

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

An Exegetical Commentary of the Book of Jonah

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Old Testament Orientation II

by

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## Introduction to Jonah

### 1. Canonicity

The Book of Jonah is a text found in the religious canons of Jews, Christians, and Islam.<sup>1</sup> In Jewish and Christian canons it belongs to a group of books known as the minor prophets. The canonicity of the Book of Jonah is not in doubt due to its mention in 3 Maccabees, 2 Esdras, the Sibylline Oracles, and quotation by Christ in Matthew 12:40-41. The content of the book itself is well preserved, as confirmed by a second century scroll found at Wadi Murabba.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Historical Dating

Jonah was a prophet working in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (approximately 786-746 B.C.E.).<sup>3</sup> In the Book of Second Kings, Jonah is mentioned as being the prophet responsible for relaying Yahweh's will to the king (2 King 14:25).<sup>4</sup> It's not clear in what part of Jeroboam II's long reign Jonah worked, but there is Jewish legend that he was one of the sons of the prophet under Elisha who was sent to Jehu to wipe out the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9:1-2).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The story of Jonah exists in the Quran, chapter 37 (As-Saaffat), versus 139-148. It is significantly shorter with multiple changes including Jonah not volunteering to be thrown overboard, a statement that had Jonah not repented he would have stayed in the fish until the day of Resurrection, and the growth of the plant occurring before he is sent to Nineveh (which is not named).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Duane Patterson, Andrew E Hill and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Minor Prophets* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Keith W. Whitelam. "Jeroboam (Person)." Edited by David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Jeroboam II is tied to an earthquake mentioned in the Book of Amos. This earthquake has been dated by archeologists to 750 B.C.E. with a potential dating error of around 30 years. See *Amos's Earthquake: An Extraordinary Middle East Seismic Event of 750 B.C.* in *International Geology Review* Volume 42, 2000 – Issue 7.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, scripture references come from *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Crossway Bibles, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Hirsch, Karl Budde and Solomon Schechter, "JONAH - Jewishencyclopedia.Com", *Jewishencyclopedia.Com*, accessed October 6, 2019, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8750-jonah..>

As Jehu reigned in Israel from 845-818 BCE that would make Jonah's tenure as a prophet a very long one indeed. Its most likely that the Book of Noah takes place somewhere between 790 and 760 BC.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Historical Background

Jonah, whose name in Hebrew means dove<sup>7</sup>, was from the Israeli city of Gath-Hepher. Originally settled during the Iron Age, it flourished into a walled city before the Assyrian conquest.<sup>8</sup> Israel, also known as Samaria, was a kingdom to the north of Judah that was comprised of the ten tribes that succeeded from unified Israel after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 11:31). Israel flourished during the rule of Jeroboam II, expanding its northern boundaries to those previously held by Solomon. However, the gains were only to be temporary as Jeroboam II was an evil king. A contemporary prophet to Jonah who also operated in the Northern Kingdom, Amos, prophesied that all the gains would be taken away from Israel (Amos 6:13-14).<sup>9</sup> In the end, The Kingdom of Israel itself would fall to the Assyrians in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:3-6).

While Israel was in a period of expansion, the Neo-Assyrian empire was in decline. A series of succession wars and revolts from population centers saw a reduction in Assyria's influence on neighboring nations.<sup>10</sup> The Neo-Assyrian Empire was a collection of cities and surroundings in Northern Mesopotamia that included Asshur, Nineveh, Arbela, and Calah. The

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<sup>6</sup> John H Walton, *The Minor Prophets: Jonah* (Zondervan, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Hyun Kim, "Jonah Read Intertextually", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3 (2007): 497, doi:10.2307/27638450.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael Greenberg. "Gath-Hepher (Place)." Edited by David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> As the earthquake previously mentioned is reported on in the Book of Amos, this helps to further narrow in on the time that Jonah operated as a prophet.

<sup>10</sup> John H. Walton, *Jonah*. Kindle.

borders of the nation in modern terms included Southern Turkey, East Syria, and Iraq.<sup>11</sup> It was a military society that made use of both a large standing army and psychological warfare. Terror tactics included torture, rape, eye gouging, mutilation, and leaving conquered areas in economic ruin.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Purpose**

Even when Yahweh has announced doom upon a people, He was willing to change His mind if those people genuinely repented of their actions.

#### **5. Key Verse**

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11)

### **Interpretation and Exposition**

#### **1. Yahweh sent Jonah to Nineveh (Chapter 1)**

##### **1.1 Jonah decided not to go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-2)**

The Book of Jonah opened with the prophet being given a command to go to Nineveh and call out the people for their evil. As a prophet, Jonah knew that Nineveh was in danger of destruction. He also knew that by giving them a warning, Yahweh was giving the city a chance to repent and escape judgment.<sup>13</sup> This was consistent with the Book of Jeremiah where it is stated that “if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,

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<sup>11</sup> Piotr Steinkeller. “Mesopotamia, History of: Mesopotami.” Edited by David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, and Astrid B. Beck. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Gale Yee, Hugh Page and Matthew Coomber, *The Prophets* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Stuart et al., *Hosea-Jonah, Volume 31* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.” (Jeremiah 18:9-10) Jonah was determined to not give Nineveh any chance at redemption.

## **1.2 Jonah hired a ship (Jonah 1:3-10)**

Instead of leaving on his mission, Jonah boarded a ship with the intention of fleeing to Tarshish. According to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and 11, Tarshish is at the very western edge of the world inhabited by the offspring of Noah.<sup>14</sup> This was the end of the known world and Jonah must have hoped it was the edge of Yahweh’s power as well.

The journey from Israel to Tarshish took around three years as a boat would move counterclockwise along the Mediterranean in sight of land.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for Jonah and the sailors, Yahweh unleashed a storm on the ship to stop the fleeing prophet. The winds and waves were so severe that the ship was on the verge of breaking apart. The word used for the “great wind” was only found twice in the Bible and in both cases involved divine violence. The sailors understood that the storm was supernatural and that they were in grave danger.<sup>16</sup>

The sailors, who were terrified, cried out to their gods. The sailors would have feared that one of two Canaanite / Phoenician gods had been offended. Either Baal (called Hadad) who was the storm god or Yamm, who was the god of the sea and chaos, would have been responsible for their danger.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Walton, *Jonah’s Commission and Flight (1:1-17)*.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Noegel, "Jonah And Leviathan: Inner-Biblical Allusions And The Problem With Dragons", *Henoch* 37, no. 2 (2015): 236-260.

However, the sailors would not have had such cosmic level deities to pray to. Instead, they prayed to ancestral, patron, or personal gods in hopes that these lesser deities would attempt to intercede<sup>17</sup>

As this happened, Noah was asleep below deck. The captain of the ship woke him up and asked him to do the same with his god. With Jonah awake and, on the deck, the sailors cast lots to find whom the gods were blaming for the storm. At the very least they hoped to find who might be able to get them out of their situation. Casting lots involved placing markers identifying each person into a container and shaking it up and down. This would allow the gods to lift the appropriate lot out of the container. When Noah's lot was selected the sailors turned to him looking for answers. When he told them that he was a Hebrew and servant of Yahweh, they became even more afraid. Instead of being a personal god or even one assigned to an area of the cosmos, Yahweh was the "God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). In other words, they are in a situation that not even Baal or Yamm could create. The sailors turned to Jonah to ask how to sooth Yahweh and keep them from being destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

### **1.3 Jonah would rather go to Sheol than Nineveh (Jonah 1:10-17)**

Jonah instructed the sailors to throw him overboard. Most likely, had Jonah decided to go to Nineveh Yahweh would have ended the storm. Instead, he would rather die than give the people of Nineveh a chance to avert destruction.<sup>19</sup> The sailors refused and instead attempted to row to the shore. The word used for row is also used in the Old Testament to describe digging

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<sup>17</sup> Walton, Jonah's Commission and Flight (1:1-17).

<sup>18</sup> Walton, Jonah's Commission and Flight.

<sup>19</sup> Coomber and Dempsy, 863.

through a wall and attempting to dig into Sheol to escape Yahweh.<sup>20</sup> Appropriately, the sailors had no luck rowing back to shore and the storm became even more severe. They agreed to throw Noah overboard but prayed to Yahweh begging Him not to hold the death against them. As soon as Jonah hit the water, the storm abated, and the sea calmed. In response, the sailors made a sacrifice to Yahweh in thanks. Of note, as the sailors were polytheists, the sacrifice did not mean that they had converted to Judaism or would in the future only worship Yahweh.<sup>21</sup> They also would not have conducted the ceremonial sacrifice on the ship as they had thrown the cargo overboard, there were no animals onboard, and in the Ancient Near East sacrifices were only done at temples and shrines.<sup>22</sup>

As Jonah sank into the Mediterranean, Yahweh sent a great fish to swallow him and hold him in its belly for three days and nights. Again the word great was used so the fish was considered a divine beast in the same camp as Leviathan, and Behemoth.<sup>23</sup> Whereas in Canaanite and Babylonian mythology gods like Baal and Marduk had to slay these creatures to create order from chaos<sup>24</sup>, they were instead under the control of Yahweh who created them in the first place.

## **2. Jonah in the Belly of the Great Fish (Chapter 2)**

Now that he had been spared from Sheol and was inside a fish, Jonah was quite ready to praise Yahweh instead of trying to evade Him. Jonah gave a prayer to Yahweh thanking Him for the rescue from the underworld. In the Ancient Near East cosmology, the sea was associated

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<sup>20</sup> Scott Noegel, "Jonah And Leviathan: Inner-Biblical Allusions And The Problem With Dragons", *Heno* 37, no. 2 (2015): 236-260.

<sup>21</sup> Coomber and Dempsy, 863.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart et al, 464.

<sup>23</sup> Tova Forti, "Of Ships And Seas, And Fish And Beasts: Viewing The Concept Of Universal Providence In The Book Of Jonah Through The Prism Of The Psalms", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 3 (2011): 359-74.

<sup>24</sup> Loren R. Fisher, "Creation At Ugarit And In The Old Testament", *Vetus Testamentum* 15, no. 3 (1965): 313.

with chaos and was connected to the underworld. For instance, Rabbi Eliezer who lived in the first and second centuries AD, taught that the fish took Jonah below the earth until they were under the Temple in Jerusalem to give the prayer.<sup>25</sup> In his prayer, Jonah also used specific language for the underworld such as “at the roots of the mountains” and “I went down to the land” (Jonah 2:6).<sup>26</sup>

The change from a story to a psalm has led some critics to believe that it was added to the Book of Jonah later. However, the use of a poem within the framework of a biblical text is not abnormal and occurred in all of the narrative books of the Pentateuch and 1 and 2 Chronicles.<sup>27</sup> It also followed the characteristics of Hebrew poetry such as parallelism where the second line uses repetition of related words and phrases to correspond to the first.<sup>28</sup>

The poem was split into two sections. Verses 2-7 were about his descent into the underworld and 8-9 covered both Yahweh’s rescue of Jonah and his response. At the end of the psalm, Jonah declared that “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:9). This is ironic because the same salvation he was celebrating was what he was trying to deny the Ninevites by first fleeing to Tarshish and then Sheol.”<sup>29</sup>

After three days and nights, Jonah was vomited ashore by the fish. The use of three days and nights was another reference to Sheol as a trip to the underworld was supposed to take that length of time. This is one reason why Jesus Christ used Jonah as a typology for his coming death and resurrection in the Book of Matthew (Matthew 12:39). The word vomit was also used in Leviticus 18:25 for the expulsion of the unclean nations as a punishment for iniquity. While

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<sup>25</sup> Coomber and Dempsy, 865.

<sup>26</sup> Michael S Heiser, *Reversing Hermon* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Stuart et al, 470.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Wiseman, Desmond Alexander and Bruce Waltke, . *Obadiah, Jonah And Micah: An Introduction And Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Wiseman et al, p. 473.



Yahweh saved Jonah, at the end of the journey the great fish sent a message that He was not happy with prophet's behavior. It is likely that Jonah was left on the shore of Palestine from where he had taken ship.<sup>30</sup> While the journey may have increased Jonah's faith in Yahweh and the sailors, he was left no closer or further from Nineveh than when he boarded the ship.

### **3. Yahweh sent Jonah to Nineveh (Chapter 3)**

#### **3.1 This time Jonah Agreed (Chapter 3:1-4)**

Chapter three began in the same manner as chapter 1, with Yahweh instructing Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah was obedient and headed for the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The empire itself was pantheistic with Assur as the primary deity. While Assur started as a deification of the Assyrian city of the same name, his mythology grew until he was associated with Marduk of the Babylonian pantheon. By the fall of the Assyrian Empire, Assur was identified as a creator deity like the Canaanite god El. The king of the Assyrian Empire was known as the Viceroy of Assur and acted as an intermediary between the cosmic and earthly realms.

The king used a series of experts in areas such as astrology and extispicy to divine the will of the gods.<sup>31</sup> The role of divination in the actions of the king was so powerful that the advisors seemed to have more control than the monarch they served. After being ordered to fast for a period by his advisors, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal stated: "Release Me. Have I not waited (long enough)?... I want to eat. I want to drink wine." In response the monarch was told to keep fasting whether he liked it or not.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Wiseman et al, p. 474

<sup>31</sup> Sarah C. Melville, "The Role Of Rituals In Warfare During The Neo-Assyrian Period", *Religion Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016): 219-220.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ferguson, "Nineveh's "Impossible" Repentance", *Bible and Spade* 27, no. 2 (2014): 33-34.

Verse three described Nineveh as a great city requiring three days to cross. While this description could not be accurate regarding the city of Nineveh itself, it would fit the time needed to cross the province. Scribes often interchanged the names of provinces and cities which may provide a better understanding of the text.<sup>33</sup> A day into his journey across Nineveh Jonah spoke to the people and declared that in forty days the city would be destroyed.

### **3.2 The King and People of Nineveh Repent (Chapter 3:5-10)**

Seemingly as soon as the people of Nineveh heard Jonah, they immediately started to repent. They did so by fasting and putting on sackcloth, a form of clothing made from goat's hair and worn with wood ash.<sup>34</sup> The king responded in kind by coming down from his throne, removing his royal vestments, putting on sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. There is some question as to whether the "king of Nineveh" (Jonah 3:6) was king of Assyria or a regional governor. The northwest Semitic word for king was translatable as the governor of a province when the term was in relation to a city.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Ferguson, "Who Was The 'King Of Nineveh' In Jonah 3:6?", *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (1996): 303-308. Here the city of Nineveh is also called great, putting it in the divine context of the wind, the storm, and the fish. As Nineveh was the cultic center for Ishtar worship, this may be the reason for the use of the word. While Israelites did not worship other gods, they did in many parts of the Bible state that they existed. The Israelite view, as laid out in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 was that after the rebellious act of the Tower of Babel, Yahweh split the people into nations and placed members of the Heavenly Host over them to be their gods. This worldview was noted in Second Temple Period literature such as the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as Gentile works such as Plato's *Critias*. For more information on the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, see Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Martin Manser, "Sackcloth And Ashes", *Dictionary Of Bible Themes: The Accessible And Comprehensive Tool For Topical Studies* (London: Martin Manser, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, "Who Was the King of Nineveh", 303.

While the actions of the king may seem out of place to modern readers, it was quite appropriate for a Mesopotamian monarch. Both Babylon and Assyria had new year rites where the king removed his regalia in order to make vows to a deity and renew the kingship. There were also situations where the ruler would repent by sitting on the floor in sackcloth. As previously stated, Jonah operated as a prophet during a tumultuous period for the Assyrian Empire. For instance, from 765 to 760 BC there was a plague, a solar eclipse, and several revolts.<sup>36</sup> These events left the monarchy on shaky ground and any omen or warning would have been taken seriously.

The solar eclipse would have been especially troubling to the monarchy as a sign of plague and political upheaval. Assyrian scribes labeled years with the major events that occurred with eclipses considered major enough to make the list. If Jonah went to Nineveh around the time of the solar eclipse of 763 BC, he would not have even found the king of Assyria on the throne. During an eclipse a substitute king would sit the throne and there would be fasting until the danger had passed.<sup>37</sup>

When Yahweh saw the repentant acts of the Ninevites, He relented from the plan to destroy the city. Because He loved His creations, Yahweh was willing to change His mind and stop or delay judgment. However, it should be noted that the people of the city did not convert to Judaism or receive salvation from Yahweh.

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<sup>36</sup> Ferguson, Nineveh's "Impossible" Repentance, 33-34.

<sup>37</sup> Ferguson, Nineveh's "Impossible" Repentance, 34. There is another option for why the king was so fast to repent. A cuneiform tablet found in Nineveh and dated to the Neo-Assyrian period details the descent of Ishtar into the underworld. The only way she was able to return was to have her husband replace her. Much like Ishtar, Jonah had been to the underworld and returned. As the king of Nineveh joined with Ishtar in sacred marriage, he may have been concerned that he would take Jonah's place just like his predecessor in the myth. See "The Descent Of Ishtar To The Netherworld [CDLI Wiki]", *Cdli.Ox.Ac.Uk*, last modified 2017, accessed October 6, 2019, [http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=descent\\_ishtar\\_netherworld](http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=descent_ishtar_netherworld).

Much like the sailors they were still polytheists and had only acted to pacify Yahweh, not declare allegiance to Him. For the people of Nineveh, judgement would eventually come in 612 BC when the city was sacked and destroyed by the Babylonians and Medes.<sup>38</sup>

#### **4. Jonah Doesn't Like the Outcome. (Chapter 4)**

After the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah became angry at Yahweh. He prayed to Yahweh basically saying, "I told you so". He stated that he had originally tried to flee to Tarshish because he knew that God would be merciful to the people of Nineveh. In his anger, Jonah asked Yahweh to kill him as he would rather be dead. He then sat outside of the city to see what would happen to the city and waited to die.<sup>39</sup>

While he was sitting there, Yahweh miraculously caused a plant to grow and give Jonah shade. He stayed under the plant overnight, but the next morning Yahweh caused a worm to attack the plant and cause it to wither. He then sent a hot east wind leaving Jonah at the point of fainting. Once again, the prophet asked to die. Yahweh's actions with Jonah outside of the city of Nineveh made up three of the four miracles in the Book of Jonah. The other miracle occurred when the fish swallowed him<sup>40</sup> so all four involved Yahweh teaching Jonah a lesson.

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<sup>38</sup> Robert B Chisholm, *Handbook On The Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002). 415.

<sup>39</sup> Chisholm, 416.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Magonet, "Jonah, Book Of", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

Yahweh then used the series of three miracles get Jonah to rethink his position on the Ninevites. He asked the prophet if he was upset that the plant had been destroyed. When the prophet exclaimed that he was angry enough to die, Yahweh stated

“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:10-11)

If Jonah was upset over the loss of a plant that he didn't even create, it did not make sense for him to be angry over Yahweh relenting from destroying an entire city of people that he had created. In addition, the people on Nineveh were not part of Yahweh's covenant people so they did not have the advantages Jonah had regarding morality and religious training.<sup>41</sup>

Chapter four and the Book of Jonah end with Yahweh's question so there is no record of Jonah's response. The Book of Nahum, which also dealt with Nineveh, also ended in a question.<sup>42</sup> Where the Book of Jonah ended with a question affirming Yahweh's love for all people, Nahum ended with a question about the evil of the king of Assyria (Nahum 3:19). Hopefully the events of his journey taught him that Yahweh's will was sovereign and that He cared about all his creations, not just those under the covenant. In doing so Jonah's heart would be more like Yahweh's than that of the king of Assyria.

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<sup>41</sup> Wiseman et al, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Kim, 510.

## Application

- 1 The Book of Jonah shows us that Yahweh cares about all His creations and not just those whom he is currently in covenant with. Just as Israel was supposed to be a nation of priests to the world (Exodus 19:6), Christians are supposed to be examples of Yahweh's love to the nations and work to bring them to Christ (Matthew 28:16-20). Just as the Assyrians were often in bloody struggle with Israel and were still allowed to repent, Christians should attempt to give followers of other religions, such as Fundamentalist Islam that deny Christ and commit great violence, a chance to hear the Gospel. As this paper is being written, the fastest growing population of Christians in the world is in the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>43</sup>
- 2 No matter what our opinion and will may be, Yahweh is sovereign. Human beings have prejudices and other deficiencies that prevent us from being perfect in our understanding of issues. Human beings have free will, but that will should never be used contrary to the stated will or doctrine of Yahweh. The Bible exists for humanity because in many cases what seems right in each moment may be wrong in the long run. Protestant denominations such as Presbyterians and Methodists have had huge debates over issues such as homosexuality even when both the Old and New Testament are clear on what the Church's stance should be (Leviticus 18:22) (Romans 1:26-27).

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<sup>43</sup> Caleb Parke, "Iran Has World'S 'Fastest-Growing Church,' Despite No Buildings - And It's Mostly Led By Women: Documentary", *Fox News*, last modified 2019, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/faith-values/worlds-fastest-growing-church-women-documentary-film>.

**3** Even though one may repent, that repentance does not bring salvation without a believing and faithful relationship with Yahweh. Even though the sailors and the people of Nineveh either repented or gave sacrifices of thanks to Yahweh, they were still polytheists and did not become God-fearers. In the end, decades later the Ninevites had returned to their sinful ways and were destroyed as prophesied in the Book of Nahum.

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