

JONAH

Introductory Matters

Title

The Hebrew title of this book, *yonah*, “Jonah,” as in the case of the other Minor Prophets, is named for its author and principal character—Jonah, son of Amittai (1:1). The name Jonah means “dove.” We usually associate the “dove” with peace and purity. The term “dove” certainly serves as an apt title for this book, for if the wicked people of Nineveh would repent of their sins, by turning to Jonah’s God in true heart repentance, they would experience peace and deliverance from His prophesied judgment/destruction.

Author

Little is known about Jonah apart from what is recorded in his book. Jonah was a Hebrew (1:9) and son of Amittai (1:1). An additional reference in 2 Kings 14:25 states that Jonah was a servant of Yahweh, a prophet, and a native of Gath-hepher, a small town to the north of Nazareth in the tribal territory of Zebulun in Galilee (Josh 19:10, 13). Hence, Jonah came from the Northern Kingdom, and according to this same reference in 2 Kings 14:25, he served as a prophet in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). He prophesied that the LORD would save Israel by the hand of Jeroboam II and would restore Israel to her former boundaries (2 Kgs 14:25-27). Jonah is unique among the Old Testament prophets, in that, he served as Israel’s foreign missionary. He is the only prophet on record whom God commissioned to carry a message of repentance and judgment to a heathen nation.¹ In addition, God used Jonah’s ministry to the Ninevites to reveal His compassion for all people, specifically Gentiles (Gen 12:3; John 3:16).

Arguments of Critical Scholars. The historicity of the Book of Jonah has been called into question by critical scholars for various reasons, including the supernatural accounts of the prophet being swallowed by a huge fish (often and erroneously thought to have been a whale, *KJV*) and the gourd which miraculously grew up overnight, and for his preaching to the Gentiles. For these and similar reasons critical scholars conclude that the book must have been written in the postexilic period after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.²

Conservative scholars would point out that it is a mistake to approach the Book of Jonah (with faulty presuppositions—an unwillingness to accept the possibility of miraculous occurrences) by denying the incredibility of some of the events related therein, or by insisting that the events are not historical in nature. The following arguments supporting the accuracy and historicity of the Book of Jonah have been put forward:

¹Nahum later delivered a message of Nineveh’s certain overthrow.

²Other liberal critics date the book to as late as 430 B.C. For a good overview of the various views of critical scholars along with conservative responses, see Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 160-65. For convincing arguments supporting the writer being Jonah see especially Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 308-15; Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 383-84.

- 1) There is no good reason to question the traditional view that Jonah wrote this book about himself (ancient Jews, Jesus, Josephus, *Ant IX*, 12:2, and Christians).
- 2) The book's story line, while unusual, nonetheless presents itself as an authentic *historical narrative* (2 Kgs 14:25), and not as a parable (a simple comparison) or an allegory (in which every detail has a figurative meaning). Moreover, in the parables and allegories of the Bible the interpretation is either given or clearly implied (cf. Ezek 15).³
- 3) To suggest that the universal idea of Yahweh's inclusion of Gentiles into His program had no relevance in the eighth century is to negate the pervasive and repeated revelations of the redemptive work of God that appear very early in the Old Testament and continue throughout (Gen 9:27; 12:3; Lev 19:33-34; 1 Sam 2:10; Isa 2:2; Joel 2:28-32). Earlier in the previous century Elijah and Elisha had extended their ministries to include both foreign peoples and lands (1 Kgs 17:7-24; 2 Kgs 8:7-17).
- 4) Probably the strongest support for the authenticity of the Book of Jonah comes from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who treated Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish as factual (Matt 12:39-41). Jesus pointed to Jonah's being vomited up alive from the belly of the great fish as a type or sign of His own death and resurrection (Luke 11:30):
- 5) But He [Jesus] answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here' (Matt 12:39-41; cf. Luke 11:30).

We concur with Ryrie, who points out that this "statement [by Jesus] does require an historical Jonah who was actually swallowed by a great fish."⁴

Date of Composition

Even though the Book of Jonah itself provides no internal chronological indicator of when the book was written, the fact that 2 Kings 14:25 relates Jonah's prophetic ministry to the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.), would certainly support "the historical traditional view that Jonah himself was the author and that he wrote his book sometime after the events actually took place. A date of sometime between 770 and 750 B.C. [during the reign of Jeroboam II, most probably] would not be far from the truth."⁵

Jonah's Contemporaries. If it be assumed, as most conservatives do, that Jonah's prophecy in 2 Kings 14:25 was delivered early in Jeroboam's reign, Jonah would have been contemporary with both Hosea and Amos (cf. Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1).

³Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 162.

⁴Charles C. Ryrie, "Matthew," in *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Moody, 1978), 1466.

⁵Charles H. Dyer, "Jonah," in *Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word, 2001), 771.

Recipients

Although Jonah recorded his experiences *among* the Ninevites, the book was nonetheless written *for* Israel. This is validated by the book's content and by the fact of its inclusion in the canon of Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament).

Historical Background

As mentioned previously, Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), the king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 14:25). It was during this period, under Jeroboam, that Israel enjoyed possibly the greatest prosperity they had ever known. This era is often referred to as the Northern Kingdom's "Golden Age". This was due in part to a temporary decline in Assyria's military power, as a series of weak rulers ascended the throne. Assyria's difficulties allowed Jeroboam to reestablish Israel's ancient borders and end nearly a century of sporadic conflict between Israel and Damascus (Syria). Unfortunately, Israel continued in their path of spiritual declension, and because of their economic prosperity, which they attributed to the blessing of God, they refused to heed the repeated prophetic exhortations to repent of their sin and turn back to God (Amos 6:1). God delineates Israel's coming judgment through His prophet Hosea who described Assyria as a sleeping giant that He was about to awaken to come forth and devour the Northern Kingdom of Israel as their prey (Hos 11:5).

Geography of Jonah

The following map depicts the three key geographical locales in the story of Jonah:⁶



While Nineveh was the largest city in Assyria at the time of Jonah's visit, it was not the capital. Calah, located about twenty-five miles southeast of Nineveh was the capital. Nineveh became the capital of Assyria during the reign of Sennacherib (706-681 B.C.), about a half century after Jonah's visit. Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris river in northern Mesopotamia, about five hundred miles to the northeast of Israel's Sea of Galilee. The city of Nineveh was actually comprised of a city-state covering a very large area, which Jonah describes as "an exceedingly great city" (3:3).⁶ The city is described as having had walls one hundred feet high and fifty feet thick.⁷ The main wall was over seven and one half miles long. The total population at the time Jonah preached is estimated to have been over six hundred thousand including the many people that lived in the surrounding districts outside the city walls. The Assyrians worshipped Asur and Istar, as their chief male and female deities. The brutality of the Assyrians is well documented, and no doubt played a part in Jonah's reluctance in not wanting to go and prophecy unto them.

Theological Purpose

Israel enjoyed economic prosperity that led to further sin and spiritual degeneration. God sent the prophets Hosea and Amos to warn His wayward and rebellious people of

⁶See the map in *Appendix A* taken from John H. Walton, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 38. For information on the ancient city of Nineveh see *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1957 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by A. H. Sayce; *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, 1975 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by Elmer B. Smick; and *New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Nineveh," by D. J. Wiseman; *Art and Empire: Treasures From Assyria In The British Museum*, ed. J. E. Curtis and J. E. Reade (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995).

⁷See *Appendix B* for an artist's rendition of the Ancient Assyrian City of Nineveh.

impending judgment, but the people refused to repent and turn back to God. Ironically, while the people of God refused to heed the message of God's impending judgment, the wicked Assyrian's believed Jonah's message of Yahweh's coming judgment and cried out for His forgiveness and were spared, for roughly another hundred years anyway (3:4-10).

Message Statement

Jonah shows unmistakably that Yahweh's merciful works of salvation are expressions of His gracious character towards anyone who will repent of their rebellion and sin against Him—be it Jew (Jonah) or Gentile (Sailors/Ninevites).

Concerning the Message Behind the Book of Jonah, Tom Constable suggest that:⁸

The Book of Jonah teaches us how God feels about His people as well as how He feels about the teeming masses [of lost humanity] who do not know Him. He needs us to take His message of compassion to the lost. God is always in need of messengers to stand in the gap. His Word must become incarnate before it becomes impressive. That was true in Jesus' case, and it is true in ours. It is good to send Bibles all over the world, but God's primary method always has been to send a preacher with His Word. When people receive the witness of someone whose life God has persuaded to obey him the message of repentance becomes persuasive.

God still needs us, and He sends us (Matt 28:19-20). Every Christian man, woman, boy, and girl can identify with God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh. Why must we lift up our voices and cry against the Nineveh's of our day? Their wickedness has come up before the Lord. It is damning them. God wants to save them. Judgment is forever God's unusual (strange) act. What is usual for God is compassion, deliverance, and salvation. Therefore we must announce God's judgment so people have an opportunity to repent. Jonah gives us the negative example in his attitude toward Nineveh. Jesus gives us the positive one in His attitude toward Jerusalem. Think of all the teeming cities of the world, where cruelty and corruption reign, and then remember that God has compassion on their inhabitants. [Jonah pouted over the prospect of Nineveh's salvation, while Jesus grieved over the realization of Jerusalem's impending destruction in A.D. 70 (Matt 23:37-39)]

Do we have more concern for plants than for people?

Outline⁹

I. A Hebrew Sinner Saved 1:1–2:10

A. Jonah's Disobedience to God: His Flight 1:1-3

1. Jonah receives a commission from God to go to Nineveh 1:1-2

⁸Thomas L. Constable, "Jonah" (notes published by Sonic Light and available for online downloading from www.soniclight.com, May 2000 Edition).

⁹Adapted in part from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 200. The outline by Morgan reflects the literary symmetry and balance of composition that lies behind this wonderful little story depicting God's sovereignty, compassion, lovingkindness, and grace and mercy in forgiveness which He exercises towards all men.

2. Jonah runs from God by fleeing on a ship for Tarshish 1:3-4
- B. Jonah's Punishment by God: His Fright 1:4-16
 1. Jonah's rebellion results in a great storm at sea 1:4-8
 2. Jonah's revelation causes the sailors to fear exceedingly 1:9-11
 - a. Jonah's revelation to the sailors 1:9
 - 1) He reveals that he is a Hebrew 1:9a
 - 2) He reveals his faith in Yahweh 1:9b
 - b. The sailor's response to Jonah 1:10-11
 - 1) Their extreme fright 1:10
 - 2) Their exasperated question 1:11
 3. Jonah's release into the sea saves the sailor's lives 1:12-16
 - a. Jonah tells sailors to throw him into the sea and storm will stop 1:12
 - b. The sailors attempted desperately to save Jonah 1:13-14
 - c. The sailors cast Jonah into the sea and the sea stopped raging 1:15
 - d. The sailors feared the LORD and offered a sacrifice and vows 1:16
 4. Jonah's rescue by God: Swallowed by a great fish 1:17
- C. Jonah's Praise to God 2:1-10
 1. Jonah's praise: A psalm of deliverance recounting Jonah's gratitude to Yahweh for His amazing provision of deliverance from the sea 2:1-9
 - a. Jonah's cry to the LORD for help 2:1-2
 - b. Jonah's confinement was a punishment from God 2:3-6
 - c. Jonah's call (prayer) for help came to God in His holy temple 2:7
 - d. Jonah's commitment to obey Yahweh 2:8-9
 2. God's last word: Yahweh orders the great fish to deliver Jonah 2:10

II. A Heathen Society Saved 3:1–4:11

- A. Jonah's Obedience: Proclamation to the Ninevites 3:1-4
 1. Jonah's renewed commission to preach 3:1-2
 2. Jonah's trip to and description of Nineveh 3:3
 - a. Jonah arose and went to Nineveh 3:3a
 - b. Jonah describes Nineveh as an "exceedingly great city" 3:3b
 3. Jonah's proclamation of judgment delivered to the Ninevites 3:4
- B. Nineveh's Repentance: Petition for God's Mercy 3:5-10
 1. The action of the people 3:5
 2. The action of the king 3:6-9
 - a. His repentance 3:6
 - b. His royal proclamation 3:7-9
 3. The action of God: He graciously spares Nineveh from judgment 3:10
- C. Jonah's Pouting Over Nineveh's Repentance 3:10–4:11
 1. Jonah's complaint to God over Nineveh's salvation 4:1-3
 - a. Jonah's anger over Nineveh's repentance and Yahweh's deliverance 4:1
 - b. Jonah's acknowledgment of God's gracious and compassionate character 4:2
 - c. Jonah asks that he might die, for death was better than seeing Nineveh saved 4:3
 2. Jonah's confrontation by God 4:4-9

- a. God's rebuke of Jonah for his attitude 4:4
- b. Jonah's response: Sits and sulks under a shelter he made for shade 4:5
- c. God's gracious provision of a plant to shade Jonah 4:6-7
 - 1) God appointed a plant to shade Jonah 4:6a
 - 2) Jonah was extremely happy about the plant 4:6b
 - 3) God appointed a worm to eat Jonah's shade plant 4:7
 - 4) God appointed a scorching east wind to scorch Jonah 4:8a
- d. Jonah's response to God's appointments 4:8b-9
 - 1) Jonah seeks death after being scorched by the sun 4:8b
 - 2) God says Jonah has no reason to be angry 4:9
3. God's last word: His compassion for those under His judgment 4:10-11
 - 1) Jonah's displaced compassion toward a plant 4:10
 - 2) God's display of compassion toward the repentant Ninevites 4:11

Argument

The Book of Jonah may be divided into two sections. The first section delineates the salvation of A Hebrew Sinner, the prophet Jonah (1:1–2:10). The book begins with Jonah's disobedience to God's explicit command to go to Nineveh and proclaim a message of Yahweh's impending judgment (1:1-3). Jonah refuses to obey¹⁰ and attempts to run away from God by fleeing on a ship for Tarshish (1:3-4). Jonah's rebellion resulted in God's causing a great storm at sea that nearly destroyed the ship, sailors, and Jonah 1:4-16. Jonah realized that he was the cause of the great storm and tells the sailors to throw him overboard, at which point the sea stopped raging and became perfectly calm. God appointed a great fish to rescue Jonah by swallowing the rebellious prophet alive 1:17.

While inside the belly of the great fish, Jonah composes a psalm of deliverance recounting his gratitude to Yahweh for His amazing provision of deliverance from the sea and renews his commitment to obey Yahweh once again (2:1-9). God has the last word by displaying His sovereignty in ordering the great fish to deliver Jonah on dry land¹¹ (2:10).

The second section of the book is concerned with Yahweh's gracious salvation of A Heathen Society, the Ninevites (3:1–4:11). Following his harrowing experience in the great storm at sea and inside the great fish's belly (and possibly the great stench of vomit), we read of Jonah's obedience in obeying God's commission to go and proclaim His message of impending judgment to the Ninevites (3:1-4). Jonah's fear of the Ninevite's repenting was realized, for immediately after his preaching of Yahweh's approaching judgment in forty days, the people of Nineveh repented and petitioned God for mercy (3:5-9). God graciously spared Nineveh from judgment (3:10). God's provision of grace resulted in Jonah's pouting over Nineveh's repentance (3:10–4:11). The remainder of the book is a record of God's interaction with His rebellious prophet. Jonah complains to God

¹⁰Jonah refused to obey God's command to go and preach judgment to the Assyrian's of Nineveh because he realized that God was a gracious and compassionate God that would forestall judgment if the wicked Ninevites repented of their sin. He also seems to have known that God would eventually use Nineveh as "a rod of judgment" to destroy Israel.

¹¹We note the irony here as the creature obeys his Creator's command, while the prophet disobeys His Creator's commission to go and preach a message of judgment unto the Ninevites.

by expressing anger over Nineveh's repentance and salvation from Yahweh's approaching judgment, and asks that he might die, for death was better than seeing Nineveh saved (4:1-3). Jonah is confronted and rebuked by God for his attitude and lack of compassion (4:4-9). Jonah turns his back on God and marches out of the city of Nineveh to a nearby hill upon which he sits and sulks under a shelter he made for shade (4:4-5). God graciously provided a plant to shade Jonah, and he was extremely happy about the plant (4:6). God, next appointed a worm to eat Jonah's shade plant and a scorching east wind to scorch Jonah (4:7-8a). Jonah's response to God's appointments was to seek death (4:8b-9). God once again speaks a last word concerning Jonah's displaced compassion toward a plant (4:10), in contrast to His compassion toward the repentant Ninevites (4:11).

The lesson that God attempted to teach Jonah is this—if something (the plant), for which he did not labor, brought so much joy to Jonah, how much more does a repentant sinner (or entire civilization such as the Assyrians) bring joy to God when the sinner is the object of God's grace, compassion, lovingkindness, labor, and care?

Map taken from John H. Walton, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 38.