



Jonah 1:4

JONAH

Background File

The book of Jonah is listed among the books of the prophets, but it is more like a short story. The story's title character, Jonah, son of Amittai, is never called a prophet, though God calls him to deliver the kind of message prophets deliver. We don't know who wrote the book, and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when this story was written. But certain clues in the book provide hints (see below).

What's the Story?

Jonah is unique among the prophetic books of the Bible. While the others are mostly made up of prophetic speeches, Jonah contains only one short prophetic speech (3:4). The rest of the book is about Jonah himself. Jonah openly disobeys God's command to go to Nineveh. He tries to run far away from God. God pursues him and causes a great fish to swallow him. Jonah calls out to God and recognizes God as his deliverer. After God has the fish vomit Jonah out, he then goes to Nineveh as God first asked him to do. But when his prophetic message causes the people of Nineveh to repent, Jonah becomes so angry that he wishes for death. Why? That's the plot twist that is key to understanding the story and why it was written.

The LORD calls Jonah to speak a prophetic word of judgment to the powerful city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Assyria had been a feared enemy of the people of Israel. In 722 B.C.E. it defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and forced many of its people to leave their homes. So when God called Jonah to deliver his message to the hated Assyrians in Nineveh, Jonah wanted no part of it. He runs away, not because he is afraid to do what he is called to do, but because he knows what might happen. He knew that the LORD is a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, . . . and ready to relent from punishing" (4:2). In other words, he knew that if he warned the Ninevites to repent, God was likely to forgive them.

The story is making a clear point about God's love extending even to Israel's enemies. This is not common among the books of the prophets. This message also contrasts with the attitude that fueled the religious and social reforms found in such books as Ezra and Nehemiah. Those books describe life for Israel in the time following the exile in Babylon (after 539 B.C.E.), when God's people returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Ezra's religious reforms called for strict measures, such as Israelite men divorcing foreign wives. The religious community was especially concerned about being

influenced by other religions, and this made them less open to those who did not live according to Jewish law and worship Israel's God. For this reason, many scholars think the story of Jonah was written sometime after the exile in Babylon ended, and long after Nineveh's reign of terror ended. Nineveh itself was defeated and destroyed in 612 B.C.E. Another hint about when this story may have been written relates to that date. Jonah 3:3 states that Nineveh was a great city, perhaps signaling that at the time the story was written, Nineveh had already been destroyed.

What's the Message?

Jonah, like the book of Ruth, offers a vision in which God's love and mercy is not only available to the people of Israel, but to other peoples as well. That message comes through in the story's plot twists, irony, and even comedy. The message of the book of Jonah is not about what kind of fish swallowed Jonah, nor about how he was able to survive inside the fish for three days. Nor is the message to be found in knowing just how big Nineveh was at the time, or what kind of plant grew up overnight to shade Jonah from the sun.

Instead, we must look for the message of Jonah in the gracious action of God in the history of God's people, and in relationship to God's creation. Jonah paints a picture of a God who pushes God's people to go beyond religious and ethnic boundaries to share the love and mercy of God with all nations, even those who were the traditional enemies of Israel. In Jonah, we see a concrete example of God's desire to save all people. The story uses irony when it shows the non-Hebrews (the sailors on the boat and the Ninevites) as the ones who end up praying to God and asking for God's mercy. Even though the destruction of Nineveh would have seemed justified to the original readers, the story takes a surprising twist. When the Ninevites express remorse for their evil actions, God decides to spare Nineveh, its people, and even its animals.

We also learn from Jonah that God is a God of surprises. God often has different things in store for us than what we had planned or imagined for ourselves. In relationship with such a God, the calling for us today is the same as it was for Jonah: to trust God always in all things, and believe that God knows better what we need than we do ourselves.

Finally, the book of Jonah illustrates how difficult it is for us to follow God's will, when we would so much rather follow our own desires. The relationship between Jonah and God shows a prophet who seems to want to control God and resists when God asks something of him that he does not want to do. In the end, however, God shows Jonah the wisdom of God's actions and the necessity of obeying God in all things. Like Jonah, we want to control God. But the story of Jonah shows how God is in control—of wind and waves, of swimming fish, and, most importantly, of helping us see the way of mercy and forgiveness.

Jonah Tries to Run Away from God



1:2 Go at once to Nineveh, that great city:

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, a hated enemy of Israel. It was located on the Tigris River in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). See Map 8, p. 2106. At the height of its power, Nineveh was one of the most powerful cities in the world, and its people did not know or fear Israel's God.



1:2-3 But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish:

Tarshish was about as far from Nineveh as one could get. It was located somewhere on the far coast of the Mediterranean, perhaps on the coast of modern-day Spain, while Nineveh was located in modern-day Iraq. See the map below. Jonah decided it was better to disobey the LORD than deliver a message that would save one of Israel's arch-enemies.



When have you run from God in your own life? Are you still running? How did God bring you back?



1:9 I am a Hebrew... I worship the LORD:

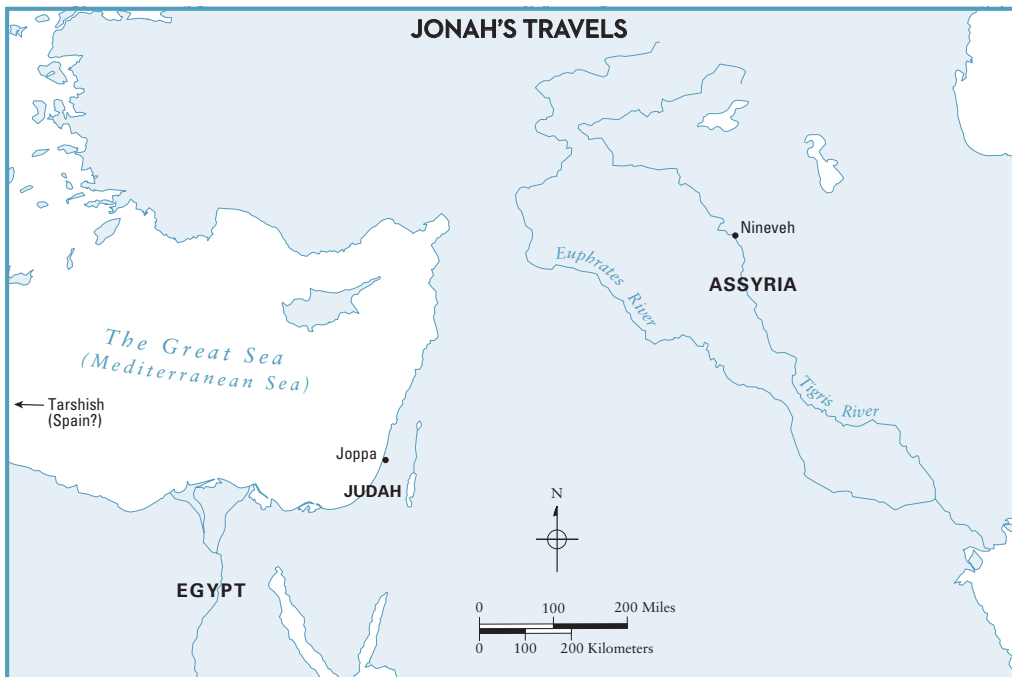
At the time, monotheism, the worship of only one god, was unique among Near Eastern cultures. By identifying himself

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷ The sailors^a said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the

^a Heb They



God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

17^a But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

A Psalm of Thanksgiving

2 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,² saying,

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³ You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
how^b shall I look again
upon your holy temple?’

⁵ The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head

⁶ at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,

^a Ch 2.1 in Heb ^b Theodotion: Heb *surely*

this way, Jonah contrasted himself with the sailors, who worshiped a variety of gods. One of the story’s ironic moments follows. When the storm came, all the sailors were praying to their gods for help, while Jonah, the only one whose God could actually save them, was sleeping.



1:14-16 they cried out to the LORD... offered a sacrifice: Here is an example of irony in the story. The non-Hebrew sailors pray to and worship Jonah’s God, the God of Israel.



What does Luther say about God’s alien work? God’s “alien work” is a technical theological term that refers to the work of God’s judgment done in response to human sin. Because God’s true nature is love, God’s words or action of judgment are always in service to God’s “proper” work of love and forgiveness. When God causes the fish to swallow Jonah, it is in response to Jonah’s disobedience to God. Through this “alien work,” God calls Jonah back into right relationship with God, and renews his faith in God’s purpose for his life. From our perspective, this work of God sometimes seems harsh. But God’s judgment makes us aware of our sins and our need for God’s saving mercy in Jesus Christ. *Jonah 1:17*



1:17 Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights:

Christians may recall here the words of Matthew 12:38-40 and be reminded of Christ’s three days in the tomb. In this story we see another example of God bringing life out of death. For all practical purposes, Jonah was dead while inside the fish. God’s bringing him up out of the depths and the darkness symbolizes a rebirth for Jonah and the gift of new life.



2:1-10 Jonah prayed to the LORD:

Jonah’s prayer is like a song (psalm) of thanksgiving. It looks like Jonah is in danger in the fish’s belly, but perhaps Jonah realizes that God is with him, using the fish to save him from drowning. This is why he gives thanks and claims God to be the one who delivers (2:10).



2:1 Have you ever prayed to God in a time of great distress? What did you say? How did God answer you?



2:2 Sheol: This is the dark underground world of the dead, a shadowy place of isolation, but not what Christians would consider hell.



2:4, 7 your holy temple: Prayers and sacrifices were offered to God at Israel's temple in Jerusalem. Though Jonah was far from this place of worship, he knew that God would hear his prayers.



3:3 exceedingly large city: A city that took three days to walk across would have been huge. This is probably an example of how the story uses exaggeration to make a point. Jonah travels only one day into the city to deliver his message (3:4).



3:4 And [Jonah] cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown": A briefer prophetic word would be hard to find in the Bible. Even though Jonah has obeyed the LORD and come to Nineveh, he presents God's message as briefly as possible. Perhaps he was hoping his words would be ignored.



3:4 [Jonah] cried out: In Luke 11:29-30, Jesus reminds his followers that he is a sign of God's judgment, just as Jonah served as a sign of God's judgment to Nineveh.



3:6-8 sackcloth...sat in ashes: Sackcloth was rough cloth made of goat or camel hair. When people wanted to express extreme sadness, they put on this clothing, rubbed ashes or dirt on their bodies, and went without eating or drinking. Even the animals got into the act (3:8).



3:10 God saw...God changed: Sometimes we think that the will of God is set and can't be influenced or altered. This verse reminds us that God's loving kindness and mercy towards God's creation is stronger than God's determination to punish. God is not deaf to the cries of God's people, and God listens when we call.



4:2 That is why I fled...you are a gracious God: Now it becomes clear why Jonah ran away in the first place. He knew God would forgive the people of Nineveh if they showed they were sorry for their evil actions.



What does Luther say about how we are to treat our neighbors? Though the words of this commandment say only that we should not slander or gossip about our neighbors, Luther argues that the Eighth Commandment demands that we go a step further. We are to "come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light" (SC:8). Jonah illus-

O LORD my God.

- ⁷ As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
- ⁸ Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
- ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Conversion of Nineveh

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Jonah's Anger

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Is it right

for you to be angry?”⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The LORD God appointed a bush,^a and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush.⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah Is Reproved

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.”¹⁰ Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

^a Heb *qiqayon*, possibly the castor bean plant

trates that this is one of the hardest commandments for us to keep, especially when our neighbors are people we don't like very much. Jonah is not happy when the Ninevites repent and are spared, much as we are not always happy when God seems to favor someone we don't think deserves it. *Jonah 4:1*



4:6 God appointed a bush: Just as God sent the fish to save Jonah from the sea, here the plant gives Jonah shade. See NRSV footnote *a* for the possible identity of the plant.



4:11 should I not be concerned about Nineveh...and also many animals: Here we see that animals also matter to God, and that God cares about their welfare, too. The loving covenant God has made with creation includes not only human life but all life. The message would have been clear: God's love and mercy are not limited to the people of Israel.



Who is the main actor in the story of Jonah—God or Jonah? Why? How can the message of the story influence the way you live?