

Bible Study – Jonah

The book of Jonah is one of a collection of books known as ‘The Minor Prophets’. The book, which is read in synagogues yearly as part of afternoon prayers (*mincha*) on *Yom Kippur*, holds special significance to Jews due to its message of repentance.

The narrative recorded in the Book of Jonah is believed to have taken place during the reign of the Israelite king Jeroboam II (786-746 BC), some have claimed to have narrowed the date of the events down to around 770 BC. That said, scholarly opinion places the actual writing of Jonah to much later, possibly after the Babylonian exile.

The Book of Jonah is unique amongst the Twelve Minor Prophets as it contains the only account of a prophet being sent to a foreign land to proclaim a message to a foreign people. The book is also unique as it does not contain a collection of prophetic words, but is composed in the genre of narrative and, most strikingly is a narrative *about* a prophet rather than a collection of their sayings. Critical scholarship has questioned whether the events recorded actually happened at all and suggest that the book itself is a poem, parable, or short story written to make a point. Although the book of Jonah has been placed amongst the minor prophets, because of its style, it could also easily have been placed within the ‘Writings’ section of the Hebrew scriptures, or even inserted after the original reference to Jonah in **2 Kings 14:25**.

Jonah

The eponymous character of the book, Jonah (Hebrew: יוֹנָה, *Yonah*, meaning *dove*) son of Amittai, is first mentioned in **2 Kings** as a prophet from Gath-hepher who had prophesied that Jeroboam II would recover “*the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea*” (**2 Kings 14:25**). The prophets Amos and Hosea would have been Jonah’s contemporaries. Jonah’s story is also found in the works of Josephus (***Antiquities* 9.10**) and he is mentioned in the Apocryphal books of Tobit (**Tobit 14:4**), Maccabees (**3 Maccabees 6:8**), and Esdras (**2 Esdras 1:38-40**). Jesus also makes references to Jonah (**Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29**).

The life of Jonah also contains parallels, although some figurative, with the life of Jesus; both were asleep on a boat during a storm, both sacrificed themselves for others, both were ‘dead’ and ‘buried’ for three days, both were raised to ‘new life’ and both preached a message of repentance for gentiles.

Gath-hepher is about 3 miles from Nazareth so Jonah would have been known in Nazareth. Jesus may have heard the stories of Jonah growing up as a boy in Nazareth – and as Jesus mentions Jonah, we have to assume that Jesus either believed this story, or at least treats it as a meaningful and authoritative story within Israel’s Scriptures.

The Book of Jonah is split into four chapters, three of which are narrative in style and one which fits the style of a psalm. The opening verses of chapter 1 and chapter 3 are almost identical, and the focus of the story follows a very similar theme in both chapters:

Chapter One	Theme	Chapter Three
Verse 1-2	God’s Command	Verse 1-2
Verse 3	Jonah’s Reaction	Verse 3
Verse 4-13	The Threat of Judgement	Verse 4
Verse 14-15	The Prayer for Deliverance	Verse 5-9
Verse 16-17	The Rescue	Verse 10

Chapter 1

“Get up and go”

Jonah is sent to Nineveh to warn the people of the threat of destruction by God because of their ‘wickedness’ (**Jonah 1:2**). We don’t know where Jonah was when he heard from God, but given his home was near Nazareth, we could assume he was somewhere in this area. Nineveh is northeast of both Nazareth and Jerusalem.

But rather than go ‘up’ to Nineveh, Jonah went down (**v3**). In fact, the writer is keen to emphasise the total disobedience of Jonah by telling us that Jonah went in the ‘opposite direction’.

Rather than head 500 miles northeast, Jonah heads southwest to Joppa (modern Jaffa) and boards a ship heading for Tarshish, which is believed to be a port in Southwestern Spain – possibly the ancient port of Tartessos (**v3**) – over 2,000 miles in the opposite direction!

It is not made clear why Jonah attempted to run away to Tarshish, but what is suggested later in the text is that Jonah was fully aware of God’s grace and forgiveness and knew that God would not punish Nineveh if they repented (**Jonah 4:2**), thus Jonah did not want to be viewed as a false prophet. Or, possibly, Jonah did not actually *want* the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent. They were, after all, Ashur worshippers and lived in the capital city of a very powerful nation that was bitterly detested and that cruelly oppressed Israel. We will talk more about Nineveh in Week 3.

There is possibly another clue to Jonah’s response, not in this text, but in **2 Kings 14:23-25**:

Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash, began to rule over Israel in the fifteenth year of King Amaziah’s reign in Judah. He reigned in Samaria forty-one years. He did what was evil in the Lord’s sight. He refused to turn from the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had led Israel to commit. Jeroboam II recovered the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had promised through Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher.

Jeroboam II was an evil king, however rather than send Jonah with a warning or message of judgement, God used Jonah to go and tell him that he would expand the kingdom of Israel! Jeroboam II, despite being evil, was blessed by God with a great military victory, subduing the armies of the rapidly growing Aramean army. Despite being prophesied and granted this victory by God, history tells us that Jeroboam II got even worse, erecting golden calves as objects of worship in traditional Israelite shrines such as Dan and Bethel (see **Amos**). So, it could be argued that, in Jonah’s eyes, God’s mercy doesn’t change bad people.

The Storm

All seems to be going well until a sudden storm whips up and threatens to tear the ship apart. It’s interesting again that when the storm begins, Jonah is “down in the hold” and the captain admonishes him to “get up and pray” (**v5-6**).

The crew of the ship are obviously ‘god-fearers’, although which god they worship is unclear – any god will do when you’re sinking! Jonah is asked to pray to his God as well.

The crew cast lots to determine who was responsible for the storm – which although was a common practice for Yahweh worshippers (**Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 18:10; I Chronicles 24; Proverbs 16:33; Nehemiah 10:34**) and even used by the disciples to choose the replacement for Judas (**Acts 1:21-26**) – it was also done by other nations and cults. Although, as Yahweh worshippers believe that God controls the outcome, even here when the practice is carried out by Gentiles, God is still in control.

v8-10

The Lots fall on Jonah who after a brief interrogation admits that he is a Hebrew, which terrifies these Gentile sailors – ‘of all the gods to upset, you’ve upset THAT God!’ There’s a curious side note in **verse 10** which suggests they already knew he was running away from God. Maybe it was OK to run away from God but not upset Him?

They plead with Jonah, recognising that only God can save them, asking him to tell them what they should do to him to appease God and stop the storm.

There are two things to note here: the first is that Jonah's behaviour, despite being his own personal choice, nearly has catastrophic effects on the people around him.

The second thing to note is that here there is the beginnings of Jonah's parallels with Jesus – Jonah is sacrificed to 'stop the storm' and to save the lives of those on the boat.

v11-16

The captain of the ship is a 'god-fearer', although probably pagan (**v6-7**), but he is also a humane man. He makes every effort to reach the shore despite Jonah's pleas to be thrown overboard (**v12-13**). The crew cry out, 'Please don't make us die for this man's sin, and don't make us responsible for this man's death', which provides us a mirroring of the words of Caiaphas regarding Jesus: *"You don't realise that it's better for you that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed."* (**John 11:50**); and the words of Jesus on the cross: *"Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing"* (**Luke 23:34**).

Jonah is picked up and tossed overboard and the storm stops instantly! (**v15**). Realising the power of God, the ship's crew begin to worship God and dedicate their lives to serving Him. Other than the miraculous instantaneous calming of the storm, what is also incredible here is that despite Jonah's disobedience, the crew of the ship still get saved! (**v16**) It's a great encouragement that despite our own mistakes, God still works!

But God's still not done, despite Jonah's disobedience, God also still has a plan for His life. God arranges a ride for Jonah in the form of a fish (**v17**). Jonah will spend three days 'in the belly' of this fish – a direct parallel with Jesus' time spent in the grave (**Matthew 12:40**). We'll spend more time on this in the next study.

There is debate about the nature, or even existence of the 'fish' mentioned in the book, with various explanations being offered. The original Hebrew text reads '*dag gadol*' (דג גדול), meaning 'big fish'. This phrase is translated in the Greek Septuagint as '*ketos megas*' (κετος μεγας). Ketos, meaning 'large fish', is a word used in Greek mythology to describe sea monsters.

It is possible, due to their size, stomach capacity and swimming territories, the 'fish' could have been a sperm whale, or a great white shark.

A surprising number of biblical scholars take issue with this event and list it as one of the arguments against Jonah being a literal narrative, or even a real person.

In response to this, I would argue that we cannot simply disregard this book as a piece of fiction due to the unlikelihood of a man being swallowed alive by a 'big fish', survive three days in the stomach of the fish and then be vomited out. If we do this, we may as well disregard most of Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, all four of the Gospels and Acts.

A final note:

Verse 17 in the original Hebrew is actually verse 1 of **chapter 2**. But it does make more literary sense to place it here.