

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JONAH 3:1-10

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Introduction and Message Statement

Jonah is the only prophet in the OT sent by God to a foreign nation.¹ The OT book which bears his name chronicles the adventures of this prophet of God and his foolish, inevitably-doomed attempt to escape the mission God has put before him. This paper focuses on Jonah 3, which describes God's second call to Jonah to fulfill his mission to Nineveh. Following Jonah's spectacular failure to run away and God's gracious discipline to turn his heart back to Him and His mission, we will now see Jonah's acting in obedience to God and witnessing His profoundly lavish grace in bringing revival to the once thoroughly wicked people of Nineveh.

Translation – Jonah 3:1-10

¹ Then, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² “Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it the message that I am speaking to you.”

³ So, Jonah arose, and he went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a walk of three days.⁴ When Jonah had entered one day's journey into the city, he cried out, saying, “In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown.”

⁵ But the men of Nineveh believed God. They called a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least [of them]. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, threw off his robe of state, covered [himself] in sackcloth, and sat in the dirt. ⁷ So, he made a proclamation, saying,

“In Nineveh, by decree of the king and [his] nobles, no man or herd [of domestic animals] or flock shall taste anything. They shall not feed or drink water. ⁸ But let them cover themselves with sackcloth, each man and beast. Let them call out to God fervently, and each man turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands.”

⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent, and turn from His fierce anger, so that we will not be destroyed.

¹⁰ And God saw what they had done – that they had turned from their evil way. And God relented from the disaster – that which he said he would do to them. And He did not do it.

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 1011.

Commentary and Analysis

Jonah 3, marking the midpoint (and turning point) in the book, opens with a profound parallel of chapter 1. The similarity in language between 1:1-3a and 3:1-3a can't be ignored. The verses begin with identical words. First, וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה (“the word of the Lord came to Jonah”; 1:1a and 3:1a). Then, God commands Jonah, saying: קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוֶה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקִרָא עָלֶיהָ (“Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it.”; vv2a).² Finally, Jonah responds: וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה (“And Jonah arose”; vv3a) and acted – first by running away, and then much more positively the second time. The two halves of the book describe Jonah's two very different response to God and God's consistently-gracious response to sin and repentance.

Here in chapter 3, Jonah is called by God שְׁנִיית. Used as an adverb in this way, the שְׁנִיית numeral indicates duplication of the event (“a second time”).³ This is “a skillful patch by which to join two originally-separate narratives into one,”⁴ and we see the story “renewing itself, and our hero has a new chance by which to fill the prophet's role.”⁵

Initially, God talks about the evil of the city, specifically referencing only that Jonah is to speak out עַל (“against”) it. The second time God commands Jonah, however, He adds the phrase אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ (“according to the word of the Lord”), which “underscores God's determination to get His message to the Ninevites, and to use Jonah [as His messenger].”⁶

Then in v3, we finally see the parallel accounts of Jonah 1 and 3 diverge. The phrase וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה (3:3) appears 26x in the OT (e.g. Josh 8:8; 1 Kgs 13:26; Jer 13:2), and is consistently

² There is in fact a small discrepancy between God's command to call out עַל (“over, against”; 1:2) Nineveh and אֶל (“upon, against”; 3:2) it. However, “most scholars [see] no perceptible difference and argue that [these terms] are basically interchangeable.” (Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:73)

³ Robert B. Chisholm, *A Workbook for Intermediate Hebrew: Grammar, Exegesis, and Commentary on Jonah and Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 69.

⁴ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary and Interpretation*, vol. 24B, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (Yale University: Doubleday, 1990), 225.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24B:225.

⁶ *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1689.

translated “according to the word of the LORD.” Used in this passage, the narrator is not simply making a statement about the content of Jonah’s prophetic message, but also emphasizing that Jonah will obey God. He will “arise and go to Nineveh” (3:3) and convey God’s message to them (3:4), *just as God commanded*.

The remainder of the verse is a two-part circumstantial clause giving us background.⁷ Here, we encounter new details about the city of Nineveh itself. The meaning of the phrase עיר גדולה לאלהים is debated. Certainly, this “emphasizes not only [the city’s] size (c.f. 1:2), but its importance (c.f. 4:11) [among earthly cities].”⁸ But מְאֵלֵהִים is used as an attributive modifier only here in all the OT.⁹ Given the author’s focus on the city’s physical size in the next verse as well, this must be at least part of his meaning. It might also mean that the city is “important to God,” an interpretation which would be in keeping with the overall message of the book.”¹⁰ Ultimately, I think the author simultaneously means “all of the above.” Further, since “the actual walled city [occupied] an area 3 miles in length and less than 1.5 miles in breadth,”¹¹ the narrator is likely referring to the “greater Nineveh” region (an area 30-56 miles across¹²). Otherwise, it would be hard to explain how a city its size could be מְהַלֵךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים (“a journey of three days”; 3:3).¹³

When Jonah begins לְבוֹא בְּעִיר מְהַלֵךְ יוֹם אֶחָד (“to enter one day’s journey into the city”; 3:4), he sets about the task of declaring God’s word. This implies urgency. The Jonah of chapter 3 is “a prophet who is very much in a hurry to do what God asks of him”¹⁴ – to proclaim God’s message of judgment: עוֹד אֲרָבָעִים יוֹם וְגִינָה נְהַפְכֶת. In terms of its content, Jonah’s statement

⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:228.

⁸ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1011.

⁹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:229–230.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, ed., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1798.

¹¹ Merrill Frederick Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. R. K. Harrison, Howard Frederic Vos, and Cyril J. Barber, Rev and Updated Ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988), 924.

¹² *ESV Study Bible*, 1689.

¹³ Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1798.

¹⁴ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:236.

incorporates עֹד as an adverb, expressing continuance or persistence,¹⁵ meaning that 40 days remain until the destruction of Nineveh. Fascinatingly, the Niphal stem of הפך used here could express “to be demolished” or “to be changed or altered in heart.”¹⁶ Though it might be tempting to choose the latter, given what we know how the story ends, the former is best in context, since it is clear God has sent Jonah to proclaim judgment on the city. This is the same verb used when God destroys Sodom (c.f. Gen 19:21).¹⁷ Because it is a participle, I take it to be acting as a predicate adjective, describing the subject, Nineveh. This assumes a linking verb, which I think is best rendered with a future sense, given Jonah’s explicit timeframe and the use of עֹד. Therefore, וְיִינֶה נְהַפְּךְ is translated, “in 40 days, Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Although v5 begins with one among many waw-consecutives, as the narrative unfolds, I take this conjunction to be logically disjunctive. Jonah has proclaimed destruction, *but* Nineveh repents. Specifically, וַיֵּאֱמְנוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִיְנוּהַ בְּאֱלֹהִים (“the men of Nineveh believed in God”). The Hifil stem of אמן used here with ב is a common construction establishing that a person (or fact) can be regarded as trustworthy (c.f. Hab 1:5; Ex 4:8).¹⁸ This form expresses a faith which “entails trust in or confident reliance on God [that] will lead to obeying His commands.”¹⁹

Note that the people put their faith בְּאֱלֹהִים (“in God”), not in YHWH. Perhaps this implies an incomplete, fledgling or impersonal faith? In any event, they certainly appear to be truly contrite, as the narrator uses the classic formula for expressing repentance to describe their

¹⁵ Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, [Nachdr.], Reprinted from the 1906 ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 728.

¹⁶ Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Study ed. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2001), 253.

¹⁷ *ESV Study Bible*, 1690.

¹⁸ Köhler et al., *HALOT*, 64.

¹⁹ *ESV Study Bible*, 77.

actions: fasting, wearing sackcloth, and (later) sitting in ashes (c.f. 1 Kgs 21:27; Joel 1:13-14).²⁰ Interestingly, this story is “unique to Scripture in featuring foreigners who fast for penance.”²¹

As repentance sweeps through the city, מַּגְדוֹלָם וְעַד-קְטָנָם (“from the greatest to the least;” 3:5), we also observe that וַיָּגַע הַדְּבָר אֶל-מֶלֶךְ נִיְנֻוֹה (“the news reached the king of Nineveh”), who subsequently decrees that the whole city must submit to God. The king of Nineveh is not given a name, but this is not unusual for a book that names only Jonah himself.²² It is unlikely, though, that this is the ruling King of Assyria (e.g. 2 Kgs 19:36) – either Adad-nārārī III (c810-783) or more likely Aššur-dān III (c772-755),²³ since Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (c793-753) of Israel (c.f. 2 Kgs 14:25).²⁴ It’s much more likely that the King of Nineveh mentioned here is a governor (of some kind) over the local region.²⁵

In any event, we see this king וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶדְרָתוֹ מֵעַלָּיו וַיִּכַּס שֵׁק וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-הָאָפֶר (“throw off his robe of state, cover himself in sackcloth, and sit in the dirt”). This sentence is introduced by a circumstantial, temporal clause, establishing “when” the king rises and does these things – each of which reinforces the sense that the city is responding in repentance. In fact, the word שֵׁק is used in Scripture exclusively to denote humiliation, mourning or penitence.²⁶ A more modern translation of “tattered rags” might also be appropriate.²⁷ And the word הָאָפֶר is typically translated “dirt,” but could indicate “ashes,” assuming no connection is made to burnt offerings, which we do not see in this scene. The main point, though, is humility, which I’ve emphasized by the translation “sat in the dirt.”²⁸ This humility has broken out not just for the king or a few

²⁰ Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1798.

²¹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:245.

²² *Ibid.*, 24B:249.

²³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1012.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1006.

²⁵ Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1798.

²⁶ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:246.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24B:252.

particularly contrite people, but מִגְדוֹלָם וְעַד־קְטָנָם (“from the greatest to the least;” 3:5), among the king and his nobles (3:7), and affecting even the herds and flocks of the people (3:8).

In vv7-8, we turn to the king’s proclamation. This segment is opened by two back-to-back verbs: וַיִּצְעַק (“[the king] made a proclamation”) and וַיֹּאמֶר (“he said”). The former makes it clear that the king is making a formal decree, while the latter marks the beginning of its content. As such, the two introductory phrases, בְּנִינְוָה (“in Nineveh”) and מִטֶּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדֹלָיו (“by decree of the king and his nobles”), are part of the narrator’s written representation of the king’s decree – a “header” of sorts, identifying the location and scope of the proclamation and the authority by which it is given.²⁹ The term מִטֶּעַם itself is translated “decree” here, uniquely in all the OT. Otherwise, it is seen as “taste” or “sense.” This is likely an “Aramism, derived by synecdoche from ‘taste,’”³⁰ but in any event, it inherits its sense of being a decree or declaration from the opening verb וַיִּצְעַק. The second use of the verb אָמַר, in infinitive form, begins the direct speech of the body of the proclamation itself, and therefore need not be translated.

The overarching tone of the king’s decree serves is that the Ninevites are taking their repentance before God *very* seriously. When the verb טָעַם (“to taste”) occurs in Scripture describing prohibitions against food (c.f. 1 Sam 14:24; 2 Sam 3:35) and paralleling other verbs for eating, as it does here in the use of רָעָה (“to graze”), we are to take it to be “emphasizing just how resolute were these decisions to impose a fast.”³¹ Including animals in the decree speaks to the king’s urgency and seriousness.³² Lastly the adverb בְּהִזְקָה (“fervently”) in v8 indicates that the Ninevites are serious, even desperate to demonstrate their repentance.

²⁹ Ibid., 24B:252–253.

³⁰ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 379.

³¹ VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE*, 2:379.

³² Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1798.

The commands made in the decree are many and varied, three negative followed by three positive jussive modals. The prohibitions in v7 are all formed by *yiqṭōl* volatives paired with אַל־. They essentially constitute a command to fast: the Ninevites shall not taste (טעם), feed (רעה), or drink (שתה). These are then followed in v8 by three positive commands. Specifically, they are to mourn (וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שָׁקִים), “let them cover themselves with sackcloth”), to pray (וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּהוֹזָקָה), “let them cry out fervently”), and to repent (וַיִּשְׁבוּ), “let them turn...”).

In fact, this concept of “turning” (שוב) – whether on the part of man or God – dominates the remainder of the passage. The Qal usage of שׁוּב primarily indicates that “having moved in a particular direction, [one must] move thereupon in the opposite direction ... [even to] return to the point of departure.”³³ Theologically, for humans, this typically means “to return to God.”³⁴

The Ninevites are directed by their king, speaking for God and echoing the prophet, to turn אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִן־הַתְּמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפְיָהֶם (“each man from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands”). This is a call to turn away from both immediate-term actions (violence they are committing) and long-term patterns of sin (evil ways in general), and turn to God and His ways. They are “two separate but mutually-reinforcing spheres of activities ... a spiritual reassessment [and] peaceful coexistence as a sign of ethical regeneration,”³⁵ both relating to the physical, ethical and moral dimensions of their lives.³⁶

Verse 9, especially the introduction וְלֹא נֹאכֵד (“who knows?!”), captures the desperation of the people of Nineveh, and echos the sailors’ desperate hope in 1:6 that they will not be destroyed. All the frenetic work of repentance by the people is directed at this hopeful thinking,

³³ G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Revised Edition., vol. 15 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 1313–1314.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15:1314.

³⁵ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:260.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24B:259.

represented by an initial *yiqṭōl* verb (יָשׁוּב) orienting God’s actions in the future, followed by a string of 3 *weqātal* forms in verb-subject order, indicating an irreal mood.³⁷ Taken together, this creates a subjunctive, hopeful, future-oriented sense. First, יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים (“God may turn and relent”). When God is the subject of the Niphal stem of נָחַם (c.f. Gen 6:6-7; 1 Sam 15:11-35; Isa 57:6), it implies that He experiences regret and turns back from a previously-determined course of action, often (about half the references in the OT) associated with God’s punishment.

Throughout the OT, when God relents in this way, the biblical writers use נָחַם (N) to describe His action. Second, וְנָחַם מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ (“[God] may turn from His fierce anger”). The phrase חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ always refers to God, and literally means “the heating of his nose.” This was a well-understood idiom for intense anger in Jonah’s day.³⁸ Lastly, וְלֹא נֶאֱבַד is a result clause, continuing in the context of hope for irreal future actions. Therefore, I translate it “so that we will not be destroyed,” precisely mirroring the sailors’ frantic hope in 1:6.

In the end, God is shown throughout the story to be radically merciful and gracious; He does in fact withhold destruction from both the sailors and the city. The narrator describes this amazing result using a five-clause parallel structure in v10, wrapping around כִּי and אֲשֶׁר conjunctions, which create mirrored object clauses in 3:10b and 3:10d respectively.³⁹ This structure is best depicted visually:

וַיִּרְא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדַּרְכֵּם הַרְעָה וַיִּנְחָם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה	And God saw what they had done – that they had turned from their evil way. And God relented from the disaster – that which he said he would do to them. And He did not do it.
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³⁷ John A. Cook, Robert D. Holmstedt, and Philip Williams, *Beginning Biblical Hebrew: A Grammar and Illustrated Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 66.

³⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:262.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24B:263.

Recalling that the evil Nineveh had come up before God's face (1:2), we now see God looking down and seeing them (3:10a). And God responds. As the people turn (שׁוּבוּ) from evil, so also God relents (נָחַם; Niphal) from the disaster He had planned. "God's decision not to destroy the Ninevites parallels [their repentance]. Prophetic denunciations were meant to produce repentance, leading to forgiveness (c.f. Jer 18:7-8),"⁴⁰ which is exactly what happens here. Finally, "the verse's last clause, וְלֹא עָשָׂה, matches the crispness of the Ninevites' own wish as expressed at the end of v9, וְלֹא נִאֲכַד.⁴¹ It's a simple Qal, in perfective aspect, and constitutes the climax of the story: God didn't do it.

Conclusion

The clear teaching of Jonah 3 is that God is a God of grace. He is merciful and compassionate, even to those considered not to be His people. He relents from disaster when we cry out to Him and bear the fruit of repentance. And He is quick to respond to those who believe in Him. Jonah teaches us well that "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 51:17b).

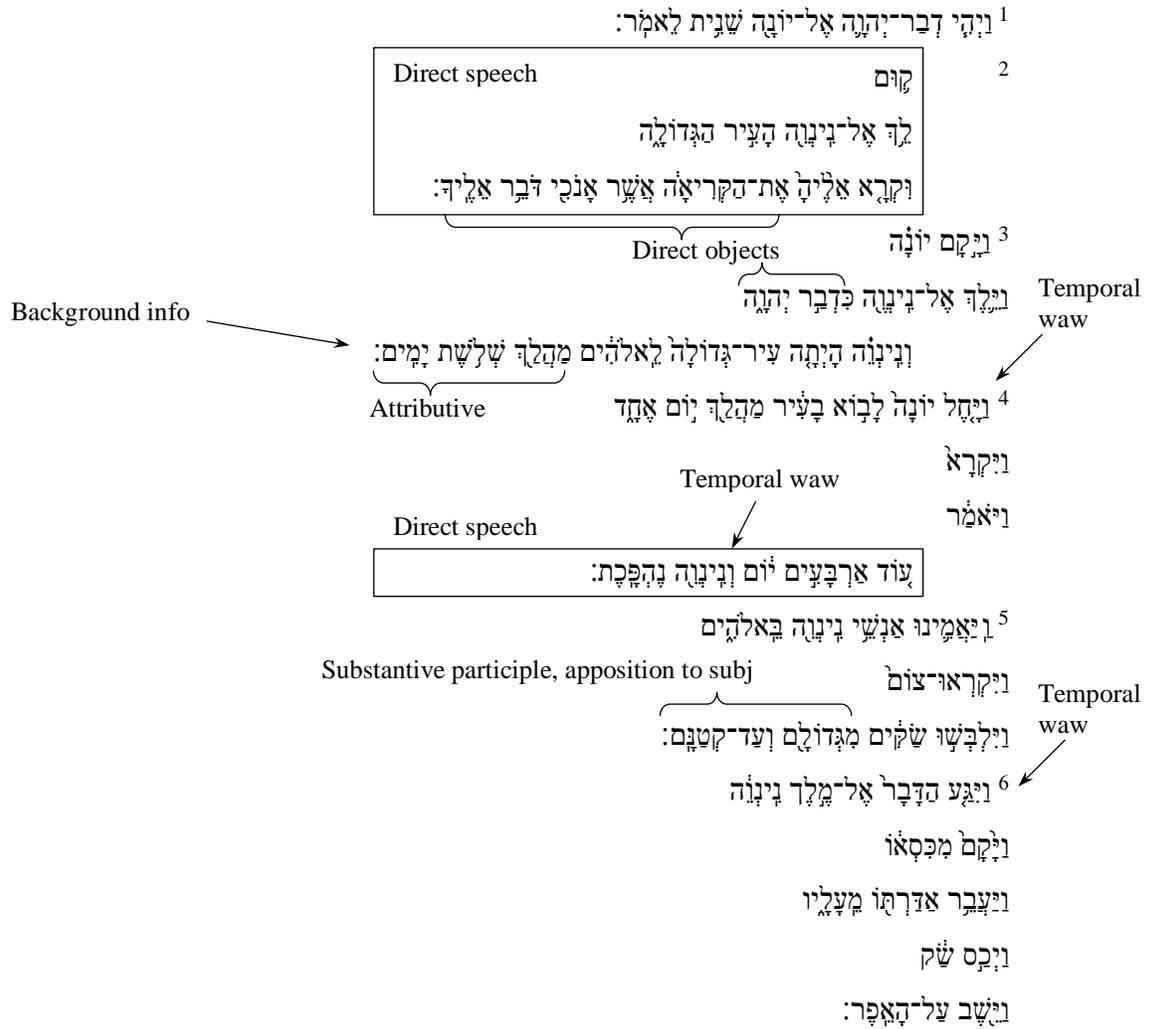
⁴⁰ Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1798.

⁴¹ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:264.

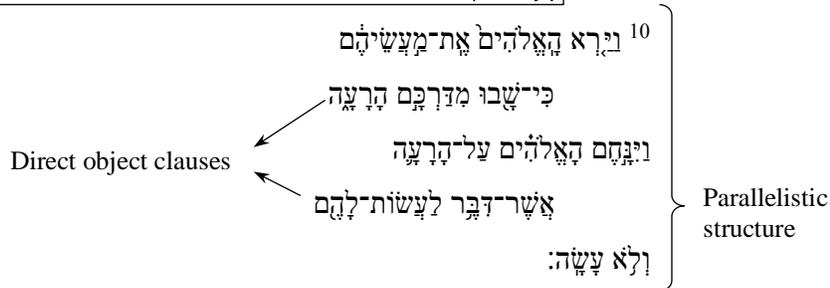
Structural Outline

1. God's command is repeated (vv1-2)
2. Jonah's response is obedience (vv3-4)
3. Nineveh's response is repentance (v5-8)
 - a. The people believe and mourn (v5)
 - b. The king mourns (v6)
 - c. The king and nobles demand repentance from the people (vv7-8)
 - i. Future disposition: They must turn from evil
 - ii. Present action: They must turn from violence
4. The king's hope is for mercy (v9)
5. God's response is grace (v10)
 - a. God sees
 - b. God relents
 - c. God does not impose judgment

Syntactic Outline



Direct speech	<p>Contents of decree</p> <p>בְּיַגְוֹהַּ מִטַּעַם הַמִּלְחָמָה וַיְגַדְלִיו לֵאמֹר הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבְּקָר וְהַצֹּאן אֵלֶי-יִטְעַמּוּ מֵאוֹמָה אֵלֶי-יִרְעוּ וּמִיָּמִים אֵלֶי-יִשְׁתּוּ: וַיִּתְכַּסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל-אֱלֹהִים בְּחִזְקָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִן-הַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם:</p>	8
	<p>מִיִּיּוֹדָע יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וַיָּשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ וְלֹא נֹאבָד:</p>	9



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