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# JONAH: IN PURSUIT OF THE DOVE

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As many a good storyteller knows, the element of surprise can be a helpful, often crucial, device in the development of a story. The skillful use of surprise allows writers to impress the audience when they are off-guard and vulnerable, to drive home the point when the audience's skepticism and defenses are down. But this technique requires that the narrator prepare well for the moment of surprise, subtly leading the audience in one direction, yet allowing for a reversal that will make the surprise twist both credible and convincing.[1] Misdirection and the skillful use of ambiguity are key elements in the development of such a narrative sequence, and without them the element of surprise would lose much of its impact.

The book of Jonah employs the element of surprise. The writer does not reveal Jonah's true attitude toward God's planned destruction of Nineveh until the beginning of chap. 4. Before that time, Jonah's response to the idea that God might destroy Nineveh is ambiguous, and Jonah flees his task of crying against the city for unspecified reasons. Chapters 1–3 contain no indication that Jonah actually fears that Nineveh will repent and thus escape destruction.[2] Chapter 1 could, however, lead the readers to conclude either that Jonah is fleeing in order to avoid being the agent of the city's destruction or that he is fleeing the terror of God's wrath. There is just enough misdirection to nudge the readers toward either of these conclusions. The basic point, however, is that the readers are left to wonder, even as late as chap. 3. Although Jonah does

[1] Aristotle observed the usefulness of surprise in *Rhetoric* 3.11.6: "Most smart sayings are derived from metaphor, and also from misleading the hearer beforehand. For it becomes more evident to him that he has learnt something, when the conclusion turns out contrary to his expectation, and the mind seems to say, 'How true it is! but I missed it.'"

[2] Unfortunately, some interpreters appear to assume that from the beginning the reader knows that Jonah is fleeing because the city will repent if he speaks a word of doom. See, for example, John A. Miles, Jr., "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," *JQR* 65 (1975) 168–81; John C. Holbert, "'Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh!': Satire in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 21 (1981) 59–81; and Millar Burrows, "The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May* (ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 80–107.

respond to God's second command to go and speak to Nineveh, he has no dialogue with God, and his thoughts while delivering the message remain shrouded. Only after Nineveh's immediate and stunning repentance (3:5–9) is followed by God's equally stunning decision to withhold the evil he had intended (3:10) is Jonah's true character revealed, when, for the first and only time in the book, Jonah and God engage in dialogue over the fate of the city (chap. 4).

This study will examine important literary devices used by the writer of the book as he "sets up" the readers for the surprising turn of events. It will be seen that the decisive revelation of God's true character as forgiving and of Jonah's true character as vengeful is more effective precisely because of the writer's skillful buildup to the moment of surprise.

## *The Flight of the Dove*

The name of the prophet, יונה ("dove") is an important element in the writer's development of misdirection in chaps. 1–3.[3] The image of the dove is used simultaneously to reveal and to hide the nature of the prophet. The picture of Jonah as a dove, which at the beginning seems to be so appropriate, turns out to be the opposite of his true character.

A survey of those instances in the Tanak where the word יונה appears suggests the following broad categories of usage: flight, frequently from a foe or danger (e.g., Ps 55:6; Jer 48:28; Ezek 7:16); passivity, expressed through mourning over the fate to which one is or has been subject (e.g., Isa 38:14; Nah 2:7; Hos 11:11) or through submission to the sacrificial cult (e.g., Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8); and beauty, as in the love between a man and a woman (e.g., Cant 1:15; 2:14; 4:1).

The last category does not play a role in the book of Jonah, but the first two, "flight" and "passivity," do. Although Jonah is told to arise (קום) and cry against Nineveh (1:2), he instead arises to flee from the presence of the Lord (מלפני יהוה), the reason for his flight being veiled. The writer's deliberate ambiguity allows the readers to speculate that Jonah may be fleeing to avoid being the agent of Nineveh's destruction. Jonah's subsequent willingness to be thrown into the sea in order to save the sailors (1:10–15) adds credence to this possibility. The readers might also

[3] Some scholars deny any significance in the prophet's name, seeing it as an incidental historical derivation from 2 Kgs 14:25. For example, Burrows ("Literary Category," 90) or Miles ("Laughing," 171), who claims, "Nor, finally, need we follow a long line of critics beginning quaintly with St. Columban, who have made much of the name Jonah, 'the dove,' as a symbol of innocence." Even though "innocence" is not quite the category I would use, I would argue that the depiction of the prophet as a dove plays a major role in the structure of the book. Holbert ("Satire," 63–64) is an example of one who takes the symbolism of the dove seriously, even though he fails to develop it adequately. Terence E. Fretheim likewise alludes to the dove symbolism without developing it (*The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977] 43).

conclude that Jonah is afraid of God's judgment directed against him for his refusal to fulfill his role as a prophet (as 1:10 and 12 seem to suggest). Or the readers might simply think that Jonah fears God's vengeful nature, which is soon to be unleashed against Nineveh. But whatever the readers might speculate, they are led away from the conclusion that Jonah wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. One would think that had Jonah desired to see the city in flames he would have eagerly fulfilled the task of crying against the wicked city.

### *The Passive Dove*

Passivity also plays an important role in chap. 1. Although Jonah's decision to flee (1:3) is certainly active, virtually everything else said about Jonah in chap. 1 is passive. He descends into the ship to be taken away from God's presence (1:3). He falls asleep (1:5).[4] He is scolded by the captain of the ship for being sound asleep instead of praying to the gods, and he is urged with two imperatives (קום and קרא) to arise and call upon his god (1:6), an action he fails to take. He is singled out by the casting of lots as the cause of the evil that has come upon the ship (1:7). Information about his background has to be pried out of him (1:8), as does the means of stilling the storm (1:11). Jonah's instructions concerning the calming of the storm specify no actions on his part but rather indicate what is to be done *to* him (1:12). Likewise, Jonah passively submits when the solution is carried out (1:15). Finally, it is important to note that, throughout chap. 1, Jonah does nothing in his own behalf to secure his deliverance.

Jonah's passivity, which continues in a diminished form in chaps. 2 and 3, sets the stage for the sudden contrast in chap. 4. There Jonah is anything but passive, as he angrily takes on God over the issue of whether the sinful but repentant city should be spared. Since 3:10 and 4:1 together constitute the key turning point in the book, it is clear that the writer has heretofore portrayed Jonah as passive in order that, when the turning point comes, the writer may use the sudden and unexpected reversal of Jonah's character as one means of focusing the reader's attention on the equally surprising reversal in God's character, God being suddenly revealed as a God who forgives even the most sinful people.

### *To Save the Dove*

As we return to chap. 1, we see that opposite the passivity of Jonah the writer has developed the strong activity of both the sailors and God. The sailors cry to their gods and lighten the ship's burden (1:5). The captain of the sailors exhorts Jonah to fervent prayer (1:6) as he desperately seeks a

[4] Note the intensity of וישכב וירדם: he was *fast* asleep.

way to calm the storm. The sailors cast lots, seeking to learn the cause of the storm, and they thoroughly question Jonah when the lot falls on him (1:7–10). Even though the sailors ask Jonah what they should do to him (presumably to satisfy the angry god, v 11), they do not immediately attempt to implement the solution but instead strive rigorously to row the vessel to shore (v 13). When their efforts fail, they reluctantly throw Jonah into the sea (1:15). Finally, they respond vigorously to the sudden stilling of the storm (1:16).

What is the significance of the sailors' intense activity, especially as it relates to Jonah's passivity? It helps to emphasize, in contrast, Jonah's passivity. It also helps shroud Jonah's character, as one is led to wonder why Jonah, who has already fled for reasons that are less than clear, appears strangely passive in the face of a possible fate that stirs every one of Jonah's fellow shipmates to intense efforts in search of a deliverance. Furthermore, the activity, humility, and submissiveness to divine influence of the sailors directly parallels the reaction of the people of Nineveh in chap. 3, thereby helping to anticipate and reinforce the idea that those who take seriously God's power as a God of wrath and respond earnestly to God's initiative will be heard by God. Jonah's response, in contrast, is to flee, sleep, and refuse to pray.

### *Punishing the Dove*

Jonah's passivity in chap. 1 is also contrasted by God's activity, which is noteworthy in that it suggests a strongly vengeful nature for God. Verse 2 clearly anticipates God's upcoming vengeance against Nineveh, because of that city's wickedness. Likewise, when Jonah flees from his task, God hurls a mighty wind and storm upon the sea, which threaten to smash the ship.[5]

When the captain of the ship comes to Jonah and exhorts him to call upon his God, hoping thereby to arouse God's pity and deliverance, Jonah neglects to call upon God. The writer hints thereby that there is no point in Jonah's praying. Jonah, as the principal target of God's wrath, could not reasonably expect God to listen to him. When the lots are cast, Jonah is chosen as the one "on whose account this evil has come upon us" (v 7). As the punishment of Jonah is delayed, the sea, the instrument of God's wrath, grows ever more tempestuous (vv 11, 13). Finally, not knowing what else to do, the sailors prepare to cast Jonah into the sea (vv 14–15). They are not yet sure of his guilt, however, and plead with God not to punish them in the event Jonah is innocent.[6] This

[5] Note the intensives in v 4, which help accentuate God's wrath (הטיל, "he threw out"; רוח גדולה, "a great wind"; סער גדול, "a great storm").

[6] The prayer of the sailors to God in v 14 suggests considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, the sailors know that Jonah has been indicated by lot as the cause of the storm,

plea gives dramatic effect to what follows: as soon as Jonah hits the water, the seas become calm (v 15).[7] Jonah is guilty, God in his wrath has pursued the dove, and God's wrath has delivered its vengeance.

The writer has cleverly used the technique of misdirection, preparing the readers to expect a God of wrath who will not rest until his vengeance is sated. God's true character, when revealed (3:10), thus stands out most emphatically, especially since Jonah's true character, as expressed in chap. 4, is a carbon copy of the vengeful nature suggested for God in chap. 1. The picture of a God of wrath also serves to emphasize the character of the sailors, who are heathen Gentiles like the people of Nineveh. Given every reason to despise Jonah and inflict their fury upon him, they resort instead to diligent efforts to save Jonah from his watery fate. Vengeance and wrath are not part of their nature: they cast Jonah into the sea out of desperation and fear.

### *Speech and Silence in Chapter 1*

In chap. 1 there is an amazing lack of dialogue between Jonah and God. The only direct communication between them comes in v 2, where Jonah is commanded to go and cry against Nineveh. Given Jonah's inclination to flee the task, one would expect Jonah to raise serious objections with God, as do Moses (Exodus 3–4), Gideon (Judges 6), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) when confronted with similarly demanding tasks. To have Jonah raise such objections would, however, undermine the writer's buildup to the moment of surprise. It is crucial that the reasons for Jonah's flight remain shrouded, and the readers are left to draw tentative conclusions on the basis of hints scattered throughout the story. Furthermore, one should note that chap. 1 contains considerable dialogue between Jonah and the captain/seamen.

Once Jonah gets to Nineveh, this dialogue pattern is reversed. Jonah

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and he himself has so indicated in v 12. On the other hand, the sailors realize that they could be wrong, that they could be throwing an innocent (if somewhat masochistic) man overboard, and they fear the consequences if the God of wrath who sent the storm should seek vengeance for their having slain an innocent man.

[7] The writer's depiction of the storm is intense from the beginning, and the account builds to a fever pitch as the narrative proceeds. At the outset (1:4), the Lord hurls (הטיל) a great wind (רוח גדולה) upon the sea, creating a mighty tempest (סער גדול) in the sea, and the ship is about to break up (חשבה להשבר). In response (v 5), the sailors are afraid (וייראו). When the sailors learn which God has sent the storm (v 9) they fear him with a great fear (v 10: ויראו . . יראה גדולה). The sea, meanwhile (v 11), is growing more and more tempestuous (הים הולך וסער). In v 12 Jonah refers to "this great storm" (הסער הגדול הזה), and the men cannot row back to land (v 13), because the storm grows more and more tempestuous against them (הים הולך וסער עליהם). All this dramatic buildup, which clearly expresses the intense, growing anger of God, comes to a sudden halt at the moment Jonah is cast into the sea. Thus, the sudden change from raging storm to calm silence gives added impact to Jonah's being the object of God's wrath.

speaks only once to the Gentiles (3:4), and never enters into conversation with them. Yet chap. 4 contains extensive and highly animated exchanges between God and Jonah in which the true character of each is brought forth. Not only has the writer heretofore avoided dialogue between God and Jonah in order to keep the true character of each hidden until the right moment; he has also used this concluding dialogue as the instrument whereby, having set up and surprised the readers, he drives home his point with emphasis.

Returning to the dialogue between Jonah and the seamen in chap. 1, we note that the writer has the character of Jonah develop considerably in these few verses. When the storm begins, he has isolated himself from the crew and is sleeping in the bowels of the ship (1:5). When roused by the captain and urged to pray on behalf of them all, he declines. The writer neither specifies why Jonah isolates himself and sleeps nor why he neglects to pray. However, the writer's careful use of ambiguity allows the readers to reach simultaneous but differing conclusions based on the same action.[8] As noted previously, the ambiguity regarding Jonah's failure to pray could lead the readers to conclude that Jonah felt there would be no point in praying for mercy, since *he* was the object of God's wrath. On the other hand, the readers could also be led to wonder whether Jonah slept and failed to pray simply because he did not care what happened to the sailors.[9]

Even after Jonah is chosen by lot, his attitude toward the crew shows little concern for their safety. He simply informs them of the power of his God (1:9) and of the fact that he is fleeing from him (1:10). Jonah makes no suggestion that he change his conduct and seek God's forgiveness, thereby saving both himself and the sailors. Yet it is surprising that a bit later he offers himself on behalf of the sailors, telling them to save themselves by throwing him into the sea (1:12). Since this occurs while God's wrath is still raging in the storm, the readers are left with the impression that Jonah's attitude toward the Gentiles has grown to be essentially positive and constructive, while God seems to vent his wrath wherever he turns.

It is noteworthy that the writer, in his skillful deployment of the technique of misdirection, has nowhere had Jonah express a hostile attitude toward Gentiles (the only possible exception being 2:8), and this pattern holds until the beginning of chap. 4. Since he offers his life in order to save the seamen, the readers would reasonably be led to conclude (after seeing Jonah delivered by means of the fish) that Jonah

[8] Another instance where the writer uses ambiguity to lead the readers to draw more than one point from the same detail comes in 3:4. See my discussion below in n. 17.

[9] Note the tone of the captain's question: מה לך נרדם, "Why are you sleeping so soundly?!!" This could be taken to mean "Don't you care what happens to us?"

would take appropriate steps to help bring about the deliverance of Nineveh. Similarly, since God in chap. 1 seems to exact vengeance that substantially exceeds the offense, and since there appears to be no abating of God's vengeance until the guilty one has been punished (1:15), the readers are led to conclude that Nineveh's fate is sealed. Thus, through his skillful use of misdirection, the writer has set the stage for the surprise he will subsequently spring on the readers.

### *The Fear of God*

It is helpful to compare the fear of God shown by the sailors with the apparent lack of such fear by Jonah. Jonah's statement in 1:9 "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" raises several questions that cry out for an answer. If Jonah knows that God created the seas, how can he see any hope in trying to flee God's presence by traveling across the sea? Would he not, in the presence of the storm, so obvious a reminder of the wrath of God, repent and agree to go on the appointed journey? How can he be so passive and nonchalant in the light of the dire threat to his life? In short, does Jonah really fear God? As we will see later, the writer makes it abundantly clear in subsequent sections of the book that Jonah is prepared to deal with a God of wrath and in fact seems incapable of relating to God in other ways, even when God's wrath must, of necessity, be directed against him. The idea that God might respond to repentance and a plea for forgiveness appears never to cross Jonah's mind. This to a large degree explains the intensity of the dialogue in chap. 4. Since Jonah has passively submitted to his own punishment, he rages when others escape their rightful doom. Perhaps one might say that what Jonah fears is not so much God and his wrath but rather a world in which God's wrath does not come to bear equally on all who are guilty.

The sailors, in contrast, show a real fear of God's wrath and power. Upon learning that Jonah, the one designated by the lottery as the cause of the storm, is under the power of "the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land," they fear greatly.[10] They are immediately concerned to placate God's anger, and they ask Jonah what to do to him. It is intriguing, however, that they do not immediately carry out the solution described to them. They actively seek to avoid the execution of God's wrath, even though their efforts to row to shore prove futile. Thus, the sailors have forgiven Jonah for placing them in such a plight. Had they not done so, the obvious next step, once they learned from Jonah the way to quiet the sea, would have been to toss Jonah into the deep

[10] As is the case frequently in chap. 1, an intensive is employed: ויראו האנשים יראה גדולה: "And the men feared a great fear."

immediately rather than trying, at their own peril, to row to shore. The writer does not develop the concept of forgiveness at this point, however, deferring it instead until chaps. 3 and 4; and the sailors are soon forced to submit to the inevitability of God's wrath. As Jonah is tossed into the sea, he is as emotionless as ever, the passive dove of chap. 1, while the sailors, as soon as the sea ceases from its raging, fear God exceedingly (v 16).[11] Thus, both the sailors' fear of God and their openness to the idea of forgiveness anticipate the repentance of the people of Nineveh in chap. 3. Here, unlike the depiction of God's wrath and Jonah's passivity in chap. 1, which the writer has clearly used as two means of misdirecting the readers in order to prepare them for a subsequent surprise, the fear of God and the openness to forgiveness on the part of the sailors provide a continuity that allows the readers to anticipate the actions of the people of Nineveh. The fact that the readers can use the reactions of the sailors to anticipate the fear of God and openness to forgiveness displayed by the people of Nineveh in chap. 3 makes even more effective the surprise sprung on the readers in 3:10 and 4:1, since at this point all that the readers have been led to anticipate regarding the actions of God and Jonah proves to be the opposite of the truth.

### *Prayer of the Dove*

It is not necessary to debate the issue of whether or not Jonah's psalm was "originally" a part of the book. As it stands, the psalm fits in well with the overall structure and focus of the narrative. It is more helpful to discuss the basic format of the psalm. Since the text says that Jonah has already been in the belly of the fish three days and three nights when the psalm is spoken, one might presume that Jonah is seeking deliverance from his gilled prison, especially when one notes the apparent correspondence between "belly of the fish" (מעי הדגה, 2:2) and "belly of Sheol" (בטן שאול, 2:3). It is more likely, however, that the fish is the mode of *deliverance*. Close analysis of the poem shows that vv 3–6 describe the gradual descent of Jonah to the depths of the watery underworld.[12] It is not as if the fish swallowed Jonah right after he was thrown overboard. Rather, Jonah descends through the deep and the floods until he reaches Sheol, whose gates threaten to close upon him forever. Then God brings up Jonah from the pit (v 6). Since the fish ultimately deposits Jonah on dry land (v 10), the point from which he began his journey before the wrath of God descended upon him in the

[11] Again, as in v 10, note the use of the intensive clause ויראו האנשים יראה גדולה: "And the men feared a great fear."

[12] As a number of scholars have noted (e.g., George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Int* 21 [1967] 25), Jonah's descent into the watery chaos continues the motif of his descent begun in chap. 1. See my discussion below.

storm, the belly of Sheol should be seen as the point of the greatest threat to Jonah's life, whereas the belly of the fish (1:17; 2:1) is Jonah's means of deliverance.[13]

The poem is thus a psalm of thanksgiving, not a prayer for help. Jonah, while still inside the fish, begins by celebrating the fact that when he called to God for help, God answered (2:2). Jonah then describes, as a vividly detailed flashback, his descent into the watery chaos (2:3–6), which is terminated by his deliverance. After he praises God further, he promises to fulfill a vow he had made, no doubt while descending into the floods (v 9).

It is surprising that, although Jonah does finally cry to God for help once he has been thrown into the water (2:2), he nowhere is said to repent and seek forgiveness for his earlier refusal to go cry out against Nineveh—even though that refusal was the cause of his plight. And this despite the fact that the wrath of God continues to be expressed through vivid imagery: *you* cast me into the deep;[14] *your* waves and your billows passed over me (v 3). Jonah's lack of repentance stands in stark contrast to the reaction of the people of Nineveh once they are confronted with a word from God showing his wrath (3:4); they immediately proclaim a fast, put on sackcloth (3:6), and cry mightily to God (3:8), repenting of their evil way (3:10). Yet, even though Jonah does not repent, he still rejoices in his deliverance and apparently considers it appropriate.

This raises the issue of Jonah's deliverance. Why does God, who has just gone to such pains to see that Jonah is punished, now see fit to deliver him? Is the writer showing us the forgiving side of God's nature? Perhaps, to a limited degree, but it is more important to note the context of Jonah's deliverance. Immediately after Jonah is vomited onto dry land, the word of the Lord again comes to Jonah and tells him to go cry against Nineveh (3:2). Clearly, Jonah's deliverance is tied in with his function as a prophet. God still needed a prophet to speak to Nineveh, and God unleashed his wrath and fury against Jonah in order to make him obedient and willing to perform the task at hand. Thus, the basic picture at the beginning of chap. 3 is still one of a God of wrath

[13] Landes, "Kerygma," 15–25.

[14] There is no incongruity between the statement in 2:3, which implies that God cast Jonah into the sea, and that in 1:15, which describes the casting of Jonah into the sea by the sailors. As with so many of the "inconsistencies" between the psalm and chaps. 1 and 3, this one disappears when one becomes sensitive to the mind-set of the ancient Israelites, who were not so punctilious about the harmonization of details as we moderns are. It was, after all, the sending of the storm by God that led the sailors to cast Jonah into the sea. On the carefully structured and literarily skillful relationship between the psalm and its context, see Landes, "Kerygma," 3–31; and James S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981) 213–46.

pursuing a wayward and stubborn creature, rather than a God of mercy who forgives his straying creatures simply out of kindness.

How can Jonah, who saw his being thrown into the water (and almost certain death) as a just punishment (1:12), now understand a God of wrath who delivers him? The answer lies in Jonah's understanding of God's justice. Throughout the whole book Jonah sees God as one who should properly inflict a punishment commensurate with the offense (which is why he is so offended at God's forgiving the evil Ninevites). Jonah does not whimper when he realizes that he must be thrown into the sea in order to still the storm: he simply accepts what he sees to be a just recompense. Since he has suffered greatly and has stared death in the face, he has received a strict reprimand. The price has been paid, and Jonah's being delivered is thus not the act of a forgiving God but rather the act of a just God who sees that the proper punishment has been meted out.

Jonah continues to be passive in chap. 2, being repeatedly acted upon once he has been thrown into the sea. It is true that Jonah does call to God out of the belly of Sheol (2:2), that he does make a vow (2:9), and that he does offer a psalm of thanksgiving from the belly of the fish (2:1). Yet even these elements receive a passive tone in the overall context of chap. 2, where Jonah can really do nothing to bring about his deliverance; and they no more dominate the picture of Jonah in chap. 2 than Jonah's flight to Joppa and descent into the ship dominate the pervasively passive character of Jonah in chap. 1. It should also be noted that Jonah still does not engage God in any dialogue. Like the element of passivity, this lack of dialogue will undergo a dramatic reversal in chap. 4.

### *The Descent of the Dove*

Jonah's flight, which began in chap. 1, continues in chap. 2, even as God's pursuit intensifies. The writer has used a number of verbs to focus on Jonah's flight. These verbs include ברח, "to flee," (1:3); ירד, "to go down," (1:3 [twice], 5; 2:7 [Heb]); טול, "to cast (down)," (1:12, 15); שלך, "to cast (down)," (2:4 [Heb]); סבב, "to encompass," (2:4, 6 [Heb]); עבר, "to pass over," (2:4 [Heb]); אפף, "to encompass," (2:6 [Heb]); חבש, "to wrap around," (2:6 [Heb]). Jonah, in his fleeing from God, consistently goes down—to Joppa, to the ship, to the inner part of the ship; then, more passively, to the sea, to the heart of the sea, to the roots of the mountains, and ultimately to Sheol, whence God, who has pursued him all along, delivers him.

How does this motif of Jonah's flight/descent contribute to the development of the story? The first point to note is the ambiguity of Jonah's flight. Even as the flight comes to an end, the reader still has no

knowledge about why Jonah fled. This ambiguity regarding Jonah's flight sets the stage for the moment of surprise in 3:10–4:2, when the readers learn, unexpectedly, that Jonah fled out of fear that God would *forgive* Nineveh. Suddenly it is uncompromisingly clear why Jonah fled, and the decisiveness of his earlier decision to flee now bears, in retrospect, a powerful impact. This sudden clarifying of what had been ambiguous prepares the readers for the blunt exchange between God and Jonah in chap. 4, wherein the merits of God's justice and God's mercy are debated. In the final chapter, Jonah's opinions and desires are brutally unequivocal as he awaits what, to him, can be the only legitimate outcome for Nineveh—its annihilation.

Furthermore, God's pursuit of Jonah, which takes so much time, contrasts strongly with the quick response of the sailors[15] and the immediate response of the Ninevites. The sailors, confronted with a God of wrath in the storm, do not flee but do everything in their power to appease his wrath. The people of Nineveh, when confronted with God's wrath, without hesitation humble themselves before God and repent of their evil ways (3:5–9). If Jonah's flight can end (if it ever really does) only when he has experienced in his person the full fury of God's wrath, the people of Nineveh are capable of trusting the forgiving side of God's nature, and thus see no need to flee.[16] It is Jonah's inability to feel in his own person the power of a forgiving God that makes it so difficult for him to accept forgiveness extended to others simply because they sought it. If Jonah gives every appearance of fleeing from a God of wrath in chaps. 1 and 2, 3:10–4:11 makes it abundantly clear that it is from a God of forgiveness that he most earnestly wants to escape, even if he no longer is physically fleeing.

### *The Obedient Dove*

Even though the motif of Jonah's fleeing comes to an end before the narrative enters chap. 3, the motif of Jonah's passivity continues. Immediately after Jonah was vomited back onto dry land (2:10), the word of God came to him a second time (שנית), ordering him to go to Nineveh and deliver God's message (3:1–2). Jonah meekly submits and does as he is told. At this point the writer has skillfully misdirected the readers, who are led to expect passive compliance from Jonah for the duration of the book.

In vv 3–4 we are told that Nineveh was an exceedingly great city,

[15] An example of the way the writer brings out the quickness of the sailors' response may be seen in 1:4 and 5, where the writer twice uses the verb טול. God throws out (הטיל) a great storm upon the sea. The sailors throw out (וימלו) the baggage so that the ship will be better able to ride out the storm.

[16] In contrast, note how the captain's appeal to Jonah (1:6) to call upon God for mercy falls upon deaf ears, since Jonah is capable of seeing God only as a God of wrath.

three days' journey in breadth. Jonah begins to go into the city, going only a single day's journey, whereupon he delivers his message. He does not march boldly into the heart of the city to proclaim God's word.[17] Even though Jonah no longer has the option of fleeing, he still gives the appearance of reluctance and hesitation in carrying out his task. As in chap. 1, the writer avoids giving any *reason* for Jonah's reluctance, causing the reader to wonder.

The cumulative effect of chaps. 1–3 is to lead the readers to the conclusion that Jonah is not a firebrand eagerly seeking Nineveh's destruction, since he then would not have displayed such hesitancy and timidity in carrying out his task. The writer has consistently led the readers away from the true Jonah, who will be revealed in chap. 4, the Jonah of justice and wrath, and has instead caused the readers to picture a passive, nonaggressive prophet who shies away from proclaiming doom and destruction and consents to delivering such a message only under extreme pressure.

The image of God projected at the beginning of chap. 3 continues to be that of the aggressor. We do not see God as one who loves Jonah and wants him to repent so that forgiveness may be offered, but rather as one who will stop at nothing to bend to his will a most reluctant and disobedient prophet. Here again is a solid example of the writer's skilled use of misdirection. By the time the readers reach 3:3, they can envision only a stern, just God who will mete out wrath with no deviation from the standards of justice. Since Nineveh has already been characterized as a wicked city, the readers are led to expect the worst possible fate to fall upon it. As God has pursued justice with Jonah, so he will pursue justice with Nineveh.

### *Nineveh Repents*

Although the writer misdirects the readers regarding the true character both of God and of Jonah, he does not, as was seen earlier, misdirect the readers about the attitude and conduct of the Gentiles. In chap. 1, the Gentile sailors greatly fear the power and justice of God, whose wrath threatens their very existence, but they are still capable of forgiving Jonah, who brought God's wrath upon them. In chap. 3, the Ninevites also feel the power of God's wrath, but they are the direct cause and object of God's wrath and therefore need to seek forgiveness rather than offer it as the sailors did.

[17] There is a double thrust to the use of יום אחד ("one day"), as it could also imply the eagerness of the Ninevites to repent: they did so before Jonah had a chance to reach the heart of the city. As seen earlier, the writer can use the same detail to make different points (see 1:6). Here, it could be said that the Ninevites eagerly repented despite Jonah's reluctance to deliver the message.

The repentance of the Ninevites and their instantaneous obedience to God stand in stark contrast to Jonah, who never repented and became obedient only under extreme duress. The Ninevites might have asked "Who is this God?" or "Why should we obey Him?" but they do not. They might have threatened Jonah in order to get him to be quiet, but they do not. They might have responded with sullen silence, as Jonah does, but they do not. Or they might even have fled, like Jonah. Instead, their obedience is immediate and wholehearted, and there is never the slightest hesitation in their commitment to humbling themselves, turning from their evil ways, and seeking God's forgiveness. With Jonah, a maximum amount of effort on God's part produced only a minimal and grudging response, whereas with the Ninevites a minimal amount of effort (Jonah's five words of 3:4, עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת, "Yet forty days until Nineveh is overthrown") produces the maximum response.

The picture of the Ninevites' repentance is, as is frequently the case in Hebrew prose where emphasis is desired, overdrawn and repetitious.[18] Not only do the Ninevites take the message of God to heart; they proclaim a fast, and everyone dresses in sackcloth. When the king hears of this, he arises from his throne,[19] puts on sackcloth, sits in ashes, and makes a proclamation requiring that all in Nineveh take the message from God seriously. Even the cattle and flocks are to refrain from food or drink, be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God. Finally, and most crucially, the Ninevites repent and turn from their evil way and from the violence in their hands, bringing to a pointed conclusion their response to the five words from God. Everything that could have been asked of them has been done.

This leads to the question—which by now must have arisen in the minds of the readers—of how God will respond. One might well imagine that God, wanting to destroy the wicked Ninevites, had Jonah deliver

[18] When I read this paper to the Rhetorical Criticism Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at its annual meeting on 20 December 1982, David Gunn and James Ackerman suggested that the repentance of the Ninevites is too quick, glib, and shallow, and that Jonah is therefore acting reasonably in chastising God for forgiving them. Although I agree that the repentance of the Ninevites seems to be suspiciously quick, I contend that one needs to look at the intentions of the writer, as evidenced by the overall form and structure he has given the book, and that such an analysis reveals the writer's intention of focusing on the forgiving nature of God and the vengeful nature of Jonah. Stories such as this, if they are to be effective, cannot simultaneously emphasize several major points. For the writer of Jonah to have raised the issue of whether or not the repentance of the Ninevites was sincere in a book where he was focusing on the forgiving nature of God would have scattered the reader's attention and would have deprived the book of its impact.

[19] ויקם. Compare 1:6, where the captain urged Jonah to arise (קום) and call upon God, but Jonah neglected to do so. Jonah is also told to arise (קום) in 1:2 and 3:2. The first time he arises to flee; the second time he arises to do God's will grudgingly. In contrast, the king of Nineveh arises spontaneously and with vigor to respond to the message from God.

a last word of warning so that they would have no excuse or reason to object when God's wrath falls upon them. If so, the Ninevites' response poses a challenge to the character of God. God has heretofore been portrayed as a God of wrath, and even his deliverance of Jonah is placed in the context of having Jonah spewed onto dry land so that God may forcefully direct him to Nineveh to deliver God's message of wrath. This point is underlined in 3:9, which stresses God's fierce anger (חרון אפו). Thus, the king's question, "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger,[20] so that we perish not?" poses the key question of the book. Can God's forgiveness overcome his anger? Can his wrath be restrained by his mercy? If Jonah had been placed on the spot by God when God pursues him, here God is placed on the spot by the Ninevites, who are in a sense pursuing him, seeking his forgiveness. To this point, nothing in the book has prepared the readers to see God as a forgiving God, and the question posed by the king of Nineveh thus creates a considerable pressure which needs to be resolved.

### *The Surprise Revealed*

The pressure strongly focuses the attention of the readers on 3:10, where the answer is given: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it." The Ninevites' repentance is accepted, and they are spared. Given the prolonged buildup provided by the extensive description of the repentance of the Ninevites, the verse that answers the implied question about whether God's wrath can be overcome by his mercy is terse but to the point. The suddenness and terseness of the statement helps to focus the readers' attention, making clear in one sentence what had been deliberately shrouded during two chapters of narration. But if this were all that was said, or if this were the end of the book, the answer to the question of the balance between God's justice and God's mercy would be insufficiently developed. Thus, having provided the basic answer, the writer now elaborates his answer by means of the extensive dialogue between God and Jonah in chap. 4. Just as the passive Jonah was used earlier (while the writer developed his misdirection) to help develop the motif of God's wrath, so Jonah now is used as a foil for bringing out the depths of God's forgiving nature.

### *The Wrathful Dove*

Jonah's demeanor, which heretofore has been passive, quiet, and unobtrusive, takes an emphatic, decisive turn in 4:1. "Jonah was exceedingly

[20] Note the twofold use of the verb שוב, in order to stress in the reader's mind the question "Will God repent?"

displeased, and he was angry" (וירע אל יונה רעה גדולה ויחר לו). This sudden, decisive show of displeasure on Jonah's part follows directly upon God's sudden and surprising change of character in 3:10, so that the writer has, in two verses, reversed the total flow of the book. The God who had been seen as a God of wrath has suddenly revealed himself as a God of forgiveness, while the seemingly mild, passive prophet has been shown to burn with wrath. The wrath anticipated of God (חרון אפו) by the king of Nineveh (3:9) in fact turns out to be the wrath exhibited by Jonah.

Now all is clear regarding Jonah's desire to flee from his appointed task: he had been afraid all along that God would forgive Nineveh (4:2). At this point the writer's use of misdirection reaches its end, and everything that had been left ambiguous in order to misdirect the readers must now make sense in the light of Jonah's real reason for flight. If the writer has done his task well, the readers' response must be: "Aha, but of course. Why didn't we see it sooner!" It is my contention that the writer has prepared the readers well for this moment and that the impact of this "Aha" experience will make the readers most vulnerable and receptive to the message of God's forgiveness. Jonah's flight is now seen as a result of Jonah's desire to have the city destroyed, without any opportunity for repentance. Even Jonah's tentative entrance into the city (3:4), which could have suggested to the readers that Jonah feared the wrath of Nineveh, now reveals Jonah's reluctance to provide the Ninevites any opportunity to repent and receive God's forgiveness.

The writer highlights God's forgiving nature even as Jonah inveighs against it, piling up several phrases to emphasize this forgiveness; you are a gracious god (אתה אל חנון) and merciful (רחום), slow to anger (ארך אפים) and abounding in kindness (ורב חסד), and repenting of evil (ונחם על הרעה). As was the case with Jonah's reversal, here too the events that came earlier and were part of the writer's technique of misdirection must fit with what now has been revealed about God. Upon reflecting, the readers would realize that, while there has been a great deal of blustering on God's part, no ships have been sunk, no cities have been destroyed, and no lives have been lost, even though Jonah and the people of Nineveh have done more than enough to deserve God's punishment. The threatening actions and words of God brought forth the desired responses. Thus, once again, the readers, having been surprised by the writer, are led to conclude, "Yes, it was there all along, and now we can see it."

It is important to note the parallel but contrasting structure of Jonah's praying to God in 2:1–9 and 4:2–3. In 2:1–9 he prays in order to express his relief and thanks for his deliverance from the wrathful pursuit of God. In 4:2, however, he prays to express his wrath over the forgiveness, relief, and deliverance extended to the Ninevites. This contrast anticipates what is to follow in the rest of chap. 4, where Jonah's actions deteriorate into a caricature of those who demand God's justice. The

"passive" dove rails against the forgiveness granted the repentant Nineveh even while he becomes obnoxious in his petty demands regarding the comforts he feels God should grant him. Thus, the one who is granted a reprieve even though he did not ask God for forgiveness balks at the idea that those who have repented and sought forgiveness should be granted the kind of reprieve he himself received.

So intense is Jonah's revulsion to the forgiveness granted Nineveh that he asks God to take his life (v 3). This is a stunning response from one who only recently had expressed his relief at being delivered from the depths of the sea. It is clear, however, that Jonah is not serious. He is only pouting and making a request he does not really want honored, in order to gain God's attention and get him to relent from his pattern of forgiveness.

In vv 4 and 5 the writer emphasizes the surprise changes in the characters of God and Jonah. In v 4 God asks Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry?" The same God who for three chapters has appeared to be a fiery, wrathful deity now chides the heretofore seemingly passive prophet for wanting to call down wrath upon a city that has meekly repented, sought forgiveness, and received God's mercy. The readers, who have gotten used to seeing a wrathful God pursuing a passive dove, now behold a wrathful prophet being chided by a dovelike God who chooses not to inflict evil.

Jonah ignores God's question, goes out of the city, and sets up a booth, where he sits and waits for the wrath he feels should fall upon the city. Jonah seems to have decided that, if God will not sit in judgment over the city, he will. The development of the caricature is already well under way, as Jonah increasingly loses contact with reality. Not only does Jonah naively think his pouting will get God to abandon his forgiving ways. Jonah also has physically retreated, removing himself from Nineveh, the object of his wrath.

As the caricature is deepened in vv 6–11, Jonah's wrath is shown to be extremely self-serving. God appoints a plant to come up over Jonah to shade him from his discomfort, and Jonah rejoices greatly.[21] Jonah is insensitive to the possibility of great suffering by others but leaps for joy when a mild annoyance is removed from him.

The caricature of the dove continues in vv 7–8, as Jonah retreats into a narrow world of his own making, where a plant, a worm, a sultry wind, and his own physical discomfort are the only things of concern to him. When the worm and the east wind both contribute to Jonah's discomfort, he complains, saying it is better for him to die than to live. The progression regarding Jonah's confrontations with death is significant. In

[21] Note the emphatic form of the repetition וישמח יונה על הקיקיון שמחה גדולה "and Jonah rejoiced over the plant, with great joy."

1:15–2:10 Jonah's brush with death had been real, his plea for life was genuine, and his deliverance by God saved him from death in the watery chaos. Conversely, in 4:3, although Jonah was in no real danger, he asked God for death, not life, in order that he might coerce God into being a God of wrath. But by 4:8, any sense of reasonable purpose is gone, Jonah having been reduced to a whining wretch moaning over his own mild discomfort. The writer has progressively and deliberately destroyed Jonah's credibility, making him one who strikes out too readily at the world when it does not suit him.

To bring the development of the caricature to its conclusion, the writer has God ask Jonah (v 9), "Do you do well to be angry over the plant?" In 4:4 the question "Do you do well to be angry?" still made sense, the issue being God's justice versus his mercy. But in 4:9 the tone of God's question is that of a father scolding a spoiled brat. Jonah and his position about God's wrath are no longer credible. Jonah's intense response, "Indeed, I do well to be angry, even unto death," is totally out of proportion to the petty issue at hand.

The writer concludes his book by contrasting the broad vision and love of God with the pettiness of those who would inflict wrath rather than grant forgiveness. They pity things such as the plant, which serve their own fleeting needs and desires and which they had no role in creating, while asking God, the creator, to have no pity on a great city that contains many of God's highest creatures.

## *Summary*

The element of surprise is the key structural device employed by the writer of Jonah. Before 3:10–4:1, the writer misdirects the readers, leading them to picture Yahweh as a God of wrath who pursues persons or groups until they are appropriately punished, and leading them to see Jonah as a reluctant, passive prophet who flees the task of crying against a wicked city. The repentance of the Ninevites poses an intriguing problem, since no one has up to this point in the book repented and sought God's forgiveness, and the question rings out: "Will this wrathful God forgive Nineveh?" The writer then springs his surprise: God does indeed repent of the evil he had intended to inflict on Nineveh, while the seemingly passive Jonah issues a furious fusillade against God (3:10 and 4:1). The element of surprise makes the readers vulnerable and therefore receptive to the writer's basic point that Jonah's anger and vindictiveness are inappropriate in the light of the forgiving nature of God. The final chapter emphasizes this point by means of the dialogue between Jonah and God, wherein God is clearly portrayed as one eager to forgive his creatures, while Jonah is seen to be excessively self-serving.