

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Jonah

The book of Jonah is well known for the amazing events it recounts, but the book's main purpose is to teach us about God. Through Jonah's experience, God, the all-powerful Creator, reveals that though he is a God who will pour out his wrath on the wicked, he is also one who eagerly pours out his mercy on those who repent—including those we would too quickly deem to be beyond mercy.

Setting

Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during the politically prosperous but spiritually dark reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). Despite Jeroboam's spiritual failures (see [2 Kgs 14:23–24](#)), his territory continued to expand, as Jonah predicted ([2 Kgs 14:25](#)), approximately growing back to what it had been in the glory days of David and Solomon (see [1 Kgs 8:65](#)). Nationalism was running high during the time of Jonah.

At that time, Nineveh was a key city in the Assyrian Empire. Assyria's power had swelled in previous decades. Shalmaneser III of Assyria (858–824 BC) had extended the influence of the empire well into Palestine. Assyrian annals from that period record Shalmaneser confronting the Israelite king Ahab ([1 Kgs 17:1–22:53](#)), among others, at the famous battle of Qarqar (853 BC). But during the reigns of Jehoash (798–782 BC) and Jeroboam II (793–753 BC) in Israel, Assyria's dominance in the region waned because of failed leadership and continued resistance on the frontiers. Jonah preached in Nineveh when the Assyrian Empire was at this low point, probably around 755 BC.

Some years following Jonah's visit to Nineveh, Assyria began reasserting itself throughout the Near East during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC). In 722 BC, a few decades after Jonah, Assyria sacked Samaria and brought the northern kingdom of Israel to an end. A century later, the prophet Nahum of Judah announced the imminent destruction of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire, a consequence of its pervasive wickedness. Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BC. Evidently, the repentance brought about through Jonah's preaching took no lasting root.

Summary

The book of Jonah falls naturally into two parts. [Chapters 1–2](#) recount Jonah’s initial rejection of the Lord’s commission to warn Nineveh of the judgment it had incurred because of its wickedness. Instead of heading for Nineveh, Jonah set out by ship in the opposite direction ([1:3](#)). But the Lord sent a raging storm to chasten the prophet. After a frantic attempt by the pagan sailors to appease whatever god had been offended, Jonah was “discovered” and was reluctantly cast overboard. God then demonstrated his power by calming the storm, and in a twist of irony, the pagan sailors worshiped God while his prophet presumably plunged to a shameful death. But God had plans to save Jonah. Jonah was swallowed by a “great fish,” within which he apparently repented ([ch 2](#)). After three days and nights, the fish spit Jonah out onto dry land.

In [chapters 3–4](#), God reasserted his commission of the prophet to preach in Nineveh, and this time, Jonah obeyed. Nineveh repented en masse upon hearing Jonah’s warnings ([ch 3](#)), and God refrained from executing the judgment that Jonah had warned was coming ([3:10](#)). In another bit of irony, Jonah was unable to accept God’s outpouring of mercy toward Israel’s enemies. Jonah moved from anger to despair ([ch 4](#)). God once more deployed his power over nature to chasten Jonah, this time through the rapid growth and demise of a plant that shaded the pouting prophet from the sun. The book ends abruptly, leaving Jonah and the reader pondering God’s final question: Shouldn’t God (and his people) “feel sorry for such a great city” and desire sinners to receive mercy rather than wrath?

Authorship

The book of Jonah does not identify its author; the title derives from the name of the main character. Jonah or an associate of his may have written the book.

Genre

Unlike other prophetic books, Jonah is almost entirely narrative rather than a collection of prophetic messages. But is it *historical* narrative? Many have insisted that the book is fictional because it describes miraculous events, and diverse attempts have been made to classify the book according to some non-historical literary genre, such as parable or didactic story. Although the author of Jonah did utilize certain literary devices to make his point (the use of poetry, irony, and language common to parables), the book presents itself as a historical account (see [1:1](#)), and it is best understood as a historical narrative with a theological message.

Meaning and Message

Jonah is unique among the prophetic books. It narrates God's sending of a prophet to Assyria, an enemy of Israel, and the widespread repentance that resulted. The lesson Jonah learned was one that the entire nation of Israel needed: "My salvation comes from the Lord alone" ([2:9](#), literally *salvation belongs to the Lord*). Salvation is the Lord's to give to whomever he pleases, and those who have received God's mercy must not try to restrict the flow of God's mercy to others, even their enemies (see [ch 4](#)).

Salvation—whether from the threat of physical harm or from judgment—is thus directly related to God's sovereignty. The sailors were saved after God calmed the storm. Jonah was saved from drowning when God sent the fish to swallow him. There is no domain, even in the depths of the ocean, from which God cannot deliver and protect human life. Likewise, there is no nation that God cannot judge ([3:4, 9](#)) or save from judgment ([3:10](#); see [Jer 18:7–10](#)).

The book of Jonah affirms that, long before Christ came, God was eager to bring salvation beyond the borders of Israel. Israel was his covenant people, but from the beginning his desire was to bless the nations through Israel (see [Gen 12:3](#)). God's heart for the nations is that they turn from idols to know him, the God of heaven who created the world ([Jon 1:9](#); see [2 Pet 3:9](#)).