

Setting

Jonah is the main character in this book, though it does not explicitly state anywhere that he authored this book, so there's lots of debate whether this is factual, or a parable. He lived in the 8th century BC in the Southern Kingdom's Zebulun territory, in the village of Gath-hepher (also known as Galilee, about 3 miles NE of Nazareth). He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, and at the time of Hosea and Amos. King Sargon of Assyria conquered Samaria (the Northern Kingdom) and deported the inhabitants to Babylon in 722 BC. So Jonah lived in the kingdom that was "next door" to the land controlled by the Assyrians – who were militaristic and brutal, and thus hated by everybody around them.

As to the book's historicity, Jonah is mentioned in **2 Kings 14:23 & 25**.

Jonah had a good job, prophesying to the king, and he was renowned for his accuracy in this prediction.

Prophets: foretell, and "forth-tell" what God has told them

Test of a true prophet:

- Conform to Scripture
- Prophecy must be a balanced message of God's judgment and hope for the people for redemption
- Must prove accurate

Jonah's Assignment & Disobedience

But, now Jonah gets a new calling from Yahweh.

¹ *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amit'tai, saying,* ² *"Arise, go to Nin'evah, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."* - Jonah 1:1-2

Nineveh is one of the Assyrian capital cities. These are a hated people, already dominating the Northern Kingdom and always at odds with the Southern Kingdom. These are gentle enemies of the Israelites! They are idolatrous and sin-ridden. And God wants Jonah to warn them that He is about to punish them for their wicked ways??

What does Jonah know about the nature of God? (from Moses' 2nd encounter with God on Sinai:)

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” - Exodus 34:5-7a

Would YOU want to go into the midst of your enemies and tell them that their bad behavior is going to get them in trouble with God?? Jonah figured it would be a lot fairer to just let them get their just desserts! So, he tried to skip out. Read **Jonah 1:3**.

There is a Tarshish in each of our Christian hearts – where we think we can hide from God’s will.

Running Away from God

Nineveh is about 500 miles to the northeast of Nazareth and Joppa was in the directly opposite direction. Joppa was a port city on the Mediterranean Sea where Jonah could find a ship headed to Tarshish, which is beyond Gibraltar and on the Atlantic side of Spain. You think God didn’t notice? You think God said, “Okay; no problem. I’ll just send somebody else”?

Everybody was in a panic! The sailors were wise enough to realize that their troubles were due to some evil amongst them. All of them were praying to their various gods – obviously without effect because they were inanimate idols. But the captain found Jonah asleep and demanded that Jonah call on his god, too. They were going to cast lots to figure out who was at fault. That is when Jonah fessed up. Read **Jonah 1:7-17**.

“...and the sea ceased from its raging.” For the sailors: problem solved. But, Jonah seems to have missed a great opportunity for evangelism! If he had repented and called on Yahweh to have mercy on the ship and sailors, Yahweh probably would have.

Do you think any of that is key to the message in the book of Jonah?
What IS the key of this encounter?

Jonah Repents

When do we usually repent and call on God to help? When we hit “rock-bottom,” and finally admit that we can’t fix things ourselves. Jonah is no different; he is in great peril and about to die. Read **Jonah 2:1-3**.

Jonah is learning his lesson about his willfulness and disloyalty to Yahweh. Now he is humbled; you can “hear” him on his knees, begging for help. Read **Jonah 2.4-10**.

In verse 6, the moorings, or roots, or foundations of the mountains is the bottom of the deepest depths. And the bars, or doors, that closed sealed the dead forever from the world of the living, so there could be no going back. When Jonah reached that depth and gave up hope, then God saved him.

In verse 9, “...what I have vowed I will pay.” As a prophet he vowed obedience; now he promised to keep that vow. This is a model prayer for us for the times that we, too, have been disobedient and have come to our good senses.

Jonah Gets Re-commissioned

God has bent Jonah’s “stiff neck,” making him malleable and useful to God’s purposes. God still wants Jonah to carry His warning to the people of Nineveh.

Note that this time Jonah is instructed to preach to Nineveh, not against it. How do the people of Nineveh respond? Read **Jonah 3:5-9**.

Before we give Jonah too much credit for his persuasiveness; I think we should acknowledge that his success was due to God, working through him. Jonah must have told the king that repentance works both ways: if you and your people repent, then God may turn from His justified decision to overthrow the city. And how did God respond?

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. - Jonah 3:10

God gave Nineveh a second chance and the people made the most of it. They put their trust in God, just like the Israelites did after they passed through the Red Sea in front of Pharaoh’s army. Read **Exodus 14:31**.

But What About Jonah?

Jonah was right: God DID NOT destroy Nineveh! How could his God, the God of Israel, be kind to Israel’s enemies?? Jonah knew that his own people did not

revere and worship God much better than the Assyrians. Why were the Assyrians getting all this warning to change their ways, but he was not being sent to warn the Israelites? He fully expected God's wrath to be poured out on his own people, so he sat down to wait and see it coming. Read **Jonah 4:1-5**.

Apparently Jonah has not fully learned his lessons in humility and obedience, because he is now questioning God. He tried to manipulate God. He wanted the Ninevehites to be destroyed, regardless of their repentance. Then, in self-pity, he wanted God to take his own life. But, in both cases, God mercifully only followed His own plan. And God asks him, "Do you think it is wise to get mad at me?" Then, God gave Jonah a shade plant, and used it to teach him a lesson. Read **Jonah 4:6-11**.

What is God's lesson here? _____

God's lesson here is that if Jonah is concerned for a plant that comes and goes so quickly, then why should God not be concerned for a great city of many people? Regardless of whether the people are Assyrians, they are still God's creation, and of great value to Him. God had a right to be angry at the Ninevehites and destroy them. But, if God showed mercy and grace towards them, what right did Jonah have to still condemn them?

"Vengeance is mine!" say the Lord - Leviticus 19:18

Jesus Affirms Jonah's Message

When asked by Pharisees for a sign, Jesus refused to accommodate them

³⁹ *But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nin'evah will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. - Matthew 12:39-41*

Jonah was a 3-day-sign (in the belly of a fish), then delivered God's message, and the people of Nineveh repented in response. Jesus told the people He, too, will be a 3-day-sign (in a tomb). Luke said it similarly. Read **Luke 11:29-30**.

Many consider the fact that Jesus referred to Jonah as further evidence of its historicity.

Summary (Why do we care - what's in it for us?)

Many sermons have been preached from the basis of Jonah, warning people not to ignore calls from God. If you fail to respond, all kinds of bad things may happen to you.

I think this is more about our God being the God of Second Chances!

- God wanted to give the people of Nineveh a *second chance* to turn from their wicked ways, so He called on Jonah to prophesy to them and they repented.
- Jonah didn't want to go, but God gave him a *second chance*. Jonah repented and it worked out well.
- Jonah got mad at God, but God gave him a lesson in the value of people, and allowed Jonah a *second chance* to evaluate his feelings (when God could easily have simply destroyed Jonah).

It is never too late to start making better decisions.

Personally, I believe the Book of Jonah reinforces the notion that God cares for ALL people and wants everyone to hear His message of repentance and redemption. Our God is the universal God of great mercy for all nations. It also demonstrates that God's plan WILL be carried out, despite any human hesitations or refusals.

Ogilvie writes that the central theme is "God's nature of mercy for all mankind."¹

Do you have a Nineveh (what had God called you to be or to do)? What is your Tarshish? Who are your enemies? Have you tried praying for them?

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