

# JONAH

## 1. Historicity of Jonah

This is an important question. The historicity of the book is denied often, even by otherwise conservative scholars (e.g., Leslie Allen in the *NIC* on Jonah, pp. 175-81, approved on cover by F. F. Bruce, and Peter Craigie, also). See G. Archer for a defense of the book's historicity.

1) Historicity is assumed by book itself; no mention of allegory, parable, or interpretation; rather, the Hebrew form of historical narrative (waw-consecutive) introduces the story

2) assumed by Jews; see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9:10:1-2. Even Philo, the supreme Jewish allegorist tried his hardest to explain the fish as a literal creature: "De Jonae Oratione," 16:21.

3) Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as an historical character

2 Kings 14:23,25 Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, ... restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher.

4) affirmed by Christ:

Jonah in fish, Mt. 12:39-40; (16:4)

preaching of Jonah, Mt. 12:41; Lk. 11:30, 32

## 2. Method of interpretation

A literal interpretation of the book is necessary if the book is indeed historical (see above).

Many writers prefer a symbolic or parabolic interpretation. Rationalists find the story difficult to believe. However, the miracles in Jonah are no more stupendous than those found in other books. Also, Philo, the supreme allegorist, tried hard to give a literal interpretation to the fish (*De Jonae Oratione*).

Others see an internal literary structure which might suggest a parabolic form (deliberate parallelisms, irony, closing question of 4:11). See Craigie's *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, Vol. 1, p. 213.

Our approach is to view it as a literal story to show God's concern for lost nations, and the importance of obeying His commands. Jonah's self pity is dwarfed by God's interests in maintaining and blessing his creation.

In addition, Jesus used the account of Jonah to illustrate his own preaching, and Jonah's experience as an illustration of his own resurrection—deliverance out of the midst of judgment.

### 3. Date — ca. 760

Some critics date Jonah in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah as a protest against narrow-minded Jewish exclusivism. Others take it as pseudepigraphical, and coming from the post-exilic period. Their primary argument is

—the “universalism” of the book, which they claim to be a later development in Jewish theology. However, note the spirit of Genesis 12:3 and of Isa 56:7.

—also, the past tense of 3:3 (but try English past perfect, “...has been a city...”), Aramaisms, and a contrastive style with Hosea’s

However, the description of Nineveh as the center of empire, and the specific mention in II Kings 14:25 of Jonah as ministering during the reign of Jeroboam II, place Jonah in the first half of the 8th century B.C.

Historical background starting with the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC):

- 1) great prosperity for Israel, 2 Kings 14:25, 28
- 2) Assyria strong; soon to be stronger: Tiglath-Pileser III invades Israel in 734-32 BC; Samaria destroyed in 722 BC by Shalmaneser V and Sargon II
- 3) although there is no secular record of Nineveh’s repentance, this not a surprise but expected
  - 773-55 = time of weak emperor; Assyrians are fighting the encroaching mountain tribes (Urartu) which had come within 100 miles of Nineveh
  - 765 = plague
  - 15Jun763 = total solar eclipse
- 4) Nineveh was destroyed 150 years later, 612 BC

The Aramaisms in Jonah are not an evidence for later date, since Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Near East in Jonah’s time. Cf. Isa. 36:11 and 2 Kings 18:26, which describe the situation in 701 BC.

### 4. Composition

a. Unity: some critics view the Psalm (chpt.2) as a later interpolation

b. Style

- 1) sparse on background detail which keeps the main thrust of the story from being lessened. A pseudepigraphal writer would have been tempted to add extra background color of a foregone era.

- 2) Familiar with the Psalter. See chart in H.L. Ellison commentary on Jonah in *EBC*, 364

c. Literary Design

1) Parallels: The first two chapters parallel the last two chapters in certain themes/actions: (see Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the OT*, p. 296, for a more detailed comparison of the symmetrical halves of the book).

Chpts. 1 & 3  
 Commission  
 Witness to Gentiles  
 Deliverance of Gentiles  
Chpts. 2 & 4  
 Jonah's Spiritual/Physical Crisis  
 Jonah's Prayer of Despair

- 2) Chiasm of chpt. 1 focusing on the central element of proper fear: see Dumbrell's chart from *The Faith of Israel*, p. 167

**5. Outline of Jonah** (Homiletic Outlines)

ch. 1 Jonah's call and flight	("Rebellion"	"Protesting")
ch. 2 Psalm from the fish's belly	("Repentance"	"Praying")
ch. 3 Nineveh's repentance	("Recommissioning"	"Preaching")
ch. 4 Jonah's lesson	("Resentment"	"Pouting")

(George L. Robinson produced the above "P" outline)

**6. Points of interest**

For an interesting history of Nineveh and its rediscovery by one of the archaeologists involved, see Andre Parrot, *Nineveh and the OT*, 2nd ed., 1955.

God's 4 providential preparations: fish, gourd, worm, wind

Jonah is cast in the image of the arch-type Northern prophet, **Elijah**:

Both men flee a hard assignment, both faced with death, both fall into deep sleep, both sit under a tree and ask to die, both associated with a forty day activity.

1:2 Told to arise, Jonah keeps going down, down, down

1:3 “Tarshish” (melt, smelt) = Tartessus in Spain (Herodotus)? or perhaps now thought to be in Sardinia since IX cent. inscriptions found there. See Is. 66:19 as an indication of its being “far out”

1:5 Note how the sailors, representative of the Gentile world in setting the theme of this book, move toward God from animal fear, to awe of the prophet (10), to reverence of God (16). This is largely in response to God’s word.

1:9 recognition of Abrahamic identity (Gen. 14:13)

1:12 a ray of compassion in his self-sacrifice for the poor idolatrous Gentiles

1:17 cf. stories in Harry Rimmer, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, 188-89; also R.K. Harrison, *OTI*, pp. 907-08. But ctr. Allen *NIC*, 176

chpt. 2 — Jonah will be fitted for his mission through his own personal experience of Repentance and forgiveness!

Many allusions to the Psalms (69:2; 30:3; 124:4; 42:5; 116:17-18)

The personal God Yaweh is mentioned in all but two vss! (5-6a)

2:4, 7, “temple,” cf. 2 Chron. 6:29-31

3:3, 3 days journey; cf. Gen. 10:12, Nineveh a great city; see D. J. Wiseman in *ZPEB* 4:442b; 8 miles of wall, enough to encompass 120,000+ people, and 60 miles of circumference around suburbia

3:4, Jonah out of the fish; cf. Parrot 24-26; symbol #200 in Labot

3:4, conditional threat; see J. B. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* 423

“‘Forty days’ and ‘overthrow’ in verse 4 connote, respectively, the flood and the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet the verb overthrow, which reminds us of the fate of the cities of the plain, is essentially neutral, pointing simply to a change in the condition of a person or object. Ironically, in this prophetic announcement of doom there is thus the nuance of repentance as a possibility; this is confirmed by the later movement in the chapter.”  
Dumbrell. *The Faith of Israel*, p. 171

3:6, king of Nineveh; may be “mayor” of city; or may be one of the Assyrian emperors of the period: Adad-nirari III, Shalmaneser IV, Ashurdan III, or Ashur-nirari V

3:9 God’s free grace; cf. 4:11

4:2 reason for Jonah’s flight in ch. 1; this is a reference to the covenantal creed of Ex. 34:6; Jonah cannot comprehend this good of God, especially extended to such “sinners” as the Ninevites

1:17; 4:4-8, God’s all-powerful and all-reaching providence; a second chance of service for the unworthy

4:4,9 Note change of divine name between Yaweh and Elohim

4:11 The book concludes as it began—with the revelation of God’s word

Mercy (ds3j3) for His creation

120,000 population very probable for a walled city within 8 miles of wall

“God is the initiator of crises in human experience, and God resolves them. We are dependent upon a grace which cannot be anticipated or expounded, just as it cannot be measured.” –Dumbrell, 172

“A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whispering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity.” —Leslie Allen, *NICOT*