

## **JONAH, PROPHET TO THE GENTILES**

Everybody knows the story of Jonah - how he tried to run away from God, but was swallowed by a great fish, and then went on to preach at Nineveh. But there are actually two main stories going on - how God deals with Jonah and how God deals with Nineveh. Jonah is the 5th of the 12 Minor Prophets ('minor' does not mean 'unimportant' but 'small' compared to the Major Prophets such as Isaiah, which has 66 chapters, and Jeremiah, which has 52 chapters). Here is Martin Luther's comment about Jonah: 'a queer and odd saint who is angry because of God's mercy for sinners ... And yet he is God's dear child.'

### **1. Jonah is commissioned by God (Jonah 1:1-3)**

1. Many people including evangelicals like Leslie Allen and F. F. Bruce say that Jonah is a myth or a parable. Does the Old Testament treat Jonah as an historical person? (2 Kings 14:25) What about Jesus' view of Jonah? (Matt.12:39-41) \_\_\_\_\_

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Jeroboam II is the king referred to. Jonah was flesh and blood, living in Israel in Gath Hopher, just north of Nazareth in the 8th century B.C., a time of great prosperity and great corruption.

'The Bible is credible if Jonah was edible.'

The attack on Jonah's historicity is linked to the miracle of a man surviving for three days in a fish, and the fact that we have no other reference to Nineveh's turning to Yahweh.

2. Who was Jonah? (1:1) How did he get his message? (1:1) \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What message was Jonah given to proclaim? (1:2) Where? Contrast that message with his earlier message in 2 Kings 14:25. \_\_\_\_\_

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Remember that Jonah had already been a prophet for some years in Israel in the days of King Jeroboam II, who reigned from about 793 B.C. to 753 B.C.

'Jonah' apparently means 'Dove' but it might well have meant 'hawk'.

The Assyrians were ruled by gangster-kings who were renowned for their cruelty. They boasted of flaying their victims alive, gauging out their eyes, and tearing out their tongues. Yet they were often transvestites who paraded about in women's robes. That is certainly true of the renowned Ashurbanipal. There is a link between cruelty and perversion. One Jewish writer refers to

the Assyrians as 'the Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world'. The book of Nahum was written a century later than the book of Jonah, but it describes Nineveh's sins - see Nahum 3:1-4.

4. What was Jonah's response to this call? (1:3) Where did he go at first, and what was his hoped-for destination? What was his intention? Compare this to Moses in Exodus 4:10 and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:6. Can we flee the Lord? (see Psalm 139:7-10 where the context is comforting) \_\_\_\_\_

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Nineveh was to the north-east, but Jonah went down to Joppa on the coast, and found a ship going to Tarshish, which is probably in Spain, although Josephus thought it was Tarsus in Asia Minor.

Why did he try to run away from God? Was he afraid? Jonah tells us why he fled (4:2). Hugh Martin, O. Palmer Robertson, and Graham Miller contend that Jonah feared that the blessing would go from Israel to Assyria, and that he only wanted to protect his people. But a touch of vengeance is surely present. William Faber:

*For the love of God is broader  
Than the measures of man's mind;  
And the heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.*

'Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom.5:6).

## 2. Trying to flee from God (Jonah 1:4-17)

1. What did God do in response? (1:4-5) How bad was the storm? How did the sailors respond? What was Jonah doing? \_\_\_\_\_

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Before C. S. Lewis became a Christian, he was an atheist, and when he became a Christian, he said that to speak of his search for God was like speaking of a mouse's search for a cat. The same could be said of Jonah - he was backsliding and the last Person he wanted to have anything to do with was God.

2. What did the pagan captain think of Jonah? (1:5-6) What was the approach of the sailors to the gods? Who won the lottery? (1:7) \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What do the sailors ask of Jonah? (1:8) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What do you make of his answer in verse 9? What part of the Old Testament revelation does he emphasise first? \_\_\_\_\_

When Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin landed on the moon in July 1969, they read from Genesis 1. The true God is the creator of the universe.

5. Why were they terrified? (1:10) How does the rebuke from a pagan especially hurt? Compare this rebuke to 2 Samuel 12:1-7a. \_\_\_\_\_

Literally, they were 'afraid with fear'.

6. How did the sailors view the problem of the great storm at sea? (1:11) What was Jonah's answer? (1:12) What does this reveal about Jonah? What was he prepared to do for these Gentiles? \_\_\_\_\_

If Tarshish is where it is commonly believed to have been, these sailors would not have been Assyrians.

7. How did the pagan sailors respond to this? (1:13) What does this indicate about all people? (Rom.2:14-16) \_\_\_\_\_

8. What did they finally do in verse 14? Again, how does this illustrate Romans 2:14-16? \_\_\_\_\_

This would have been the first time they ever prayed to the Lord (Yahweh; 'I am who I am').

9. What happened after that, and how did the sailors react? (1:15-16) \_\_\_\_\_

This would have been a sacrifice without a Levitical priest. Gordon Keddie says this is true faith, and he criticises Calvin for being hesitant about accepting it.

10. What did the Lord do for Jonah? (1:17) For how long was he inside the

great fish? \_\_\_\_\_  
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A Cachelot (sperm) whale eats squid and octopus, so it could swallow a man whole, but the point is that this is a miracle. God has prepared a great fish.

11. Notice how Ephesians 1:11 is illustrated in:

(a) v.4; Ps.107:25 \_\_\_\_\_  
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(b) vv.5-7; Prov.16:33 \_\_\_\_\_  
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(c) v.15 \_\_\_\_\_  
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(d) v.17 \_\_\_\_\_  
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Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* describes his flight from God:

*I fled Him down the nights and down the days;*

*I fled Him down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways*

*of my own mind; and in the midst of tears*

*I hid from Him ...*

*Trials make the promise sweet;/ Trials give new life to prayer;/ Trials bring me to His feet,/ Lay me low, and keep me there.*

In Psalm 32:7 David says of God: 'You are my hiding place.' There is no hiding place from God; rather, God Himself is our hiding place.

### 3. Coming to one's senses (Jonah 2)

Many whales cannot swallow an orange, let alone a man, but sperm whales are capable of swallowing even large men. C. F. Keil tells of a whole horse (dead, admittedly) being found in a shark, and also of a sailor in 1758 who fell overboard into the Mediterranean Sea, was swallowed by a sea-dog (a kind of shark known as a Rhineodon - it is huge but without fearsome teeth), but recovered unhurt when the captain fired a cannon-ball at the shark so that it immediately vomited up the sailor - alive and well, but I daresay with quite a story to tell his grandchildren.

James Montgomery Boice repeats the story of James Bartley who was supposed to have had quite an adventure on and off the whaling ship *Star of the East* in 1891 near the Falkland Islands. One of the boats capsized and two men were lost. It soon emerged that one man drowned. The other man, James Bartley, disappeared and was presumed drowned, but when the whale was cut up the next day the missing man was found, unconscious but alive.

The great fish must have been a red herring! The point is this, if God created the world out of nothing, He can do any miracle He likes. It makes no sense to believe that Christ defeated death in His resurrection, but that Jonah could not survive three days in a great fish. All things are possible with God.

1. What did Jonah do when he found that he was alive in the belly of the great fish? (2:1) \_\_\_\_\_

It must have been some time since he had prayed.

2. How does Jonah describe his situation and how does he describe his prayer? (2:2) \_\_\_\_\_

He was in Sheol (ESV), the grave (NIV), the place of the dead. The sign of Jonah is to be three days 'dead', as it were.

3. What was it like being in the belly of a great fish? (2:3, 5, 6a) Who put him there? (2:3) Why? (Ps.119:67) \_\_\_\_\_

Betsie ten Boom testified in the Nazi labour camp: 'there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still'.

Calvin compares the belly of the fish to a hospital.

Joni Eareckson-Tada, writing as a quadriplegic: 'But today as I look back, I am convinced that the whole ordeal of my paralysis was inspired by his love. I wasn't a rat in a maze. I wasn't the brunt of some cruel divine joke. God had reasons behind my suffering, and learning some of them has made all the

difference in the world.'

4. What is the turning point in verse 4? Why does he look to the temple? (2:4, 7; see Ps.84:1-2, 4) What does this mean for us? (John 2:19-21) \_\_\_\_\_

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He now wants to reverse Jonah 1:3.

C. S. Lewis: 'There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."'

John Newton: *Be Thou my shield and hiding-place,/ That, sheltered near Thy side,/ I may my fierce accuser face,/ And tell him Thou hast died.*

5. What takes place in 2:8-9? (Rom.12:1) What does Jonah realise afresh? \_\_\_\_\_

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Jonah has finally caught up with the pagan sailors! The sacrifices point to the forgiveness of sins, the vows point to renewed obedience.

Frances Ridley Havergal: *Take my life, and let it be/ Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.*

Spurgeon on Jonah 3:9, 'This verse contains the sum and substance of Calvinistic doctrine.'

6. What did God do in response? (2:10) What happened? \_\_\_\_\_

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God is ready to use him again. *Take my will, and make it Thine;/ It shall be no longer mine* (Frances Ridley Havergal).

**4. NINEVEH REPENTS (Jonah 3:1-10)**

1. How gracious is God in 3:1-2? Compare it to Peter in John 21:15-17. \_\_\_\_\_

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John Newton:

*'Tis grace has led me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*

Catherine the Great: 'God forgives, that's His job.' Is it?

2. What does Jonah do this time? (3:3-4) What was the size of Nineveh? What was Jonah's message to its people? Yet what was Jonah thinking all this time? (4:1-2) How far was he from the mind and heart of the apostle Paul? (cf. Acts 20:31; Rom.9:2-3) \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What are the indications that the Ninevites repented:

(a) 3:5 \_\_\_\_\_

The king was regarded as a regent of the god Asshur, but they came to believe the God of Israel.

(b) 3:5-8 \_\_\_\_\_

Acts 2:37.

(c) 3:8,10; Luke 3:10-14 \_\_\_\_\_

(d) 3:9; 1 John 1:9 \_\_\_\_\_

4. How does God respond to our repentance? (3:10) \_\_\_\_\_

5. What does Matthew 12:41 have to say to us? \_\_\_\_\_

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The Japanese Christian, Kosuke Koyama, dedicated one of his books: 'To the memory of Herbert G. Brand (1865-1942), through whose preaching, in broken Japanese, my grandfather was converted to Jesus Christ.' All the Ninevites had was some cranky prophet on a fruit box,

### 5. REBUKING AN ANGRY PROPHET (Jonah 4:1-11)

This is one major temper tantrum from one cantankerous minor prophet.

1. What is Jonah's surprising response to Nineveh's repentance? (4:1-3) What is the significance of Exodus 34:6-7? How does Jonah compare to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4? \_\_\_\_\_

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Note the lessons of Luke 15.

2. How does God rebuke Jonah? (4:4) What response does God get? (4:5) \_\_\_\_\_

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Early in the American Civil War of 1861-1865, people would sometimes come with their picnic baskets to watch the fighting.

3. What did the Lord do next? (4:6) \_\_\_\_\_

God prepared this plant ('kikayon' in Hebrew). Some say it was a cucumber; the KJV calls it a gourd; the NIV has 'vine', but the Jerusalem Bible suggests that it was a castor-oil plant.

4. Then what did God send? (4:7) What happened to the plant? Then what happened? (4:8) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What do you make of the interaction between God and Jonah in verses 8-9? What of Jonah's frame of mind? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What lesson does God drive home in 4:10-11? See Ezek.33:11; Matt.9:36; Luke 15:10 \_\_\_\_\_

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The plant is literally a 'son of a night'. Shylock's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?*



*If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?*

I used to live near a fellow who had a sticker on his car: *Whaling is murder*. What about abortion, the deliberate killing of 90,000 babies each year in Australia?

The 120,000 presumably refers to youngsters.

7. How did Jonah accept this rebuke? (I am assuming that Jonah wrote this book) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. What have you learnt from the book of Jonah? \_\_\_\_\_

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