

# The Book of Jonah

Gath-hepher, located three miles from the village of Nazareth, was the hometown and final resting place of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC prophet named Jonah (who is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25). His story has a similar ring to the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings 17-19. Some are tempted to dismiss the story as a children's morality tale about an ill-tempered, myopic, ethnocentric, anti-prophet whose account is primarily listed in holy Scripture as a warning of how not to behave. That Jesus, the other Galilean prophet, identified with Jonah, should make us cautious about any dismissive tendencies.

## The Word of the Lord—Go!

Jonah was commanded by God to do something extremely difficult—preach redemption to Nineveh, capital of the warmongering Assyrian Empire who would years later turn around and destroy Israel. Did Jonah see it as redemption without justice? Did he feel he was betraying all his countrymen who were about to lose their lives to the cruel Assyrian war machine? Was he trapped between the mysterious command of God and the lonely journey of a prophet who longed for someone to take him seriously? No wonder he ran from the assignment. What sane person would not run or at least question such a call?

## Questions

Speaking of questions, the book, which one commentator calls a masterpiece of biblical literature, has thirteen of them and it ends with one. "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" It's that question that hints at the intent of the author. He used his considerable story-telling skills to grab the attention of his audience helping them to move from a position of skeptical cynicism to thoughtful inquisitiveness.

## Why Read This Book

### Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover

The word of the Lord came to Jonah and his first instinct was to run. It's the same for us who take our religion seriously. To live in the presence of the Lord requires patience, honesty, humility, and vulnerability. Those qualities are hard to come by in an image conscious culture that values speed, assertiveness, and measurable results. We are experts at both distraction and distortion. If we are unable to redirect God's call upon our lives in a way that keeps us in control, we tend to redefine God in ways that enable us to receive preferential treatment. Yahweh, the Lord of Heaven, the maker of the sea and dry land is reduced to the God who favors our gender, nationality, ethnicity, race, or political and religious persuasion. The problem of course is that Yahweh refuses to be corralled inside anyone's fence. Read this book expecting to have some of your own ways of flight exposed.



## The Ways God Speaks

In the Book of Jonah, the Creator of the universe displays his creative ways of speaking to his people. They include direct speech, intuition, storms, compassionate pagan sailors, lot casting, big fish, dreams, near death experiences, remembered words from scripture, humbled warlords and sackcloth covered

cattle, plants, worms, hot winds, and a patient presence that seeks to draw a beleaguered prophet out of his self-imposed funk. Read this book to expand your categories of God's speech.

### Disillusionment

The book ends with Jonah, a stewpot of emotions, sitting on the hillside overlooking Nineveh. He was angry that the ruthless and powerful got a free pass. He grieved for the poor and helpless who suffered at their hands. He was befuddled by the ways of Yahweh finding His actions absurd. He was embarrassed by his own absurdities and failings. He longed for the comforting presence of Yahweh while at the same time feeling terrified at what being in His presence required of him.

Jonah reflects the interior experience of many a modern Christian leader who is required to work in environments with high expectations and ambiguous goals while partnered with an invisible presence who is often silent. Some are asked to solve unsolvable organizational problems while working with associates who are over-burdened, under-funded, and angry with their circumstances. Others must endure guilt by association from a secular culture suspicious of religion and religious institutions. Were that not enough, all of us have blind spots, compulsions, and addictions created by the boarding house of unruly roommates that live in our brains. Life is not easy, so read the book of Jonah to meet a man who will give you a healthy dose of reality.

### Justice, Mercy, and the Cross

Jonah believed the great city of Nineveh deserved judgement. It was comprised of bad people who had broken the rules and should be punished. Yet God felt compassion for folks who knew neither their right hand from their left. Law and order conservatives and bleeding-heart liberals know that fight. Border-wall advocates and amnesty granting politicians are familiar with that debate. Battle lines are drawn while both sides claim the divine is exclusively on their side. But he is not. Read the book of Jonah to meet a God who neither pulls rank nor destroys his opponent. He leaves the question open only to be resolved seven hundred years later when Jesus gave his life on the cross. On the cross both justice and mercy are satisfied, but at a cost few may be willing to pay.



### Salvation is From the Lord

From beginning to end, the Book of Jonah is about salvation. The international crew of sailors are rescued from the storm and make vows and sacrifice to Yahweh. Jonah is rescued from drowning by a fish. The lives of the repentant citizens of Nineveh, from king to cattle, are spared. And Jonah, who three times said he would be better off dead than alive, was wooed back to life so he could tell the greatest fish story of all time. Read the Book of Jonah to discover that salvation is more than acquiring a ticket to heaven. It also includes being coaxed, prodded, and cajoled by a mysterious presence into living a life more authentic and meaningful. The Creator ceaselessly works to help the seed of the image of God that is planted in the soul of each human being to grow towards its divine potential. Read the Book of Jonah.

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