

## Jonah: Who, What, Why and When?

### **Written by whom?**

The book does not identify the author. Tradition says it was Jonah himself, son of Amittai from Gath Hopher. However, because it shares some similarities, it may come from the same prophetic circles that originally composed the accounts about Elijah and Elisha.

### **Written from where and when?**

If it was written by the group that wrote the accounts of Elijah and Elisha, it would be sometime in the eighth century BC. Jonah himself served as a prophet for fifty years, 800-750 BC, in the northern kingdom of Israel. The most likely date is after the public ministries of Amos and Hosea and before the fall of Samaria to Assyria in 722-721 BC, or the third quarter of the eighth century BC.

### **Written to whom?**

To the Israelites of the northern kingdom, Israel. Jesus used the lessons of Jonah to teach the people of his day.

### **Why was it written?**

During the time of King Jeroboam II, the traditional borders of Israel had been restored. This was possible because the country of Damascus had been defeated by Assyria. This war had temporarily weakened Assyria, giving Israel a chance to build itself up. Israel had become proud, complacent about her status before God as a chosen nation. The religion became focused on the 'day of the Lord', when God's darkness would swallow up the other nations, leaving Israel alone to bask in God's light.

The primary purpose of the book is to make the readers think carefully on the compassionate character of God and to see if their own character is similar. God wanted them to share his compassion in the world that God had made and cared for so deeply..

## 2 Jonah: Chapter 1 – Scripture Questions

1. Where did the Lord want Jonah to go, and what was he to do there? (vs. 2)
2. Where did Jonah go instead? (vs. 3)
3. What happened to disrupt Jonah's voyage? (vs. 4)
4. What did the sailors do to figure out who was responsible for the storm? (vs. 7)
5. How did the sailors respond to Jonah's explanation? (vs. 10, 11)
6. What did Jonah tell them to do to calm the storm? (vs. 12)
7. What did the sailors try to do, instead of throwing him overboard? (vs. 13, 14)
8. Then they took Jonah and threw him \_\_\_\_\_, and the raging sea grew \_\_\_\_\_ (vs. 15)
9. How did the sailors respond to the calming of the sea? (vs. 16)
10. What happened to Jonah? (vs. 17)

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## Jonah: Chapter 1 – What Did It Mean To Them?

The main theme for Jonah is compassion: God's compassion for all peoples, everywhere. There are several other ideas included under this main idea:

1. God is in control over all events on the earth
2. God is determined to get his message to all nations
3. Everyone needs to repent from sin
4. Specific repentance is needed from hypocrisy and self-centeredness
5. There is assurance that God will relent and forgive when people repent

The name 'Jonah' means 'dove', and in the book of Hosea it was used as a symbol for Israel as silly and senseless. 'Son of Amittai' means 'son of my faithfulness'. Taken together, it means that no matter how ridiculous Jonah is, he is still the object of God's faithful love.

The episode with the pagan sailors is designed to ask the question, Who fears the Lord, Jonah or the pagans? The key repeated word is 'fear'. Jonah claims to fear the Lord, but the sailors actually do fear and respect the Lord. It is also noteworthy that the Israelite prophet has to be called to prayer by the pagan sailor! And who is concerned that people not perish? Again, it is the sailors who seem to care.

Casting lots was used in the ancient world to discover and understand the will of divinity. The Israelites believed that God controlled the outcome.

'God of heaven' referred to the universal and supreme God, not necessarily to the God of the Hebrews. This is why the sailors were terrified, and very hopeful that tossing Jonah overboard did not offend the supreme God.

## 4 Jonah: Chapter 1 – Application Questions

1. God called Jonah, a prophet, to reach out to a city of people who were enemies of Israel. Jonah was understandably reluctant. What has God called you to do, that you resisted?
2. Jonah made a really bad decision and did something he knew was wrong. How do you make up for this kind of action?
3. It was common for sailors to 'pick up' deities they liked as they sailed around. We still do this: people get invested in angels, crystals, 'earth spirits', the Mayan Calendar, UFOs, aliens, cults, conspiracy theories, etc. Why do you think people enjoy this kind of 'spirituality'?
4. God used the 'lots' cast by the sailors as a way to point out Jonah as the responsible party. (You notice Jonah didn't volunteer.) Could we do something similar today if we are trying to choose people to lead our church?

## 5 Jonah: Chapter 2 – Scripture Questions

1. From where did Jonah call for help? (vs. 1)
2. Where had God hurled Jonah? (vs. 3)
3. Jonah said, “I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your \_\_\_\_\_.” (vs. 4)
4. Who brought Jonah’s life up from the pit? (vs. 6)
5. What did Jonah remember as he was dying? (vs. 7)
6. What is lost by those who worship worthless idols (vs. 8)
7. Jonah said, “What I have vowed, I will make good. \_\_\_\_\_ comes from the Lord. (vs. 9)
8. What did the fish do, upon command of the Lord? (vs. 10)

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## Jonah: Chapter 2 – What Did It Mean To Them?

This is a summary of Jonah's prayer of confession and thanksgiving. He didn't pray to God to ask for salvation for the pagan sailors, but he did thank God for saving him. Jonah is aware that if he calls for help from God, that God will answer.

'Sheol' refers to the realm, or land, of the dead, which a person would enter by going through a gate made of 'bars'. Jonah was not praying from Sheol, but describing his near-death experience.

Even though it was the sailors who had thrown Jonah into the ocean, he knows that God was working through them, and so he can say that it was God that cast him into the sea. 'Look upon', or 'look toward', is referring to the ancient practice of physically turning oneself toward the temple to pray. Many religions still incorporate this practice in their worship.

'I went down' is a way of saying that Jonah was descending to death. There was a belief that the roots of the mountain were at the bottom of the sea, and these roots were where the gates of Sheol were located.

The verse about vain idols is referring to the pagan sailors, but it is also a message to Jonah's fellow Israelites who were following idols. Jonah finishes his prayer with 'Salvation belongs to the Lord', which is ironic since he believed that it was God's responsibility to save the Israelites and not the Gentiles.

## 7 Jonah: Chapter 2 – Application Questions

1. Jonah was so grateful for his salvation, he wrote a poem/psalm. Do you remember when you were saved? How did you celebrate?
2. Have you ever felt dead, or on your 'last leg'? What did you do?
3. Jonah recognized God's power and his right to judge. Can you describe an instance when you felt God's power?
4. The fish responded to God's command immediately. Why does nature respond, but we resist? Why does it sometimes take us a long time to respond to God?

## 8 Jonah: Chapter 3 – Scripture Questions

1. What was the word of the Lord that came to Jonah a second time? (vs. 2)
2. How did Jonah respond? (vs. 3)
3. What was Jonah's message to the Ninevites? (vs. 4)
4. How did the Ninevites respond to Jonah's message? (vs. 5)
5. What did the king do when he heard the news? (vs. 6, 7)
6. The king called on his people to give up their \_\_\_\_\_ ways and their \_\_\_\_\_. (vs. 8)
7. Were the Ninevites sure about God's compassion? (vs. 9)
8. What did God do when he saw their sincere repentance? (vs. 10)

## Jonah: Chapter 3 – What Did It Mean To Them?

This chapter is concerned with the Ninevites' (and their animals') relationship to the Creator.

When Yahweh's word comes to Jonah "a second time," he obeys immediately, and he completes the mission on the first day: "The Ninevites believed God" (3:1-5).

The king hears how the city has been overturned in repentance. He, too, responds in belief and in hope that God will "with compassion turn from his fierce anger." God does.

This book is not about the Ninevites,' faith, but about the unbelievably true possibility that God would care enough to overthrow their hearts. It stands as a reminder of the incredible love of the Creator for the creation and his radical willingness to seek out the most distant person and restore them to his grace.

## Jonah: Chapter 3 – Application Questions

1. What is our responsibility towards violent, wicked people? How should we fulfill that responsibility?
2. If the violent repent, should God forgive them without consequence for their actions?
3. If terrible things happen to bad people, should we rejoice in their punishment or pray/hope for their repentance? Is it possible to do both?
4. The Ninevites were 'overthrown', or changed, by the message they heard. From history we see that they certainly didn't stay changed. What is the point of repentance if it doesn't 'stick' with a person?

## 11 Jonah: Chapter 4– Scripture Questions

1. What was Jonah's complaint about God? (vs. 2)
2. How did God answer Jonah's wish for death? (vs. 4)
3. Where did Jonah go while he waited to see what happened to Nineveh? (vs. 5)
4. What did God send to shade Jonah? (vs. 6)
5. At dawn the next day God provided a \_\_\_\_\_, which chewed the vine so that it \_\_\_\_\_ . (vs. 7)
6. What kind of weather did God send after the vine died? (vs. 8)
7. How did God answer Jonah's complaint about the death of the vine? (vs. 10, 11)

Ezekiel 33:11: "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."

## Jonah: Chapter 4 – What Did It Mean To Them?

Jonah was angry because God had compassion on the repentant Ninevites. He was ready to die, he was so angry. God told Jonah that he had no right to be angry.

So Jonah went outside the city and found a ringside seat, hoping to see the destruction of Nineveh. He built a shade, and God made a vine grow up over the shade (which made Jonah happy!).

Next day, God sent a worm that killed the vine. The weather turned scorching hot and windy, giving Jonah a near heatstroke. Jonah was angry again and wanted to die.

God told Jonah that he had no right to be angry, that Jonah had nothing to do with the vine. God cared about Jonah and the Ninevites.

God was trying to teach Jonah that his care and concern were for all people, even those who were wicked. Jonah had lived his life as an observant Jew and felt that he deserved God's care and compassion. He felt that the Ninevites deserved only God's justice (death), not mercy.

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## Jonah: Chapter 4 – Application Questions

1. God extended mercy to Jonah, but Jonah did not want that mercy extended to the Ninevites. What can we do to keep ourselves from becoming possessive about the gospel and God's salvation?
2. If God is willing to waive his rules and forgive wickedness, why should we care how people behave? Which sins do we judge harshly, and which sins do we ignore?
3. We know from history that the Ninevites didn't stick with their repentance. What good is a turning from sin if it fails to stay turned?
4. God was willing to have compassion on the Ninevites, but they eventually turned back to their bad old ways. If we accept that eternal consequences are up to God, then how do we balance compassion and justice in our own society?