

THE BOOK OF JONAH

Message:

Concern for the salvation of all people, including one's enemies, is the proper attitude for people of God.¹

Author:

Although the author of Jonah is never identified in the book itself, Jonah himself has traditionally been identified as the author. The issue is complicated somewhat by the use of the third person² rather than the first person in the book and the problem of genre. If Jonah is a work of fiction, then identifying the author becomes substantially more difficult. However, since we will affirm the general historicity of the book, it seems likely given the details in the book that the human author was Jonah or someone close to Jonah.³ It has been argued that the negative portrayal of the prophet indicates that Jonah was not the author since he would not have presented himself in such poor light. However, Paul calls himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:16). Also if one assumes that the Gospel of Mark reflects the recollections of Peter, then Peter did not excise incidents that show him in poor light (e.g., the denials of Christ). It is just as plausible to suggest that Jonah repented sometime after the events recorded in the book and used his failures as a tool to teach Israel.

Concerning the prophet himself, several details help to flesh out the prophet. First, it is noted that Jonah's name (יֹנָתַן) is not theophoric, but means "dove."⁴ He is also identified in 1:1 as the son of Amittai ("my true one"). The only other scriptural reference to Jonah is found in 2 Kings 14:25. In this passage Jonah is referred to as "a servant of the Lord," "son of Amittai," and "a prophet from Gath Hopher⁵ (a town in Galilee [about three miles northeast of Nazareth] in the territory assigned to Zebulun [Josh 19:10, 13]). The context of the verse places the prophet in the reign of king Jeroboam II of the Northern Kingdom (793–753 B.C.; 2 Kgs 14:23-24).

¹ The message to Jonah is closely tied to the much-debated issues of purpose and genre. Both these issues will be discussed below.

² Cf. Jonah 1:3, 5, 9, 12; 2:1; 3:4; 4:1, 5, 8–9. It is not uncommon for authors in the Old Testament to write of themselves in the third person. For example, Moses, Isaiah, and Daniel used the third person form+- to describe some of their own actions.

³ It is also likely that Jonah is the work of a single author or editor. The literary structure and brevity of the book point to a unified work.

⁴ Some see significance in the fact that Hosea refers to Ephraim as a "silly dove." However, D. Stuart suggests that caution should be exercised. He writes, "there is no evidence whatever that this name bears any special significance in the book (e.g., allegorical), any more than the name of Moses' wife (Zipporah, i.e., 'Birdie') does in Exodus, or than Simon Peter's father (Jonah) does in Matt 16:17" (Douglas Stuart, *Hosea - Jonah*, vol. 31, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. John D. W. Watts [Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1987], 431).

⁵ The name Gath Hopher means "winepress of the well."

Recipients:

The identification of the original recipients is tied closely to the issue of the date of Jonah's writing and the book's purpose (both of which are discussed below). Suffice it to say at this point that the original recipients were eighth century Israel.

Dating:

The issue of dating is linked to the issue of authorship. If Jonah, or someone who knew Jonah is the author then it would be reasonable to expect an eighth century date given the reference to Jeroboam II in 2 Kings 14:25.⁶ This passage also makes reference to the extension of Israel's borders. This may suggest a date early in Jeroboam's rule (793–753 B.C.). Some commentators suggest that the mass repentance in Jonah might have been partially helped by two plagues that struck Nineveh in 765 and 759 B.C. and a total eclipse of the sun in 763 B.C. In any case, a date around 760 B.C. seems reasonable.

Historical Setting:

According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah ministered during the time of Jeroboam II. It was also during this time that Jeroboam was expanding the borders of his kingdom (2 Kgs 14:23–29).⁷ This expansion was made possible by a temporary decline in Assyrian dominance. Unfortunately, this growth did not extend to spiritual matters. Along with Jonah, God sent the prophets Hosea and Amos to warn Israel of impending judgment. Israel's failure to repent and return to God ultimately brought about this judgment through Sargon II and the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. Commentators have frequently speculated that Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh was in some sense motivated by his foreknowledge of this Assyrian threat.

The Assyrians were idolatrous⁸ and cruel people.⁹ The capital city of the Assyrians was Nineveh. This important city founded by Nimrod (Gen 10:8–10) was located on the east bank of the Tigris River, over 500 miles from Samaria the capital of the Northern Kingdom. The city was protected by a massive wall with 15 main gates and extending over two miles along the Tigris River and eight miles around the inner city. The inner wall was fifty feet wide and forty to fifty feet high. Jonah's remarks concerning the size of the city (3:3; 4:11) appear to be supported by the archaeological data. Felix Jones' survey of 1834, suggests that 175,000 persons could have lived

⁶ Some suggest that Jonah's use of the past tense in reference to Nineveh (Jon 3:3) suggests a date after the city's destruction in 612 B.C. But this argument is unconvincing given the fluid nature of the verb.

⁷ Jeroboam expansion included land formerly belonging to Aram.

⁸ W. C Gwaltney Jr. notes, "The Assyrians, like their Babylonian neighbors, lived in a world inhabited and controlled by gods, demons, spirits, and ghosts of the dead" ("Assyrians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, Edwin M. Yamauchi [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 103).

⁹ Erika Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Jan/Feb 1991): 52–61, 75.

in Nineveh.¹⁰ This would appear to confirm the plausibility of the statement in 4:11 of a population of over 120,000. The relatively large size of the city and its population would also appear to add credence to the statement that it took three day's to travel around Nineveh. It is also worth noting that the mass repentance in Jonah might have been aided by two plagues that had struck the city in 765 and 759 B.C. as well as a total eclipse of the sun in 763 B.C.

Purpose:

The purpose of Jonah is widely debated. Is it “to instruct God’s people more fully in the character of their God, particularly his mercy as it operates in relation to repentance”?¹¹ Related to this is the proposal that the purpose of the book is to convey God’s sovereignty or love for the whole world with the intention of motivating the Israelites to fulfill its calling to carry the Word of God to the world. Or is the focus on the prophet himself? That is, people should not act like Jonah (e.g., disobedient, uncaring, etc.). Perhaps the book was a veiled attempt to critique later attempts of Judaism to be inward and exclusivistic (most normally represented by Ezra and Nehemiah). All of these approaches have textual and contextual merit. Nonetheless, we tentatively suggest that the purpose of Jonah is related to showing the Israelites that God is concerned for all people and therefore, they should be concerned as well.

Contributions:

The Book of Jonah is interesting and unusual in several ways. First, unlike other prophetic books, Jonah is primarily a narrative. Second, Jonah is the most unprophet-like prophet in the prophetic writings. He is disobedient and wholly uninterested in serving as a prophet. Third, there is only one prophecy in Jonah (“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” 3:4) and it does not come to pass. Fourth, Jonah clearly reveals God’s concern and compassion for the pagan nations of the world.¹² This final point is perhaps the greatest contribution of the book.

Jonah in the New Testament:

Jonah’s contribution to the New Testament is its significant link to the person and work of Christ. First, he is one of four Old Testament prophets referred to by Christ (see Matt 12:40–41; Luke 11:30–32).¹³ Second, Christ uses Jonah as a “sign” in reference to His death and burial (Matt 12:39–40; Luke 11:29–30). Third, Jesus is the greater Jonah (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32). Fourth, the

¹⁰ It has also been noted that Calah, a city located south of Nineveh was about half the size of Nineveh yet had a population of 69,754.

¹¹ Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, vol. 19b, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 219.

¹² This is not to suggest that the Scriptures do not reveal God’s concern for the nations elsewhere. Such concerns can be found in Genesis 12:3 to the Psalms. Furthermore, the prophets Elijah (1 Kgs 17–19; 21; 2 Kgs 1–2) and Elisha (2 Kgs 2–9; 13) ministered in Phoenicia and Aram.

¹³ Jesus also referred to Elijah (Matt 17:11–12), Elisha (Luke 4:27), and Isaiah (Matt 15:7).

repentance of the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah is used to critique the Israelites of Jesus' day.

Literary Issues:

One of the most debated issues concerning Jonah is its genre. Suggestions have included Jewish midrash, allegory, didactic fiction, or history.¹⁴ The narrational form of Jonah is not in doubt,¹⁵ but the issue of genre has largely been driven by the unusual events in the story (e.g., the large fish swallowing Jonah). On the one hand, those with anti-supernaturalistic biases tend to reject any possibility of historicity. On the other hand, some evangelicals who do not have such biases still find the story difficult to swallow. Nonetheless, we suggest that Jonah is best read as a stylized historical narrative. Several lines of evidence support this view. First, the vast majority of Jewish and Christian interpreters up to the nineteenth century have regarded Jonah as historical.¹⁶ For example, Philo well known for his allegorical interpretations elsewhere, appears to take the giant fish literally (*Jonae Oratione* 16.21). Josephus also appears to treat Jonah historically (*Ant.* 9.206–214). Second, the person of Jonah is attested in 2 Kings 14 complete with reference to his father. This would seem to indicate that Jonah was a real person and prophet. Third, the place names Joppa, Tarshish, Nineveh all appear to be real places. Indeed, there is little if any explicit indication in the text that Jonah should be read non-historically. Finally, Jesus Himself seems to treat the story as historical (Matt 12:40–41; Luke 11:30–32). Some argue that Jesus either did not know or was accommodating his audience's ignorance. The latter would seem to not be befitting of the One who claimed to be truth embodied (John 14:6). Likewise the charge of ignorance is unwarranted. As H.L. Ellison states, "Even if it were true that his knowledge had been restricted in the way demanded by the kenosis theory, it is impossible to think that, filled with the Holy Spirit as he was, he would not have been able to distinguish between history and allegory or parable. So much is this argument felt by some that there is a growing tendency, based on modern criticism of the synoptic Gospels, to deny that Jesus mentioned Jonah at all."¹⁷

As noted earlier, the form of Jonah is narrational. The only exception is Jonah 2:2-9. This poetic section is interesting in several ways. First, it is interesting that although the words are cast in the story as a prayer (פִּלְלִי), the form is one of a Thanksgiving Psalm.¹⁸ This can be seen in the layout below.¹⁹

¹⁴ Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 209-19.

¹⁵ C. F. Keil suggests that Jonah contains similarities to the stories of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 17–19 and 2 Kings 2:4–6 ("Minor Prophets," In *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 10, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982. Reprint], 380.

¹⁶ "If Jonah is so 'clearly non-historical,' as many claim, it only became so in the nineteenth century. Prior to that virtually every biblical scholar and reader of the book assumed that it at least claimed to recount actual events" (Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 215).

¹⁷ H. L. Ellison, "Jonah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 362.

¹⁸ See Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 215, Stuart, *Hosea - Jonah*, 472.

¹⁹ Stuart, *Hosea - Jonah*, 472.

<i>Thanksgiving Psalm Structure</i>	<i>Jonah 2:3–10[2–9]</i>
Introduction to the psalm	v 3[2]
Description of past distress	vv 4–7a[3–6a]
Appeal to God for help	v 8[7]
Reference to the rescue God provided	v 7b[6b]
Vow of praise and/or testimonial	vv 9–10[8–9]

A second interesting feature of Jonah’s prayer/psalm is the number of quotations or allusions to the psalms that are found in it. Ellison has noted the following correspondences.²⁰

Jonah	Psalms
Jonah 2:2a	Ps 3:4; Ps 120:1
Jonah 2:2b	Ps 18:4-5; Ps 30:3
Jonah 2:3a	Ps 88:6–7
Jonah 2:3b	Ps 42:7
Jonah 2:4a	Ps 31:22
Jonah 2:4b	Ps 5:7
Jonah 2:5a	Ps 69:1–2
Jonah 2:6b	Ps 49:15; Ps 56:13; Ps 103:4
Jonah 2:7a	Ps 107:5; Ps 142:3
Jonah 2:8a	Ps 31:6
Jonah 2:9a	Ps 50:14; Ps 69:30; Ps 107:22
Jonah 2:9c	Ps 3:8; Ps 37:39

In conclusion it might be helpful to note that at one level Jonah is fairly uncomplicated. The Hebrew vocabulary is fairly straightforward and the book is often studied by beginning Hebrew students. However, at another level, the book displays a remarkable level of literary artistry. It contains frequent word plays (e.g., *ra’ ער*), rich imagery (e.g., the storm, large fish, etc.), and sophisticated storytelling.²¹ As Allen states, “The book of Jonah is a model of literary artistry . . .”²²

Structure:

The book of Jonah is readily divided into two major sections. Chapters 1–2 contains Jonah’s rejection of God’s call and the extreme steps that God takes to bring His prophet back. Chapters 3–4 record Jonah’s second call and the prophet’s ministry in Nineveh.²³

²⁰ Ellison, “Jonah,” 364.

²¹ See also Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie (Bern / Frankfurt: Herbert Lang / Peter Lang, 1976).

²² Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 197.

²³ A helpful examination of the structure of Jonah from a textlinguistic perspective can be seen in R. E. Longacre and S. J. J. Hwang, “A Textlinguistic Approach to Biblical Hebrew Narrative of Jonah,” in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, ed. R. D. Bergen (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994), 342-43.

SOME SIMILARITIES

Jonah 1:1 – **The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:**

Jonah 1:2 – “**Go to the great city of Nineveh** and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Jonah 2:1 – From inside the fish Jonah **prayed to the LORD** his God.

Jonah 3:1 – **Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah** a second time:

Jonah 3:2 – **Go to the great city of Nineveh** and proclaim to it the message I give you.

Jonah 4:2 –He **prayed to the LORD**

SOME DIFFERENCES

Jonah 1:3 – But Jonah ran away from the **LORD** and headed for Tarshish.

Jonah 2:2 – In my distress I called to the **LORD** . . . From the depths of the grave I called for help

Jonah 3:2 – **Jonah obeyed** the word of the **LORD** and went to Nineveh.

Jonah 4:3 – “Now, O **LORD**, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Outline

- I. Jonah’s First Call and God’s Interactions With a Disobedient Prophet (1:1–2:10)
 - A. Jonah’s Disobedience (1:1–16)
 - B. Jonah’s Deliverance (1:17)
 - C. Jonah’s Devotion (2:1–10)

- II. Jonah’s Second Call and God’s Interactions With a Disappointed Prophet (3:1–4:11)
 - A. Jonah’s Proclamation in Nineveh (3:1–10)
 - B. Jonah’s Problem in Nineveh (4:1–11)

Chart

Jonah’s First Call and God’s Interactions With a Disobedient Prophet 1:1–2:10			Jonah’s Second Call and God’s Interactions With a Disappointed Prophet 2:1–3:21	
Jonah’s Disobedience	Jonah’s Deliverance	Jonah’s Devotion	Jonah’s Proclamation in Nineveh	Jonah’s Problem in Nineveh
1:1–16	1:17	2:1–10	3:1–10	4:1–11
God’s Compassion on Jonah			God’s Compassion on Nineveh	

Expositional Outline of Jonah:**I. JONAH'S FIRST CALL AND GOD INTERACTS WITH HIS DISOBEDIENT PROPHET (1:1–2:10)****A. Jonah's Disobedience (1:1–16)**

Jonah receives his call (1:1–2) –

The Recurring Use of "Great" (<i>Gadol</i>) in Jonah
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A "great city" (1:2; 3:2; 4:11)• A "great wind" (1:4)• A "great storm" (1:12)• A "great fear" (1:16)• A "great fish" (1:17)• A "great displeasure" (4:1)• A "great happiness" (4:6.)

The Recurring Use of <i>Rā'â</i> in Jonah
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "wickedness" (1:2)• "calamity" (1:7; 4:2)• "trouble" (1:8)• "destruction" (3:10)• "displeased" (4:1)• "discomfort" (4:6)

2. Jonah runs from his call (1:3) –

3. Jonah rides into a storm (1:4–16) –

- a. The sailors' fright (vv. 4-5a)²⁴
- b. The sailors' prayer to their gods (v. 5b)
- c. The sailors' unloading the ship (v. 5c)
- d. The captain's speech to Jonah (v. 6)
- e. The sailors' word to each other (v. 7a)
- f. The sailors' question to Jonah, Who are you? (vv. 7b-8)
- g. Jonah's confession (v. 9)
- f'. The sailors' question to Jonah, What have you done? (v. 10a)
- e'. The sailors' question to Jonah, What shall we do? (vv. 10b-11)
- d'. Jonah's words to the sailors (v. 12)
- c'. The sailors' rowing of the ship (v. 13)
- b'. The sailor's prayer to the Lord (v. 14)
- a'. The sailors' fear of the Lord (vv. 15-16)

- a. The coming of the storm (vv. 4-5) –
- b. The confrontation of Jonah (vv. 6-10) –
- c. The conclusion of the crisis (vv. 11-15) –
- d. The consecration of the sailors (v. 16) –

B. Jonah's Deliverance (1:17)

C. Jonah's Devotion (2:1-10)

- 1. The setting of the psalm in the fish (v. 1) –
- 2. The introduction to the psalm (v. 2) –
- 3. A description of past distress (vv. 3-6a) –
- 4. A reference to divine rescue God (v. 6b) –

²⁴ Hannah, "Jonah," 1465. Hannah's work is a modification of Yehuda Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Literature," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 60.

5. An appeal to God for help (v. 7) –
6. A vow of praise (vv. 8–9) –
7. The setting of Jonah on the dry land (v. 10) –

II. JONAH'S SECOND CALL AND GOD'S INTERACTION WITH A DISAPPOINTED PROPHET (3:1–4:11)

A. Jonah's Proclamation in Nineveh (3:1–10)

1. Jonah's response to God's call (3:1–4) –
2. Nineveh's response to Jonah's message (3:5–9) –
3. God's response to Nineveh's repentance (3:10) –

B. Jonah's Problem in Nineveh (4:1–11)

1. Jonah's Displeasure and God's Response (4:1–4) –
2. Jonah's Discomfort and God's Response (4:5–11) –

Which is more Important?

Plants	OR	People
One plant	OR	120,000 people
One plant	OR	Much cattle

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