

We Are Jonah

Jonah 1

Intro

The book of Jonah can certainly claim to be one of the most famous Bible stories of all time. Who isn't intrigued by the story of the rebellious prophet who gets swallowed by a big fish, and then is spit up after three days to go preach to an enemy city? But Jonah is more than just a memorable story. It shows us the life of a follower of God who struggled with obedience, selfishness, and pride. When looked at from this angle, we see that we have much to learn from this little story. In this week's Digging Deeper we will look at some of the background material that will help us understand Jonah's story.

Who was Jonah?

Jonah was a prophet during the reign of the Israelite king Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). Other than the book of Jonah, the only other place he is mentioned is in 2 Kings 14:25. There we learn he prophesied about the expansion of Israel under Jeroboam II. We don't know much about Jonah except that his father's name was Amittai and he was from Gath-Hepher (a city of moderate size, about three miles from modern Nazareth).

From the book of Jonah itself it is evident that Jonah was an ardent nationalist, pro-Israel, and anti-foreign; at least, anti-Assyrian. The book also reveals, implicitly, that he was a dedicated, disciplined, strong-willed prophet. All of these are traits we learn about Jonah throughout the book. We don't need to have any previous knowledge of Jonah to appreciate the story.

The emphasis in the book of Jonah is different than the rest of the prophetic books in two ways: 1) the person of Jonah and his *personal* experience are central to the message of the book that bears his name, as contrasted to, for example, Samuel or Amos; 2) the book is written *about* Jonah biographically, rather than reflecting primarily the message he preached, as contrasted with all other Old Testament prophetic books (Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, Thomas Nelson, 431).



Digging
Deeper

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The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Jonah 1:1-3

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What did the prophets do?

Prophets had a prominent place in the history of Israel. They were in a special class of their own, not being part of either the priesthood or the monarchy. Prophets were raised up by God to deliver messages to the people of Israel (and later to other groups too) in a time of need. Prophets played a crucial role in Israel's life during the monarchy. They often opposed the kings and priests who had turned from God.

Prophets received messages directly from God to speak to the people. Often these would come in the forms of visions or dreams. Prophets are probably best known for predicting the future. However, another significant part of their message involved reading God's word and applying it to the circumstances of contemporary Israel. Prophets were not only concerned with the things that would happen in the future, but also with the spiritual needs of the people in their own day. In this way, they speak to their own time and our time as well.

What are the minor prophets?

The book of Jonah is in the middle of a group of twelve books often referred to as the minor prophets. The term minor prophets is unfortunate because it tends to convey the idea that these books of the Bible are unimportant. But this is not how the title is meant. These books are called "minor" because they are much smaller than the books of the "major" prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.). Far from being minor, these books teach us a great deal about God, salvation, Jesus, and the future. They were regularly quoted by the writers of the New Testament. The Jews from the time of Jesus until today view the twelve books of the minor prophets as one book called "The Book of the Twelve." Jonah, arguably, stands out as one of the most intriguing and, at times, confusing books of the twelve.

Who were the Ninevites?

Jonah was called to go to Nineveh in Assyria. Nineveh was located just east of the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia. Although Nineveh was the largest Assyrian city in the time of Jonah, it was not the capital. At the time of Jonah's visit, the capital was at Calah, about twenty-five miles to the southeast. Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrian Empire, was destroyed by the Babylonian and Median armies in 612 B.C. (J. Carl Laney and Robert Hughes, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale, 347).

Assyria probably was the fiercest, most cruel, and most oppressive foreign power ever to threaten Israel and Judah. Israel had been paying tribute to Assyria from as early as 841 B.C.; thus Jonah was called to go to the dominant city of Israel's enemies. This ambitious, seemingly relentless nation terrorized Palestine from the mid-eighth century B.C. to the late seventh century B.C. Assyria's power was especially devastating to Israel, since Assyria conquered and destroyed the entire nation in 722 B.C. Judah also felt the sting of Assyrian oppression in 701 B.C. when the Assyrians nearly captured Jerusalem. Only a miracle of God saved the city (2 Kings 18:17-19:37).

Three Assyrian kings figured prominently in Israel and Judah's history during the period from 750 to 700 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser (745-727 B.C.) changed the Assyrian foreign policy toward Israel and by the end of his reign he had annexed parts of northern Israel to punish her for disobedience.

Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) finished what Tiglath began in Israel. Israel quit paying tribute to Assyria and Assyria responded by destroying the northern kingdom, taking 27,290 of its inhabitants off to Assyria and Media. Tiny Judah was all that remained of the covenant nation.

Sennacherib (704-681) nearly obliterated Judah in 701 B.C. Judah's King Hezekiah decided to break with Assyria when the country was at war with Babylon. Sennacherib, in response, invaded

Judah, took several cities, and laid siege to Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:1-17). Isaiah the prophet counseled Hezekiah to resist, trusting only in the Lord's power (2 Kings 19:20-34). Because Hezekiah obeyed, God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, then removed Sennacherib from power (2 Kings 19:35-37). After Hezekiah's death, however, Manasseh reverted to appeasing Assyria and not trusting the Lord (2 Kings 21:1-18) (Paul House, *New American Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings*, Holman, 45-46).

Background for Jonah 1

To this point in Scripture readers have grown used to encountering call stories in which the recipients of the call express doubt or make excuses but always respond eventually to the Lord's summons. Jonah breaks this mold. He has been identified as an accurate prophet in 2 Kings 14:25, where he predicts military victory for Israel. Now, however, he runs from the Lord's call; he attempts to run from the Lord's presence (1:2-3). God's call does not stop with this refusal, for Yahweh causes a great storm to toss the ship in which Jonah travels (1:4-5). The pagan sailors attempt to save Jonah and then offer sacrifices to the Lord when the sea turns calm after Jonah is tossed overboard (1:6-16). Jonah confesses that he is rebelling against the God who created the heavens and earth (1:9). His offhand statement leads to the sailors' conversion (1:16). God's sending of Jonah has already begun to pay dividends among the Gentiles (Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*, IVP, 366).

Jonah is told to "call out against" Nineveh, i.e., denounce it. To a prophet such a command could have meant little else than to warn that God was about to enforce his covenant by enacting its sanctions, or curses. Yahweh, God of the whole earth, has the prerogative to punish evil wherever it is found. But Jonah would also recognize- as would the hearers/readers of this story in ancient Israel- that to give advance warning of the coming judgment was to open the door to the possibility of repentance. The term "call out against" by itself probably does not imply that God will *guarantee* the Ninevites a chance of repent, but it leaves open the question. Even Jonah's message ("Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" [3:4]), is not of immediate destruction, but of a warning about what is to come (Stuart, 449-450).

The port Jonah chose to embark from was Joppa, a small harbor town on the Palestine coast. It was never controlled by Israel during Old Testament times, but became Judean only under Jonathan during the Maccabean revolt around 148 B.C. Accordingly, Jonah chose a port where the people he might meet, and the ships he could hire, were not likely to be Israelite. It is probable that Jonah believed that God would only visit him if he were in the land of Israel or around other Israelites. Once in Joppa he was already partly "away from Yahweh" as he apparently conceived it. That Israelites knew about Joppa and its contacts with distant parts is evident from its mention in 2 Chronicles 2:15, Joshua 19:46, and Ezra 3:7 as a port through which goods bound for Israel sometimes flowed. Of course, those who sailed ships from Joppa were hardly likely to have been worshipers of Yahweh, and this fact is important for the proper appreciation of the sailors' actions described later in the chapter (Stuart, 451).

Final Thoughts

Jonah was called to go preach to Israel's greatest enemy. However, Jonah refused. This isn't the first time a prophet has been reluctant to offer a message, but it is the first time one has tried to flee from God's very presence. Jonah's decision to flee to Joppa and head for open waters demonstrates that he was trying to get away from God. But in sending the big fish to swallow Jonah we see that God had other plans for him.

Home Group Questions

1. Why did God tell Jonah to go and preach his judgment to the Ninevites? How do you think Jonah felt about the Ninevites? Why do you think he refused to take God's message to them?

2. What are some things that God asks us to do in the Bible that seem unreasonable or difficult to obey?

3. What was foolish about Jonah's belief that he could flee from God (Jonah 1:3)? What do you think Jonah was thinking during the storm?

4. Have you ever tried to ignore God or run from him? Where did running from God get you?

5. What does our running from God reveal about our concept of God?

6. How can our running from God hurt others?

Questions for Personal Application

7. In your spiritual life, are you running towards God or away from God? What is causing you to run away from God? What has God put in your life to bring you back to him?