

# Through the Bible Book by Book

## Old Testament

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### Jonah

**Theme:** The book of Jonah is peculiar among the prophets in that it contains no direct message to Israel, the message of the prophet being addressed to the Ninevites. But though not directly stated, there is a great lesson in this book for the Jewish nation; namely, that GOD is the GOD, not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles, and that it is the duty of His chosen people to bring the light of Divine revelation to them.

Thus the book of Jonah is a rebuke of the exclusiveness of the Jews who held themselves aloof from, and considered themselves superior to the Gentiles. Because of its description of a prophet's preaching to the Gentiles, Jonah has been referred to as the missionary book of the Old Testament. The theme of the book may be summed up as follows: GOD's love for the Gentiles seen in His sending of a prophet to turn them to repentance.

**Author:** Jonah was a Galilean from the town of Gath-hepher, near Nazareth. The Pharisees in CHRIST's time evidently overlooked this when they asserted that no prophet ever came from Galilee (John 7:52). He ministered to the Ten Tribes during the reign of Jeroboam II during whose reign he prophesied concerning the restoration of some Israelitish territory (II Kings 14:25-27).

When Elisha's ministry closed, his began. JESUS Himself bore witness to Jonah's personal existence, miraculous fate, and prophetic office (Matthew 12:40).

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#### **I. Jonah's First Commission, His Disobedience and Its Results (Chs. 1, 2)**

##### 1. Jonah's destination: Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and at the time of Jonah it was at the height of its pride and prosperity it had a circumference of about 54 to 60 miles, and was surrounded by a

wall a hundred feet high, so broad that three chariots could ride abreast on it.

The population must have been about one million. The walled towns of Babylon seem to have enclosed large spaces for cultivation and pasture so that they were able to stand a prolonged siege.

That Nineveh was a city of this kind is attested by the reference to its having much cattle."

## 2 Jonah's disobedience.

Many believe that Jonah's motive in disobeying GOD was a personal and selfish one - namely fear of being branded a false prophet, knowing as he did that GOD would spare the city if it repented, and its repentance would bring a result that would contradict his message of impending destruction.

Others, however, do not believe this motive strong enough to account for Jonah's flight from duty. They assert that he was inspired by patriotism, though that patriotism blinded him to mercy. Being a prophet he knew that Assyria would some day invade the land of Israel and practice on its inhabitants the cruelties for which it was noted. Therefore he chose rather to risk GOD's displeasure than to be the means of preserving a nation that would bring untold suffering on his people.

John Urquhart, a noted scholar, thus states the matter:

"Assyria had been laying her hand for some generations upon the nations on the Mediterranean coast, and it was the hand of a fierce and ferocious mastery. No considerations of pity were permitted to stand in the way of Assyrian policy. It could not afford to garrison its conquests and it practiced a plan which largely dispensed with leaving garrisons behind the Assyrian army.

There was unsparing slaughter to begin with. The kings in their inscriptions seem to gloat over the spectacle presented by the field of battle. They describe how it was covered by the corpses of the vanquished. This carnage was followed by fiendish inflictions on individual cities.

The leading men, as at Lachish when Sennacherib conquered that city, were led forth, seized by the executioners and subjected to various punishments, all of which were filled to the brim with horror. Some of the victims were held down while one of the band of torturers, who are portrayed upon the monument gloating fiendishly over their fearful work, inserts his hand into a victim's mouth, grips his tongue, and wrenches it out by the roots.

In another spot pegs are driven into the ground. To these, another victim's wrists are fixed with cords. His ankles are similarly made fast, and the man is stretched out unable to move a muscle. The executioner then applies himself to his task; and beginning at the accustomed spot, the sharp knife makes its incision, and the skin is raised inch by inch until the man is flayed alive. The skins are then stretched out upon the city walls, or otherwise disposed of, so as to terrify the people and leave behind long-enduring impressions of Assyrian vengeance.

For others long sharp poles are prepared. The sufferer, taken, like the rest, from the leading men of the city, is laid down; the sharpened end of the pole is driven in through the lower part of the chest; the pole is then raised, bearing the writhing victim aloft; it is planted in the hole dug for it and the man is left to die.

"No man in Israel was ignorant of these things, Jonah may have witnessed them. Without doubt, too, Jonah knew that Assyria, the spoiler of the nations was the appointed executioner of GOD's vengeance on the ten tribes. . . . The word of the Lord came: '**Arise, go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.**' Nineveh's cup, then, was full.

Sentence was about to be pronounced. Happier news than this, Jonah's ears had never heard. If Nineveh perished then Israel was saved! There was only one thing to be feared: GOD's mercy might arrest the smiting of GOD's justice. Jonah knew that the Lord was a merciful GOD and that if Nineveh cried unto Him, Assyria might be saved, and then Israel would perish. But what if Nineveh were left without warning? What if she and her princes were now abandoned to reap the reward of their atrocities?

"It was a choice between vengeance on him, a rebellious prophet, and vengeance on his people. He would sacrifice himself, let Nineveh perish and so save Israel! This seems to have been Jonah's purpose and the reason for his sorrow at Nineveh's escape. Paul said he was willing to be accursed - cast out from GOD's presence - if by that means Israel could be saved. It was CHRIST's resolve when He saved us; for He was made a curse for us. The Lord told us that Jonah was a type of Himself. The type may have begun here."

Compare in this connection II Kings 8:7-13, where it is recorded that Elisha wept, when, looking into the future, he saw the atrocities that an invading army would perpetrate upon his people.

### 3. Jonah's punishment

No miracle in the Bible has evoked the unbelief of scientists and the ridicule of infidels as the story of Jonah's being swallowed by a whale. The main objection against the possibility of the miracle is the fact that it is claimed that the throat of the whale is not sufficiently wide to permit the passage of a man. From the standpoint of Scripture the miracle is an established fact, its veracity being confirmed by CHRIST (Matthew 12:40).

The following quotations will show the possibility of the miracle from the natural standpoint:

"Anyone who will read Frank Bullen's '*Cruise of the Cachalot*' will have some idea of the size and habits of that mighty sea monster, the sperm whale. Mr. Bullen is an experienced whaler and speaks of what he has actually seen. He tells us in more places than one, how they caught whales of 'such gigantic proportions as over seventy feet long, with a breadth of bulk quite in proportion to such a vast length,' the head of which alone 'the skipper himself estimated to weigh fifteen tons!' And the idea of a whale's gullet being incapable of admitting any large substance, Mr. Bullen characterizes as 'a piece of crass ignorance.' He tells how on one occasion 'a shark fifteen feet in length has been found in the stomach of a sperm whale,' and adds this remarkable piece of

evidence, 'that when dying the sperm whale always ejects the contents of it's stomach.'

He tells of one full-grown whale which has been caught and killed: 'the ejected food from whose stomach was in masses of enormous size, larger than any we have yet seen on the voyage, some of them being estimated to be of the size of our hatch house' - viz. eight feet by six feet by six feet. And yet we are asked to believe that a whale could not swallow a man!" - Sydney Collett: "*All About the Bible.*"

The following is from the Springfield Leader Dec. 7, 1924. "Dr. Straton, famous New York fundamentalist, and the enemy of evolution, believes that he has discovered a man who actually - in modern times (1891) - suffered the same fate as Jonah. This man James Bartley, able British seaman and member of the whaling ship Star of the East.

In the attempt to capture a gigantic sperm whale, in a whaling expedition off the coast of Labrador, a whale upset one of the boats. The men were saved by the other boat with the exception of two; these were thought to have been drowned.

They finally succeeded in killing the whale and towed it to the shore. Then they proceeded to cut it up, and the second day after it was captured, they opened the whale's stomach, and to their amazement found one of their comrades, whom they thought drowned unconscious but still alive.

He suffered intensely afterwards but finally made a complete recovery after a long stay in a British hospital. Dr. Straton says that the account was fully investigated by one of the most careful, and painstaking journalists of Europe, M. de Parville, editor of the *Journal des Debats*, who said that the statements given by the captain and the crew of the English vessel coincided perfectly and were worthy of belief."

Note: Let the student make himself well acquainted with the above facts.

4. Jonah's prayer and deliverance (Ch. 2). In his prayer Jonah quotes copiously from the Psalms. He identifies himself with the saints of old, appropriating their experiences as recorded in the Word of GOD.

"There seems to be a strong probability that Jonah actually did die and was raised from the dead. If he actually did die, this only adds one more to the resurrections recorded in the Bible and makes Jonah a still more remarkable type of CHRIST. To those who believe in GOD, there is no difficulty in believing in the resurrection if sufficiently well attested." - Dr. Torrey.

### **III. Jonah's Second Commission, His Obedience, and Its Results (Chap. 3)**

"To grasp the significance of the events in this chapter it is necessary to know that the Ninevites worshiped the fish-god, Dagon, part human and part fish. They believed that he came out of the sea and founded their nation, and that messengers came to them from the sea from time to time. If GOD, therefore, would send a preacher to them, what more likely that He would bring His plan down to their level and send a real messenger from the sea? Doubtless great numbers saw

Jonah cast up from the sea and accompanied him to Nineveh as his witnesses and credentials.

"There are two side arguments that corroborate the historicity of this event.

In the first place, '*Oannes*' is the name of one of the incarnations of the fish-god, but this name with 'J' before it is the spelling for Jonas in the New Testament.

In the second place, there was for centuries an Assyrian mound named '*Yunnas*,' a corrupted Assyrian form for Jonas, and it was this mound's name that first gave the suggestion to the archaeologists that the ancient city of Nineveh might be buried beneath it. Botta associated '*Yunnas*' with Jonah, and so pushed in his spade and struck the walls of the city." - From Dr. Gray's *Christian Worker's Commentary*.

In this chapter we shall answer three questions asked by modern critics of the book of Jonah. The quotations are from Urquhart's *New Biblical Guide*.

1. Is it possible that a great heathen city like Nineveh should be so moved by the preaching of an obscure Hebrew preacher?

In answer let it be noted that Jonah preached to them at a time when they were experiencing an alarming decline of power. There was possibly an expectation of coming calamity, and the presence of a prophet who had been thrown up by a fish would be sufficient to stir the superstitious people, who believed that their GOD sent messengers from the sea.

2. But was it at all likely that the state would interfere and a royal edict be issued enjoining a prolonged fast? Was action of this kind in accord with Assyrian custom?

"It was just such a fast," says Professor Sayee, "as was ordained by Esarhaddon II, when the northern foe was gathering against the Assyrian empire, and prayers were raised to the sun-god to 'remove the sin' of the king and people. 'From this day,' runs the inscription, 'from the third day of the month even the month Iyyar, to the fifteenth day of Ab of this year, for these hundred days (and) hundred nights the prophets have proclaimed (a period of supplication).' The prophets of Nineveh had declared that it was necessary to appease the anger of heaven, and the king accordingly issued his proclamation enjoining the solemn service of humiliation for one hundred days."

3. Was it the Assyrian custom to cause even the beasts to share in the humiliation (Jonah 3:7)?

"Herodotus has answered that question long ago. He tells us that, when the Persians were in Greece, a battle was fought in which a general, endeared to the whole army, was slain. 'On their arrival at the camp,' says Herodotus, 'the death of Masistius spread a general sorrow through the army, and greatly afflicted Mardonius himself. They cut off the hair from themselves, their horses, and their beasts of burden, and all Boeotia resounded with their cries and lamentations. The man they had lost was, next to Mardonius, most esteemed by the Persians and their king. Thus the barbarians in their manner honored the deceased Masistius.'"

#### **IV. Jonah's Complaint and GOD's Answer (Ch. 4)**

Jonah still had a lingering hope that the city might be destroyed (v. 5). He was still influenced by a misguided patriotism that had blinded him to mercy. GOD dealt gently with His servant and by an object lesson rebuked the petulant and vindictive spirit of the prophet. Jonah was willing to spare a worthless gourd yet was angry because GOD had spared a great city and its teeming population. If Jonah was willing to spare the gourd should not GOD spare Nineveh?

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