

John MacArthur :: Bible Introductions - Jonah

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Title

Following the lead of the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT), the title of the book is derived from the principal character, Jonah (meaning “dove”), the son of Amittai ([1:1](#)). Both the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate ascribe the same name.

Author and Date

The book makes no direct claim regarding authorship. Throughout the book, Jonah is repeatedly referred to in the third person, causing some to search for another author. It was not an uncommon OT practice, however, to write in the third person (e.g., [Ex. 11:3](#); [1 Sam. 12:11](#)). Furthermore, the autobiographical information revealed within its pages clearly points to Jonah as the author. The firsthand accounts of such unusual events and experiences would be best recounted from the hand of Jonah himself. Nor should the introductory verse suggest otherwise, since other prophets such as Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah have similar openings.

According to [2 Kin. 14:25](#), Jonah came from Gath-hepher near Nazareth. The context places him during the long and prosperous reign of Jeroboam II (ca. 793–758 B.C.), making him a prophet to the northern tribes just prior to Amos during the first half of the eighth century B.C., ca. 760 B.C. The Pharisees were wrong when they said “no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” ([John 7:52](#)), because Jonah was a Galilean. An unverifiable Jewish tradition says Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from the dead ([1 Kin. 17:8–24](#)).

Background and Setting

As a prophet to the 10 northern tribes of Israel, Jonah shares a background and setting with Amos. The nation enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity. Both Syria and Assyria were weak, allowing Jeroboam II to enlarge the northern borders of Israel to where they had been in the days of David and Solomon ([2 Kin. 14:23–27](#)). Spiritually, however, it was a time of poverty; religion was ritualistic and increasingly idolatrous, and justice had become perverted. Peacetime and wealth had made her bankrupt spiritually, morally, and ethically (cf. [2 Kin. 14:24](#); [Amos 4:1ff.](#); [5:10–13](#)). As a result, God was to punish her by bringing destruction and captivity from the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Nineveh's repentance may have been aided by the two plagues (765 and 759 B.C.) and a solar eclipse (763 B.C.), preparing them for Jonah's judgment message.

Historical and Theological Themes

Jonah, though a prophet of Israel, is not remembered for his ministry in Israel which could explain why the Pharisees erringly claimed in Jesus' day that no prophet had come from Galilee (cf. [John 7:52](#)). Rather, the book relates the account of his call to preach repentance to Nineveh and his refusal to go. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and infamous for its cruelty, was an historical nemesis of Israel and Judah. The focus of this book is on that Gentile city, which was founded by Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah ([Gen. 10:6–12](#)). Perhaps the largest city in the ancient world ([1:2](#); [3:2](#), [3](#); [4:11](#)), it was nevertheless destroyed about 150 years after the repentance of the generation in the time of Jonah's visit (612 B.C.), as Nahum prophesied ([Nah. 1:1ff.](#)). Israel's political distaste for Assyria, coupled with a sense of spiritual superiority as the recipient of God's covenant blessing, produced a recalcitrant attitude in Jonah toward God's request for missionary service. Jonah was sent to Nineveh in part to shame Israel by the fact that a pagan city repented at the preaching of a stranger, whereas Israel would not repent though preached to by many prophets. He was soon to learn that God's love and mercy extends to all of His creatures ([4:2](#), [10](#), [11](#)), not just His covenant people (cf. [Gen. 9:27](#); [12:3](#); [Lev. 19:33](#), [34](#); [1 Sam. 2:10](#); [Is. 2:2](#); [Joel 2:28–32](#)).

The book of Jonah reveals God's sovereign rule over man and all creation. Creation came into being through Him ([1:9](#)) and responds to His every command ([1:4](#), [17](#); [2:10](#); [4:6](#), [7](#); cf. [Mark 4:41](#)). Jesus employed the repentance of the Ninevites to rebuke the Pharisees, thereby illustrating the hardness of the Pharisees' hearts and their unwillingness to repent ([Matt. 12:38–41](#); [Luke 11:29–32](#)). The heathen city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a reluctant prophet, but the Pharisees would not repent at the preaching of the greatest of all prophets, in spite of overwhelming evidence that He was actually their Lord and Messiah. Jonah is a picture of Israel, who was chosen and commissioned by God to be His witness ([Is. 43:10–12](#); [44:8](#)), who rebelled against His will ([Ex. 32:1–4](#); [Judg. 2:11–19](#); [Ezek. 6:1–5](#); [Mark 7:6–9](#)), but who has been miraculously preserved by God through centuries of exile and dispersion to finally preach His truth ([Jer. 30:11](#); [31:35–37](#); [Hos. 3:3–5](#); [Rev. 7:1–8](#); [14:1–3](#)).

Interpretive Challenges

The primary challenge is whether the book is to be interpreted as historical narrative or as allegory/parable. The grand scale of the miracles, such as being kept alive 3 days and nights in a big fish, has led some skeptics and critics to deny their historical validity and substitute spiritual lessons, either to the constituent parts (allegory) or to the book as a whole (parable). But however grandiose and miraculous the events may have been, the narrative must be viewed as historical. Centered on an historically identifiable OT prophet who lived in the eighth century B.C., the account of whom has been recorded in narrative form, there is no alternative but to understand Jonah as historical. Furthermore, Jesus did not teach the story of Jonah as a parable but as an actual account firmly rooted in history ([Matt. 12:38–41](#); [16:4](#); [Luke 11:29–32](#)).

Outline

1. Running from God's Will ([1:1–17](#))
 - A. The Commission of Jonah ([1:1](#), [2](#))
 - B. The Flight of Jonah ([1:3](#))
 - C. The Pursuit of Jonah ([1:4–16](#))
 - D. The Preservation of Jonah ([1:17](#))
2. Submitting to God's Will ([2:1–10](#))
 - A. The Helplessness of Jonah ([2:1–3](#))
 - B. The Prayer of Jonah ([2:4–7](#))
 - C. The Repentance of Jonah ([2:8](#), [9](#))
 - D. The Deliverance of Jonah ([2:10](#))
3. Fulfilling God's Will ([3:1–10](#))
 - A. The Commission Renewed ([3:1](#), [2](#))
 - B. The Prophet Obeys ([3:3](#), [4](#))
 - C. The City Repents ([3:5–9](#))
 - D. The Lord Relents ([3:10](#))
4. Questioning God's Will ([4:1–11](#))
 - A. The Prophet Displeased ([4:1–5](#))
 - B. The Prophet Rebuked ([4:6–11](#))

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