

The Prophets, Book 10

Jonah

Of all the 66 books of the Bible, this book is probably the one most emphatically and universally rejected by the unbelieving, secular world, and by many critical theologians. It is a myth, they say, a fairy tale--it couldn't possibly be true. They cite the testimony of biologists who say that whales cannot swallow a man whole (I remember being convinced of this lie when told by a biology professor that the largest of whales (the Blue Whale) can choke to death on a tennis ball). But the Bible doesn't say that it was a whale--it says that it was a "great **fish**." Whales are not fish--they are mammals, complete with umbilical cords and mammary glands. As fetuses they have hair on their heads but lose it before they are born. Some species of whales and dolphins have a few hairs as adults.

Most game fish swallow other animals whole; and this fish was a very large one. In addition, it was apparently a custom-made fish, created by God just for this project ("Now the Lord had **prepared** a great fish to swallow up Jonah"). Critics also say that Jonah could not possibly have lived for three days after being swallowed by a fish; but maybe he didn't live--as we shall see.

NOTES:

*a. One characteristic of the Hebrew language is that one word typically can have several different meanings. In this case, it appears that God, knowing that there would be this distortion of his Word concerning Jonah, fish and whale, wished to make the matter clear; for the Hebrew word rendered "fish" is "da'g" ("dawg"), and it has **only one meaning**: that one meaning is "**fish**."*

b. Actually, in Matt 12, where Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees about seeking a sign, "whale" is used in the passage; but we will deal with that when we come to it.

Some Examples of Huge Fish (and a Whale)

Some huge fish, and at least one whale, large enough to swallow a man whole, have been caught and examined. Finis Jennings Dake, in his "Dake Annotated Reference Bible," cites examples, from which I quote. "A Mediterranean fish was caught and exhibited in Beirut [Lebanon] which had a head that weighed 6 tons. A man of average height, standing on the lower jaw, could not reach the upper jaw, the opening being about 8 feet high. The April 4th 1896 issue of Literary Digest included the story of a Mediterranean whale that demolished a harpoon boat. Two men were lost. One, James Bartley, was found alive in the whale's belly a day and a half after it was killed. Bartley survived the amazing incident with no after

effects, except that his skin was tanned by the gastric juices. A pure [sic] fish was caught off the Florida coast that weighed 30,000 pounds. It was 45 feet long and 8 feet thick. It had a 1,500 pound fish in its stomach, besides a large octopus. A man of average height could easily stand up in its stomach. It could have swallowed 10 Jonahs¹."

"It Ain't Necessarily So." In the classic 1935 Negro folk opera, "Porgy and Bess," composed by George and Ira Gershwin, there is a song which attacks the validity of the story of Jonah (and other miraculous events in the Bible). The song is, "It Ain't Necessarily So"; its theme, and repeated refrain, is "The things that you're liable, to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so." In the opera, the song is sung by a wicked character, defending a life of sin; but today it could be the theme song of a great many preachers and priests, and of most critical theologians and professors of religion. Today, many critical Bible scholars not only deny the miracle of the great fish, they even deny that such a person as Jonah ever existed.

Did Jonah Even Exist?

And yet his existence, and his ministry as a prophet, are recorded as Jewish **history** in II Kings 14:25². Both Jonah and his book have been accepted from the beginning as historical and canonical in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. And, of all the evidence for the validity of the book, the most compelling for Christians is the fact that Jesus accepted it as history and as Scripture. He referred to the miraculous repentance of the Assyrians at Nineveh that resulted from Jonah's preaching. He even said that the story of Jonah's experience was actually about Himself, referring to Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the great fish as symbolic of his own coming death, burial and resurrection³. Yes, Jonah was what is called a "type" (symbolic forerunner) of Christ. In fact, Jonah's statement that God had "brought up [his] life from corruption" (2:6) is at least a strong suggestion that Jonah died in the sea (or after being swallowed by the great fish), and that God had raised him from death when the fish spit him out on the beach. If so, he was an even more perfect type than he is usually thought to be, of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

NOTE: For a more thorough examination of Jonah as a type of Christ, see "Jonah As a 'Type' of Christ" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

Jonah's ministry took place in the Northern Kingdom, Israel, during the reign of King Jeroboam II. This 41-year period was a time of unequalled prosperity and

¹ Dake Annotated Reference Bible, Matt 12, footnote s.

² Except for this book, the only place in the OT where Jonah is mentioned is in II Kings 14:25.

³ Matthew 12:38-42; Lk 11:29-32.

military success in the Northern Kingdom, during which territory, previously lost to the Assyrians and other pagan invaders, was regained⁴. This military success was probably made possible by the repentance in Ninevah, led by the king himself, as a result of Jonah's reluctant preaching there. This reformation in Assyria seems to have lasted for one generation; about 40 years later Assyria, under different leaders, would conquer Israel and carry the survivors into cruel captivity.

Jonah's Tomb in Mosul, Iraq

Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, is the modern successor to ancient Nineveh, whose ruins lie beneath it, on the bank of the Tigris River. Ancient Mosul is on the west bank of the Tigris River, built over the ruins of Nineveh; but today the city has expanded to both sides of the river, connected by bridges over the Tigris. Mosul has been famous for the muslin material made there (and named for the city in which it was made).

Until July of 2014, there was a population of 30,000-40,000 Iraqi Christians in Mosul; it was the only significant population of Christians in Iraq. There is, at the site of ancient Nineveh, a mound which the local people call the "Yunas (Jonah) mound." It is within a stone's throw of the site of the ancient wall of Nineveh, It is 100 feet high, covers 40 acres, and is revered by the local people. Noah's tomb was there, revered by Christians, Jews and Muslims, suggesting that, after his reluctant prophesying brought the great reformation there, he stayed and ministered in Nineveh for the rest of his life. In July 2014 there was a mass exodus of Christians from Mosul to escape slaughter by the unimaginably barbaric Islamist army calling itself "ISIS" (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The Christians fled northward to Kurdistan and, behind them, the ISIS invaders occupied Mosul. One of the first things the barbarians did was to destroy the tomb of Jonah, although he is supposedly venerated by Muslims as a prophet, and then they insanely destroyed with explosives the mosque containing the tomb⁵.

(Put the photo s here of the tomb being destroyed)

The Small Book Is Rich in Revelation

Although the Book of Jonah is small, it is extremely rich in revelation, and must be read carefully. Attention will be called to such places in the study guide, with explanations.

⁴ This military success of Jeroboam II was prophesied by Jonah; although this prophecy is not mentioned in Jonah's book, it is referred to in II Kings 14:23-25.

⁵ The mosque had been built by Muslims on the site of an earlier Assyrian Christian Church.

A. Author. The human author of the book is Jonah, the son of Amittai, and the prophet with the bad attitude. Although he was a native of Gath-hepher in Galilee, his ministry was to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was a contemporary of Hosea, Isaiah and Amos.

NOTES:

a. This town, Gath-hepher, is not the Gath of Philistia, Goliath's home town.

b. Jonah's birthplace gives the lie to the arrogant pronouncement of the Pharisees concerning Jesus that, "out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (Jn 7:52). Nahum (the only other prophet sent to Nineveh, after its return to paganism, to predict its doom) was also probably a native of Capernaum in Galilee⁶. One would expect better scholarship of those arrogant, religious snobs.

B. Place and Date. Jonah probably wrote his book between 800 and 750 BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II. Some scholars believe it to be the first of all the prophetic books to be written. The place of writing, like almost everything else about Jonah, is unknown. Since it appears that he spent the rest of his life in Nineveh and died there, his book was probably written there.

C. Theme. The theme of Jonah is (at least) two-fold:

1. That we cannot run far enough away to escape from God and his calling on our lives;

2. That God is not willing that any should perish; He wants to forgive and save even the most vicious and cruel among us (for that is what the Assyrians were in the era of their geopolitical dominance)⁷.

D. The Uniqueness of Jonah. Among the prophets of God, Jonah seems to be unique in at least two ways: first, he is the only one who rejected God's calling and actively rebelled against it; and, second, he was sent, as a missionary to a pagan nation, to call it to repentance⁸. In this second way, he was not only a type of Christ, but his ministry was a type of the New Covenant to come, in which the message of repentance and salvation will be taken "into all the world"⁹. (Matt 28:19; Mk 16:15)

E. Highlights. Highlights of Jonah include the following:

1. Arise and Go--WHERE? (1:1-3)

⁶ The meaning of Capernaum is "town of Nahum."

⁷ Ezekiel 18:31-32; I Tim 2:4; II Pet 3:9.

⁸ Nahum will be a prophet to Nineveh, about 150 years later, but his message will not be a call to repentance; his message will be a pronouncement of the city's, and the nation's, impending doom.

⁹ Matthew 28:19; Mk 16:15.

The LORD speaks to Jonah and tells him to arise and go to Nineveh, capital city of Assyria, and to call the city (and, thus, the nation) to repentance¹⁰. The Assyrian Empire is the World's reigning super power, having risen to its position of dominance about the time of the division of Israel into Northern and Southern Kingdoms by Jeroboam I. Assyria is a cruel, malignant, enemy which has been progressively conquering and destroying the Northern Kingdom, almost since its beginning. The Assyrians are also a people of almost unbelievable ferocity and cruelty. According to Herbert Lockyer, "The people gloated that 'space failed for [the] corpses of their enemies. They made 'pyramids of human heads.' Pillars were covered with the flayed skins of their rivals"¹¹."

What the Lord tells Jonah makes absolutely no sense to him: in the first place, he (and everyone else in the Northern Kingdom) hates Assyria; and, in the second place, for him to go to Nineveh would surely be to die, and probably in a horrible form of death. Thus, Jonah was called by God to go preach in, and prolong the life of, the all-powerful, unbelievably cruel, enemy nation which was in the process of gradually exterminating his own nation.

Small wonder then that, in a human sense, Jonah doesn't welcome the assignment; in fact, he decides to run as far as he can go--in the opposite direction ("from the presence of the LORD")¹². He travels to Joppa, buys a ticket, boards a ship bound for Tarshish, and they set sail westward, away from Nineveh.

NOTE: The location of Tarshish cannot be known with certainty. It was probably as far away from Nineveh as Jonah believed that he could sail with safety. Many believe it to have been Tartessus, in what is now Spain (not to be confused with Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul the apostle, in Cilicia--now southern Turkey)¹³. This would have been the very edge of the known World--literally as far as one could go in the opposite direction from Nineveh, according to the knowledge of the time, without passing through the Strait of Gibraltar and "falling off" the Earth.

2. Into the Storm. (1:4-6)

Running from God and resisting his will is never an easy trip on a smooth road; but Jonah's rough experience of it is extreme. There is smooth sailing at first as the ship sails westward, and Jonah goes to sleep. Then the Lord sends a mighty wind that threatens to sink the ship, the sailors dump the cargo overboard and pray

¹⁰ Nineveh was founded by Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah, in the early centuries after the Great Flood. The city was built among the Assyrians (the people descended from Asshur, son of Shem). The King James margin reads, "He [Nimrod] went forth into Assyria and builded Nineveh...."

¹¹ Lockyer, Herbert: "All the Men of the Bible," "Nahum," p 251.

¹² We cannot go far enough to escape the presence of the LORD; see Ps 139:7-13.

¹³ "Tarshish" is a Phoenician word meaning "a smelting plant or refinery" of metals from ore. What is now Spain was the Pittsburgh of the ancient World.

to their various pagan gods, but it doesn't help. The captain wakes Jonah, rebukes him for sleeping during such a crisis, and asks him to pray to **his** God¹⁴. Whether or not Jonah prayed for the storm to cease is not recorded; but, if he did, it didn't work.

3. God Loads the Dice. (1:7-10)

There was a common superstitious belief in the ancient and medieval world that when bad things happened, it was because of someone's bad deeds (and, in this case, it was true). Casting lots, something akin to rolling dice, as a means of divination was also a common practice. Prayer hasn't worked, so the frantic sailors decide to cast lots to see whose wickedness is the cause of the storm. God loads the dice, so that the lot falls on Jonah, who confesses. He declares that he serves the LORD (*YHWH*), the God (*Elohim*) of Heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land; and he tells them that he is sinning by running from this Almighty God.

4. Over the Side with Jonah. (1:11-16)

Jonah volunteers to be thrown over the side in order to save the ship, but the crew is reluctant to do this¹⁵. Instead, they row hard for the shore; but the wind is against them, and they cannot overcome it. Finally, the pagan sailors cry out to Jonah's God, *YHWH*, begging Him to forgive them for what they are about to do, and they throw Jonah over the side¹⁶. Immediately, the storm ceases, and the sailors are believers. They offer sacrifices and make vows to *YHWH*, and one wonders if they kept those vows; perhaps we can meet them in Heaven and listen to their stories of that terrible storm.

5. "Out of the Belly of Hell": Enter the Great Fish. (1:17-2:10)

The lord prepares a "great fish," and sends it to swallow Jonah, who spends three days and three nights in the fish's belly, which Jonah refers to as "the belly of hell." The Hebrew word rendered "hell" in 2:2 is *sheol*, which can also be translated as "grave." There is enormous symbolism here, but for now we will press on with Jonah's misadventure, and deal with the symbolism in some detail in Part IV¹⁷. Jonah describes going into the raging sea and sinking to the depths, entangled in

¹⁴ Isn't it interesting that Jonah, a type of Christ, was still sleeping, in spite of the violent storm, frantic activity, and screaming of the crew? See Matthew 8:23-25; Mk 4:35-38; Lk 8:22-25.

¹⁵ Here we see another way in which Jonah is a type of Christ: he offered up his life in order to save the others. The pagan sailors were reluctant to throw him overboard, foreshadowing Pilate's reluctance to crucify Jesus (vv12-13). In addition to this, the sailors apparently recognized the reality of *YHWH* as did the centurion supervising the crucifixion, and vowed to serve him (v 16).

¹⁶ It vexes me that those pagan sinners (and a great many others) knew how to pronounce this unique name of our *YHWH*, and yet we, his people, cannot be certain. If you are not sure what I mean by this, see "Notes on the Names of God" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

¹⁷ "Jonah as a 'Type' of Christ," Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

sea weed; as his "soul faint[s] within him" he cries out to YHWH, promises to do better, and the LORD causes the fish to vomit out Jonah onto the beach.

NOTE: There are some really interesting things in this brief passage, including the following:

a. The first and last verses of Chapt 2 are written in the third person; all the rest of the chapter is written in the first person and past tense, as Jonah tells of his experience.

b. In v 6 Jonah speaks of having been brought up "from corruption," suggesting that he died in the sea (or within the fish) and was restored to life.

c. In v 6 he also speaks of going down in the sea "to the bottoms of the mountains." This appears to be a supernatural revelation, almost hidden in this passage in its understatement, because the fact that there are mountain ranges rising from the sea floor, thousands of feet down, was known but to God until very recent times. Man can only free-dive (i.e. without breathing equipment) to a maximum depth of about 100 feet (and this is exceptional); not until the development of deep-sea exploration vehicles in the 20th Century did man know of these mountains. What we call "islands" in the oceans are merely the peaks of undersea mountains, rising from the sea floor to various heights above sea level.

6. Jonah's Second Chance. (3:1-4)

With Jonah chastened and "slapped back to parade rest," the Lord gives him, a second time, his orders to go to Nineveh, and tells Jonah what to say (vv 1-2). This time, Jonah obeys, and what follows seems to me to be at least as miraculous as the episode of the great fish. Nineveh was not only an extremely hostile and dangerous place for Jonah to appear, but it was also probably the World's largest city. It was huge--a city "of three days journey" (about 60 miles), which probably refers to its circumference. Its walls were impregnable: they were 100 feet high, and wide enough at the top that three chariots (some say four) could drive on it abreast. Built into the walls were 1,500 watch towers, each 200 feet high¹⁸. The defensive effectiveness of the walls was greatly multiplied by the fact that they were surrounded by a series of rivers and canals. Although the inner, walled fortress was only three miles long and about 1 1/2 miles wide, what the ancient Hebrews referred to as Nineveh was, like modern New York City, actually a cluster of walled cities. The entire city complex was so huge that it will probably

¹⁸ These dimensions and statistics are taken from the works of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus of Sicily, also known as Diodorus Cronus, (90-30 BC), and quoted by the great commentator, Matthew Henry (1662-1714). Other authorities differ concerning Nineveh's dimensions; but two things are universally accepted: it was huge; and it seemed impregnable.

never be completely excavated, partly because parts of it are covered with cemeteries and a populated village¹⁹.

Had not the Lord gone before him to prepare the hearts of the Assyrians, Jonah would have been as ineffective as if one of us went, unannounced, into Tokyo, Bangkok, Calcutta or any other great, teeming, foreign city, one with which we were at war, shouting "repent or perish." Without miraculous preparation, no one would have paid any attention to him and, if street criminals didn't murder him for his possessions (or just for the fun of it), he would probably have been quickly executed as a public nuisance. Ah, but the Lord **has** gone before him, supernaturally, and he is apparently expected. As he walks through the city "a day's journey" he prophesies, saying that the people have 40 days to repent; if they don't repent, he tells them, the city will be conquered and destroyed²⁰.

NOTE: "Slapped back to parade rest" is a Marine Corps metaphor that I have always thought to be particularly eloquent. "Parade rest" is a position in formation more restful than "attention," but not as relaxed as in "at ease"; it is often used when the troops are to receive instruction. They cannot move, except for the head; hands are clasped behind them, at the small of the back, and eyes are to the front, on the leader. They are strictly under control, and ready to listen. "Slapped back to parade rest," means the application of on-the-spot correction, putting an "out-of-line" subordinate back in his proper place; it may be in the form of verbal rebuke alone, or it may include something physical for emphasis. The metaphor is usually used with reference to correction of insubordination or a bad attitude.

7. The Assyrians Repent. (3:5-10)

A cloud of conviction seems to settle over the great city and the people are broken, "from the greatest of them even to the least of them." This is clearly supernatural; it appears that all Jonah had to do was to show up and do a little half-hearted preaching and prophesying.

The people "believed God" and repented²¹. The people are led in their correct response by their king, who sets the example, lays aside his royal robe, and puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes. He publishes a proclamation to the people, calling on them to follow his example, and to fast (even the animals are to fast) and pray. He

¹⁹ Unger, Merrill F. in Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Nineveh," 3rd Edition: Chicago, Moody Press, 1966.

²⁰ Verse 4 is not clear as to the meaning of "enter into the city a day's journey"; to enter into the city and walk 20 miles straight ahead would have taken him all the way to the other end of the city (which was approximately 20 miles long and 12 miles wide). It probably means that he walked, preaching as he went, a total of 20 miles in various directions, inside the city.

²¹ Verse 5 tells us that step one in the great reformation was that the people of Nineveh "believed God." This is a thing at which the children of Israel repeatedly failed in the Exodus, and it got them in trouble each time (e.g. Nu 14:11).

calls on them to "turn every one from his evil way"; significantly, the king calls on them to forsake violence, for the violence and cruelty of the Assyrians are notorious, and he has been the leader of it. The king and his people repent, God is satisfied, and the city is saved--for now.

8. Jonah's Unbelievable Sulk. (4:1-5)

Rather than rejoicing at the amazing triumph of his preaching and prophesying, Jonah is displeased "exceedingly" and extremely angry. He had not come to lead them to repentance, but to announce their doom. He had not anticipated seeing them react with righteousness; he had looked forward to seeing their destruction. He says to the LORD something like, "I told you that if I came here something like this would happen!" and he goes out of the city, builds a crude little brush arbor, and sits down to watch. He hasn't given up hope that the Lord will change his mind and destroy Nineveh with fire from Heaven. But all he sees is the Assyrians, happily adjusting to their newfound joy in the Lord. They are rejoicing, but Jonah is just sulking and suffering from the heat. He goes out of the city, builds a crude "booth" (brush arbor), and sits under it; but it gives him poor shade from the hot Sun.

9. God's Illustrated Lecture. (4:6-9)

The LORD God "prepares" a gourd vine to cover Jonah's brush arbor, and he is more comfortable²². His mood improves. But then the Lord prepares a supernatural worm to destroy Jonah's supernatural vine, and prepares a supernatural hot wind to make Jonah even more miserable. He wants to die. Then the LORD rebukes him and points out the wrongness of his reactions, but Jonah's nasty attitude is **completely** out of control; he--unbelievably--talks back to God! This is the most amazing question-and-answer session in human history!

10. A Lesson in Divine Compassion. (4:10-11)

The Lord, patiently, points out to Jonah that he is upset over the loss of his vine, which he did nothing to bring about or deserve, and asks a rhetorical question. Should not the LORD have compassion and forgiveness for the people of Nineveh, who have repented, and who include more than 60,000 who "cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand²³?" We are not told how Jonah reacted to this; in fact, we are not told anything else at all about Jonah and his ministry--this is where the book ends.

²² "Prepared" here in v 6 (and in vv 7 and 8 following) is the same word, both in Hebrew and English, as that used in referring to the great fish in 1:17; they were all created supernaturally, it appears, to serve a temporary purpose in getting Jonah's attention.

²³ This figure of more than 60,000 probably refers to innocent children. If so, the total population may have been more than 1,000,000. Interestingly, God also mentions the vast amount of livestock which He would not wish to destroy; He, after all, attends the funeral of every sparrow.

One hopes that his attitude improved, and that he, himself, knew the joy of repentance and forgiveness that he had brought to the people of Nineveh. But we will have to wait until we get to Heaven to find out how his story ended; at this point he completely disappears from history.

***NOTE:** As we have seen in the introductory material, it appears that Jonah remained at Nineveh, as God's spokesman, for the rest of his life, died and was buried there.*