

Who was Jonah in the Bible?

Proud, stubborn, disobedient, unfaithful, a grumbler, and altogether a bad-tempered, cantankerous old curmudgeon—this was Jonah, whose name means “dove”! Jonah was the son of Amittai, who came from Gath-hepher in Zebulun (called Gittah-hepher in Joshua 19:10-13). He was the earliest of the prophets and close behind Elisha in his place in the Old Testament. Jonah’s story is told in the short (just 48 verses) but powerful book of Jonah.

When God called Jonah to go and warn the violent and godless Ninevites of their impending doom, all his pride in being a Hebrew—and therefore uniquely favored by the Almighty (so he thought, no doubt along with many others of his nation)—rose up in rebellion. Pagans, to him, were the worst kind of human garbage, not even fit to pollute the good earth by living on it. They were the “untouchables,” and that God should take an interest in them was unthinkable. Therefore, not being one to put up with that which was not to his mind, he fled to Joppa and got himself a passage on a ship bound for Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

A human father would probably have shrugged Jonah off in disgust and found someone else more willing to take his message to Nineveh, but not so our Heavenly Father. If God has a purpose for someone, then, the gifts and calling of God being irrevocable, he will either fulfill His purpose, or He will simply roll over him to accomplish what He has foreordained (Isaiah 46:9-10). God rolled over Jonah with a vengeance, causing a violent storm to threaten the safety of his ship and its crew, so that their indignation at his contented snoring through their danger soon put an end to his satisfaction. This unceremonious awakening also awakened Jonah to the fact that, far from being an “artful dodger,” he was being followed by the Almighty. There was nothing for it but to confess

what he had been up to and tell the sailors that only by dumping him overboard could they be saved. This they did, and the huge fish sent by God (not a whale as commonly supposed, but some sea creature common to that time) promptly swallowed him up (Jonah 1:17). This, and the immediate stilling of the storm, brought the ship's crew to faith and salvation as a result (Jonah 1:16). The Lord is not one to miss out on His opportunities!

At this point Jonah has now found himself in a situation worse than anything he could have imagined, but like Jacob, he has by now awakened to the fact that God is with him wherever he ends up, in obedience or disobedience. The result is a beautiful prayer of faith rising up from the belly of the great fish, but still with a hint of spiritual pride: "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:8-9).

In response to this prayer of contrition and faith, on his Creator's orders, the fish then vomits up Jonah on what was probably the shores of Israel. Researchers tell us that it must in all probability have been there because it was a three-day journey on foot from that point to the great city of Nineveh, which is in line with the statement in Jonah 3:3. Ancient cave drawings from this time indicate that Ninevite fishermen lived on the shores of the Mediterranean. This fact is important in illustrating the wonderful way in which God paves the way for His servants to fulfill His commands. The principal goddess worshiped by the Ninevites at that time was Ashtoreth, but they also deferred to the god Dagon who had a man's upper body and a fish's tail. Jonah, so the researchers say, would have been bleached completely white from his head to his toes by the acids present in the belly of the fish, and on the sudden appearance of this ghostly figure

from the waves the fishermen may have been convinced that this was Dagon's messenger and fallen flat in worship. These men would have fed and housed Jonah until he was recovered enough from his experience and then, as he was a stranger in those parts, given him directions on how to find their city. Of course, the biblical narrative doesn't give us these details, but it is fascinating to theorize.

In any case, the biblical text is a masterful expression of understatement: "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you'" (Jonah 3:1-2). This time, there is no arguing from Jonah, who, although he may be complying on the outside, is still stubbornly disobeying on the inside. He finally arrives at Nineveh and strides vengefully through the city announcing doom and destruction on the people in forty days because of their wickedness and their ignorance of the Lord and His ways. He then retires to a flimsy shelter he builds for himself, probably on a hill overlooking the city, and waits for the fireworks to start (Jonah 4:5). Result? Utterly and absolutely nothing! To his utter chagrin, he finds not just the people from the king down, but their animals as well, clothed in sackcloth and sprinkled with ashes as an indication of their absolute acceptance of the prophetic word sent to them by God, their deep repentance, and their fervent anxiety to get right with the Lord (Jonah 3:5-10). This does not suit our friend Jonah at all and he flies into a fury at God and lets Him have no small piece of his mind (Jonah 4:1-3). God's answer is to cause a leafy gourd to grow up to help protect Jonah from the blazing sun, for which Jonah is somewhat sullenly grateful, and then to promptly remove it the next day! His reply to Jonah's bitter complaints about this is that if Jonah can have so much compassion on himself for his loss of comfort in spite of being aware of what a faulty child of God he is, then how much more compassion will Almighty God have on a people who are utterly ignorant of right from wrong (Jonah

4:9-11).

So that is Jonah—a very great comfort to all who fall flat at times when it comes to obedience and who run away from what they know God wants them to do. Jonah's story is also an object lesson to those who are possessed of a short fuse and those who are at times guilty of a superior attitude to the spiritually ignorant or immature. Like the Ninevites, many around us are in darkness, and but for the grace of God, so would we be. May we all by that grace read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word!