



Jonah

The story of Jonah is one of the best loved stories of the Old Testament. God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) and call them to repentance. Jonah was, to say the least, reluctant and fled in the opposite direction. God caused a storm to arise so that, eventually, Jonah recognized he needed to be thrown overboard. This caused the storm to cease and Jonah to be swallowed by a large fish. In the belly of the fish Jonah prayed to God for help. The fish regurgitated Jonah and he continued on to Nineveh where he called the people to repentance. They repented and Jonah was upset with God. Outside of the city he sat down and waited for God to wreak vengeance on the city, which didn't happen because of their repentance. Jonah was angry and remonstrated with God. God caused a plant to grow to shadow him from the sun and then killed it. Jonah was upset again. The book ends with a question from God to Jonah about whether he was right to be merciful or not.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 8 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-4; 3.4-4.11



Genre

Prophecy (with a difference)



Anything tricky?

The tricky element of this book is how to read it. It has various features that feel 'fairy tale' like: a miraculous storm; a fish large enough to swallow someone but keep them alive; cattle that repent with dust cloth and ashes; a miraculous plant that grows and dies in a night. At the same time the story has a lot of elements that ring true, especially Jonah's reluctance to do what God asks and his anger that God didn't smite the people of Nineneveh.



Inspiring quotes

"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."
(Jonah 1.9)

⁵The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head ⁶at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lordmy God.
(Jonah 2.5-6)

¹⁰Then the Lordsaid, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"
(Jonah 4.10-11)



About the Author

No one knows

What do we know about him?

Nothing



About the times

The problem is that no one can even agree when Jonah was written. Some think it is early (around the time of the eighth century bc); others that it is much later (in the fifth century bc, so after the return from exile). If the later fifth century date is right (which it may not be), the added wrinkle is that Nineveh was destroyed in the seventh century bc, in other words, two centuries earlier. This would add another spin to the story.

What were people feeling?

Hard to say as it is hard to work out when it was either set or written.



Look out for...

What God told Jonah to say and what he actually said.

The multiple moments of comedy throughout the book.

The deep questions about mercy and forgiveness beneath the entertaining exterior.



How is it structured?

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 1.1-17 | Jonah's call and flight |
| 2.1-10 | Jonah's prayer from the belly of a fish |
| 3.1-10 | Jonah's reluctant message of repentance |
| 4.1-11 | Jonah's lesson about the goodness of God. |



What kind of Book is it?

Prophecy with a twist. This is a story about a prophet (a bit like those found in 1 and 2 Kings). The twist is that Jonah was a terrible prophet – reluctant, grumpy and easily upset. In contrast, the people (all non-Israelites) with whom he engaged, behave impeccably, from the sailors on the ship to Tarshish, to the cows in Nineveh. As such it throws up multiple questions for us to reflect on.



What could this mean for me?

One of the themes of Jonah is what happens when we disagree with God, especially when God is merciful and we would like him not to be. Reflect on who you would find it hard for God to forgive.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Jonah comes across as grumpy from beginning to end. Have a go at defending him and see if you succeed.
- The thought of speaking to the people of Nineveh – let alone forgiving them – clearly made Jonah's stomach churn. Who would you feel like that about if God asked you to go to them with a message?
- The real heart of the message of Jonah is in chapter 4 and the conversation between God and Jonah about God's mercy. The whole book ends with a question. Do you imagine that Jonah ended up agreeing with God or not in the end?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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