

# LEARNING FROM SAILORS

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The Reluctant Prophet, Pt. 2: Jonah 1:3-17

September 17, 2023

## Rough seas make good sailors

<sup>1</sup> *The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup> “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”*

<sup>3</sup> *But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.*

<sup>4</sup> *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.*

*But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. <sup>6</sup> The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.”*

<sup>7</sup> *Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.*

<sup>8</sup> *So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”*

<sup>9</sup> *He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”*

<sup>10</sup> *This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)*

<sup>11</sup> *The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”*

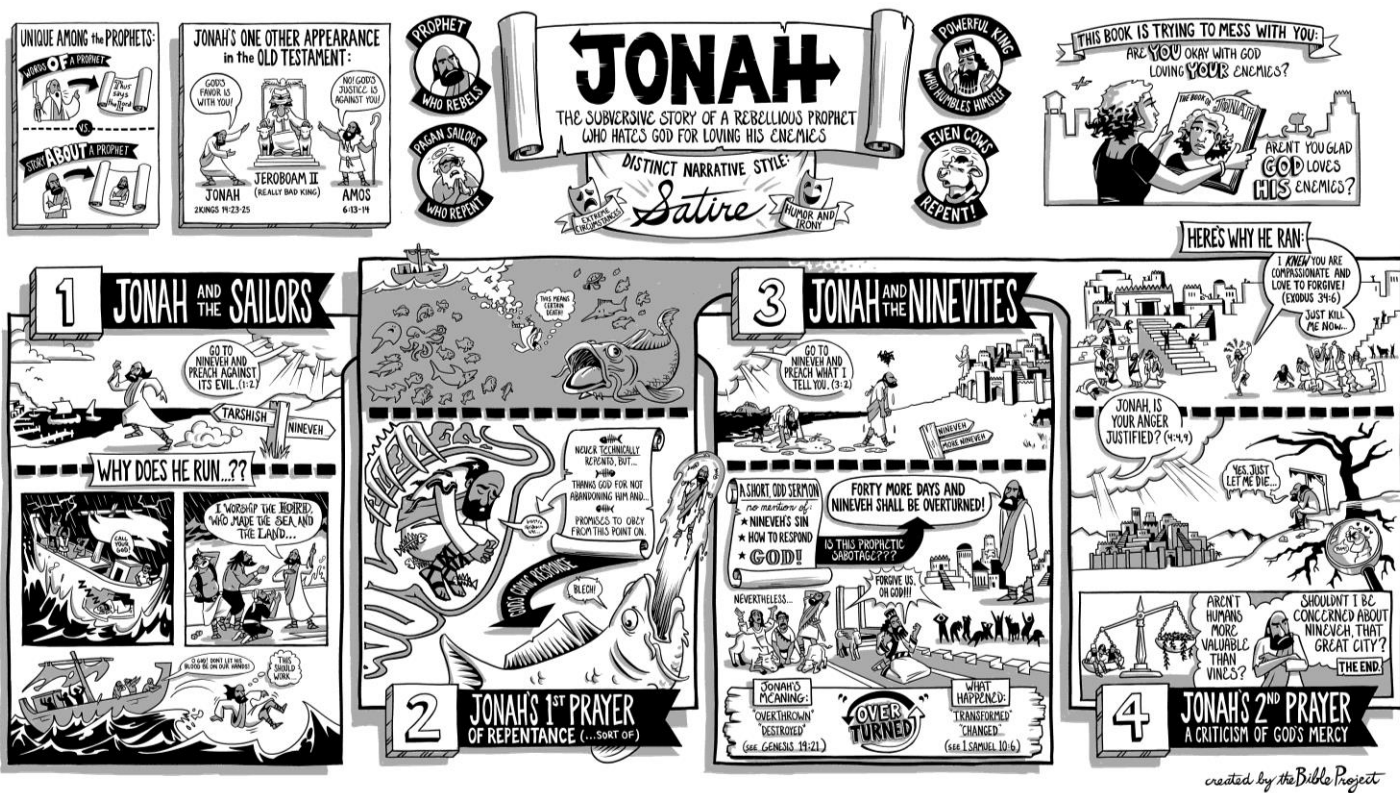
<sup>12</sup> *“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”*

<sup>13</sup> *Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. <sup>14</sup> Then they cried to the LORD, “O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.” <sup>15</sup> Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. <sup>16</sup> At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.*

<sup>17</sup> *But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.*

## Jonah 1

1. God is at work in this classic “running away” story (see Luke 15 and *Huckleberry Finn*)
2. Phoenician sailors would not be impressed with Jonah’s Hebrew heritage or sailing skills
3. “What have you done?” is an exclamation, not a question
4. The story changes when God’s name changes



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## The first hints of the gospel

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Jonah 1

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Jonah 1

1. God provides the “pig pen” circumstances
2. The sailors know they must act in alignment with the character of the God of the storm
3. Jonah testifies to the sovereignty and grace of God
4. The sailors do experience God’s power, but is this authentic faith?

## Learning with the sailors (and also from Jonah!)

1. Jonah should have been at work during the storm, but praying and not in the sailors' way

*But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. <sup>6</sup> The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."*

Jonah 1

Doug's question: When did Jonah begin to care about the lives of the lives of the Gentile sailors?

Application: In what ways is the church asleep today?

2. Isaiah looks forward to the second Jonah

<sup>4</sup> *"Listen to me, my people;  
hear me, my nation:  
The law will go out from me;  
my justice will become a light to the nations.*

<sup>5</sup> *My righteousness draws near speedily,  
my salvation is on the way,  
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.  
The islands will look to me  
and wait in hope for my arm.*

Isaiah 51

3. Jonah does trust in the character of Yaweh and experiences grace for himself

<sup>10</sup> *This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)*

<sup>11</sup> *The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"*

<sup>12</sup> *"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."*

Jonah 1 (see Jonah 4:1-3; Exodus 34:6-7)

## Resources for further study

The Bible Project team does a great job of introducing Jonah at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-jonah/>

Spurgeon has five sermons on Jonah at this Monergism site: <https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/jon.htm>

Doug's Logos library includes a helpful Bible study by Paul Mackrell (Day One Publishing, 2007)

Erik Manning has an interesting discussion of the scientific questions around the Jonah sign/miracle at <https://crossexamined.org/the-mind-blowing-meaning-behind-the-sign-of-jonah/>

Doug likes the ESV Study Bible's introduction to Jonah included below.

## ESV Study Bible introduction:

### *Theme*

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for “us” (Jonah and the Israelites) but also for “them” (the pagan sailors and Ninevites).

### *Purpose, Occasion, and Background*

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 B.C. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans (2 Kings 13:3). But because of the Lord's great compassion (2 Kings 13:4, 23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression (2 Kings 13:5). This deliverance came through a “savior” (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810–783 B.C.), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798–782 B.C.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Though Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was “according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God's providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Arameans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire (where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy). Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771–754 B.C.). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah's call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745–727 B.C.) would gain control and reestablish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727–722) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was

not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

### *Genre*

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an *allegory*, using fictional figures to symbolize some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God's mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as a historical and not a fictional figure (see the specific historical and geographical details in 1:1–3; 3:2–10; 4:11; cf. also 2 Kings 14:25). Another proposal is that the book is a *parable* to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The book of Jonah has all the marks of a *prophetic narrative*, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book (“the word of the LORD came to”) is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) and is used in other prophetic narratives as well (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish “provides transportation” for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact “appoint” the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matt. 12:41).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly *didactic* (as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm); that is, the story is told *to teach the reader key lessons*. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

### *Key Themes*

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to “us” but also available for “them.” This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion: (1) Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. (2) The story ends with the question, “Should I not pity Nineveh ...?” (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that “perished” (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not “perish.”

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God's sovereign control over events on the earth
2. God's determination to get his message to the nations
3. The need for repentance from sin in general
4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular
5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent

## *History of Salvation Summary*

Jonah's rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:47). (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.)

### *Literary Features*

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book (see below).

The main category for the book is satire—the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the book of Jonah: (1) the *object of attack* is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community (in the OT, the nation of Israel); (2) the *satiric vehicle* is narrative or story; (3) the *satiric norm* or standard by which Jonah's bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries; (4) the *satiric tone* is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure—someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important. (1) The *giantesque motif*—the motif of the unexpectedly large (e.g., the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah's eight-word sermon accomplishes). (2) A *pervasive irony* (e.g., the ironic discrepancy between Jonah's prophetic vocation and his ignominious behavior, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God). (3) *Humor*, as Jonah's behavior is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

### **The Setting of Jonah**

*c. 760 B.C.*

Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles. (2008). [\*The ESV Study Bible\*](#) (pp. 1683–1685). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.