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JONAH

*God's heart for Israel's enemies*

SETTING

793-753 BC

KEY VERSE

*"He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."*

4:2

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# INTRODUCTION

Jonah is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, which tells us that Jonah lived at the same time as Jeroboam II (793-753 BC). He was thus a historical person, and Jesus also refers to the inhabitants of Nineveh as historical persons (Matthew 12:41). In addition, professor of Old Testament Douglas Stuart believes that *"it is well documented that several people (mostly whalers) have survived long periods inside sea creatures."* There are thus no clear signs that this is a made-up story, although it probably goes deeper than just historical facts.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. In Jonah's time, the Assyrians were not yet at their most brutal, but they were far from well-liked nonetheless. Even the prophet Jonah did not like that God cared about evil pagans and Israel's enemies. He instead heads west, exactly in the opposite direction of Nineveh, which was in present-day Iraq. He tries to run away because he knows God is going to spare them if they repent, and he doesn't want to be part of that. His hatred for his enemies surpasses his faithfulness to God.

The book is more about God's love and grace than Jonah trying to run away. It encourages us to love our enemies, even our worst enemies, because God loves them.

Both Jesus and Jonah were prophets from Galilee. Jonah came from Gath-Hepher (2 Kings 14:25), which was located approximately 5 km away from Nazareth. Jesus referred to the *"sign of Jonah"* in Matt 12:39-40. Jonah in the fish thus pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection.

## JONAH

Also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25:

“He [Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.”

Lived under Jeroboam II (793-753 BC)

Only prophet from the Northern Kingdom. Gat-Hepher was in Galilee, approx. 5 km from Nazareth.

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| --- | --- |
| **Chapters 1-2** | **Chapters 3-4** |
| God sends Jonah to Nineveh (1:2) | God sends Jonah to Nineveh (3:2) |
| Jonah disobeys (1:3) | Jonah obeys (3:3) |
| Jonah tells the sailors that the storm (judgment) is from God (1:4-9) | Jonah tells the people of Nineveh that God's judgment is coming (3:4) |
| The sailors pray to God not to sink (1:14) | The inhabitants of Nineveh pray to God not to perish (3:9) |
| The storm (judgment) is stopped, and the crew is spared (1:15) | The judgment is stopped, and Nineveh is spared (3:10) |
| Jonah prays to God as he is about to die (2:2-10) | Jonah prays to God when the people of Nineveh do not die, and he wants to die himself (4:2) |
| Jonah's prayer is heard: The fish spits Jonah out (2:11) | Jonah's prayer is heard: God rebukes him (4:4, 9-11) |

## IS THE BOOK HISTORICAL OR FICTIONAL? WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

Wikipedia says:

*"The consensus of mainstream Biblical scholars holds that the contents of the Book of Jonah are entirely ahistorical.*

*Although the prophet Jonah allegedly lived in the eighth century BCE, the Book of Jonah was written centuries later during the time of the Achaemenid Empire. The Hebrew used in the Book of Jonah shows strong influences from Aramaic and the cultural practices described in it match those of the Achaemenid Persians. Many scholars regard the Book of Jonah as an intentional work of parody or satire. If this is the case, then it was probably admitted into the canon of the Hebrew Bible by sages who misunderstood its satirical nature and mistakenly interpreted it as a serious prophetic work.*

*While the Book of Jonah itself is considered fiction, Jonah himself may have been a historical prophet; he is briefly mentioned in the Second Book of Kings... Most scholars believe that the anonymous author of the Book of Jonah may have seized upon this obscure prophet from 2 Kings and used him as the basis for the fictional character of Jonah, but some have contended that the figure of Jonah himself is entirely legendary.*

*Book of Jonah: Set in the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC) but written in the post-exilic some time between the late 5th to early 4th century BC…"*

Later discoveries have meant that the language in the book can no longer be used as an argument for the dating.

## WHAT POINTS TO FICTITIOUS HISTORY? (AND USUALLY POST-EXILIAN DATING)

**1. Jonah survives three days in a large fish/whale, the plant that grows and dies quickly.**

Too unbelievable to be true. Sounds made up.

**2. “Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.” (3:3) with 120,000 inhabitants (4:11).**

The circumference was only 11 km, and archeology suggests a much smaller population. Deliberate exaggeration or legend by a much later author who does not know much about Nineveh.

**3. The whole city turns to God (3:5).**

Unlikely, and no trace of this in Assyrian texts.

**4. The animals are fasting and must be covered with sackcloth (3:7-8).**

Sounds like satire. In addition, this Persian practice suggests post-exilic times.

**5. Symmetrical structure.**

Not common in historical accounts.

**6. The book is didactic (teaching).**

Therefore, it is not historical.

## WHAT POINTS OUT THAT THE BOOK IS HISTORICAL? (AND USUALLY DATED TO THE 8TH CENTURY)

Common prophet introduction (1:1), and Jonah was a historical person (2 Kings 14:25).

1:1-2 is similar to 1 Kings 17:8-9 taken historically. No signs that Jonah should be read differently.

Jesus seems to have understood it as a historical event.

Josephus (1st century AD) includes Jonah in his Jewish history (Ant. 9.206-214)

Has been the traditional view until the last 100 years.

*"He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."* Matthew 12:39-41

*"The fact that generations of scholars and writers were convinced that the author of Jonah did not intend to write fiction argues against the modern view that the form and style of the narrative give us this impression. Were these earlier generations completely blind to features that we are asked to believe are immediately obvious? Didn't these earlier writers live and study in an environment much closer to that of Jonah's author than we do? And if so, wouldn't they have been more attuned to the genre cues in an ancient tale? With these factors in mind, we must indeed expect good reasons to ignore or reject the traditional view of Jonah."* T. Desmond Alexander

## ASSYRIA IN THE 7TH CENTURY B.C.: BAD TIMES

A golden age in the 8th century. Major rebellion in 826-820 BC was due to King Salmanassar's inability to restrain the provincial governors who went beyond their positions in the districts. Then a general decline occurred until Tiglath-Pileser III became king in 745 BC.

* Marked decline in campaigns against other nations under these kings.
* Famine in 765 and again (or still) in 759, and a solar eclipse in 763.

## HOW ARE THE FICTION ARGUMENTS EXPLAINED HISTORICALLY?

**1. Jonah survives three days in a large fish/whale, the plant that grows and dies quickly.**

It has been documented that whalers have survived long periods inside whales.

The word "belly" can be used for a lot "inside" a body. Perhaps Jonah was in the mouth of the fish/whale.

Is this more incredible than, e.g., that Elijah is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire in the books of Kings?

**2. The whole city turns to God (3:5).**

We generally have little information about Assyria in the first half of the seventh century.

The book does not mention Yahweh in Chapter 3, but only the more general God.

The famine in 765 (-759) and the solar eclipse in 763 were probably interpreted as signs from the gods, in addition to attacks from enemies and recessions. This makes it likely that they would be able to react in this way to Jonah's message.

«From Assyrian omen texts, we know of four circumstances that could move a people, and its king, to fasting and mourning: invasion by an enemy; a total solar eclipse; famine and a major outbreak of disease; and a major flood. We know that enemy nations, such as Urartu, had beaten the Assyrians in a number of military encounters in the time of Ashurdan III and that a major earthquake occurred in the reign of one of the kings with the name Ashurdan - but not for certain Ashurdan III. Moreover, on June 15, 763 BC in the tenth year of Ashurdan III, there was a total solar eclipse over Assyria!” Douglas Stuart

**3. Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.” (3:3) with 120,000 inhabitants (4:11).**

*Nineveh ha-ir hagadolah* ("Nineveh the great city") is used for several cities over a larger area in Genesis 10:11-12. Then it may be natural with 120,000 inhabitants (4:11).

**4. The animals are fasting and must be covered with sackcloth (3:7-8).**

This became a Persian practice later. Not unlikely that the Assyrians did the same, although we do not (yet) have any sources that say so.

**5. Symmetrical structure.**

Does not rule out that it is history.

**6. The book is didactic (teaching).**

Does not rule out that it is history.

## CONCLUSION

What we know is that Jonah lived in the 7th century BC. No convincing signs that the book should be read against a different later background; that would quickly become speculation.

The author seems to present the book as historical but with a clear theological point. He downplays historical details to focus on the universality of the book's message.

Can be called didactic (teaching) history.

Jonah himself has traditionally been considered the author, but it may also have been someone else.

## FIRST READER?

The story happened in Jonah's time, e.g., about 760 BC under Asur-dan III (772-754), who experienced both a famine, attacks from enemies, and a solar eclipse.

Perhaps it was written towards the end of the 7th century when Assyria was becoming the biggest threat. Interest in the book's theme had been even greater after the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria in 722 BC.

First reader: Israel/Judah in the last half of the 7th century BC, who had difficulties with how to deal with the Assyrians.

How would you feel if God asked you to share the gospel with an enemy of your country?

# CHAPTER 1

## 1:1-3

Quick response, but the opposite of what God is asking him to do.

He not only flees away from Nineveh in the opposite direction but also "away from the Lord".

He went down to Joppa in the boat.

Jonah also escapes from his prophetic ministry. He could not continue as a prophet if he refused to speak the word of God.

*"If you run away from God, there is always a ship going in that direction."* Colin Smith

## 1:4-16

A. Yahweh hurls a storm on the sea; sailors fear and cry to their gods (vv. 4-5a)

B. Jonah sleeps; cry to your god; we shall not perish; divine sovereignty (vv. 5b-6)

C. That we may know on whose account (v. 7)

D. The sailors question Jonah (v. 8)

E. I fear (v. 9)

E. The sailor's fear (v. 10)

D. The sailors question Jonah (v. 11)

C. I know that it is on my account (v. 12)

B. The sailors strive for land; sailors cry to Yahweh: let us not perish; divine sovereignty (vv. 13-14)

A. The sailors hurl Jonah into the sea; the storm ceases; the sailors fear Yahweh and sacrifice (vv. 15-16)

1:5: *"below deck".* Contrast: While the sailors are scared and in full action, Jonah is sleeping below deck in a deep sleep.

1:6: A heathen tells him to cry to God, from whom he flees. Ironic. Also a parallel with *"stand up and shout"* in v. 2. The captain sounds like God.

1:10: The sailors fear God more than Jonah does.

1:14: Now they cry to Yahweh and not to their other gods.

1:15: Further *down* (although the word is not used)

## 1:4-16

The sailors' "fear process":

* v. 5: they fear the sea
* v. 10: seized with great fear both of the Lord and the sea
* v. 16: *“the men greatly feared the Lord”*

Jonah is the world's worst evangelist on the boat, but they still come to faith.

We are saved by the gospel and not by the evangelist.

Jonah goes down, down, down, down…until he can go no further down (and further away from God).

## JONAH 1 — MARK 4:35-41

Many similar words and expressions

* Both Jonah and Jesus are in a boat
* Both are in a storm that is described in a similar way
* Both boats are full of scared people
* Both prophets are awakened by criticism
* Both storms miraculously stop, and everyone is saved
* Both stories conclude that the men in the boats were more scared afterward
* Jonah is "sacrificed" voluntarily so that others are saved. Jesus voluntarily sacrificed Himself so that others could be saved.

# CHAPTER 2: JONAH'S PRAYER

2:7: *“When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.”*

*"But…"* (Eph 2:4, Rom 3:21). God saves by grace when all hope is lost.

2:10: He does the same thing the sailors did before him in 1:16. Ironic that as an Israelite he lags behind.

2:11 He gets a second chance. He experiences mercy and grace.

# CHAPTER 3

3:4: A pun with *overthrown* and *repent*: *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”*

Luk 11:29-30: *"As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation."*

The sign was that he was 3 days in the fish. He probably talked about that too, about God being gracious and saving from death and destruction.

# CHAPTER 4

Contrasts:

1. Jonah was happy about his rescue (Ch. 2) **but** angry that Nineveh was saved. He wants to die because of God's goodness, **but** he is happy to be saved by God's goodness in Chapter 2.

2. God "relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened" (3:10b), **but** Jonah gets angry. He uses Exodus 34:6 against God (4:2). Ironically.

3. Jonah is full of emotions because of a plant that he neither created nor kept alive, **but** he has no emotions toward 120,000 people. He does not understand why God cares about them, even though he created them and keeps them alive.

4. God cares about all the people in Nineveh, **but** Jonah only cares about himself.

The book ends with a question for both Jonah and the reader: Should I not have concern for all these people - even if they are your enemies?

# JONAH → JESUS

Jesus and Jonah were from the same place and were the only prophets from Galilee.

Both sleep in the storm

Both asked the people to repent

Jonah's 3 days in the fish were a sign of Jesus' death and resurrection

Both willingly sacrifice themselves to save others

But Jesus wept over Jerusalem, which did not repent, while Jonah gets angry because 120,000 repented.

# MAIN POINTS

Some Gentiles fear God more than Israel does.

Abraham, the "father of faith", lied about Sarah because he thought the Gentiles in Gerar did not fear God, but he was wrong. (Genesis 20:11)

Jesus says of a Roman that *"I have not found such great faith even in Israel."* (Luke 7:9)

The Assyrians are not to be regarded as heathens without hope, even though they are enemies of Israel. They are nevertheless inalienable to God, and some people surprisingly can believe - even more than the Israelites themselves. Although Israel is God's people, they should not be nationalists.

# APPLICATION

1. Who are our “enemies”? Do we love them, or are we like Jonah? Do we want judgment on them while we have received grace? Are we angry at the "sinners" of the world, or do we long for them to be saved?

2. Do we say "no" like Jonah to entering a difficult situation that we don't want to enter, or do we say "yes" as Jesus did?