

# **Book of Jonah**

## **Lesson 1**

Welcome to the study of the Book of Jonah!

This Old Testament book describes at least part of the ministry of a prophet called “Jonah,” the only prophet who attempted to run away from God. Jonah, whose name means “dove,” lived in Gath-hepher, located just north of Nazareth, during the reign of Jeroboam II in the eighth century B.C., when Hosea and Amos were also prophesying.

Elijah and Elisha were Jonah’s predecessors, and like Jonah, were called to minister not only to Israel, but also to Gentiles in surrounding countries. The purpose of the Book of Jonah was to encourage all God’s people to extend mercy to the nations of the world, something they were not at all inclined to do.

Some of the key truths to emerge from this book are that

- God calls His people to seek the repentance of the nations.
- God delights in showing mercy to repentant Gentiles.
- God’s people will suffer His displeasure if they fail to extend His mercy to the nations.

As you prepare to study, take a moment to thank God for His mercy to you and to ask Him for courage to proclaim His mercy and love to a world sorely in need of repentance and reconciliation to Him.

## Overview

1. There are several types of Old Testament literature. To learn more about them, refer to a dictionary or other resource to define the following:
  - A. Allegory
  - B. Midrash
  - C. Parable
  - D. Historical narrative
  
2. Keep the above definitions in mind as you read the entire book. Also read Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32.
  - A. Which of the definitions best describes the Book of Jonah? Why?

B. List and briefly describe the main characters in the story.

C. List some of the main themes or principles you noticed from your reading of this book.

## Jonah Flees from the Lord

3. Read Jonah 1:1-3.
  - A. What comes to Jonah, son of Amittai (whose name means “my true one”)?
  - B. State the mandate.
  - C. Why is this order given?
  - D. What is Jonah’s response to the command? Where does he decide to go?
  - E. Consult a resource to locate Tarshish and Nineveh. What do the locations of these two places suggest about Jonah’s intentions?

F. Nineveh was the capital city of a powerful neighboring Gentile nation. Why do you think Jonah may be loath to go there?

4. Read Jonah 1:4-7.

A. What does God do in response to Jonah's attempt to run away?

B. What is the sailors' emotional reaction?

C. What two things do the sailors do to try to survive the tempest?

D. In contrast to the sailors, what does Jonah do?

E. How does the ship's captain react to Jonah's behavior? What, if anything, do you find positive in the captain's conduct? Please explain.

5. Read Jonah 1:7-10 and Proverbs 16:33 and 18:18.
  - A. From Jonah 1:7, what method do the sailors use to identify the party responsible for the calamity enveloping them?
  - B. What do Proverbs 16:33 and 18:18 reveal about this method?
  - C. Who is identified as responsible for the misfortune?
  - D. From Jonah 1:8, what questions do the sailors ask Jonah to help them understand the reason for their predicament?
  - E. How does Jonah answer their questioning?
  - F. Why does Jonah's response (1:9) terrify the crew?

G. From Jonah 1:10

- (1) What else do the sailors ask Jonah?
  
- (2) What has Jonah already told them that clearly reveals his defiance of the Lord?

### **The Beginning of Repentance**

6. Read Jonah 1:11-12.

- A. Since the sea is becoming increasingly rough, what else do the sailors ask Jonah?
  
- B. What does Jonah tell them to do?
  
- C. How does Jonah's reply
  - (1) acknowledge his responsibility for their danger?
  
  - (2) illustrate the first step of repentance?



(2) What happens to the raging sea? What does this illustrate about the nature of God?

(3) What effect does this have upon the sailors? What do they do?

F. From Jonah 1:17:

(1) What does the Lord do?

(2) Is the Lord finished with Jonah? Why or why not?

(3) Do you think it's possible to survive in a great fish for three days and nights? Why or why not?



8. Read Psalm 139:1-12.

A. What does the psalmist David express about the presence of the Lord?

B. How does this truth comfort and/or challenge you? Why?

C. Read Romans 8:38-39. How can this truth encourage those who are having trouble, even when the hardship is the result of their own disobedience?

## Historical Evidence for Jonah

*The following information was taken from a webpage compiled by historian Dr. Richard Riss. The webpage is no longer online.*

Many people believe that the account of Jonah given in the Bible is legendary, since even if there were a fish big enough to swallow a man, certainly no man would be able to survive three days in its digestive tract and then escape to the outside world. However, Jesus referred to this as an historical event, and even pointed to it as a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection.

There are several documented accounts of people who have been swallowed by whales and large fish and have lived to tell about it, even after several days. One species of fish, the "Sea Dog" (*Carcharodon carcharias*), is found in all warm seas, and can reach a length of 40 feet. In 1758, a sailor fell overboard from a boat in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by a sea dog. The captain of the vessel ordered a cannon on the deck to be fired at the fish, which vomited up the sailor alive and unharmed after it was struck.<sup>1</sup>

Sperm whales can swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter. Entire skeletons of sharks up to sixteen feet in length have been found in them. In February of 1891, James Bartley, a sailor aboard the whaling ship "Star of the East," was swallowed by a whale near the Falkland Islands. He was within the whale for more than forty-eight hours, and after he was found inside the whale, which had been harpooned and brought aboard the whaling ship, it took him two weeks to recover from the ordeal. Sir Francis Fox wrote about this as follows:

Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not from lack of air. He remembers the sensation of being thrown out of the boat into the sea.... He was then encompassed by a great darkness and he felt he was slipping along a smooth passage of some sort that seemed to move and carry him forward.

The sensation lasted but a brief time and then he realized he had more room. He felt about him and his hands met a slimy substance that seemed to shrink from his touch. It finally dawned upon him that he had been swallowed by the whale.... He could easily breathe; but the heat was terrible. It was not of a scorching, stifling nature, but it seemed to open the pores of his skin and draw out his vitality.... His skin where it was exposed to the gastric juice—face, neck and hands—was bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment...and never recovered its natural appearance...though otherwise, his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience.<sup>2</sup>

Another individual, Marshall Jenkins, was swallowed by a Sperm Whale in the South Seas. The Boston Post Boy, October 14, 1771, reported that an Edgartown whaling vessel struck a whale, and that after the whale had bitten one of the boats in two, it took Jenkins in its mouth and went under the water with him. After returning to the surface, the whale vomited him on to the wreckage of the broken boat much bruised but not seriously injured.

There is, of course, a great deal of historical and archaeological evidence for the ministry of Jonah in Nineveh. Prominent among the divinities of ancient Assyria was Dagan, a creature part man and part fish. This was sometimes represented as an upright figure, with the head of a fish above the head of a man, the open mouth of the fish forming a miter as the man's sacred headdress, and the feet of a man extending below the tail of the fish. In other cases, the body of a man was at right angles to the conjoined body of a fish. Images of this fish-god were found guarding the entrance to the palace and temple in the ruins of Nineveh, and they appear on ancient Babylonian seals in a variety of forms.

Berosus, a Babylonian historian, writing in the fourth century B.C., recorded the early traditions concerning the origin of the worship of this fish-man. According to the earliest tradition, the very beginning of civilization in Chaldea and Babylonia was under the direction of a person,

part man and part fish, who came up out of the sea. During Jonah's time, the people of Nineveh believed in a divinity who sent messages to them by a person who rose out of the sea, as part fish and part man, and they would undoubtedly have been very receptive to Jonah's ministry if he had been vomited out of a fish. H. Clay Trumbull wrote of this as follows:

What better heralding, as a divinely sent messenger to Nineveh, could Jonah have had, than to be thrown up out of the mouth of a great fish, in the presence of witnesses, say, on the coast of Phoenicia, where the fish-god was a favorite object of worship?

The recorded sudden and profound alarm of the people of an entire city at his warning was most natural, because of the coincidence of this miracle with their religious beliefs and expectations.<sup>3</sup>

Berosis gives the name of the Assyrian fish-god as "Oannes," while he mentions the name "Odacon" as that of one of the avatars of Oannes. Since the name Dagan appears frequently in the Assyrian records from earlier dates, and no trace has been found in them of the name "Oannes," it is possible that this name is a reference to Jonah, as the supposed manifestation of the fish-god himself. The name Oannes for Jonah appears in the Septuagint and in the New Testament with the addition of "I" before it (Ioannes). However, according to Dr. Herman V. Hilprecht, the eminent Assyriologist, in the Assyrian inscriptions the "J" of foreign words becomes "I," or disappears altogether. Hence Joannes as the Greek representation of Jonah would appear in Assyrian either as Ioannes or as Oannes. Therefore, in his opinion, Oannes would be a regular Greco-Babylonian writing for Jonah.<sup>4</sup>

The preservation of the name "Yunas" or "Jonah" at the ruins of Nineveh also confirms the historicity of the Jonah story. As soon as modern discoverers unearthed the mound that had been known for centuries by the name of "Neby Yunas," they found beneath it the ruined palaces of the kings of Nineveh.

<sup>1</sup> Ambrose John Wilson, "The Sign of the Prophet Jonah and Its Modern Confirmations," *The Princeton Theological Review* 25 (1927): p. 638.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 636.

<sup>3</sup> H. Clay Trumbull, "Jonah In Nineveh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11 (1892), p. 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.