

3. Jonah 780-750 B.C. (written c. 760)

The book of Jonah has 4 chapters. It is a Gentile prophecy book.

The Assyrian Empire

Daniel starts his prophecy of the western world (Daniel 2 and 7) with the Babylonian Empire, which began in earnest when they defeated the Assyrians, conquering Nineveh in 612 B.C. But the pre-exilic minor prophets all ministered under the shadow of the preceding empire of the Assyrians. Their empire began back during the time of David, when Assyria started to consolidate territory under Tiglath-Pileser I (1105-1070 B.C.). By the 900s, the century Israel split into a Northern and Southern Kingdom (c. 930), and Assyria became aggressive, controlling the trade routes which ran from Egypt to Babylon. This allowed them to collect tolls, force nations to pay tribute, and control the distribution of goods. [Map from <https://sites.google.com/a/syd.catholic.edu.au/boudica/year-11-ancient-history/assyria/introduction>]



Adadnirari II (911-891 B.C.) extended territory to the lower Euphrates River. Ashurnasirpal II (883-59 B.C.) and his son Shalmaneser III (858-24 B.C.) extended control to the Mediterranean. Shalmaneser III (859-824 B.C.) chose Nineveh to be his base for military operations. He wrote that he fought a coalition of kings of Aram and others including “Ahab the Israelite” (in 853 B.C.) and later from “Jehu, son of Omri” (841-814 B.C.). This involved almost constant fighting to maintain control of those territories. It was Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) who established the capitol at Nineveh on the Tigris River. The last great Assyrian king was Ashurbanipal (669-27 B.C.). After him, the empire began to collapse, finally being conquered, when the Babylonians and Medes joined forces and conquered the Assyrian capitol of Nineveh in 612 B.C.

We can, therefore, conclude that when Jonah went to Nineveh in the mid-700s, it was not yet the capitol of Assyria, but it was the center of their military operations. All the smaller nations hated Assyria, especially their military control of their trade and forcing them to pay tribute. That hatred focused on the military city of Nineveh and is personified in the prophet Jonah.

Jesus called the people to whom He was speaking *an evil and adulterous generation*. There is no evidence that the Ninevites converted to faith in God. They simply turned from their wickedness (repented) to avoid the consequences of Jonah’s prophecy, *Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown* (3:4). Jesus also said, “*The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment*” (Matthew 12:41). Both groups appear at the same Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20:11-15. Therefore, we can conclude that the repentance of the Ninevites at the time of Jonah was a not a general repentance of the city. The book of Jonah is not about Nineveh, it is about Jonah.

Author

It is highly unlikely that Jonah wrote this book himself. For one thing, the entire book is in as the third person. That is not decisive, since much of the Old Testament is written in the third person.

But this book is an analysis of Jonah's character. Of course, it is really about God, but it is what we learn about God as He deals with Jonah. Nowhere else in Scripture does an author of a narrative so thoroughly criticize himself. So we must conclude the author of the book is unknown.

Date

It is likely that the account was written not too long after the events occurred. The date of recorded events took place during the reign of Jeroboam II. *In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah [782 B.C.], Jeroboam [Jeroboam II] the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, [after he had served as coregent with his father Jehoash from 793 to 782 B.C.] and reigned forty-one years [from 782-741]. He did evil in the sight of the LORD... He restored the border of Israel... according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher [near Nazareth in New Testament Galilee] (2 Kings 14:23-25).*

Jonah Is Historical, Not Metaphorical

There is nothing in the book that would suggest that the author intended anything other than a historically accurate account of Jonah's trip to Nineveh. Jesus considered Jonah to be historically true. Jonah's time in the fish was a foreshadow of Jesus' own burial, both of which were real, actual three-day events (Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32). Jonah was known as a prophet of *the Lord the God of Israel*, and he prophesied during the 41-year reign of Jeroboam II, including accurately predicting Jeroboam's border expansions. So we estimate his prophecy was between 780 and 750.

Purpose

Jonah is one of the best-known characters of the Bible. Most people, even those who are mostly ignorant of what the Bible says, have heard about "Jonah and the whale." But the whale has very little to do with the purpose of the book. Jonah is indeed a very strange prophecy book.

- Other prophetic books are focused on God's message to the people or a king. Jonah is focused on God's message to the prophet.
- Other prophets are focused on carrying out God's message, often to a stubborn people. Jonah is about a stubborn prophet who wanted to avoid carrying out God's message to a people.
- Other prophetic books are about a prophecy that comes true, and a people who do not repent. Jonah is about a prophecy that does not come true and a people who do repent.
- Other prophetic books describe God's anger with the people. Jonah is about a prophet's anger with God.
- Other prophets were faithful to God's call. Jonah ran from God's call. His last recorded words were anger towards God (4:3, 9).

The purpose of the book of Jonah was to tell the pre-exilic Northern Kingdom Israelites that the Lord was God of all the earth and His people. His sovereignty, His omnipotence, and His compassion extended beyond the nation of Israel and the Jewish people.

Theme

Subject: The compassion of God

Complement: extends to all who repent and call upon Him

Key Verse

Jonah *prayed to the Lord and said, "...You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity"* (4:2).

Outline

Jonah 1, Jonah running away from God
Jonah 2, Jonah coming back to God

Jonah 3, Jonah (reluctantly) obeying God
Jonah 4, Jonah arguing with God

Commentary

Jonah 1, Jonah Running Away from God

Verses 1-2, The call of the prophet

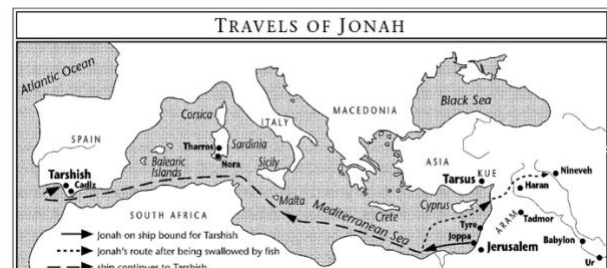
The word of the Lord came to Jonah in words, sentences, and a clear logical message, not mystical feelings. Actually, this is one of the few things this prophetic book has in common with the others.

Verse 3, The disobedience of the prophet

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish [in what is today, Spain] *from the presence of the Lord*. Jonah knew enough about God to realize he could not escape His omnipresence. What Jonah hoped to do was escape God's plan. [Map from "The Ryrie Study Bible"]

Verses 4-17, The confession of the prophet

The rest of chapter one focuses on the sailors who try very hard to save, not just themselves but also Jonah, even after, *He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."*



There are two significant observations to be made here:

- (1) God created the heavens and the earth. They did not evolve over a long period of time.
- (2) Jonah's circumstances here had nothing to do with Jonah figuring out some mystical message from God.

Verse 17 tells us about God's circumstantial control of Jonah's ministry.

Jonah 2, Jonah Coming Back to God

Chapter 2 is Jonah's prayer *to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish*. It is the word for *fish* not whale, although it could have been a whale, since the author's intention is not to classify the creature biologically. This is also intended to be a miracle of God, not something that could occur naturally. Jonah, like the people of Nineveh where he was going, repented and cried out to God. But he had not changed his mind about the nature of his mission. The difference is he was now willing to obey God, even with a heart of disagreement with God. Some specifics:

Verse 2, *Sheol* has three meanings in the Old Testament: extreme suffering, death, and the place of the dead. Here it has the idea of suffering, not that Jonah died and was resurrected.

Verse 3, *You had cast me into the deep*. Jonah realized his suffering situation came from God.

Verses 4-7, *Temple* is used here of two different places. The one in verse 4 is most likely Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The one in verse 7 is in heaven.

Verse 8, Jonah contrasts himself with *those who regard vain idols*. Even during his disobedience, his faith in God had not changed.

An Application: It is interesting that we can believe in God and yet not believe we need to obey Him.

Verse 9, The vow he would pay is likely a commitment to go to Nineveh, as originally commanded.

Verse 10, God's answer to Jonah's prayer was, as it often is for us, a change in his circumstances.

Jonah 3, Jonah (Reluctantly) Obeying God

Verse 3, *a three day's walk*, likely includes the various places he went to proclaim God's message including the surrounding suburbs, about 60 miles (97 km).

Verse 4, *Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown* is the only prophetic message in the book (eight words in English, five words in Hebrew).

Verses 5-9, just exactly what the repentance of the people entailed is hard to know. We know that not much later the people, possibly the next generation, were back to their evil ways. But we are told these Ninevites *believed God*, i.e., the message from God, and that they needed to repent to possibly keep from being destroyed.

Verse 10, God *relented* (changed His mind, as in Genesis 6:6 when *the Lord repented that He had made man on the earth*).

Jonah 4, Jonah Arguing with God

Verse 1, *But it greatly displeased Jonah*—The Hebrew is very strong here. Lit. "it became evil/wrong to Jonah." He was furious with what God had done, or failed to do, to the Ninevites. It seems that this strong language is supposed to be shocking to the readers. Jonah hoped right to the end of the 40 days that God would destroy the wicked enemy of Israel. But instead, after 40 days, nothing happened to the city, and the people went back to their business. And Jonah *became angry* (literally, "to burn with rage"). This is followed by two brief discussions with God interspersed with the final sequence of events.

Verses 2-4, The first discussion with God. Jonah prayed, expressing the reason for his anger as knowledge of the character of God. *...for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.* God's response to the prayer was the question, "*Do you have a good reason to be angry?*"

Verses 5-8, The final sequence of events

- *Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it.* He would have entered the city from the west and made his way through it to the east.
- *There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.* The Hebrew word for "shelter" is the shelters made for the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:40-42).
- *So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up [probably miraculously, in a short period of time] over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And*

Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. God aided Jonah's comfort, but it was to make a point about the character of God, not to just give comfort to Jonah.

- *But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head. God appointed a comfort, and a worm, plus an east wind, to take away the comfort.*

Verses 9-11, The second discussion with God. God began with the same question, "*Do you have a good reason to be angry?*" This time it was about the plant. Jonah said he did. Then God compared Jonah's compassion for the plant he did not create to God's compassion for people He did create. God described Nineveh as *120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand*. Some say this refers to the children of Nineveh (making the total population around 600,000). But more likely it refers to the fact that the adult people of Nineveh were all like that, not knowing *the difference between their right and left hand* in the sense of being undisciplined, undiscerning, and without the Law of Moses given to Israel (making the total population more like 300,000). The comment on the animals, does not indicate their having spirits, but only that animals are also important to God, being part of His creation.

An Application

Jonah liked God's compassion, even when he was running away from God, but he also wanted to control God's compassion. Do not impose your preferences on your understanding of the character of God.