

BOOK OF JONAH

Approximate date: 850-750 B.C.E. (Right, some conservative-moderate); 400s-200s B.C.E. (some conservative-moderate, Left)

Time period: God's impending judgment upon Nineveh

Author(s): Jonah (Right, some conservative-moderate); Jonah and/or members of the prophetic school (some conservative moderate); anonymous (some conservative moderate, Left)

Location of author: somewhere in the Land of Israel (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Target audience and their location: Northern Kingdom Israelites, people of Nineveh

People:

Jonah (son of Ammitai)

Places:

Nineveh, Tarshish, Joppa

Key Themes:

the Lord calls Jonah to go preach against Nineveh / Jonah instead boards a ship bound for Tarshish, in the opposite direction / the ship is tossed about in a storm / the sailors recall how Jonah said that he was running away from his god / Jonah is thrown overboard, causing the storm to stop / Jonah is swallowed by a large "fish" / Jonah prays to the Lord and repents of his errors while inside the sea creature / Jonah obeys the Lord and travels to Nineveh / the people of Nineveh repent of their sinful ways / Jonah expresses his anger over the Ninevites' repentance / God expresses how important the people of Nineveh are to Him

Key Scriptures: Jonah 1:7-10; 2:1-3, 7-9; 3:10; 4:11 / **Jonah forsakes his mission** (1:1-2:10); **Jonah fulfills his mission** (3:1-4:11)

Theological Summary: The Book of Jonah is named for its principal character. Jonah (Heb. *Yonah*, יוֹנָה) was the son of Ammitai (1:1) from Gath-Hepher in Zebulun (2 Kings 14:25). There are some similarities between the accounts of Elijah and Elisha, compared to Jonah, leading many to conclude that they were all part of the same prophetic school. Undeniably, Jonah is one of the most controversial texts in the Tanach. We see that Jonah is called out by God to proclaim a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh (1:1), but instead Jonah boards a ship bound for Tarshish (1:3) at the opposite end of the Mediterranean.¹ The story is all too familiar. A storm ravishes the ship (1:4), and Jonah is swallowed by a great fish (1:17). He remains in the innards of the creature for three days and prayed in repentance to God (2:1-9). God must intervene to see that the Prophet accomplishes his assigned mission.

The authorship of Jonah in the text itself is strictly anonymous, but tradition ascribes it to the Prophet Jonah. Conservatives widely accept that Jonah was indeed an Israelite prophet who was called to minister outside of his own people and call the people of Nineveh to repentance. It is widely acknowledged that the Jonah of this book is the same Jonah referenced in 2 Kings 14:25. Conservatives often agree that Jonah was composed sometime in the Eighth Century B.C.E., most likely before the fall of the Northern Kingdom.² Jonah in total could have been written by Jonah himself, or he could have simply been the originator of the bulk of

¹ Jonathan Magonet, "Jonah, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:937.

² D.W.B. Robinson, "Jonah," in *NCBR*, 747.

its material. This material could then have been compiled and expanded by his school of prophets, or a later author/compiler.³ The text is somewhat autobiographical, and has been interpreted from many different vantage points.⁴

It is notable that a few conservatives sit on the side of Jonah not being the actual account of a real prophet,⁵ but instead see Jonah as being an ahistorical story designed to teach a critical lesson. **This does not include the author.**

Liberals commonly assign a post-exilic date to the Book of Jonah, largely because Jonah is depicted as an Israelite prophet who proclaims repentance to the Ninevites. It is asserted that this can only reflect a post-exilic ideology of the Jews searching for clarity in the midst of losing their nation. Liberals largely espouse that Jonah must have been written after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E., usually in the 400s or 300s B.C.E.⁶ In some cases, linguistic evidence of Aramaisms in the Hebrew text is offered for a later date,⁷ but in actuality this is inconclusive,⁸ given the strong presence of Aramaic in the Galilee region in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries B.C.E.⁹

Most significantly, liberals will often consider Jonah to be some kind of “Biblical fiction” or “*novella*, distinguished by mythical and folkloric motifs” (*IDBSup*),¹⁰ but not the genuine story of an Israelite prophet called to go to Nineveh. Most frequently, this idea is based on the fact that the Book of Jonah is presented as narrative, and should instead be equated as no different than a Scriptural version of “Jack and the Beanstalk” (*IDB*).¹¹ A most frequent suggestion is that Jonah is just a parable, or a story attempting to probe the important issues of the post-exilic Jewish community.¹² Some liberals go further and would speculate that Jonah represents an early form of what would develop into midrash.¹³

In response to liberals’ logic, conservatives often point out that if Jonah is a post-exilic text compiled sometime in the Persian era, then it was written during a time when Nineveh was largely forgotten. Perhaps all that both liberals and conservatives can agree upon is that Jonah “is one of the Bible’s literary gems” (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*).¹⁴ More liberal trends today tend to focus on the message of Jonah itself, when compared to the historical debates surrounding it.¹⁵

The current state of the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Jonah is very good, and there is no indication that its status among the Twelve Prophets was ever disputed.¹⁶ Sirach 49:10¹⁷ in the Apocrypha seems to indicate that its author recognized Jonah as one of the Twelve Prophets.¹⁸

The biggest concern regarding the Book of Jonah among any interpreter is establishing whether or not the text is truly historical, or is based more on legend than fact.¹⁹ Was Jonah truly swallowed by some kind of “fish”? There are significant critiques from scientists regarding whether this is even possible.²⁰ Harrison notes

³ W.C. Williams, “Jonah, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1114.

⁴ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 905-908, 911-918; Williams, “Jonah, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1115-1116.

⁵ Dillard and Longman, 392.

⁶ W. Neil, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:964.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:966.

⁸ Barabas, “Jonah, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 747; G.M. Landes, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 490.

⁹ Williams, “Jonah, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1113-1114.

¹⁰ Landes, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 489.

¹¹ Neil, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:966.

¹² H.L. Ellison, “Jonah,” in *EXP*, 7:363.

¹³ Landes, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 489.

¹⁴ Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., “Jonah,” in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1297; cf. D.W.B. Robinson, “Jonah,” in *NBCR*, 746; Dillard and Longman, 392.

¹⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, “Jonah, Book of,” in *EDB*, 730.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 918; Magonet, “Jonah, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:941.

¹⁷ “May the bones of the twelve prophets revive from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope” (Sirach 49:10).

¹⁸ Ellison, in *EXP*, 7:364.

¹⁹ Landes, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 489; Fretheim, “Jonah, Book of,” in *EDB*, 729.

²⁰ Neil, “Jonah, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:965-966.

that there are accounts of modern people being swallowed by whales and surviving,²¹ indicating that it is certainly possible and that Jonah could be representing an actual event that happened.

Likewise, did all of the city of Nineveh repent when they heard Jonah's message? Many conservatives consider the reference to Nineveh in the Book of Jonah as actually referring to the district where the city was located, not just the city, and that the "three days' journey" (4:11) is more a reference to the administration area or province than the actual city.²²

Liberals assert that the Book of Jonah is not to be interpreted entirely seriously, and that certain accounts are literary features of the author's imagination. Critical questions considered include: Did Jonah as a prophet truly reject the will of God? Did Nineveh as a city truly turn in repentance from its evil? Many of the liberal critiques of Jonah are notably based in doubting miracles and supernatural occurrences.

If one accepts that Jonah represents the account of a real, historical prophet, then the historical backdrop is very important to consider for right interpretation. Jonah likely prophesied as the Northern Kingdom of Israel reestablished its old borders, ending a series of conflicts with Damascus. Damascus had once been able to wield some influence on the political affairs of the Northern Kingdom, but this had been stopped when Assyria defeated Damascus (2 Kings 14:26-27). Assyria still remained, however, a threat to the Northern Kingdom. The Prophets were speaking poignantly to these events. Elisha spoke of future victories (2 Kings 13:14-19), and Jonah prophesied of the restoration that King Jeroboam II accomplished (2 Kings 14:25). This indicates that Jonah must have prophesied before Jeroboam II's reign (793-753 B.C.E.), sometime in the earlier Eighth Century B.C.E.²³

The Northern Kingdom had prided itself in its power, and because of this we see compelling warnings of judgment issued by the Lord. Amos was likely a contemporary of Jonah whose warnings against the Northern Kingdom were very strong. Jonah's own flight to Tarshish was probably due to his thought that if Assyria were spared having repented, it could later defeat Israel. The Book of Jonah is unique among the Prophets because it depicts a single prophetic mission.

Varied themes have been proposed for the Book of Jonah, including: repentance, a contrast of Divine justice and Divine grace, and a conflict between nationalism and universalism. Is God only concerned about Israel, or all nations?²⁴ The Book of Jonah can often not be reduced to a single theme.²⁵

There are important influences between the Book of Jonah and what we see in the teachings of Yeshua and mission of the Apostles.²⁶ We should all be aware of the fact that Yeshua the Messiah Himself treats Jonah as an actual prophet who was swallowed by a sea creature (Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-31) as a model for His death and resurrection. Likewise, Yeshua treats the repentance of the Ninevites as authentic.²⁷ Liberals will often claim, though, that Yeshua was only using a commonly known story to make a theological point, and they play down His treatment of Jonah as an historical figure.²⁸ We concur with Harrison, who asserts, "Whatever... Christ may have thought about Jonah, He certainly did not view it as a parable, but as something that was firmly rooted in history."²⁹

In Jewish tradition, the Book of Jonah is customarily read during the afternoon service of *Yom Kippur* (b. *Megillah* 31a), per its theme of repentance. Jews are encouraged to identify with the Ninevites.³⁰

Some limited Messianic engagement of Jonah may take place during the season of *Yom Kippur*. Serious engagement with Jonah, though, is widely lacking in today's Messianic community. Most only argue whether the "fish" was just a big fish, or actually a species of whale,³¹ but there is frequently no consideration for the

²¹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 907-908.

²² *Ibid.*, 909.

²³ Ellison, in *EXP*, 7:361.

²⁴ Landes, "Jonah, Book of," in *IDBSup*, 490; Steven Barabas, "Jonah, Book of," in *NIDB*, 540.

²⁵ Dillard and Longman, pp 394-395.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

²⁷ Robinson, in *NCBR*, 747; Ellison, in *EXP*, 7:362.

²⁸ Neil, "Jonah, Book of," in *IDB*, 2:966; Dillard and Longman, 393.

²⁹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 906.

³⁰ Ehud ben Zvi, "Jonah," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1199.

³¹ Neil, "Jonah, Book of," in *IDB*, 2:964.

larger message of Jonah. Likewise, there is often no consideration for the critical views of Jonah, and how we can maintain the text's integrity and Jonah as a real, historical prophet in the Lord's service. This will certainly have to change as God equips us to fulfill His mission in the world, and we appropriate the important message—and indeed warning—that the Book of Jonah issues.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON JONAH:

1. What was the severe sin that Jonah committed when commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh?
2. What did Jonah pray to the Lord while inside the great "fish"?
3. What is the connection made in the Gospels between Jonah being inside of the sea monster and the resurrection of Yeshua (1:17; cf. Matthew 12:40; 16:4; Luke 11:30)?
4. Why do you think Jonah was angry about the repentance of the Ninevites?