

# Jonah - Introduction & Background

## Title

Like many other OT books, the title of the book is derived from its principal character. The Hebrew title is *Yonah*. The LXX Greek title is *Ionas*. The title in the Latin Vulgate is *Jonas*.

## Authorship

The principal character of the book is Jonah Son of Amitai (1:1). Although not identified as the author, tradition states that this same figure also served as the book's author. His name means "dove." While this name can refer to peace and purity, it can also refer to silliness (Hosea 7:11). This later designation is probably the intended meaning of his name since he is held up throughout the book as a humorous, negative example not to be imitated by Israel. Jonah was from Gath-hepher (2 Kings 14:25) in Zebulun (Joshua 19:10,13), which is located several miles northeast of Nazareth. Nothing is known of Jonah's father.

## Date

Although no internal chronological markers are found in the book, 2 Kings 14:25 indicates that Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. Thus, the date of Jonah's ministry can be placed somewhere in between 793–753 BC. Therefore, Jonah prophesied after Elisha, concurrently with Amos, and just before Hosea. While the date of Jonah's ministry is easy to determine, the date of the writing of Jonah's book is more difficult to ascertain. Critical scholarship contends that the book was not written until after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC during the post-exilic era. This view maintains that the book was written for the purpose of introducing universal concepts in order to oppose the over-zealous nationalism and ethnocentrism during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. An anonymous author supposedly produced the book during this time in order to counter Israel's practices of excluding the Samaritans from building the temple and divorcing their non-Jewish wives. This theory relies upon several arguments that can be rebutted.

First, critical scholars note the universal themes emphasized in the Book of Jonah. However, such an emphasis does not need to be understood as merely a rebuke to post-exilic Judaism since such themes are replete throughout earlier Scripture (Gen 9:27; 12:3; Lev 19:34; 1 Sam 2:10; Joel 2:28-32; Is 2:2). Second, critical scholars rely upon Aramaisms found throughout the Book of Jonah in order to date the book late. However, these Aramaisms appear in early as well as late OT books, appear in ancient Near Eastern texts as early as 1500 BC, and were more prevalent in the Galilean region where Jonah was from. Moreover, there is no other literary composition from Galilee that the Book of Jonah can be compared to in order to determine if Jonah contains a disproportionately larger number of Aramaisms.

Third, critical scholars note the emphasis that the Book of Jonah places upon preaching to the Gentiles. However, such an emphasis does not need to be understood as merely a rebuke to post-exilic Judaism since Elijah and Elisha ministered to the Gentiles a century earlier (1 Kings 17:7-24; 2 Kings 8:7-17) and Jonah's contemporary Amos also spoke to the Gentile nations (Amos 1:3—2:16; 9:7,12). Fourth, critical scholars contend that Jonah did not author the book since the writer speaks of himself in the third person. However, the third person style was common not only among biblical writers<sup>6</sup> but also other writers in the ancient Near East.

Fifth, critical scholars argue that nowhere does Jonah claim to be the book's writer. However, this contention represents an argument from silence. Sixth, critical scholars maintain that because 3:3 indicates that Nineveh "was a great city," the book must have been written after Nineveh had fallen. However, others note that because the grammar of this verse indicates that Nineveh "had become" a great city, the verse simply teaches that the city was great at the time of the writing. Also, this text may simply indicate that someone other than Jonah wrote 3:3 at a later date.

Seventh, critical scholars point to the disunity in style between Jonah and Hosea who was another eighth century northern prophet. However, this argument rests upon the tenuous presupposition that a consistent style existed among the northern prophets. Eighth, critical scholars observe that 3:9; 4:2 reflect Joel 2:14; 2:13. However, this argument is without merit if Joel can be assigned a ninth century date. It may be asked of the critical scholar why Nineveh's repentance and avoided destruction interested the author if the book was written after Nineveh was overthrown? Thus, the book may have been written sometime after 770 BC but before the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC. All things considered, a date of 770–750 BC for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong.

### **Recipients**

Because Jonah ministered under the reign of Jeroboam II who was king over Israel (2 Kings 14:25), it is safe to conclude that Jonah ministered to the northern kingdom. While the subject matter of the book concerns the Assyrians, Israel is the recipient of the book. Thus, Geisler notes, "Jonah wrote to his proud and patriotic fellow-countrymen who were already under heavy taxation by the notoriously evil Assyrian empire." The Jewish focus of the book is evidenced by the fact that it is included in the Hebrew canon.

### **Historical Background**

Jonah's ministry took place during the kingship of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25) who reigned from 793 to 753 BC. Jeroboam II ended ongoing conflict between Israel and Damascus by restoring Israel's traditional borders. Prior to this enlargement of borders, Israel's size had been minimized and Damascus controlled the internal affairs of the nation (2 Kings 13:7). However, the Assyrian weakening of Damascus (797 BC) gave Jehoash, king of Israel, the opportunity to recover territory initially lost to Damascus (2 Kings 13:25).

Subsequent Assyrian internal turmoil gave Jeroboam II further opportunity to restore Israel's northern borders.

Elisha had predicted Israel's victory over Damascus (2 Kings 13:14-19). Jonah similarly predicted Jeroboam's victory (2 Kings 14:25). However, Israel's victories caused her to become prideful (Amos 5:18-20; 6:1). Assyria remained a northern threat to Israel during this era and was destined to conquer Israel in 722 BC. The Assyrians were well known for their brutality.

Although Nineveh would not become the capital of the Assyrian empire until the kingship of Sennacherib (706–681 BC), Nineveh represented the largest city in the Assyrian empire in the time of Jonah. Nineveh, which was located in northern Mesopotamia east of the Tigris River, was eventually destroyed in 612 BC. The various kings of Assyria during Jonah's era include Ashur Dan III (773–755 BC), Adad nirari III (810–783 BC), Shalmaneser IV (782–773 BC), Ahur-nirari (754–745 BC). "The repentance of Nineveh probably occurred during the reign of Ashur-dan III (773–755 BC). Two plagues (765 and 759 BC) and a solar eclipse (759 BC) may have prepared the people for Jonah's message of judgment."

### **Historicity of the Book of Jonah**

Critical scholars have dismissed the Book of Jonah's historicity. Yet several reasons should cause interpreters to take the book of Jonah as narrative history. *First*, the book presents its material in the form of normative history. There is not the slightest hint that any of its personages or places are fictional. *Second*, the book gives specific historical referents such as Jonah the Son of Amitai (1:1). *Third*, Jewish tradition accepts the book as historical.

*Fourth*, Christ believed both the story of Jonah and the fish as well as the repentance of Nineveh were events that transpired in history (Matt 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32). Christ even went so far as to tie the cardinal doctrine of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:14) to the historicity of the story of Jonah and the fish. Interestingly, the other OT characters that Christ mentions are normally taken as historical. Examples include Elijah (Matt 17:11-12), Elisha (Luke 4:27), and Isaiah (Matt 15:7). Why should Jonah be the one exception to this rule?

*Fifth*, because divine miracles had already been well established in Exodus and 1-2 Kings, it should not be surprising to see miracles emphasized in the Book of Jonah. *Sixth*, although they often selectively used history in order to shape their individual theological purposes, OT writers, especially the prophets, had a great concern for historical accuracy. *Seventh*, according to Ecclesiasticus 49:10, Ben Sira accepted Jonah as belonging to the 12 Minor prophets in 190 BC. This categorization stood the test of time. No Rabbis ever doubted or challenged the book's canonicity. Thus, Jonah's longstanding canonicity would never have occurred if the book abounded with historical inaccuracies.

*Eighth*, some have noticed a similarity between Jonah and Elijah since both ministered around the same time and to the same nation. Also, God commissioned both and both

sought death (4:8; 1 Kings 19:4). Thus, if Elijah is a literal character, then so must Jonah be a person of history. *Ninth*, 2:2-9 is reminiscent of many other Psalms. Thus, one's conclusion upon the historicity of Jonah 2 will automatically influence one's attitude toward many other Psalms. *Tenth*, the historical books indicate that Jonah was a historical figure (2 Kings 14:25).

Despite the historicity of Jonah, critical scholars rely upon several arguments in order to de-historicize the book. However, these arguments are answerable. First, the critics argue that it is impossible for a man to survive after being swallowed by a giant fish. However, there have been many historical examples where this very thing has happened.

Second, the critics argue that 3:3 incorrectly refers to the king of Nineveh rather than the king of Assyria. However, as mentioned previously, Nineveh would not become the capital of Assyria until 50 years after Jonah visited that city. Furthermore, in the OT, kings were often referred to by the city that they ruled (1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 3:9,12; 2 Chr 24:23). Third, the critics contend that the population of the city of Nineveh is too large for a city of that time (3:3; 4:11). However, this argument is rebutted by archeological excavations indicating that Nineveh was 8 miles in circumference and capable of housing at least 175,000 people, by understanding that the half-size neighboring city of Nimrud was capable of accommodating 69,574 people, and by understanding that the reference to the three days journey (3:3) is not a reference to the breadth of the city but rather to the 30 to 60 mile administrative district. Regarding this latter point, it is possible that Jonah could have entered the city to preach at various junctures rather than to walk as far as possible for each of the three days.

Fourth, the critics argue that it would be impossible for an unknown Hebrew prophet to have successfully converted an entire major Assyrian city. Archer's response is appropriate.

"Well, it must be admitted that such a ready response from a pagan populace was nothing short of miraculous, but the narrative makes it plain that the will and power of God Almighty were behind the whole enterprise. There would have been little point to God's insistence that Jonah go to Nineveh unless He Himself was prepared to make the prophet's preaching effectual. Who can define the power of the Holy Spirit in bringing men under conviction when His truth is preached?"

Fifth, critics also point out the absurdity of a plant that rapidly grows and decays. However, this objection betrays an anti-supernatural presuppositional bias.

### **Genre**

About 40 verses of the book consist of narrative material (1:1—2:1; 2:10—4:11). The rest of the book consists of the psalmic genre (2:2-9). This psalm has been called both a psalm of deliverance and a declarative praise psalm. A larger issue involves the literary form of the

entire book. Scholars have proposed various forms.<sup>19</sup> The first four of these forms deny the historicity of the book.

First, some call the Book of Jonah an allegory. Thus, the book's characters and places correspond to spiritual concepts rather than historical facts. Under this rubric, "Jonah" represents Israel's reluctance to accept outsiders into the covenant community rather than a literal person, "Nineveh" represents the Gentiles rather than an actual city, the three days in the belly of the whale refer to the length of Babylonian captivity rather than an actual experience, the whale represents the fact of the Babylonian captivity rather than a literal animal, and Jonah's message represents God's love for the Gentiles rather than a specific message. "This interpretation may have arisen because 'Jonah' means 'dove,' and the Jews had long regarded the dove as a symbol of their nation (Cf. Ps 74:19; Hosea 11:11). Those who adopt this view see the book as teaching Israel's mission and failure in being God's missionary agent to the Gentiles." However, this view suffers since the Book of Jonah is filled with too much detail and specific information for it to be understood as a mere allegory. Although great spiritual truths can be drawn from this book, this does not negate its historicity. Furthermore, other biblical allegories are overtly identified (Gal 4:24) and such a conspicuous designation seems to be lacking here.

Second, others call the Book of Jonah a parable, which is a non-historical story told for the purpose of accomplishing a didactic propose. In this case, the point of the story would be to rebut ethnocentrism in favor of universalism. However, this view is unlikely. Scriptural parables are typically identified with the word "parable" which is not the case here. Also, parables do not typically use specific people and places and yet the Book of Jonah does refer to actual people and places. Moreover, it is improbable that a parable would comprise an entire biblical book.

Third, some regard the book of Jonah as a mere fictional story teaching a moral or spiritual lesson. However, the book presents itself as giving normative history. Fourth, others regard the book as symbolic. Thus, "the author employs symbols to communicate the message. The three days and three nights in the fish is symbolic of Jonah's visit to Nineveh. His being vomited out is symbolic of leaving the repentant city." However, when symbols are used in scripture, the text usually makes it clear that symbols are being associated with specific referents (Gal 4:25; Dan 2:38; Rev 11:8). All of these non-historical approaches to the book suffer from the same problems involving a denial of the book's historicity identified in the preceding section.

Others simply categorize the Book of Jonah as historical narrative. However, this designation fails to consider why the book is categorized in the prophetic section of the Hebrew canon. It is best to categorize the book as a prophetic parable. This approach honors the historicity of the book as well as its position in the Hebrew canon. It also honors

the great spiritual lesson taught in the book regarding God's grace and Israel's narrowness conveyed through the folly of its central character Jonah.

### **Message**

God's redemptive purposes are not limited to national Israel but rather extend to all the nations of the earth through Israel (Gen 12:3). God reminds Israel of this forgotten purpose during a time of pride and intense nationalism associated with Jeroboam's successful expansion of Israel's borders. This reminder is communicated through the foolish (Hosea 7:11), sinful, and disobedient actions and attitudes of Jonah the prophet whose attitudes were a microcosm of ethnocentric Israel.

### **Purposes**

The writer had at least two purposes in mind when he wrote his book. *First*, he wanted to challenge Israel's ethnocentrism by reminding her that her very reason for existing was to export God's grace to the nations (Gen 12:3). *Second*, he wanted to stimulate national repentance by demonstrating that if the wicked Ninevites were capable of repentance and receiving forgiveness, then so was God's elect nation. This goal of encouraging national repentance was relevant given the rapidly approaching national judgment to be executed in 722 BC.

### **Theological Themes**

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Jonah. *First*, the book stresses the sovereignty of God. God is constantly portrayed as taking unilateral actions throughout the book (1:1-2,4,17; 2:10; 3:2,10; 4:6,7,8,11). *Second*, because God is sovereign, He has the unilateral right to lavish compassion on whomever He wishes. Thus, God is not limited by human misconceptions when He bestows such compassion.

*Third*, the book stresses the "all nations" theme (1:2,10,14-16; 2:8; 3:1-2,5-10; 4:2,10-11) that is revealed in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:3). Because this theme is the very reason for Israel's existence, she had no right to withhold God's light from other nations on account of their barbarism. In other words, God does not sanction ethnocentrism and patriotism at the expense of evangelism. *Fourth*, the book stresses God's compassion and mercy toward those who do not know Him (Ex 34:6).

### **Unique Characteristics**

The Book of Jonah boasts several outstanding characteristics. *First*, the book is unique among the prophetic books in that it gives the mission of a prophet without little attention to his prophecies. In fact only 5 words of the book's 48 verses focus on Jonah's prophecies. *Second*, Christ holds out one of the book's key events as an illustration of His death and resurrection (Matt 12:38-42). *Third*, the book gives no internal clues as to who its author was. *Fourth*, the book's central character is held up as a negative example that the nation is not to imitate. *Fifth*, little is known of the background of the prophet featured in this book.

*Sixth*, the Book of Jonah, along with Obadiah and Nahum, represents one of the few OT books whose main subject matter concerns the Gentiles. *Seventh*, Jonah is the only OT prophet who was sent to the Gentiles. *Eighth*, Jonah is the only prophet who sought to hide his message by fleeing from God. *Ninth*, Jonah represents the only example of a "successful" prophet. *Tenth*, more than any other prophetic book, the Book of Jonah unfolds God's universal concern for the entire human race.

### **Structure**

The book of Jonah has two basic parts. In the first part, Jonah rebels against his first commission to preach to Nineveh. This section primarily takes place in the theatre of the great sea (1–2). In the second part, Jonah, with reticence, fulfills his second commission to preach to Nineveh. This section takes place in the theatre of the great city known as Nineveh (3–4). The book's four chapters can be further divided into the running prophet (1), the praying prophet (2), the preaching prophet (3), and the pouting prophet (4). In each chapter, Jonah said, "I will not go" (1), "I will go" (2), "I went" (3), and "I should not have gone" (4). Other structural clues may include Jonah's three confessions (1:9; 2:9; 4:2) as well as two cycles with each cycle containing the two calls of Jonah and Nineveh and the two responses of Nineveh and Jonah.

### **Christ in Jonah**

"Jonah's experience is a type of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ" (Matt 12:39–41).

### **Application**

Although the Book of Jonah is an indictment against the ethnocentricity of Israel, such narrowness is not just something that ancient Israel had to deal with. It is also an issue that all of God's people throughout the ages must wrestle with. God's people always run the risk of becoming so internally focused that they lose sight of the plight of the lost. Other points of application from the Book of Jonah include the following:

1. It is impossible to succeed in running from God.
2. There is no limit to what God can do to get one's attention.
3. Failure does not disqualify a person from God's service.
4. Disobedience to God creates turmoil in the life of a believer.
5. Patriotism should never stand between a believer and the plan of God.

### **Outline**

I. Jonah disobeys his divine commission to preach to Nineveh (Jonah 1:1–2:10)

- (1) Running prophet (1:1-17)
  - (A) Jonah's commission (1:1-2)
  - (B) Jonah flees to Tarshish (1:3)
  - (C) Jonah and his shipmates are caught in a storm (1:4-6)
  - (D) Jonah exposed as the culprit (1:7-9)

- (E) Jonah is thrown overboard (1:10-16)
- (F) Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish (1:17)
- (2) Praying prophet (2:1-10)
  - (A) Introduction (2:1)
  - (B) Jonah's psalm of deliverance (2:2-9)
    - (a) Jonah calls out to God (2:2)
    - (b) Jonah recounts his adversities (2:3-6)
    - (c) Report of Jonah's prayer to God (2:7)
    - (d) Jonah praises God (2:8-9)
  - (C) Jonah is delivered from the belly of the fish (2:10)

## II. Jonah reluctantly obeys his divine commission to preach to Nineveh (Jonah 3:1—4:11)

- (1) Preaching prophet (3:1-10)
  - (A) Jonah's re-commission(3:1-2)
  - (B) Jonah's proclamation to Nineveh (3:3-4)
  - (C) Nineveh's repentance (3:5-10)
- (2) Pouting prophet (4:1-11)
  - (A) Jonah's unhappiness with God regarding the extension of mercy to Nineveh (4:1-4)
  - (B) God rebukes Jonah's misplaced priorities (4:5-11)
    - (a) Jonah sulks under the plant (4:5-6)
    - (b) Jonah wishes for death after the plant dies (4:7-8)
    - (c) Jonah asserts a right to anger (4:9)
    - (d) Jonah hears the merciful proclamation of God (4:10-11)