah insists that it is. The stage is now set for God's closing argument.
10. The verb *chasta* ('you cared, you had compassion') is from the root *chus*, meaning to look upon with compassion, to have pity. God does not say Jonah was wrong to care about the plant — He establishes a principle of proportional compassion. The phrase *ben lailah* ('son of a night') is a Hebrew idiom for something ephemeral — the plant lived and died within a single day. The argument builds from lesser to greater (*qal vachomer*): if Jonah can feel compassion for a plant he neither planted nor tended, how much more should God feel compassion for an entire city.
11. The book ends with a question — God's question to Jonah, left unanswered. The verb *achus* ('be concerned, have compassion') is the same as *chasta* in verse 10, creating the *qal vachomer* argument: you had compassion on a plant; should I not have compassion on a city? The phrase 'who cannot tell their right hand from their left' (*lo yada bein yemino lismo'lo*) is interpreted variously as referring to young children (suggesting 120,000 children in a city of perhaps 600,000), to moral ignorance (the Ninevites did not know right from wrong until told), or to spiritual naivety. The ambiguity is deliberate and serves God's argument — these are people in need of guidance, not monsters beyond redemption. The final words — *uvehemah rabbah* ('and many animals as well') — extend God's concern even to animals, recalling the animals who wore sackcloth in 3:8. The book's theology is breathtaking in scope: the God of Israel cares about Assyrian cattle. No answer from Jonah is recorded. The question hangs in the air, directed now at every reader.