

The Bible's Big Story



Jonah

Jonah is unique among the prophetic books because it is a biographical narrative rather than collected sermons or oracles. In Jonah, the story itself carries the book's message. Far more than a children's tale or a fish story, this account displays God's sovereignty, justice, and merciful steadfast love.

Introductory Information

Title: The book is named for Jonah a prophet who ministered in the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC), making him a contemporary of Amos, who may have been prophesying in Israel around the same time Jonah preached in Nineveh.

Authorship: The book is technically anonymous. Historically, Jonah himself was assumed to be the author. Many modern scholars however, including some conservative ones, view it as anonymous mainly because it is written entirely in the third person. This is not conclusive, since Moses is described the same way in sections of the Pentateuch he is known to have authored. Jonah's sole authorship, partial contribution, or a later anonymous author are all views within orthodoxy, yet the historic view of Jonah as author is preferred in this overview.

Date: The Authorship of the book and its dating are linked. The events of Jonah likely occurred 780–750 BC when Jeroboam II's prosperity and territorial expansion were possible because Assyria weakened after the death of Adad-nirari III (783 BC). If Jonah wrote the book, it dates near that time; if written later, it likely predates Nineveh's destruction in 612 BC, since that event is not mentioned. Given these factors, the date of writing can be placed ca. 760–610 BC.

Theme & Purpose: Though Jonah's preaching was addressed to Nineveh, the book's message is directed at God's people. It teaches God's sovereignty in both judgment and nature, His missional heart, His justice, His merciful nature, and the universal need for repentance. The book's clear message is that sin must be dealt with everywhere, that God will judge His own people, that they bear responsibility to be a light to the Gentiles, and that deliverance from sin and death comes only through God's supernatural intervention.

Theme Summary: Jonah, a reluctant prophet, flees from God's command to preach and is swallowed by a great fish. After three days, he repents and is spared, finally delivering God's message to Nineveh. The city likewise repents, and God relents from judgment, revealing that His compassion extends to all who will call on him for mercy.

Redemption Revealed In Jonah

Jonah reveals that God's sovereign grace extends to all who repent and trust in him, anticipating the inclusion of Gentiles into his kingdom.

God's mercy and saving purposes were not limited by ethnicity or nationality, even under the Old Testament theocracy. Israel was called to be a light to the nations as a kingdom of priests (see Exod. 19:5–6; Deut. 4:6), a role conditioned on covenant obedience. Israel's rebellion instead profaned God's name among the nations (Ezek. 36:21), yet Jonah shows God still sending prophets, working miracles, and changing hearts among the Gentiles. In this way Jonah's story anticipates the eventual inclusion of Gentiles in the new covenant.

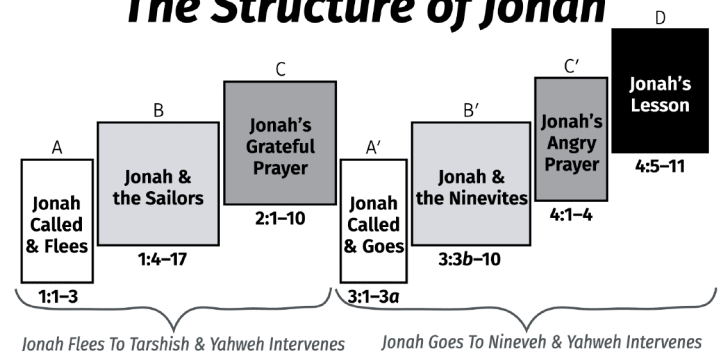
Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the great fish and his deliverance are explicitly identified by Christ himself as a type of his own death, burial, and resurrection.

Jonah points forward to Christ's redemptive work. As Jonah was punished, swallowed, and delivered after three days, so Christ went down into death for three days and nights before being raised, bringing hope to a sinful world. Jesus Himself identifies this connection in Matthew 12:38–40. He rebukes the scribes and Pharisees for the same self-righteous, hard-hearted attitude Jonah displayed—trusting in ancestry and ceremonial observance rather than repentance. Matthew 12:41 foretells that the repentant Ninevites will condemn the unbelieving Pharisees who rejected the message of one much greater than Jonah.

Conclusion

Jonah exposes the wrong thinking and sinful attitudes present among God's people. Throughout the narrative, Yahweh's judgment and steadfast love are displayed toward both Jonah and the pagans he encounters. Ultimately, Jonah's experience points to Christ—one who passes through death for three days and nights and rises to deliver the hope of salvation to all who repent, Jew and Gentile alike.

The Structure of Jonah



Notes:

Problems of Interpretation

The Genre of Jonah

Some propose Jonah is allegory or parable rather than historical narrative, citing the supernatural deliverance, the size of Nineveh in 3:3, and Nineveh's repentance as reasons to doubt historicity. These objections are answerable, but the decisive point is Jesus' own testimony in Matthew 12:38–40 (cf. Luke 11:29–32), where He treats Jonah's experience as historical and declares that the men of Nineveh will rise at judgment to condemn this generation—something impossible for a mere story to do.

The King of Nineveh

Critics argue that Jonah 3:6–7's description of "the king of Nineveh" acting with his nobles does not match known Assyrian practice and instead reflects the later Persian period. Conservative scholar Paul Lawrence has shown this actually fits the early eighth century BC, when powerful provincial governors acted as virtual monarchs while nominally loyal to the Assyrian crown. This detail therefore supports rather than undermines the book's historicity and shows the author's close knowledge of the period.

The Size of Nineveh

Objectors claim the population and size figures in Jonah 3:3 and 4:11 don't match the historical or archaeological record. The Hebrew "three days' journey" may refer to the administrative district around Nineveh (30–56 miles across) or to the time needed for Jonah's preaching circuit. R. K. Harrison notes that Nimrud, about half Nineveh's size, held 70,000 people, meaning Nineveh could easily have housed 120,000.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. The book of Jonah ends not with Nineveh's repentance but with God's unanswered question to Jonah. Why do you think the narrative closes this way, and what does it ask of you as the reader?
2. Jonah expected God's mercy for himself almost as a right, while viewing the Ninevites as unworthy of that same mercy. Where might you be tempted to think the same way about the mercy God shows to others?
3. God's judgment and God's mercy are both displayed toward Jonah and toward the pagans he encounters in this book. How do you see God's holiness and His compassion in Scripture working together rather than in tension?
4. Jesus points to Jonah's three days and nights as a sign of His own death, burial, and resurrection, and rebukes those who demanded a sign despite having one already. How does the certainty of Christ's resurrection shape how you respond to Him?