

REFLECTIONS ON JONAH

(John Walton)

It has often been noted that the book of Jonah teaches obedience to the command of the Lord. That is certainly true, but we should not stop there. Jonah learns the hard way that in some matters the choice is not whether to obey or disobey; rather, it is whether we yield to God's command or leave him no choice but to drag us to obedience. There are times when God will not be denied—we can go willingly, grudgingly, or by pure force, but go we will.

Another lesson learned by Jonah is that nice and neat theological categories do not confine God. God is not limited to our perception or understanding of him. This is not to say that there are no theological absolutes. Jonah finds out, however, that there are fewer than he thought.

Finally, in connection with both of the above lessons, we see in Jonah a spiritual pride that we should all strive to avoid. Jonah feels that he knows best how God works, and he even disregards God's attempts to lead him out of his misconceived presuppositions. Our job is to follow, not to understand, the the directions of God as he guides our lives and ministries.

So what became of Jonah? As we have seen, the book is not about him in the end, it is about God, so the text never tells us how his story ends. We may get a hint, however, from an unexpected source. In the introduction we noted that Jonah shows up again in 2 Kings 14:25. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that the Kings incident comes after the book of Jonah, for in Kings we find Jonah giving a message of God's compassion on an undeserving people. The explanation given by the narrator of Kings even sounds a bit like God's assessment of Nineveh at the end of Jonah: "The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them." And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash" (2Ki 14:26-27). Perhaps Jonah learned the lesson of God's compassion after all and spread the news to the northern kingdom, Israel.

