

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

History, Prophecy, Literature —
Why Modern Readers Need to Know the Difference
and What It Means for Faith Today



STEVEN L. MCKENZIE

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STEVEN L. MCKENZIE

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McKenzie, Steven L., 1953–

How to Read the Bible : history, prophecy, literature—why modern readers need to know the difference, and what it means for faith today / Steven L. McKenzie.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-516149-6 ISBN-10: 0-19-516149-1

1. Bible—Introductions. 2. Bible—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.
BS475.3M38 2005 220.6—dc22 2005003875

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book arises out of more than twenty years of trying to teach undergraduate college students to read the Bible in its historical, cultural, and literary context. My goal is to prod them toward more in-depth reading and analysis of biblical literature and to provoke them to critical evaluation of their preconceived ideas about it. I am grateful to my students for provoking me over the years both in formulating my understanding of the Bible and in expressing my ideas clearly.

John Van Seters first showed me the significance of genre for biblical study in a 1989 seminar on historiography, and I shall always be grateful to him for that and for his friendship. I am also grateful to his student, Kenton Sparks, for sharing portions of a manuscript he is preparing on literary genres in the Bible and the ancient world.

This is the second book I have published with Oxford University Press and I am indebted to their editorial and production staff for consistently efficient and cordial work. In particular, Cynthia Read's detailed critique of the manuscript proved indispensable.

I am especially fortunate to have several superb scholars and teachers in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament as colleagues. Ryan Byrne, Patrick Gray, John Kaltner, and Milton Moreland have been dialogue partners throughout the process of research, writing, and revision of this book. My most supportive dialogue partner has been my wife Aimee. The interest and enthusiasm she displayed in listening to me talk about the progress on each chapter was an enormous encouragement. To these, my dialogue partners, I dedicate this book.

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Introduction

JONAH AND GENRE

Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.
—Jonathan Swift, Preface to *The Battle of the Books*

What writing is. Telepathy, of course.
—Stephen King, *On Writing*

The thesis of this book is simple. It is that many—I would even venture to say “most”—people who read the Bible misunderstand it. This is not exactly a novel claim. I had a teacher once who was fond of saying that the Bible is bigger than all of us. No one understands the Bible completely, but most readers of the Bible fail to appreciate the true nature of its literature. I would add that the consequences of their misunderstanding can be devastating. I don't mean that they can be spiritually devastating—as in the idea that misunderstanding the Bible can lead to eternal damnation—but that they can be psychologically devastating—as when an individual feels torn between abandoning faith because the Bible seems unreasonable and untrue, or committing to a belief system that affirms the complete accuracy of the Bible in all matters despite reasonable indications to the contrary. These are extreme reactions, but they illustrate the point that the question of what to do with the Bible is a real one for those people who want to hold on to a faith that allows for a realistic view of the world.

Jonah: A Fishy Tale

The story of Jonah furnishes a good case in point. It is one of the Bible's best-known stories. Every Sunday school child has heard about Jonah and the whale.

But Jonah is also one of the least-understood stories in the Bible. Its real message often gets lost amid the debate over whether the story actually happened. How, exactly, is the story to be understood? Is it history or some kind of fairy tale? Could a person really survive for three days and nights inside a whale? Some staunchly defend the possibility, while others ridicule it and dismiss the book—and in some cases the entire Bible—as a ridiculous fable or myth. But if Jonah is not history, what is its point?

A careful reading of the book of Jonah suggests that the misunderstanding arises from attempts to make it something that it is not. The story is full of humor, exaggeration, irony, and ridicule. These features indicate that the book was never intended to be read as history but was written as a kind of satire. No wonder it has been misunderstood! Trying to read the story as history can only lead to a failure to appreciate its true nature and to misconstrue its primary message. The treatment of Jonah that follows points out the many instances of exaggeration and the like and discusses how they work to make a satirical point. The translations of Bible passages in this book are mostly my own and are usually marked AT for “author’s translation.” Otherwise, they are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and marked NRSV.

Outline

Jonah is comprised of two distinct halves, each introduced by the statement, “the word of Yahweh¹ came to Jonah” (1:1; 3:1) with the additional Hebrew word “again” or “a second time” occurring in 3:1. Jonah’s prayers further divide each half in two.² Thus, the book falls into four principal scenes mostly corresponding to the four chapter divisions.

1. Jonah’s call and flight
2. Jonah’s psalm
3. Jonah’s mission to Nineveh
4. Yahweh’s lesson to Jonah

The symmetry between the two halves of the book shows Jonah to be a well-organized work of narrative literature. The symmetry is even clearer in the Hebrew numbering.³ The outline also shows that Jonah is the central character of the book and suggests that its contents revolve around the interactions between him and the other characters. An examination of the book’s content by its four scenes will help to answer the questions raised earlier about its main point and how the details of the story relate to that point.

Jonah's Call and Flight

The book of Jonah begins, "The word of Yahweh came to Jonah, the son of Amittai." Jonah is one of the writings within the division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Prophets (Hebrew *Nevi'im*). More specifically, it is one of the works in the Book of the Twelve, also known as the Minor Prophets. Its beginning is both similar to and different from other prophetic books. The opening sentence is not like those found at the beginnings of most prophetic writings. It does not say "the word of Yahweh *that* came to Jonah." Rather, it launches right into the story: "The word of Yahweh came to Jonah, *saying* . . ."

This beginning already signals something unusual about the book of Jonah: it is a narrative, a story about the prophet rather than a collection of his sayings. It is not unusual for prophetic books to contain some biographical narrative. The first three chapters of Hosea, for example, relate intimate details of the prophet's marriage and family life. But prophetic books are generally collections of the oracles or speeches of the prophets. Jonah is the opposite, being nearly all narrative. There is only one oracle in Jonah (3:4), and it is very brief.

Some other prophetic books, such as Haggai and Zechariah, begin kind of like Jonah by launching directly into a narrative. Haggai and Zechariah both begin their narratives with a dating formula: "In the X year of such-and-such ruler," but Jonah does not begin with such a formula. The author does not explain when Jonah lived or worked or give any additional details about his life. The book never even calls him a prophet. The only additional information about Jonah comes from 2 Kings 14:25. In 2 Kings we learn that Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet who lived during the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel (approx. 786–746 BCE). He was from a town called Gath-Hepher in Israel, and he prophesied the enlargement of a portion of Israel's northern border under Jeroboam. The absence of such details, especially the lack of chronological information, from the book of Jonah suggests that the author deemed the specifics about the historical setting of the story as unimportant.

One other significant feature of the story of Jonah related to its first verse has to do with the meanings of his name and that of his father. "Jonah" means "dove" in Hebrew. Perhaps this suggests something about Jonah's character in the story—that he was flighty and unstable like a dove. The dove is also sometimes used in the Bible as a symbol for Israel (Hos 7:11). So it may be that Jonah, the "dove," is meant to symbolize Israel or an attitude or characteristic prevalent in Israel. His father's name, Amittai, derives from the Hebrew root meaning "truth" or "faithfulness." Here is the first irony in the book. Jonah, the "son of truth," is hardly a model of faithfulness in the story. The meanings of his and his father's

names may be at least part of the reason that Jonah was chosen as the “hero” of this satirical tale.

Continuing the story, Yahweh commands Jonah to go to “the great city” of Nineveh and to “cry out” against it because of its wickedness. If reading Jonah as history, the reference to Nineveh raises a chronological problem. Nineveh came to prominence as the capital of the Assyrian empire in the seventh century (the 600s) BCE, long after the Jonah of 2 Kings 14:25. In fact, by the time Nineveh became the capital, the nation of Israel had ceased to exist. The Assyrians themselves brought an end to the kingdom of Israel by destroying its capital, Samaria, in 721 BCE and taking many of its citizens into captivity from which they would never return (see 2 Kings 17). Thus, the role of Nineveh in the book of Jonah appears to be an anachronism.

The occurrence of an anachronism in Jonah is a problem only if the story of Jonah is history or if one assumes that it is. It is not a problem, though, if Jonah is some kind of story, such as a satirical parable, in which the characters represent an attitude or even a larger class of people. Nineveh might have been chosen by the author of Jonah as the embodiment of the evil foreign city precisely because it once served as the Assyrian capital. Assyria, in turn, had likely come to symbolize the foreign “evil empire” ever since it destroyed Israel in 722 BCE. This is the role that Nineveh and the Ninevites play in the story of Jonah, in order to make the point that if God cares for them, God cares for everyone.

The Ninevites and Jonah complement each other in their respective roles in the book of Jonah. Jonah the prophet lived in Israel in the eighth century at the time the Assyrian empire was on the ascent and before its destruction of Israel. Nineveh was not yet the Assyrian capital at the time Jonah lived and would become so only in the following century. The author of Jonah, writing several centuries later, may not have known that it was not actually the capital during Jonah’s lifetime. But this did not matter, since the author was not trying to write history.

Jonah’s response to God’s command is surprising on several levels. He boards a ship in order to flee toward Tarshish. Nineveh lay northeast of Israel in the modern country of Iraq. Tarshish, on the southern coast of Spain (modern Tartessos), represented the westernmost extreme of the known world for the writer of Jonah and his audience. In essence, therefore, Jonah heads in the opposite direction from where God tells him to go.

This part of the story again presents some historical problems that indicate that the author lived long after Jonah’s time. The reference to Joppa as Jonah’s port of embarkation is odd, since Joppa was in Philistine hands, not Israelite, in the eighth century. Also, the Phoenician port of Tyre was closer to Jonah’s northern Israelite hometown of Gath-hepher than was Joppa. These problems of de-

tail do not impede the point of the story and are not of much consequence unless one insists on trying to read it as history.

More surprising for the reader is Jonah's response in the first place. Prophets are messengers from God, and "Crying out" is what prophets do. They are privy to special divine revelation and go where the divine word sends them. Then they utter God's judgments against people in hopes of bringing them to repentance. Not Jonah. He does just the opposite, blatantly disobeying a direct order from God. To anticipate the story, Jonah, the prophet, whom the reader expects to be Yahweh's closest servant, is the only one of all the characters in the story—human and nonhuman—who fails to obey God. Jonah is a very unusual prophet indeed!

The narrative twice uses the expression "from the presence of Yahweh," making it clear that Jonah is trying to *run away* from God. The statement that he paid the *ship's* hire, rather than *his* hire or fare, may even mean that he was in such a hurry that he chartered the ship. (This also makes his choice of Joppa all the more strange since it was not the closest port.) Why exactly does Jonah flee? What is he running away from? What does he fear? The writer will have Jonah explain his actions later on in the story when he sees the people of Nineveh repent.

Whatever the motive for Jonah's response, his attempted flight makes no sense in his own belief system. On board, he boasts to the sailors that he worships (lit. "fears") Yahweh "who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). If he really believes that Yahweh is the Lord of land and sea, how can he hope to run away? His actions are nonsensical. His deeds do not correspond either to his expressed beliefs or to the expectations for his vocation as a prophet. Jonah is a contradictory character, who does not act in accordance with what he claims to believe. The author paints him as foolish, even deluded—a ridiculous character. The story gradually reveals what it is that makes Jonah a ridiculous figure and that blinds him to the foolishness of his deeds.

Yahweh reacts to Jonah's flight by hurling a "great wind" and a "great storm" against the ship where Jonah is a passenger. This is part of a rather unusual view of God in Jonah. Yahweh is depicted as a real micromanager, personally involved in every facet of the story. These are the second and third uses (in addition to the reference to Nineveh as a great city) of the word "great" in Jonah. There will be other "greats" in Jonah, notably the famous "great fish." The frequent use of "great" is a mark of the book's penchant for hyperbole. The storm is so severe that the ship is on the verge of breaking up. The Hebrew literally says that the ship "thought about" breaking up. The idea is silly; inanimate objects don't think. But images like this one occur repeatedly in Jonah and are a sure sign that the book was not written as history.

Another laughable image follows immediately. With the ship in grave danger, everyone on board prays fervently. Everyone, that is, except Jonah. He is asleep

in the hold, completely oblivious to the weather and the peril of the ship. The Hebrew verb (נָדָם, *nirdam*) means to sleep soundly or deeply; the Greek translation even adds the detail that he is snoring! Though humorous, the scene also suggests how far out of touch with God's activity Jonah has become.

The sailors contrast with Jonah—they are more in tune with God, more righteous than Jonah, and they immediately sense the hand of the divine in the storm. They are not monotheists or worshippers of Yahweh; they have different gods but are religious men, who turn immediately to prayer. They throw the ship's cargo overboard and thus do away with any economic gain they might have hoped for from the voyage; in doing so they exhibit their respect for human life over material gain. Even after the ship's captain awakens Jonah with a request that he pray for deliverance from the storm, there is no mention of any prayer on Jonah's lips. Ironically, the man of God is the only person on board the ship who does not pray.

The sailors perceive that the sudden storm is no coincidence but is a divine response to something someone on the ship has done. They cast lots in order to discern who the responsible party is. Lot casting was something like drawing straws and occurs elsewhere in the Bible as a way for Yahweh to designate a person who is guilty of breaking a commandment (Achan in Josh 7:10–21) or an oath (Saul in 1 Sam 14:24–46). The sailors believe that the lot will be divinely guided to pick out the culprit whose disobedience caused the storm to be sent. The lot falls on Jonah, and it is understood that Yahweh has guided its outcome. In response to the sailors' questioning, Jonah arrogantly boasts about his national origin and his religion, "I am a Hebrew. I worship (lit. "fear") Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

This response seems calculated to enhance the sailors' estimation of Jonah's importance as well as their fears. They do indeed become more afraid—literally, they "feared with *great* fear." Jonah's confession comes as a revelation to the sailors; he has already told them that he is fleeing from Yahweh, but apparently they did not know who Yahweh was. Now that Jonah reveals that Yahweh is the supreme God, the sailors are terrified. The confession, however, also makes clear just how ridiculous Jonah's attempt to run away from Yahweh is. How can he possibly hope to escape the presence of the Maker of both land and sea? The sailors' question, "What is this that you have done?" shows their recognition of the foolishness and irrationality of Jonah's actions. Jonah claims to *fear* Yahweh but disobeys and tries to run away, and it is the non-Israelite mariners who are the true *fearers* of God.

The sailors ask what they should do to Jonah in order to quiet the increasingly tempestuous sea. Jonah tells them to pick him up and throw him overboard. One might expect hardened men like sailors to do just that—with

pleasure—especially since their own lives are in peril. Besides, Jonah clearly thinks that he is superior to them and no doubt has as little regard for their lives as he does for all the other people in the book. Yet the sailors, as moral men, are reluctant to harm Jonah. Instead, they do everything possible to save him. They have already thrown the cargo overboard, and now they try hard to row the ship back to shore. It is only as a last resort and with great regret that they toss Jonah into the sea. Even then, they first pray to Yahweh (instead of their gods) asking him not to hold them accountable for Jonah's life.

The sea halts its fury at the moment it engulfs Jonah. The word here (זַעַף, *zā'af*) typically refers to raging anger or vexation, so that the story again ascribes a human attribute to an inanimate object. Also, for a second time "great fear" is attributed to the sailors. This time the text explicitly states that they fear Yahweh, to whom they now sacrifice and make vows. In other words, they are instantly "converted" into worshippers of Yahweh. The "pagan" sailors, in short, have a greater regard for human life than does Jonah and are also more pious.

Jonah's Psalm

Next comes the best known and most controversial part of the story. Yahweh, the micromanager, has appointed a "great fish" to swallow Jonah and keep him in its belly for three days and nights. The text never actually identifies the fish as a whale, though most readers have assumed that a whale is what the writer had in mind, since it would have been the only "fish" large enough to swallow a human. Some have pointed out that a whale is not a fish, but that in itself well illustrates the point of this book—the tendency of modern readers to try to read the Bible on their terms instead of those of the Bible's authors and original audience. The latter were unaware of the scientific differences between mammals and fish, so those kinds of modern, technical issues are irrelevant as far as the story of Jonah is concerned.

There is another detail in the text, however, that suggests the deliberately farcical nature of the story: It uses two slightly different words for "fish."⁴ Both words stem from the same Hebrew root, but the word in Jonah 2:1 is masculine, while the one in 2:2 is feminine. In 2:11 it is again masculine. There is no explanation for these changes from a historical or biological standpoint that makes any sense. The best explanation lies in the nature of the story as a satire with its many deliberately exaggerated and nonsensical features. Considering the nature of the Jonah story, the idea of someone being inside a large fish for three days is just as ridiculous as the idea that the fish changes gender. Whether such a thing is actually possible is irrelevant. The whole story is intended to be preposterous because its very purpose is to make fun of Jonah and his attitude.

The entire scene now becomes even more comical. Trapped inside of the fish, Jonah finally prays. Jonah's prayer is actually a hymn of thanksgiving and as such is not entirely appropriate to his situation.⁵ Here is the wayward prophet, who is not exactly the grateful type, intoning a rousing hymn of thanks inside of a large fish. The humorous image that this chapter conjures up may be precisely the reason that the psalm was included.

The original setting of the psalm was apparently its author's survival of a "near death" experience. The psalmist says that he cried out to Yahweh from the belly of Sheol. "Sheol" is the Hebrew name for the underworld or place of the dead, also called the "Pit" later in the poem. The Hebrew term for "belly" here is different from the word used for the belly of the fish, though they are both translated the same in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Even so, the reference to Jonah being in the "belly" of Sheol easily brings to mind his predicament in the recesses of the fish. Another image for death used in the poem is that of drowning, and it also reminds one of Jonah's situation. Still, even though Jonah has not drowned in the sea, he does not yet know that he will survive his ordeal in the fish. Thus, the psalm of thanksgiving is inappropriate because it is premature.

There are other differences between Jonah's situation and that reflected in the psalm. It is Yahweh in the psalm, rather than the sailors, who throws the psalmist into the sea. There is no mention of the fish or any of the circumstances that landed Jonah there in the psalm. The references to Yahweh's "house" or "temple" are also inappropriate to Jonah's situation; the temple was in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, while Jonah was from the kingdom of Israel. The condemnation of idol worshippers as forsaking their loyalty fits ill with the story in Jonah, since the foreigners, who presumably worship idols, are more faithful and obedient to Yahweh than Jonah. The mention of sacrifice at the temple also presupposes a setting on land rather than in the fish's interior. The vow mentioned at the end of the poem ("and what I have vowed I will pay") is presumably occasioned by the psalmist's restoration . . . of which there is no mention yet in the story of Jonah.

Despite the inappropriateness of the psalm to Jonah's situation, the scene in the belly of the fish furthers the story and the characterization of Jonah by what it does *not* say. There is no indication on Jonah's part of any regret for his disobedience and failure to carry out God's order. In spite of his experience in the fish, he remains obstinate and unrepentant. The humor of this scene continues. In what must be intended as a wry twist, after three days Yahweh speaks to the fish. The idea of the Almighty personally addressing a fish is comical enough, and adding to the comedy is what Yahweh tells the fish to do. We have a saying that "Fish and guests stink after three days." Both Jonah and the great fish agree,

though for different reasons. Following Yahweh's command, the fish spews (lit. "vomits") up the distasteful prophet.

Jonah's Mission to Nineveh

Yahweh tells Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, and this time he goes. He has at least learned that he cannot run away from the Maker of sea and dry land—something that was already quite obvious to the non-Israelite sailors. Nineveh is called an exceedingly large city, literally, "a great city to God." The further specification, "a three days' walk across," (NRSV) indicates an enormous city indeed. Although the expression alone is ambiguous, its reference to diameter is evident from the statement that Jonah walks a day's journey into the city. Figuring twenty miles as the approximate distance that one can walk in a day, this would mean that Nineveh was sixty miles across—huge even by modern standards! In fact, the figure is exaggerated beyond any semblance of reality and can only be considered hyperbole. This is another problem for a historical reading of the book. The location of ancient Nineveh was identified and excavated well over a century ago. At its height, the city had a circumference of only about 7.75 miles; at its widest point it was about three miles across—nowhere near the size that Jonah attributes to it.⁶ Again, the discrepancy is only a problem if one attempts to read Jonah as history. This kind of exaggeration is to be expected, however, in satire.

Entering a day's walk into the heart of Nineveh, Jonah utters a terse oracle consisting of only five words in Hebrew: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be overturned" (עוד ארבעים יום וינייה נהפכת, 3:4). There is no indication in the text that he repeats the message. Rather, he apparently turns abruptly and leaves. Again, his behavior is out of character for a prophet (remember that prophets "cry out") and reflects his stubbornness. Other prophets deliver extended oracles full of colorful language and vivid metaphors. Jonah does the bare minimum, nothing more. The reason for this terseness is simple. Unlike every other prophet in the Bible, Jonah does not want his audience to listen. He refuses to prolong his message or his visit because he does not want them to be effective; he does not want his audience to repent. As he soon makes clear in the story, he hopes that the Ninevites will ignore his message and that God will destroy them.

Jonah's oracle is less straightforward than it initially appears to be. He apparently means to say that Nineveh's "overturning" is coming soon. But "forty days" is typically a round-number metaphor for a long time in the Bible. One expects a period more like three days for such an ultimatum. As a result, Jonah seems confused. Is he calling the Ninevites to immediate action or assuring them that they have adequate time to change their ways? The point of the oracle is also ambiguous. The verb for "overturned" (נהפכת, *nehfāket*) may mean "destroyed"

or “changed.” Thus, Jonah’s prediction will prove true regardless of how the Ninevites react. If they fail to listen and respond, the city will be destroyed. On the other hand, if they repent, the city will not be destroyed, but it will be changed. This means that, counter to an interpretation that has sometimes been offered, Jonah’s subsequent anger is not occasioned by his concern over his “prophetic record” (i.e., the accuracy of his predictions). His record remains intact however the Ninevites respond. There is some other reason that Jonah gets angry—a reason that gets at the heart of the book’s message.

In spite of the curttness of Jonah’s oracle, it is enormously successful—to a ridiculous extreme. All the people of Nineveh believe in God, making Jonah the most effective prophet in the Bible by far. The Ninevites are amazingly perceptive. Not only do they discern the implicit threat in Jonah’s oracle, they also perceive that the threat comes from God, even though the oracle did not mention God. What is more, they intuit how they should respond in order to avoid destruction. The entire citizenry of Nineveh, from the greatest or most important to the smallest or least important (4:6), fasts and dresses in sackcloth—conventional signs of mourning. The king of Nineveh himself comes down from his throne to sit in the dust dressed in sackcloth. Incidentally, the title, “king of Nineveh,” is not attested in the voluminous literature recovered from ancient Nineveh and Assyria, and again suggests the unhistorical nature of the story.

The king issues a decree requiring all the people *and the animals* in the city to fast, dress in sackcloth, pray, and repent of evil deeds and violence. Like his people, the king is incredibly perceptive. He makes this decree without any certainty of the abatement of divine punishment but only in the mere hope that Yahweh may relent and decide not to destroy the city. The decree appears at first glance to be superfluous, since it follows the notice that the people repented. However, the royal decree highlights the ridiculousness of the extent of effectiveness of Jonah’s oracle in the story. Imagine sheep, cattle, and other animals dressed in sackcloth refusing to eat or drink, preferring instead to lament their evil deeds and pray for mercy! The idea is ludicrous. No other scene in the book quite so clearly illustrates the satirical nature of the story with its ridiculous images and hyperbole.

The repentance of the Ninevites—humans and animals alike—is effective. Yahweh is moved by it to change his mind about the disaster he had intended for the city. Ironically, Nineveh is not destroyed, because it *is* changed. One might expect Jonah to be gratified at the effectiveness of his proclamation. He is not. Instead, he is displeased. The Hebrew literally says that he perceived it as a “great evil,” and he became angry—angry at God for being merciful. Yet, the very mercy of God that infuriates Jonah and upon which the Ninevites rely is also the mercy that has kept Jonah himself alive. This is another of the book’s great ironies.

Yahweh's Lesson to Jonah

In the final scene of the story Jonah at last explains why he so foolishly tried to run away when Yahweh first ordered him to go to Nineveh. The explanation, or the reasoning behind it, is even more startling than Jonah's flight.

Oh Yahweh, is this not what I said when I was still in my own country? This is why I preemptively fled towards Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God—slow to become angry, great in kindness, and who changes his mind about bringing disaster. (4:2, AT)

He ran away, he says, because he knew God to be merciful and gracious, patient and forgiving. Jonah, it seems, wanted Nineveh to be destroyed, and he was afraid that God would relent if his preaching caused the city's residents to repent. That is precisely what happened, and now Jonah is angry—angry with God for being merciful.

Jonah is so angry that he asks God to take his life. "It is better for me to die than to live," he says. Yahweh responds with a question, "Do you do well to be angry?" (AT) But Jonah does not answer. Instead, he takes a position overlooking Nineveh, apparently hopeful that God will change his mind again and destroy the city with its inhabitants.

But Yahweh decides to try yet once more to teach Jonah a lesson. He appoints a bush to grow up and give Jonah shade. Jonah finds "great joy" in the bush—in contrast to the "great evil" that he felt at Yahweh's decision not to destroy Nineveh. Then, the Almighty, who previously spoke to a fish, now appoints a worm. Following divine command, the worm attacks the bush so that it withers. Finally, God appoints a dry, eastern wind that, together with the hot sun, bears down oppressively on Jonah. The prophet is miserable and for the second time asks God to take his life. He repeats his earlier lament: "It is better for me to die than to live." So Yahweh also repeats his rejoinder question: "Do you do well to be angry?" this time adding "about the bush?" And this time Jonah answers—defiantly: "I do well to be angry enough to die." Yahweh's speech concludes the book with a question:

You cared about⁷ the bush, which you did not work or grow, which came to be in a day and perished in a night. And should I not care about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, as well as many animals? (AT)

Like its beginning, the ending of Jonah is unusual and points to the book's uniqueness. Only one other book of the Hebrew Bible concludes with a question.