

## *Jonah*

By its nature this book is different from the other eleven books of the Minor Prophets (*or, The Twelve*).

Several basic theories have been presented to assist in understanding the book. The main of these are: 1. The book is factual history. 2. The book is a parable. 3. The book is a religious tract.

1. The book is history: Jonah is mentioned, as a prophet in II Kings 14:25. This would have Jonah living ca. 785 BCE and that he foretold the expansion of the territory Israel. He is declared to be a real person, the son of Amittai (1:1).

2. The book is a parable: This seems to fit the unique circumstances of chapter 2 more naturally. Such a device is used a number of times in the Old Testament. The prophet tells a story which, to the hearer, seems to present an objective case for God's judgment. The name Jonah means "dove" which is a symbol of Israel. The name Amittai means "truth."

3. The book is a religious tract: The unique story of Jonah was written and circulated to remind readers that there is no way to escape God's presence. The Lord is declared not to be a regional God. It is also a "missionary" book since it reminds the readers that God is not the God of the Hebrew people alone but God also has concern for persons of other nations and beliefs. Further, it is declared that God is a forgiving God who will relent when people turn to him. Thus, it would be looked upon as a challenge to all Israelites who were self righteous.

T. E. Bird writes in The Book of Jonah "The question is not whether what is related could possibly have taken place, but rather in what genre of literature the author is writing." This, after all, becomes, in the mind of each scholar, the determining factor as to which of the above theories is the preferred one.

If one identifies the Jonah of this book with the prophet of II Kings 14:25 he would be an 8th century BCE prophet. Nineveh, in 3:3 is described as a great metropolis (*or, vast city*), but being that in the past. Based on that one can make an argument that this book was written following the exile. A number of the Hebrew words used in the book are of a late origin in Hebrew literature. If this argument holds, the book would be post-exilic. External evidence would set the time prior to 612 BCE when Nineveh was destroyed. Internal evidence, with those late words and loan words from other languages and dialects makes the date uncertain. There is no clear agreement about the date of the writing.

The identity of the writer is unknown. It was written by someone who glorified faith in God and the concern of God for people, beyond Palestine, along with the reassurance of the possibility of repentance. Evidence points to the fact that the book was known and accepted by 200 BCE.

The book poses an interesting question. What would have happened if other communities and nations had followed Nineveh's remarkable change? In this book we are dealing with the juxtaposition of justice and mercy.

Many scholars dismiss Jonah 2:2-9 as a later interpolation. For a defense of this passage as being a part of the original work cf. G. M. Landes The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah pp. 3-31.

G. Campbell Morgan, writes in his summary of the contents of the books of the Bible: "Men have been looking so hard for the great fish that they have failed to see the great God."

## *Jonah*

### <CHAPTER 1>

#### *I A prophet fleeing from his God 1:1-17 [H 1:1-2:1]*

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to Jonah, <sup>1</sup> the son of Amittai, <sup>2</sup> saying, <sup>2</sup> "Rise and go to Nineveh, <sup>3</sup> that great metropolis (*or, vast city*), and denounce (*or, preach against*) <sup>4</sup> it; because their wickedness has been noticed by me." <sup>3</sup> Jonah, however, did not go but fled in the direction of Tarshish, <sup>5</sup> running from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa <sup>6</sup> and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare and went on board, to go with those who were sailing <sup>7</sup> to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

<sup>4</sup> But the Lord hurled <sup>8</sup> a strong wind onto the sea; the storm being so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. <sup>9</sup> <sup>5</sup> Then the sailors grew terrified. Each desperately appealed to his god for help, <sup>10</sup> and they threw the wares <sup>11</sup> that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. <sup>12</sup> Meanwhile Jonah had gone below deck (*or, into the hold*) of the ship and having lain down, he snored (*or, fell asleep*). <sup>13</sup> <sup>6</sup> The captain found him and said to him: "What do you mean, by sleeping? Get up and call on your god! Perhaps that god <sup>14</sup> will pay attention to us so that we will be kept from perishing."

<sup>7</sup> The crew said to one another, "Come on, let us draw lots so that we may learn who is the cause of this evil we are experiencing." So they drew lots and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Then they said to him: "Tell us [on whose account this evil has come on us.] <sup>16</sup> What is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What is your nationality?" <sup>9</sup> Jonah replied, "I am a Hebrew; <sup>17</sup> and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, maker of the sea and the land."

<sup>10</sup> Then the men were very afraid because of what Jonah had told them and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" (For the men knew that he was running away from the presence of the

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1 The name means "dove." The dove is sometimes used as a symbol of Israel.

2 The name means "true." These names identify Jonah with II Kings 14:25.

3 Located on the east bank of the Tigris river in what is now the area of Mosul, Iraq.

4 The Hebrew word can mean "nail."

5 I. e. the opposite direction. The Phoenicians had a colony in southern Spain which was called Tarshish. In Greek it was *Ταρτεσσος*. There was also a Phoenician trading center, a source of copper, in Sicily with a name that was virtually identical to Tarshish. Either would be "in the opposite direction" from Nineveh.

6 Modern Jaffa, the only usable seaport south of Mount Carmel in Judah.

7 No doubt a Phoenician cargo ship.

8 So: literally.

9 Literally: "be broken."

10 SOS prayers.

11 Literally "vessels" which would imply cargo. The Hebrew word also can mean "tackle" and "equipment."

12 Literally: "from upon them."

13 The Hebrew word literally means "to snore."

14 The captain uses the Hebrew word *halhim*.

15 Jonah either won (or lost) the lottery.

16 Omitted by several Hebrew manuscripts & LXX. It is no doubt a gloss that was added later.

17 LXX has "a servant of the Lord," based on the misreading of the Hebrew: *bdi as bri*. "B" & "R" are very similar in appearance in Hebrew.

Lord because he had told them.)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Then they said to Jonah, "What should we do with you to make the sea calm?"<sup>19</sup> (For the sea raged more urgently.)<sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will stop attacking you, becoming calm. I am to blame for this violent storm that has hit you."<sup>13</sup> However, the men rowed<sup>20</sup> desperately to bring the ship back to land, but they failed, for the storm grew more intense, resisting their efforts.<sup>14</sup> So they cried to the Lord, "We implore you, O Lord, do not let us perish because of this man's life, and do not punish us for murder!"<sup>21</sup><sup>15</sup> Having said this they heaved<sup>22</sup> Jonah overboard; and the sea ceased raging.<sup>16</sup> Then the men were exceedingly filled with awe of the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

<sup>17</sup> [H2:1]<sup>23</sup> The Lord then provided<sup>24</sup> an enormous fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah stayed inside the fish three days and three nights.<sup>25</sup>

## <CHAPTER 2>

### *II A psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance 2:1-10 [H2:2- 11]*

<sup>1</sup>[H2] Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside<sup>26</sup> the fish, <sup>2</sup>[H3] saying:

"Out of my distress I called to the Lord  
and he answered me.

Out of the innermost parts<sup>27</sup> of the world of the dead (*or, Sheol*) I cried,  
and you heard me.

<sup>3</sup> You threw me into the depths,  
into the midst of the sea,<sup>28</sup>  
and the current<sup>29</sup> overwhelmed (*or, engulfed*)<sup>30</sup> me.

All your breakers (*or, powerful waves*) and your billows  
rolled over me.

<sup>4</sup>[H5] Then I said, 'I have been banished  
from our presence (*or, sight*);<sup>31</sup>  
Would I ever again be able to see  
your holy temple?'

<sup>5</sup>[H6] "The waters closed in over me.

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18 Some scholars feel this sentence is a gloss.

19 Literally: "the sea from upon us."

20 Literally: "dug their oars into the water."

21 Literally: "do not put upon us (*the responsibly for*) innocent blood."

22 The word is the same in Hebrew as in verse 4.

23 The Hebrew and Vulgate begin chapter 2 at this point.

24 Each event in Jonah takes place at God's direct command. The word "whale" appears in the KJV and RSV of Matthew 12:40. There the Greek word *χιητος* could be translated "sea monster."

25 The question is raised: of what is the fish a sign? It is an exercise in futility to attempt to determine what kind of fish it was.

26 Literally: "belly."

27 Literally: "belly." The Hebrew word used here is *bbtn*. In 1:17 & 2:1 the Hebrew word is *mayim*.

28 The MT includes the word "depths" which does not fit the poetry nor is it acceptable grammatically in Hebrew. BHS considers it to be a gloss and suggests two emendations: *hlostm* or *simi bbib*.

29 Hebrew unclear. Possibly "flood." Cf. the same word in Psalm 24:2 and Ugaritic usage. MT: *mhr*.

30 Literally: "surrounded."

31 Literally: "from before your eyes."

The ocean <sup>32</sup> overwhelmed (*or, engulfed*) me;  
 sea weed was wrapped around my head;  
<sup>6[H7]</sup> and (*I descended to*) the extremities <sup>33</sup> of the mountains.  
 "I went down to the earth <sup>34</sup>  
 with its bars closed behind me forever; <sup>35</sup>  
 yet you brought me alive from the Pit (*or, corruption*),  
 O Lord, my God.  
<sup>7[H8]</sup> Just as I was losing consciousness  
 I remembered the Lord, <sup>36</sup>  
 and my prayer reached you  
 in your holy temple. <sup>37</sup>

<sup>8[H9]</sup> "Those who pay regard <sup>38</sup> to false idols <sup>39</sup>  
 have spurned (*or, abandoned*) their true loyalty. <sup>40</sup>  
<sup>9[H10]</sup> I will sacrifice to you,  
 with the voice of thanksgiving  
 What I have vowed I will pay.  
 Salvation belongs to the Lord." <sup>41</sup>

<sup>10[H11]</sup> Then the Lord gave word to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on the shore.

### <CHAPTER 3>

#### III The reluctant missionary 3:1-10

<sup>1</sup> Jonah again received a message from the Lord, which said: <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that vast metropolis, and proclaim the message to the city that I will tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah rose and went to Nineveh, obeying the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was such a vast metropolis that it required three days to walk through the city. <sup>42</sup> <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. He proclaimed (*or, shouted*) <sup>43</sup> 'After forty days <sup>44</sup> pass Nineveh will be

32 The Hebrew word used here is for the primeval ocean. Cf. Genesis 1:2. ~וַיִּתְּ

33 Hebrew: *qaib*. Possibly "roots" i.e. the most distant part.

34 The word in this concept can mean "the underworld" or "the nether world."

35 Cf. 2:2. A more modern way of stating this would possibly be: "I was in the torment of Hell." Cf. ICC. Emended: "the land whose gate bars are eternally bolted."

36 Some scholars emend to read "you."

37 Admonition of the necessity of the efficacy of prayer.

38 Possibly an Akkadian loan word meaning "to carefully regard the name of a deity or god."

39 Literally: "empty vanities."

40 MFT translates "refuge."

41 Four elements of a Psalm of Praise are found here.

1. Answered prayer.

2. Report of personal crisis.

3. Divine rescue.

4. A vow of praise.

42 Hebrew meaning uncertain. Scholars who did archaeological work in Nineveh did not find the city to be as large as is reported in Jonah. Ancient reports declare the vastness of the city. It is possible that the reference is to the city and the administrative district surrounding it. MT: "a great city to God."

43 Interestingly, Jonah needs no urging to fulfill the commission from God that he had shunned earlier.

44 LXX: "three days" which reflects the information in chapter 4. It seems more appropriate to say "three days."

overthrown!"<sup>45</sup> 5 The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and donned sackcloth, from the highest ranking official to the lowest pauper.

6 When the message reached the King of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, exchanged his robes, covering himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.<sup>46</sup> 7 He made a proclamation and had it distributed throughout Nineveh. 'By the decree of the King and the privy counselors: Let no person or animal: herd or flock, taste anything! No person or animal is to eat or even drink water! 8 Let all people and animals be covered with sackcloth<sup>47</sup> and let them call fervently to God! Yes, let everyone turn from their wicked and violent ways! 9 Who knows! Possibly God will yet relent and withdraw his fierce anger so that we will not perish!"<sup>48</sup>

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their wicked ways, God relented, not carrying out the punishment (*or, calamity*) he had threatened to carry out. He did not do it.<sup>49</sup>

#### <CHAPTER 4>

#### *IV The absurdity of limiting God's mercy 4:1-11*

1 Jonah was very upset, as well as angry.<sup>50</sup> 2 He prayed to the Lord, saying: "I implore you, Lord, wasn't this exactly what I said<sup>51</sup> when I was still in my home land? That is why I ran away<sup>52</sup> to go to Tarshish; for I knew you were a kindly (*or, gracious*) and compassionate God, patient and filled with grace (*or, steadfast love*),<sup>53</sup> readily relenting on behalf of evildoers. 3 Because of this, O Lord, please take my life from me, I beg of you, for I would rather die than continue living."<sup>54</sup> 4 The Lord asked, "Do you have any right<sup>55</sup> to be angry?"

5 Jonah had gone out of the city and seated himself east of the city and there made a shelter<sup>56</sup> for himself there. He sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to the city.

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45 The fulfillment came in 612 BCE. The destruction was so complete that in 401 BCE Xenophon walked over the area and did not know a city had existed there. Cf. commentaries and Bible Dictionaries for further information.

46 It was a Semitic practice to mourn seated on the ground.

47 A Persian custom included animals as participants in mourning ceremonies.

48 There is an en masse acceptance of Jonah's message. Three elements occur:

1. Threat of disaster.

2. Acts of penitence.

3. Eventual divine intervention.

49 There is a word play in this verse in Hebrew but regrettably seems impossible to translate.

50 Grammatically the word is almost an expletive. Possibly it could be correctly translated "damned angry." Jonah is not convinced that God is correct in his mercy toward Nineveh. Jonah again becomes a rebel. He has a problem in dealing with the thought that God is not exclusively his and his nation's.

51 Literally: "my word."

52 Literally: "I was beforehand in fleeing."

53 This seems to be a key word.  $\delta\sigma\zeta$  "grace." **The Lord provides his grace not just to his covenant people but to all of humanity.**

54 Jonah feels he can no longer be a representative of the Lord. His feeling seems to be "over my dead body." In these verses of chapter 4 there is a continuous play on words. This seems to be untranslatable into English. How could Jonah complain after the experience of chapter 1?

55 Literally: "well."

56 **The phrase 'make a shelter' seems unnecessary and is perhaps a later addition or gloss based on the reading of the MT reading of 40 days in 3:4. The word for shelter is the one used for the shelter for the feast of tabernacles Cf. Leviticus 23:40-42, to provide shade by day and prevent chill at night.**

57 If the LXX translation of 3:4 is correct only one of the three days intermission would remain.

6 The Lord God arranged for a plant<sup>58</sup> to grow so that it might provide shade over Jonah's head, to furnish some relief<sup>59</sup> for his distress.<sup>60</sup> Jonah was very happy because of the plant. 7 But when, on the next day, as dawn arrived, God arranged that a [cut]worm (or, weevil) attack the plant, and it withered. 8 Then as the sun rose, God arranged for a sultry<sup>61</sup> east wind, and the sun beat down

on Jonah's head until he felt faint and wished he were dead.<sup>62</sup> He said, "I would rather die than stay alive." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have any right to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied: "I have righteous indignation enough to die!"<sup>63</sup> 10 And the Lord said, "You are concerned about the plant for which you did not work nor did you make it grow.<sup>64</sup> It shot up in one night and died the next night.<sup>65</sup> 12 Should I not also show concern for Nineveh, that vast metropolis which has a population of over one hundred twenty five thousand who do not yet know their right hand from their left,<sup>66</sup> along with many animals.<sup>67</sup>

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58 **The exact identity is uncertain. Probably a ricinus communis or castor oil (bean). LXX & KJV translate it as "gourd" eucubita ligenosia. The same Hebrew word is used in the verses 6-10.**

59 LXX: "shade." This comes from a misreading of one vowel by the LXX translators.

60 This same Hebrew word is translated as "wickedness" in 1:2 and "punishment" in 3:10.

61 A hapax legomenon. **The word is also found in a hymn among the Dead Sea Scrolls. LXX and Syriac translate "burning."** Vulgate: "hot and burning." Targums: "quiet." KJV: "vehement." These are all only a guess.

62 Literally: "ask his soul to die."

63 As if to say, "What is your hurt compared to mine?" If Jonah is hurt, how much more is the Lord hurt by the rebellious nature of Jonah.

64 Jonah has more concern for the plant than for the people of Nineveh.

65 Literally: "which is a son of the night and perished a son of the night." Jonah's unreasonableness is fully revealed. He can be merciful to Job, yet Job is unwilling for God to be merciful to Nineveh. God declares that Jonah's concern was prompted by self interest not genuine love.

66 I. e. children.

67 Is there a Jonah lurking within Christians with smug messages, prejudices, traditions and claims of exclusiveness?