

Book of Jonah

Title: Following the lead of the Hebrew Masoretic text, the title of the book is derived from the principal character, Jonah. Both the Septuagint (LXX), and the Latin Vulgate (Vg.), ascribe the same name.

Author – Date: The book makes no direct claim regarding authorship. Throughout the book, Jonah is repeatedly referred to in the third person, causing some to search for another author. It was not an uncommon Old Testament practice, however, to write in the third person (e.g., Exodus 11:3; 1 Sam. 12:11). Furthermore, the autobiographical information revealed within its pages clearly points to Jonah as the author. The firsthand accounts of such unusual events and experiences would be best recounted from the hand of Jonah himself. Nor should the introductory verse suggest otherwise, since other prophets such as Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah have similar openings.

All that is known about Jonah is a brief historical statement made about him in 2 Kings 14:25, which indicates that he gave a prophecy that was fulfilled during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jonah's name means "Dove," and his father's name (Amittai) means "Truthful." Jonah came from the tribe of Zebulun, one of the tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel, and he was from the village of Gath-hepher, located about two miles northeast of the city of Nazareth.

An unverifiable Jewish tradition says Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from the dead (1 Kings 17:8-24).

The purpose of Jonah's prophecy is to show the sovereignty of God at work in the life of an individual (the prophet Jonah, and his concern for His own people and that the way to avert national catastrophe is a concentrated missionary effort toward all people).

The fact that the prophecy ends with the prophet in discouragement and under God's rebuke would leave the reader discouraged. But because it is written in the third person the reader knows that the prophet wrote it after he had returned from his mission to Assyria and had favorably responded to God's rebuke. He leaves behind a record of God's dealings with him as an individual and with Assyria as a nation, and in this unique form he magnifies the power of God and obscures himself behind his message.

Jonah clearly prophesied at a very early date. (2 Kings 14:25), indicates that Jonah gave a prophecy that was fulfilled during the reign of Jeroboam II, who reigned from (793 to 752 B.C.). The prophecy was given when Assyria was becoming a great world power and imminent threat to Israel. The prophecy then, can be assigned a date in the first half of the eighth century B.C. There is no indication given as to where the prophecy originated. It gives the record of an earlier oral ministry to Assyria. Possibly Jonah wrote the words of this prophecy at his home village of Gath-hepher, after returning from the ministry to Assyria as he reflected on the ministry's success and his own personal failure.

Historical – Theological Themes: Jonah, though a prophet of Israel, is not remembered for his ministry in Israel which could explain why the Pharisees erringly claimed in Jesus' day that no prophet had come from Galilee (John 7:52). Rather, the book relates the account of his call to

preach repentance to Nineveh and his refusal to go. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and infamous for its cruelty, was a historical nemesis of Israel and Judah. The focus of this book is on that Gentile city, which was founded by Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah (Gen. 10:6-12). Perhaps the largest city in the ancient world (1:2; 3:2-3; 4:11), it was nevertheless destroyed about 136 years after the repentance of the generation in the time of Jonah's visit (612 B.C.), as Nahum prophesied (Nahum 1:1). Israel's political distaste for Assyria, coupled with a sense of spiritual superiority as the recipient of God's covenant blessing, produced a recalcitrant attitude in Jonah toward God's request for missionary service. Jonah was sent to Nineveh in part to shame Israel by the fact that a pagan city repented at the preaching of a stranger, whereas Israel would not repent though preached to by many prophets. He was soon to learn that God's love and mercy extends to all of His creatures (4:2; 10-11), not just His covenant people (Gen. 9:27; 12:3; Lev. 19:33-34; 1 Sam. 2:10; Isa. 2:2; Joel 2:28-32).

The book of Jonah reveals God's sovereign rule over man and all creation. Creation came into being through Him (1:9), and responds to His every command (1:4, 17; 2:10; 4:6-7; Mark 4:41). Jesus employed the repentance of the Ninevites to rebuke the Pharisees, thereby illustrating the hardness of the Pharisees' hearts and their unwillingness to repent (Matt. 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-32). The heathen city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a reluctant prophet, but the Pharisees would not repent at the preaching of the greatest of all prophets, in spite of overwhelming evidence that He was actually their Lord and Messiah. Jonah is a picture of Israel, who was chosen and commissioned by God to be His witness (Isa. 43:10-12; 44:8), who rebelled against His will (Exodus 32:1-4; Judges 2:11-19; Ezek. 6:1-5; Mark 7:6-9), but who has been miraculously preserved by God through centuries of exile and dispersion to finally preach His truth (Jer. 30:11; 31:35-37; Hosea 3:3-5; Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-3).

What the book of Acts is to the New Testament, the prophecy of Jonah is to the Old Testament. It shows that God has always had concern for the heathen, who are without hope apart from Him. It also shows God's concern for His people Israel. As a result of Jonah's ministry to Assyria, the Assyrian captivity of Israel was postponed over 130 years. While the prophecy makes no specific mention of Israel, it abounds in its clear testimony to the supernatural working of God in behalf of the prophet, whose life He preserved and whose desires He modified. The prophecy also shows God's working in behalf of the heathen Assyrians, who He brought to national repentance, and in behalf of the nation Israel, whose security He guaranteed and whose captivity He delayed for an additional 136 years.

Background – Setting: As a prophet to the 10 northern tribes of Israel, Jonah shares a background and setting with Amos. The nation enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity. Both Syria and Assyria were weak, allowing Jeroboam II to enlarge the northern borders of Israel to where they had been in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:23-27). Spiritually, however, it was a time of poverty; religion was ritualistic and increasing idolatrous, and justice had become perverted. Peacetime and wealth had made her bankrupt spiritually, morally, and ethically (2 Kings 14:24; Amos 4:1; 5:10-13). As a result, God was to punish her by bringing destruction and captivity from the Assyrians (in 722 B.C.). Nineveh's repentance may have been aided by the two plagues (765 and 759 B.C.), and a solar eclipse (763 B.C.), preparing them for Jonah's judgment message.

Jonah's theme is God's mercy to the individual (Jonah, a Jew), a group (the heathen sailors), the heathen world power (Assyria, a Gentile nation), and His people (Israel).