

The Big Fish and the Big, Bad City

A Study of the Book of Jonah

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Introduction

Most of us remember the story of “Jonah and the Whale” from Sunday School (actually, the Bible identifies the marine animal in question as a “big fish”). Many of us, however, have not taken a closer look at the details of the story, or a broader look at the context of the memorable event.

No one knows who authored the Book of Jonah. And scholars disagree about when the book was written. We know for certain that it was written prior to 200 B.C., as the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus makes reference to the books of the “12 prophets” of Israel, one of which is the Book of Jonah. Some believe the book was written during or after the Exile (between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C.). Commentator Desmond Alexander¹ presents a compelling argument for the possibility that Jonah was written closer to the time of the events the book reports.

The main character of the book, “Jonah of Amittai”, was a prophet of Israel at the beginning of the 8th century B.C. Jonah is given brief mention in 2 Kings 14:25, the only other place Jonah appears in the Old Testament. The significance of this seemingly minor character is underscored by the fact that Jesus refers to Jonah on two separate occasions (see Matthew 12, 16, and Luke 11).

At the beginning of the 8th century, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom – Israel; and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Jonah’s Israel was ruled by Jeroboam II, whose 42-year reign was marked by military expansion of the Northern Kingdom’s borders; and rampant injustice within them. At the same time, the nation of Assyria was undergoing rapid imperial expansion. As the Northern Kingdom’s nearest neighbors, the Assyrians represented its greatest threat. Indeed, shortly after Jonah’s lifetime, Assyria dealt a final death blow to the Northern Kingdom, scattering and enslaving its people (722 B.C.).

Against this political backdrop, we get the surprising story of Jonah: the prophet of the LORD (YHWH), God of Israel; who is sent out from Israel to preach judgment (or is it grace?) to the inhabitants of Nineveh – the capital of Assyria. This book represents God’s pointed reminder to Israel of his ultimate purpose for them – to be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6). It also prompts us, as Christians, to pay closer attention to the God of the Old Testament, and his heart of compassion not just for one people, but all people. In the LORD, YHWH, we meet the God whose love comes to perfect expression in *our* Lord, Jesus Christ.

¹ Alexander, Desmond. *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (1988, Intervarsity Press), 55.

Week 1: “The God Who Gets His Way”

Jonah 1

1. *Read Jonah 1:1-5.* From whom does Jonah hear? What does this tell us about Jonah’s special role? What is Jonah told to do? What two things are unexpected about this order?
2. How does Jonah respond to the orders? How much success does Jonah achieve in his endeavor? What forces does God have at his disposal? Is there a lesson here about choosing one’s own way over God’s? Have you ever pursued a plan or ambition that failed no matter how hard you tried?
3. What are the respective responses of Jonah, and the sailors, to the storm? What does the sailors’ response tell us about their ethnic and religious background? What concrete thing do the sailors do to try to save themselves?
Note: The Hebrew phrasing in 1:5 is ambiguous. It is normally translated, “To lighten the ship.” Literally, it reads, “to lighten it/him (that is, the sea) from upon them.” Additionally, the Hebrew word for “the sea” is Yam, which is also the proper name of the Syrian god of the sea. The author is using a deliberate play on words to capture the fact that the pagan sailors are attempting to pay tribute to Yam in the hopes he will “lighten up.”
4. *Read Jonah 1:6-10.* What does the captain tell Jonah to do? Is this something Jonah should be doing without prompting? Who might be working *through* the captain at this point? Based on the captain’s words, have appeals to *other* gods worked thus far?
5. What strategy do the sailors use to pinpoint the problem? Why do you think their strategy works? What is Jonah’s response when confronted? Should he have waited this long to make his testimony? What are the sailors starting to conclude about Jonah’s God? How do you know?
6. *Read Jonah 1:11-17.* What does Jonah propose as a solution? How does he know it will work? What do the sailors do instead? How does their character compare to that of Jonah, the “prophet of the LORD”? When the sailors comply, to whom do they pray? What is the immediate result of the sailors’ obedience? What do they do next? What has Jonah done in the lives of the sailors – in spite of himself? What does this say about God’s objective vs. that of his people?
7. What happens to Jonah next? Is the “big fish” a curse or a blessing, according to the author? Have you ever encountered circumstances that felt like a “big fish”, but turned out to be a blessing in disguise?

Week 2: “Prayer from the Gut”

Jonah 2

1. *Read Jonah 2:1-6.* Jonah uses vivid language to describe his circumstances. Do you think this is figurative, or literal, language? Is the initial tone of Jonah’s prayer negative (complaint) or positive (praise)?
2. Jonah lists some of God’s actions on his behalf – what are they? Jonah uses the past tense – as though God has *already* done these things. Is this the case? Where is Jonah right now? Do you think Jonah trusts his God? What reasons might he have for this trust?
3. *Read Jonah 2:7-10.* When Jonah was in the sea, then in the fish, what did he think was going to happen to him? In his most dire circumstances, what does Jonah remember? Where does Jonah picture his prayers going? What does this say about where Jonah thinks God lives?
4. When people turn away from God’s love, what’s the only alternative (according to Jonah)? Recalling the beginning of Jonah’s story, what do you suppose were his “alternatives” to God? What are some places you turn for comfort or happiness instead of God’s love?
5. What does Jonah promise to do? What concrete action do you think Jonah will take, once he is free of the fish?
6. The narrator makes it clear that God “provided” the fish to save Jonah; and that God commands the fish to spit Jonah onto dry land. What does this say about the relationship between God and all things? What might this mean for the circumstances of your life – even circumstances that are big and scary?
7. What does Jonah’s prayer teach us about how a person of faith responds to all things – good and bad?

Week 3: “Best. Sermon. Ever.”

Jonah 3

1. *Read Jonah 3:1-5.* What does Jonah hear? Has he heard it before? Clearly Jonah hasn't forgotten what God told him in the beginning. What do you think it means that God repeats his original command?
2. What is Jonah's message to the Ninevites? How does it compare, lengthwise, to the average sermon? How does Jonah's sermon rate in terms of effectiveness? How do you know?
3. *Read Jonah 3:6-10.* Besides the people on the streets, who else hears Jonah's message? How does he respond personally? What actions does he demand of his city? Based on his actions, does he take Jonah's sermon seriously? What outcome does the king hope for, and does he seem confident of it? What does this suggest about his perception of Jonah's God?
4. Do you think the impact of Jonah's sermon has to do with the actual words he uses? Why or why not? If the power is not coming from Jonah's words, where does it come from? How might this be a comfort to anyone called to represent God to an unbelieving world?
5. In Jonah 1 and 2, God demonstrates that he has the power to change the forces of nature. Here in Jonah 3, what else does God have the power to change?
6. What does God do following Nineveh's response to Jonah's sermon? Does this seem like a surprise? *Read Ezekiel 18:21-23.* What is God's desired response from, and toward, *all* people – even the wicked? Are there circumstances in which we might feel convicted by God's gracious response toward others? What about comforted?

Week 4: "Should I Not Love This Great City?"

Read Jonah 4

1. *Read Jonah 4:1-4.* According to Jonah, why did he disobey God the first time? Jonah uses a very familiar list of descriptive terms that first appear in Exodus 34:6. This phrase forms a commonly-used extended name for God. It captures God's most praiseworthy attributes. Does it sound as though Jonah is praising God here? In the past, the Israelites have been overjoyed that God is "gracious and compassionate." Why? Why isn't Jonah pleased that God is "gracious and compassionate" now?
2. What does God ask Jonah? Does God expect an answer, or is the answer implied in the question? Can you think of any recent times in which, if God spoke out loud, he might have asked you the same question?
3. *Read Jonah 4:5-9.* Jonah waits outside Nineveh, hoping to see the city burn under God's judgment. As he waits, the sun burns his head. God provides a vine that gives relief from the burning. What happens to Jonah's vine? At various points in the Bible, God refers to Israel as a "vine". Consider the following passages:

You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. (Psalm 80:8,14-16)

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isaiah 5:7)

I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21)

What different things might God be attempting to show Jonah through this vine? What was God's original purpose for Israel, his chosen people? What does he communicate will happen to Israel if they fail to live out God's intended purpose? Now consider Jesus' words in John 15:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1,5)

For what greater purpose does God claim us, call us, and bless us? Based on the story of Jonah's vine, what happens to God's gifts when they aren't devoted to God's greater purposes?

How does Jonah respond when God takes the vine away? What question does God repeat?

4. Read Jonah 4:10-11. Contrast God's concern with that of Jonah. What/who are each concerned for? Is the concern self- or other-serving? God asks a question in verse 11. What are some different ways Jonah *could* respond? How does God describe the inhabitants of Nineveh? How does this compare to the way Jonah and his fellow Israelites might characterize them?

5. Think about those you might consider beyond the reach of God's grace. How do you suppose God sees them? Many believe that the God of the Old Testament is primarily, or even exclusively, concerned with the nation of Israel. Does the Book of Jonah support, or contradict, this view? Many Christians live as though God is primarily, or even exclusively, concerned with us. Does the Book of Jonah invite a change in perspective? If God extended the same call to you that He extended to Jonah, where might He send you?

Map: The Biblical World of Jonah

