

Week 1 – Introduction to JONAH

Salvation Belongs to the LORD

The Father Heart of God is full of grace and compassion, and is sovereign.

The Book of Jonah is the **fifth of the twelve Minor Prophets** and is unique in being almost completely narrative.¹ The prophet Jonah was **certainly a historical figure** who **prophesied the expansion of the northern kingdom of Israel under King Jeroboam II**, recorded in 2 Kings 14:25. **The central theme in Jonah is principally the sovereignty, grace, and compassion of God.** When God declares his compassion for the lost and sinful people of Nineveh in chapter four, the **“father heart of God”** is fully on display and **should rally Christians to share the Gospel boldly.**

Jonah is among the **most controversial** books in the Old Testament centering upon a debate whether the book is a **historical narrative or fiction.**² Determining the date and authorship of the book depends greatly on which side of the controversy scholars choose. While there have been skeptics to the historicity of the narrative, **it wasn't until the 19th century** that significant voices, beginning with German theologian J. G. Eichhorn, argued the **account is a parable teaching God's mercy and compassion.**³

The principle arguments being

- first, that the story of Jonah's being swallowed alive by a “great fish” seems unbelievable;
- second, there is no historical record that Nineveh experienced a mass revival;
- and third, Jonah's psalm makes little sense in the context of the story.

If the book is fiction, it could have been written any time after the 8th century, and scholars concur it was likely written in the post-exilic era.⁴

Despite the skeptics, scholars have long believed the book is the **historical and miraculous** account of the prophet's experience preaching against the wickedness of Nineveh, and for good reason.

- First, the emphasis on God's power over the sea was a significant demonstration of God's ultimate sovereignty. The near-eastern pagan people viewed the god of the ocean as supreme.⁵ In this light, the provision of a great fish to save Jonah is simply a miracle within God's ability.
- Secondly, the first century rabbi Philo, who was a “lover of the allegory” went to great pains to explain the “marvel of the fish literally.”⁶
- Third, the Ninevites' repentance doesn't indicate that they converted to become worshipers of Yahweh. It merely suggests that they “ritually asked God to spare them” and the event is unlikely to have shown up in the city's historical record.⁷
- Fourth, Jonah's psalm could have happened just as it is recorded, however, there are scholars who assert the psalm might be a later interpolation and the prophet might have given “later polish” at a time when his situation wasn't so urgent.⁸
- Finally, Jesus himself referred to Jonah as an “obvious” historical event.⁹

If it is a historical narrative, the book was written in the 8th century as a protest against **narrow-minded nationalism**, and to be effective, would depend heavily on the truth of the account.¹⁰

The prophet **Jonah is very likely the author** since most of the narrative **depends on information only he would know**, such as the provision of the vine in chapter four. However it is possible the book was taken as dictation from the prophet. Evidence for this is the usage of past tense in chapter three and the fact that the prophet is always referred to in the third person.¹¹

Nineveh's historical situation in the 8th century may explain the readiness of the king and his people to accept Jonah's message. Assyrian power was at a low point and the nation suffered multiple military set-backs as well as famine and domestic uprisings.

Spiritually, there was a solar eclipse in June of 763 B. C. which could have been interpreted as a bad omen. The cultural conflation of these events could put the Ninevites in a posture to receive Jonah's message favorably and quickly act on his warning.¹²

Key Verses:

- "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me..." Jonah 2:2
- "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" Jonah 2:9
- "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it." Jonah 3:10