

JONAH MEETS GOD

The Reluctant Prophet, Jonah 4:1-5

October 15, 2023

*“But Nineveh has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people
Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

Jonah 4:10-11

God reaches down to Jonah

¹⁰ *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴ *But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”*

⁵ *Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”*

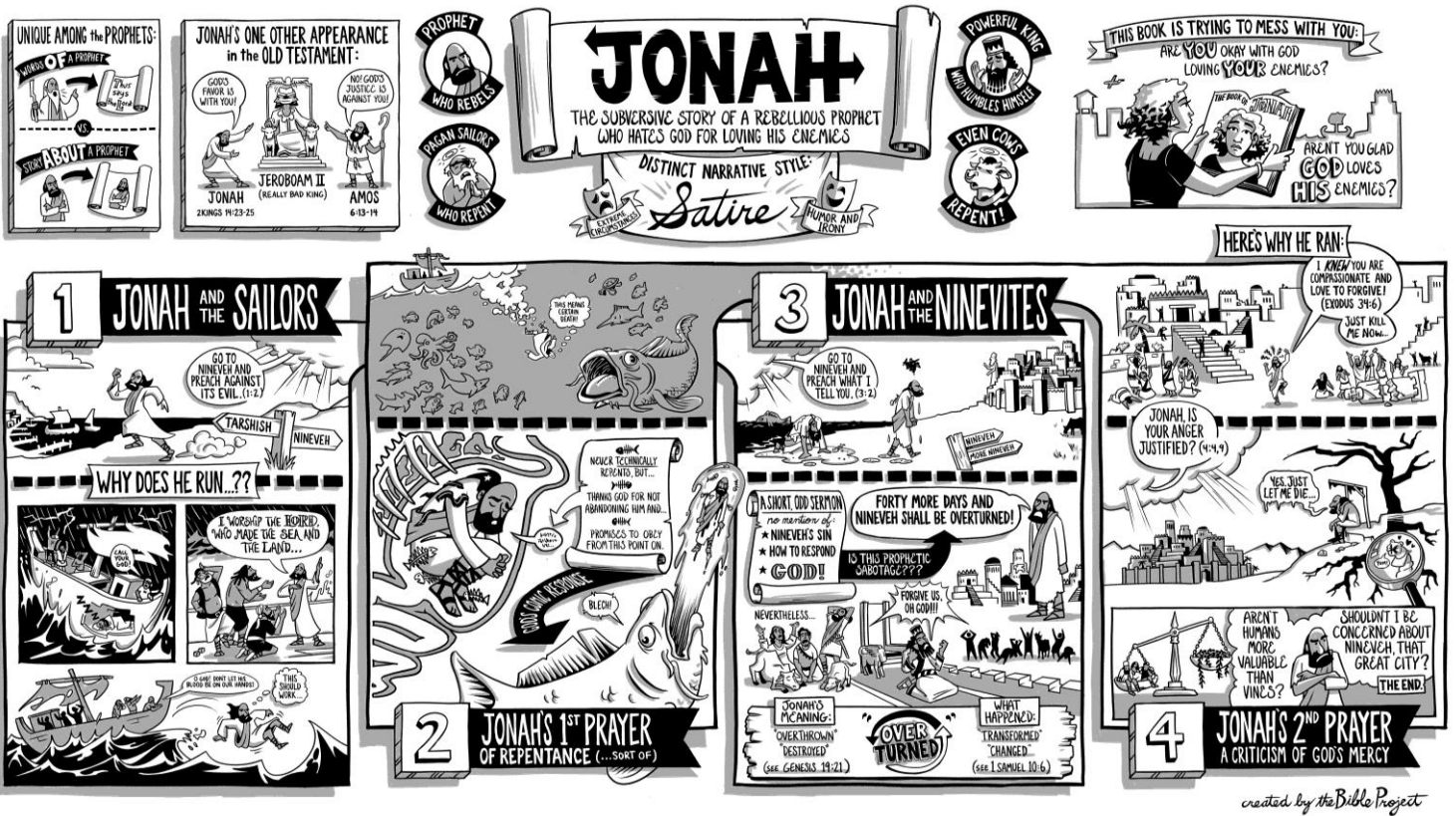
⁹ *But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”*

“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”

¹⁰ *But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

Jonah 3:10-4:11

1. Jonah’s pronouns reveal that he needs a paradigm shift, and God provides for the change in perspective
2. Jonah is not a false prophet (see Deuteronomy 18:21-22) because God’s judgment always leaves room for repentance
3. As in Genesis 3, God initiates this conversation and provides what Jonah needs



Answering God's questions

God's first question reveals Jonah's heart

⁴ But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"
Jonah 4

God's second question reveals Jonah's folly: he doesn't acknowledge God as creator or provider

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"
Jonah 4

God's third question reveals to Jonah what really moves the heart of God

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Jonah 4

Doug's final lessons from the vine, the worm and the east wind

1. Mercy triumphs over anger

²⁷ *"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

³² *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Luke 6

2. I miss God's blessing (and misunderstand the gospel) when I miss God's heart for his world (see Luke 19:41-44)

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ *Then Jesus told them this parable*

Luke 15 (remember that "this parable" is actually three parables)

¹⁰ *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

¹² *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Matthew 9

¹² *"Even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning."*

¹³ *Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.*

Joel 2 (see how Peter appeals to this passage in Acts 2)

3. The invitation to celebrate with the Father is still open!

³¹ “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

Luke 15

³⁹ [Jesus] answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

Matthew 12

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>

For Jonah 4, I recommend Spurgeon’s sermon at <https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2504.htm>

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

Sam Millen recommends Keller’s study of Jonah in *The Prodigal Prophet* (Viking, 2018) and his article at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/>

The Gospel Coalition has these articles based on Keller’s *The Prodigal Prophet*:

“Fishy Story” at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tim-keller-fishy-story/>

“Meet Jonah” at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/>

and a podcast on “The Mystery of Mercy” at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/jonah-and-the-mystery-of-mercy/>

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 in his full notes.

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.¹

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