

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## A. ORIENTING DATA FOR JONAH

- Content: through a very reluctant prophet, God shows compassion for one of Israel's hated enemies
- Prophet: Jonah son of Amittai, who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (see 2 Kgs 14:25)
- Emphases: Yahweh as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all; Yahweh's compassionate concern for the Gentiles (represented by Nineveh); Israel's reluctance (represented by Jonah) to acknowledge Yahweh's compassion for the nations

## B. OVERVIEW OF JONAH

The book of Jonah is unique among the Latter Prophets. Rather than a collection of prophetic oracles, it is instead a narrative about God's compassion for some hated Gentiles by way of a Hebrew prophet who wants nothing to do with it.

The story is in four easily discernible parts (corresponding to our present chapter divisions): (1) Jonah is called to preach judgment against Nineveh—in Nineveh!—to which he responds by fleeing as far in the other direction as he can go. Yahweh sends a storm, and Jonah is thrown overboard and is rescued by God's miraculous provision of a large fish. (2) Jonah responds in prayer, a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance. (3) Jonah accepts his mission to Nineveh, with these results: Nineveh repents and God relents (in keeping with Jer 18:7–8). (4) Jonah erupts in anger, to which God responds with an object lesson and a final question to Jonah (Jonah 4:9–10)—the point of everything.

## C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JONAH

In order to read Jonah well, you need to be watching for two things—the narrator's skill in telling his story and the theological concerns that he brings to it.

First, in order to appreciate the power of this narrative, you might try to put yourself in the sandals of its intended Israelite hearers. The story functions in much the same way as the parables of Jesus (see *How to 1*, pp. 151–56), as the narrator draws his hearers/readers into the story and then catches them off guard with the final question.

The narrator's literary skills are reflected in several ways. For example, the basic story is framed by Jonah's flight from God (1:3) and his reason for it (4:2). Note also how the sailors' response to God's rescue of them anticipates God's compassion on Nineveh. Irony is used throughout to secure theological points: The pagan sailors end up sacrificing to Yahweh, after Yahweh's defiant prophet is thrown into the sea. At the end of his psalm Jonah exclaims (of his own deliverance): "Salvation comes from the LORD"—which is then played out by Nineveh's repentance and God's withholding of judgment. Jonah in his anger with Yahweh nonetheless speaks the truth about Yahweh's character (4:2), which turns out to be the very reason for his anger. And Jonah, rescued from death by Yahweh, in the end wishes to die rather than to live—because the Ninevites get to live rather than die.

Second, this story is primarily about Yahweh and only secondarily about Jonah. Yahweh is the protagonist throughout: He calls Jonah; he sends a storm when Jonah disobeys—and intensifies it to keep the sailors from rescuing him; he provides a great fish to rescue Jonah; he is the object of praise and thanksgiving in Jonah’s psalm; he sends Jonah a second time and then stays his hand when Jonah’s preaching is successful; and in the end he provides both the plant and the worm and the scorching east wind to instruct Jonah in Yahweh’s ways. Jonah, on the other hand, serves as the foil so that Yahweh’s story can be told with power and punch.

At issue in all of this is the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3)—that Yahweh is full of compassion and mercy for all that he has made (Ps 145:8–9, 13, 17) and that he intended all along to bless the nations through his election of Israel. But God’s election, always an act of mercy, sometimes becomes the basis for pride and prejudice. And in this case remember that Assyria was the most cruel empire in ancient history (see the book of Nahum), yet God was giving such people a chance to repent—not conversion to Yahweh, but nonetheless a response sufficient for Yahweh to withhold his punishments. It is this “injustice” of God’s mercy that is so offensive to Jonah.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 231–232.