

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## *Introduction*

### **1. The prophet Jonah**

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We know little about the prophet Jonah. Naturally, we are introduced to him in the Bible book that is named after him. Apart from that he is mentioned again in 2 Kings 14:25. There we read about *the prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai* who is called the servant of God. Because the father's name is the same as that in Jonah 1:1, we may conclude that it is one and the same person. The name Amittai is an uncommon one. Maybe it is because of this that Jonah is not introduced to us in more detail in 1:1.

In 2 Kings 14 we read how Jonah announced the expansion of the territories of the Ten Tribes, in the name of the Lord. This occurred during the reign of King Jeroboam, the son of Joash. Jonah would have been prophesying shortly before, or perhaps during, the first part of the reign of Jeroboam. Presumably, he was a contemporary of Amos (Amos 1:1) and possibly also of Hosea (Hosea 1:1).

2 Kings 14 states that Jonah came from Gath Hopher. This is a small place in the area of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13), a few kilometers north-east of Nazareth.

### **2. Author**

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It is not likely that Jonah wrote this Bible book himself. Someone else narrates these events. Moreover, the language of the book of Jonah points to the time of, or after, the exile. In any case, the book was already in existence about 200 years before Christ. The book "Jesus Sirach," a contemporary writing, already speaks about the twelve prophets: "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)

Thus the book Jonah would have been written somewhere between 500 - 200 years before Christ; most likely in the time of the Persians (550-330 BC). We must assume that Jonah told his adventures to others. The Lord saved this history for his people by word of mouth, after which an unknown author led by the Holy Spirit set these things on paper as God's Word.

### **3. Place of the book Jonah**

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The book of Jonah is included in the list of the twelve "minor" prophets. However, if you look closely at the content of this book, then its inclusion is remarkable. The other eleven prophetic writings consist mainly of prophecies. But the book of Jonah contains only one prophecy. Moreover, that prophecy could scarcely have been shorter, as it involves only one verse (3:4b). Thus, the book is not filled with prophecies proclaimed by the prophet, although it does tell us a few things about him. Because of this it demonstrates a resemblance to those parts of God's Word which tell us about Elijah, Elisha and Isaiah (1 Kings 17-19; 21; 2 Kings 1-8; 13:14-

25; Isaiah 36-39; see also 2 Kings 18:13-20:19)

There is no easy answer to the question why Jonah has found a place amongst the minor prophets. Is it because this book as a whole tells about a prophet? Or is it because it has something to say about the calling and the task of prophets, or because it refers to the character and the effect of their pronouncement of judgments? Or have all these elements played a role?

#### **4. The character of the book**

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Many people have difficulty believing that everything recorded in Jonah has actually happened. The incredible stay of Jonah in the fish, the radical repentance of Nineveh, the miraculous plant, surely all these things could not really have happened? Because of these questions, some people read the book as a legend, a parable, or an allegory.

a. A legend is a story in which the main character is held up as an example for us. Another characteristic of a legend is that the story offers a religious tone. The story has not actually taken place but there is a historical background for it. In this way, according to some, the prophet Jonah from Gath Hepher could really have existed as well as the city of Nineveh. Possibly Jonah also made a journey to Nineveh, but many other details have been imagined. It is possible that these were borrowed from all sorts of other (fantastic) stories which were going around at the time.

This opinion raises great objections. Actually, Jonah is not the main character of this book. It is not important what he experienced and how he pulled through. Central in these events is how the Lord deals with this prophet and how the Lord achieves his goal. In this way Jonah does not become some kind of a hero to be held up as an example to us. Neither is he to be seen as a warning. These grounds alone are enough reason not to see the book of Jonah as a legend.

b. Others prefer to call the book of Jonah a parable. That is, a fantasized story with a message. We find an example of a parable in 2 Samuel 12:1b-4.

This opinion is also difficult to maintain if we look at the content of the book of Jonah. First of all, the length of the story goes against this idea. Parables have a limited size in the Old and the New Testaments. Also, it must be clear from the context that the story in question is a parable. This is not the case with Jonah. Further, the message is often directly connected to the parable. That is also not the case here. Moreover, the existence of the historical person Jonah is evidence that this is not a parable.

c. Some people are of the opinion that Jonah should be read as an allegory. That is to say that the whole book of Jonah is actually a widely detailed type of imagery hiding a deeper meaning behind the facts. We do hear about Jonah, the fish and Nineveh, but the actual meaning only becomes clear when we ask ourselves: to what does the story refer? The allegorical view latches on to the name Jonah, which means "wild dove." The people of Israel are sometimes also referred to as a dove, see Hosea 11:11. This is also the case in Psalm 74:19 where actually another Hebrew word is used. According to allegorical readers, Jonah is an image for the people of Israel. The call for Jonah to pronounce judgment on Nineveh is the call to

Israel to proclaim God's word to the heathen, but Israel wants to keep the Word of God for herself. Jonah's refusal points to the refusal of Israel to take responsibility for this task. The result: Jonah is swallowed up by the fish and, likewise, God's people disappear into exile. Jeremiah 51:34,44 is referred to in this connection. Just as Jonah is saved from the fish, so God's people are freed from exile. And, like Jonah, the people remain discontented with God's long suffering towards heathen nations.

The content of Jonah resists also this opinion. If you take this explanation seriously you will come across all kinds of absurdities. You must work out the comparison to the very end, yet many aspects of this history will remain unexplained. If the fish which swallows up Jonah represents Babel, who then is represented by the crew of the ship? Jonah asks the sailors to throw him overboard but Israel did not willingly go into exile. Moreover, the (Babylonians and) Assyrians did not hesitate to fulfill this "wish." The punishment of the exile came upon the people for reasons other than those indicated above, and when did Israel go to the heathen with the gospel as Jonah went to Nineveh? The heathen nations did not repent as the people of Nineveh did. From all of this it is obvious to conclude that the allegorical point of view cannot be correct.

Various other researchers are of the opinion that the book of Jonah is neither legend, parable, nor allegory. This does not mean that they consider all the facts as they are recorded to be historically reliable. It appears to be difficult to pin the book down to any satisfactory literary style. That the story is meant to teach the reader something is generally agreed.

## **5. Historically reliability**

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The fact that miracles occur in the book of Jonah should not be taken as evidence against the historical reliability of what is written. On the contrary, the Lord has done even greater wonders! It is clear that the author means to tell a history which has actually happened. We must accept it in this light. God's authority is behind it. That which was written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit became a book. The way the Lord Jesus speaks about Jonah also indicates that we are dealing with a historical event (Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32). Otherwise why should Jesus use the sign of Jonah as proof of his identity? If the Ninevites had not actually repented he could not have connected them with the Queen of the South. She came from far to see the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13). The Ninevites' repentance was just as real.

Jonah tells us a story that has actually happened. It is a history showing how the Lord wrestled for the heart of his prophet and how he revealed himself as God.

## **6. Nineveh, the great city**

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Jonah 1:2 and 3:2 speak about Nineveh, the great city. In 3:3 we read: "Now Nineveh was an important city - a visit required three days." The ruins of Nineveh were rediscovered on the east shore of the River Tigris, opposite the present day Mosul. But a problem arises here. In Jonah's day, Nineveh was not a great city. Jonah lived in the time of Jeroboam, the son of Joash (around 784 - 753 BC). Nineveh only became truly great, according to their conception of great, in the time of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705 - 681 BC). Nineveh had existed for centuries

but Sennacherib chose it as his residence. He increased the area of the city and built an inner and outer wall around it. He provided for a good water supply and built palaces in the city. But even at this time Nineveh could not have been bigger than 5 to 6 km in length and a maximum of 3 km in breadth. The measurements from excavations make this clear to us. Do these facts damage the historical reliability of the book of Jonah?

In Jonah's time Assur was the capital city of the Assyrian Kingdom. But Nineveh was already an important cultural and religious centre. Moreover, the kings of Assyria already had a (summer) palace there. Jonah would have proclaimed the judgment while the king was staying there (3:6).

But how can we explain the claims of Jonah 3:3 about an exceedingly great city, a three days' journey in breadth? The Hebrew word makes no distinction between the actual city and the district which took its name from the city. In this way a metropolitan Nineveh could have been indicated. This is also consistent with the population numbers given in 4:11.

## **7. Structure**

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Jonah is a beautifully composed book, carefully constructed from a number of scenes.

The first scene (1:1-3) opens with the charge that God gives to Jonah. The purpose of the mandate is the preaching to Nineveh. When Jonah refuses to fulfill this task, another plan of action comes into sight - the ship. This whole history begins with the Word of the Lord and also ends with it (4:10,11). The events are set in motion and are decided by God's Word. God concerns himself with Jonah, his servant, beginning with the charge to go to Nineveh.

The second scene (1:4-16) reveals what happens on board the ship. The Lord creates a heavy storm at sea. In the midst of the unleashed forces of nature the sailors, without realizing it, are standing face to face with God. Jonah does not enter the picture until later. By means of the storm God brings him into contact with these heathen people. In spite of the rather reserved attitude of the prophet, the sailors slowly realize that they are dealing with God. Jonah, appointed by lot, proves to be the cause of the storm. On his advice the sailors eventually throw him overboard. At this point the story branches out. While Jonah sinks into the depths of the sea, we learn what happens to the ship and its crew. Jonah is taken briefly from the stage and the sailors are alone with God. They are saved and honour him. At this stage it appears that it is not only Jonah and the sailors who are important. Their confrontation is incorporated in God's counsel regarding the ship's crew. He knows how to use them to make progress with his servant. He knows how to bring them also to worship him.

In the third scene (1:17-2:10) we return to the moment in which Jonah was thrown overboard. The writer continues from this point. The Lord sends a fish, which swallows up Jonah. Having been three days and nights in the fish, he is spewed out onto land.

The fourth scene (3:1-3a) is like a new beginning. It serves as the connection between the first and the last two chapters of this Bible book. Once again Jonah stands before God, who repeats his mandate in basically the same terms. This time Jonah obeys.

The fifth scene (3:3a-10) shows Jonah's arrival in Nineveh. First Jonah is brought back to God via heathen people. Now he may direct the heathens to God. First the heathen sailors came to worship God in spite of Jonah, because God was merciful. Now the heathen population of Nineveh can be brought to repentance through the services of the prophet so that they too may come to know God's mercy. But the repentance of Nineveh does not touch Jonah's heart and soul. His lack of feeling for the Ninevites comes to the surface later because again the scene shifts. As soon as Jonah has brought the message, he disappears once more from sight. Just as with the sailors in 1:4-6, now the Ninevites stand directly before God. Once again heathen people with a minimal knowledge of God come to repentance in a radical way and the city is spared. Once again Jonah's proclamation to these heathens is used in the Lord's dealings with them. They too are used as a means in the final scene by which God "works on" his prophet.

In the final scene (4:1-11) we return to the point where Jonah disappeared in the previous chapter. He appears to have left the city having proclaimed his message of judgment. Jonah made himself comfortable to watch what would take place. When he sees that God spares the city, he is furious. Then the Lord brings the message of the miracle plant, a lesson that ends with a question. We hear no more replies from Jonah's side. In this way the end of the book of Jonah keeps a question echoing also in our ears.

Having seen the whole, it is obvious how magnificently and carefully this Bible book has been structured. We can especially notice the similarity in form and content between the first and the fourth, the second and the fifth, the third and the sixth scene. Even so, in the midst of all these similarities we should not forget the differences but rather be all the more aware of them.

## **8. Meaning**

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A common opinion is that Jonah wanted to see God's mercy and love restricted to the Lord's own people. He would have wanted God's unconditional judgment to be reserved for heathen nations. This is why he refused to go to Nineveh the first time. He would choose to die rather than do that. Imagine that God should show mercy to heathen Nineveh! Even so, against his own desire, he is the means by which heathen sailors come to know God. Unlike Jonah, they honour God and are spared. When the prophet still has to go to Nineveh, he performs his task reluctantly. It proves all too much for Jonah when it appears that God does indeed show mercy to the city. Again he wishes to die. He cannot accept the fact that God is merciful to the heathens, certainly not to that heathen city of Nineveh, a part of the nation that would later prove to be a great threat for Israel. This view of God's mercy is sometimes known as nationalistic particularism. It is a view which is supposed to have had many followers in Israel. Jonah would be the embodiment of this view. In this Bible book the Lord would then make clear how wrong this approach is.

Various objections have been advanced against this view of the book of Jonah and rightly so. Nowhere can it be proven that Jonah could be seen as representative of this opinion in Israel. The text itself offers no evidence that Jonah would have agreed with this opinion. Jonah is not irritated by Nineveh, but by God, because the Lord does not do to Nineveh what he threatened. Jonah suspects this from the beginning and therefore does not want to cooperate.

It seems better therefore, to look for the meaning of the book in the way in which the Lord deals with his prophet. The book of Jonah shows him to be an almighty and merciful God and Father. This meaning is also real for people of today. As children of the Lord we have to fulfill the same task of prophet in our own circumstances (see Heidelberg Catechism, LD 12, Q&A 32).

The first two chapters sketch Jonah's departure from Canaan. Jonah's refusal to do his duty is not acceptable to God. Even though the mission seems to Jonah to be in opposition to God's honour and damaging to God's people, he must complete his task. Even if the calling does not appeal to you, that does not relieve you of doing what the Lord asks of you.

The last two chapters emphasize how the Lord is free to act according to his word. The servant must deliver the word which God has given to him, but the Lord determines the results as he pleases. Even in the sharpest proclamation of judgment God seeks the sinner's repentance not his death. That is what Jonah must learn.

## **9. Tips for introduction and study**

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Make an outline of the book of Jonah. Compare the passages that display a mutual agreement. Note those also which possibly differ. Compare also the structure of the first two chapters with that of the last two.

## **10. Discussion Aid**

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1. What is the message of the book of Jonah? In what way does this message have a meaning for our life today?
2. What is the task of a prophet? Does the book of Jonah give instructions for that task? What does that task have to do with us?
3. Does an allegorical explanation have any justification? (see section 4.c) Why or why not?
4. There is a clear regularity in the structure of Jonah (see section 7). Can you also see differences or irregularities? Are the first three scenes thematically parallel with the last three?
5. What strikes you when you read this Bible book?
6. What questions do you have as a result of the book of Jonah?