

# INTRODUCTION AND JONAH 1:1 - 2:10

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## Introduction

### I. The Prophet

A. According to 2 Ki. 14:25, Jonah son of Amittai was a prophet from Gath-hepher, a small town in Galilee a few miles northeast of Nazareth. He lived in the days of Israel's king Jeroboam II, who reigned from 793 - 753 B.C.

B. He prophesied that Israel would successfully extend its territory from the entrance of Lebo Hamath (to the north) to the Dead Sea (to the south).

II. Date of Book - The book is about Jonah, not necessarily authored by him, so it could have been composed at a later date. If, despite the third-party perspective and the unflattering portrait of Jonah, one assumes that Jonah wrote it in the latter part of his life, the time of composition would be somewhere in the eighth century B.C.

### III. Assyrian Situation

A. Assyria's expansion under Shalmaneser III was temporarily checked in 853 B.C. in the battle of Qarqar by a coalition that included Damascus and Hamath (city states) and Israel. Bright, 243.

B. In 841 B.C. Shalmaneser III made another assault on Damascus (Aram) and beyond and succeeded in taking tribute from Jehu, king of Israel. Bright, 254. An obelisk from the reign of Shalmaneser III that includes a relief of Jehu paying tribute to Shalmaneser was discovered 150 years ago by A. H. Layard in Calah (modern Nimrud).

C. For the next forty years or so, Assyria was preoccupied with other campaigns and with internal strife, which allowed Damascus to ascend in power. Around 802 B.C. the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III resumed the aggressive policy of Shalmaneser III and crushed Damascus (not seriously striking Israel), but he was unable to follow up his successes. Bright, 254-56.

D. The three succeeding Assyrian kings from 782-745 B.C. were ineffectual rulers. There was a famine in 765 that recurred in or lasted to 759 (Baldwin, 545). In 763 there occurred the ominous solar eclipse (Baldwin, 765). This all contributed to rebellions in various cities, which, along with the menace of the powerful kingdom of Urartu to the north, substantially weakened Assyria. In the words of John Bright, "By the mid-eighth century, indeed, Assyria seemed threatened with disintegration." Bright, 256.

## Jonah 1:1 - 2:10

### I. Jonah Receives God's Grace (1:1 - 2:10)

#### A. Jonah's Disobedience (1:1-3)

1. Jonah commanded to go to Nineveh to announce its condemnation.

a. Nineveh was an ancient and important city in Assyria, about 500 miles east of Palestine, a city in which a number of kings through the centuries had built palaces. Years later, during the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.), it became the capital and one of the architectural wonders of the world.

b. God is prepared to destroy the city because of its wickedness, but rather than simply destroy it, he commands Jonah to go there to announce its condemnation.

2. Jonah seeks to flee from the Lord's presence by boarding a ship at Joppa heading to "Tarshish."

a. He just flat disobeys; he promptly heads in the opposite direction. Tarshish is usually identified with Tartessos in southwest Spain, 2,000 miles west of Palestine.

b. No reason is given at this point for the disobedience; Jonah simply is stamped as a rebel, a deserter. But we'll see in 4:2 that what motivated him was that he couldn't stand the thought of being a source of divine warning to the despised Assyrians, which warning he feared would be their opportunity to receive divine mercy.

c. He was trying to flee "the presence" of God, probably meaning the place where he specially experienced God's presence in the revelation of his word to him.

(1) The disobedient shun intimacy with God. They don't want to face God in their rebellion. Rather than longing for his nearness, they flee from it. When a Christian starts missing corporate worship times and generally avoiding Christians and quits praying and studying the Bible, it is a danger sign that they are in rebellion.

(2) Perhaps he thought God would not reveal himself so personally outside of Israel or in such a far-off place. (A prophet need not be a theologian.) He may have thought (or hoped) that his fleeing would cause God to seek a more willing prophet to preach against Nineveh.

3. At this time, Joppa, a port city northwest of Jerusalem, was probably under control of the king of Ashkelon, a Philistine city (ISBE 2:1119). The crew of the vessel was

obviously non-Hebrew, people who did not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Jonah 1:8-9).

#### B. Jonah's Punishment (1:4-16)

1. The wrath of God is unleashed against the defiance of his prophet. This creature will not thumb his nose at God with impunity, no matter where he tries to go!

2. God causes such a mighty storm that the ship is on the verge of tearing apart. This is the awesomeness of God's wrath. Sailors, the old salts who had seen everything, were scared stiff. They were throwing their cargo overboard and were all yelling to their gods, hoping that he or she or they would somehow intervene to help them.

3. O.T. scholars John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas write in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (p. 778):

Patron deities were rarely cosmic deities, so the sailors would not have thought that their personal or family gods had sent the storm. In the polytheistic context of the ancient world, one could generally identify divine activity with confidence, but it was another matter altogether to discover which god was acting and why. The sailors call out to their gods in the hope that one of their patron deities might be able to exert some influence on whichever god has become disturbed enough to send the storm. The more contacts made the better, so the captain wakes Jonah so that he could also call upon his patron deity.

4. God's judgment on sin is sure. If we are in rebellion to God, our storm is coming. We may have false hopes like Jonah, we may feel that somehow we're going to avoid judgment for our rebellion, but the storm is coming. See, Mat. 7:24-27.

5. In contrast to everyone else on board, Jonah is not interested in calling on his God; he's sleeping during the crisis. Even the pagan captain rebukes the Lord's prophet for failing to seek his god's intervention. What an indictment of his spiritual condition!

6. Jonah is revealed by lot to be responsible for the calamity. The lots were probably dice, their sides alternately light or dark. Two darks probably meant "No," two lights "Yes," and a light and a dark meant "Throw again" (Stuart, 459). God chose to cause the lots to work according to plan, as the sailors eliminated others on the ship until Jonah was left.

7. After Jonah is revealed by lot to be responsible for the calamity, the sailors bombard him with questions about the details. When they learn that the God from whom Jonah is fleeing is the LORD, they are even more afraid and are incredulous that Jonah has disobeyed him (not to mention that he'd chosen their vessel as his means of flight). Another pagan rebuke.

7. When they ask Jonah what to do to calm the sea, he advises them to throw him overboard. In doing so, he is acknowledging God's just claim on his life for sin, submitting to God's death sentence. In essence, he tells them to hand him over to God.

a. We cannot appreciate grace until we appreciate the justice of our condemnation. If I never accept that I deserve death, I will not see commutation of my sentence as mercy; I will simply see it as delayed justice.

b. "The soul that sins will die" (Ezek. 18:4, 20); "For the wages of sin is death, . . ." (Rom. 6:23). Jonah felt this so concretely that he offered to be tossed overboard.

7. The sailors fear playing a role in killing Jonah. They fear that this might expose them to the vengeance of Jonah's God. They try to row back to land, but God had other plans. Seeing no other solution, the sailors pray that God not hold them accountable for Jonah's death. This is another indication of spiritual awareness.

8. They throw Jonah overboard and the sea immediately calms. Thus, Jonah's acceptance of God's claim on his life is the path for pagan deliverance. As a result, they fear God even more (add him to their pantheon), offer sacrifice to him, and make vows. (The latter possibly is to be understood as taking place later when they were back on land.)

### C. Jonah's Rescue (1:17 - 2:10)

#### 1. God provides a large fish to swallow a penitent Jonah

a. Jonah being thrown overboard should be the end of the story. He stuck his tongue out at the Almighty, came to accept God's just punishment for his sin, surrendered to what he understood God demanded of him (his life), and in the process delivered the pagan sailors from destruction.

b. But as his life was ebbing away (2:7), as he was in the belly of Sheol (2:2) or the Pit (2:6), he remembered the LORD and prayed to him (2:2,7). This was no longer a stoic acceptance of his death sentence as justice; this was a plea for mercy from the depths of his soul. He recognized he was on the verge of being forever shut out from the presence of the Lord (2:4).

c. You can be sure this was not a plea of reservation, not a plea in which limits or conditions were set. When he prayed to be spared, he was praying with a prostrate spirit, with a broken and contrite heart. He had fully and completely surrendered to God's claim on his life.

d. God is so magnificent in mercy that he miraculously rescues the sinner who deserves to die. He provides a living submarine to swallow Jonah and preserve his life.

2. Jonah praises the LORD for his deliverance

a. From inside the large fish, Jonah sings the Lord's praise. Repentance brought forth mercy, and mercy, genuinely appreciated, brought forth praise (2:8-9).

b. We must truly recognize that our sin deserves death and then repent of it that we might receive the Lord's mercy. Then we too will be inspired to praise the Lord and to give our lives in his service. We will be like the sinful woman in Luke 7: we will love much because we will recognize the magnitude of our rescue.

3. God completes the rescue by returning the converted Jonah to this "world," to dry land where he can again become an instrument in God's service.