

**5**

**JONAH**

## Introduction

The Book of Jonah is included among the books of prophecy in the 'Scroll of the Twelve Prophets'. Obviously, each of these twelve books has its own special features, but the book of Jonah is very different from any of the others. The reasons for its inclusion in the scroll are not at all obvious. Perhaps it is because the author has chosen as his main character the prophet Jonah (though he is never called a 'prophet' in the text), who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel in the second quarter of the eighth century (see 2Kings 14:25), but there is no evidence that what is in the scroll has any historical connection with this otherwise unknown prophet. Other reasons could be that the main character, Jonah, is given a prophetic mission from God which he carries out (eventually), and that, as with other prophets, God and Jonah are often engaged in direct communication.

It is a marvellous story, which may well have had a long oral history before finding the written form which appears in the scroll. There is a storm scene, which has all the elements of a folk tale. There is a psalm that would fit nicely in the Psalm Scroll. There is a big fish and an extraordinary bush, both of which would fit well in a fable. The stories about Jonah are of a kind with the legends we have about Elijah and Elisha. An anonymous genius has gathered this material, and more, and weaved it into a narrative that holds together well, and that does have significant things to say about God and about what matters in our lives. We have an intervening God who controls everything, and a prophet who thinks (at first) he can get away with not obeying. We have a prophet who is never really taken into God's confidence, and we are left with a God who cannot be fitted into our tidy theological concepts.

We are following the lead of those scholars who locate the written text in the post-exilic period and possibly in the fifth century. This is little more than a guess, for the historical context does little (if anything) to help the reader understand the text, and the text sheds no special light on the historical context. If the work was published in the second half of the fifth century, then it could be seen as a protest against the policies of Nehemiah who sought to have foreign wives and their children banished from Judah as a means of helping to 'purify' the nation (see Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9:1-5). Nehemiah would not be pleased with a satirical presentation of a rather bumbling Jewish prophet and God showing compassion for the people of foreign Nineveh. However, this is all rather speculative, and the power of the story doesn't depend on it being composed to oppose Nehemiah's policies.

Nineveh was the capital of the great empire of the Assyrians that dominated the Ancient Near East for most of the eighth and seventh centuries. From Israel's point of view it was the capital of the 'Evil Empire'. It is significant that our author locates his story there, but he has no interest in offering information of the city or its inhabitants. His interest (and this he shares with the other prophets) is focused on God. Like a lot of stories, it is meant to interest, even captivate, the reader. It is written as a story, and it is to be read (and enjoyed) as a story. Therein lies its power.

The Book of Jonah is a good counter to a narrow view of God that thinks that our enemies are God's enemies (an attitude frequently found in other prophetic scrolls). We are reminded that there is no point in trying to run away from God's word. Jonah's prayer (2:2-9) can be prayed by anyone who feels lost and bewildered.

The opening words prepare us for a ‘word’ that YHWH is giving a prophet for him to communicate to the people (see, for example, Joel 1:1). Our first surprise is that, in this instance, the divine word is for Jonah’s ears only.

The name ‘Jonah’ means ‘dove’ (יֹנָתַן, yônâ). Did the author choose Jonah as his main character because of an allusion to the famous dove in the Flood Story who brought good news to Noah (Genesis 8:11)? His father’s name has a symbolic power for the story. ‘Amittai’ (אֲמִיטַי) derives from the Hebrew root אָמַן (‘am), translating as ‘YHWH is faithful’.

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, was, indeed, a ‘great city’ before it was sacked by the combined forces of Babylon and Media in 612. The prophet Zephaniah looked forward to its downfall (Zephaniah 2:13), and the prophet Nahum celebrated it.

The message Jonah is to deliver to the citizens of Nineveh (verse 2) is entirely negative. There is no suggestion that he is to encourage the Ninevites to repent. Like the angels sent to Sodom, his one task is to announce the doom that is to fall on the city. Divine judgment is in no sense arbitrary. It is something they have brought upon themselves by the ‘wickedness’ of their lives (compare Genesis 18:20).

Psalms 139:7-10 recognises the impossibility of escaping from YHWH. Jonah thinks he knows better and decides to try (verse 3). He wants to get as far away from Nineveh as possible, so he heads west, across the Mediterranean to Tarshish. We are not certain where Tarshish was, but it was clearly way out west somewhere (see Isaiah 66:19). Some suggest Spain; others somewhere in the Aegean. Jonah began by leaving YHWH’s land (Judah) and seeking transport in the Philistine port of Jaffa. We should imagine Jonah’s delight at what appeared to him to be the good fortune of finding a ship about to head west. Little does he know YHWH.

It is possible (and in the light of what ensues, likely) that we are meant to imagine Jonah not just paying his fare, but actually hiring the boat and its crew.

**<sup>1</sup>Now the word of YHWH came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish to escape the presence of YHWH. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship that had just come from Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of YHWH.**

**4**But YHWH hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.

**5**Then 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. As for Jonah, he went down into the hold of the ship, lay down, and fell into a trance.

**6**The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing in a trance? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

**7**The sailors 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.

**8**Then 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 YHWH, the 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 YHWH, 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."

A storm threatens to sink the ship. The mariners make offerings in the hope of assuaging the anger of the sea, and each prays to his own god. Jonah knows that it is YHWH who has caused the storm. His attempt to escape God has failed. He separates himself from the others, and, prophet that he is, he goes into a trance, awaiting instructions from YHWH.

The ship's captain (or is it the helmsman?) demands that Jonah do what the others are doing: call on his God. Without realising it, in so doing, he is acknowledging the special power of Jonah's God to save. That seems to be how the story-teller wants us to understand his action. The helmsman represents any leader who approaches a prophet to find out why God is so 'angry'.

Casting lots was a rather primitive way of attempting to discover the will of the gods by bypassing human decision. It was practised in Israel (for example, the Urim and Thummim, 1Samuel 14:41). Jesus' Jewish disciples used it to decide who was to replace Judas (Acts 1:26).

The casting of the lots points to Jonah, who owns up to his sin (verse 10). He proudly proclaims his race and his belief in YHWH 'the God of the heaven' (who can therefore stop the tempest), 'who made the sea' (and can therefore calm it), 'and the dry land' (and can therefore bring them safely to land).

In response to their question, he advises them to throw him into the sea. Offering him as a sacrifice to the angry sea is something they could understand.

The sailors aren't too sure about Jonah's suggestion. How would this powerful god react if they threw his devotee overboard to his fate, even though Jonah has caused the problem by his attempt to disobey his god.

No sailors would try to bring a boat to land during a raging storm. That would ensure shipwreck. We are meant to ask why they attempted to do something that they knew was foolish. Did they hope that YHWH would be pleased that they stopped Jonah's attempt to escape God, but without killing him, and would miraculously intervene? Their attempt to row to shore mimics Jonah's action is heading west. They think they can improve on God's will. The worsening of the storm answered that question.

Then something marvellous happens. These pagan sailors pray to YHWH! They see no way out. Either they have to suffer for what Jonah has done (which doesn't seem fair), or they can be blamed for taking his life. They accept that YHWH is all-powerful, and can do whatever he decides (compare Psalm 115:3; Psalm 135:6), and they cry out to him in their distress.

They risk the only option open to them, and the miracle happens. There is no suggestion that they converted and became Jews. But they are so impressed that they offer sacrifices to YHWH and make solemn promises to express their gratitude to the God who saved them in such a marvellous way. One thinks of Solomon's prayer when he dedicated the temple (see 1Kings 8:41-43). The words of Isaiah, too, are relevant, when he looks forward to the time when Egypt will turn to YHWH (see Isaiah 19:19-22; see also Isaiah 56:6-7). Jonah witnesses to that strand of Judaism that never lost touch with the idea that YHWH is the God of the universe, and that one day all nations would worship him.

**<sup>13</sup>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.**

**<sup>14</sup>Then they appealed to YHWH, "Please, YHWH, we pray, do not let us perish because of this man. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you are YHWH. You accomplish whatever you desire."**

**<sup>15</sup>So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.**

**<sup>16</sup>Then the men feared YHWH even more, and they offered a sacrifice to YHWH and made VOWS.**

Swallowed by a large fish

**<sup>1</sup>But YHWH provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**

**<sup>2</sup>Then Jonah prayed to YHWH his God from the belly of the fish.**

This fish is not the first animal in the Bible to be introduced into a story to see that God's will is achieved. We think of the humorous story in which a female donkey can see what Balaam (who is supposed to be a 'seer') cannot see, and who speaks to him to instruct him (see Numbers 22:22-23). God sends ravens to bring food to Elijah in the Wadi Cherith (1Kings 17:1-6). There is also the huge fish in the story of Tobit (6:2).

Some English translations number verse 2:1 as 1:17 and begin chapter 2 at verse 2. Here we are following the verse numbering of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin versions.

The first point to notice in this fable here in Jonah is that what happened to Jonah was not by chance. It was YHWH who 'provided the large fish'. The second point is to note that Jonah has gone down as far as you can go. He went down to Jaffa (1:3). When the storm broke he went down to the hold of the ship (1:5). When he was thrown overboard, he went down into the raging waters (1:15). Now he is swallowed by the fish and goes down into its innards (2:1).

More than that, he is stuck there, not one, or two, but three days and three nights. We are not into chronological time here. We are being told that his miserable state was a substantial, enduring one, like that of the Egyptian slave abandoned by his master in the story of David in 1Samuel 30:12-15 (or like the three-fold prayer of Jesus in the Agony; Matthew 26:44).

After the frenetic action of chapter one, the silence of chapter two presents Jonah with nowhere to go. He is utterly alone with 'YHWH his God'. Psalm 130 begins:

Out of the depths I cry to you, YHWH.

We are invited to listen to the prayer that Jonah prays when he is in the depths (and to make it our own).

Every verse of this psalm, sometimes word for word, can be found somewhere in the Book of Psalms. Verse 3 expresses Jonah's distress, but also his profound knowing that his cry is being heard by his God (compare Psalm 120:1). Jonah feels locked in the nether world. He can contact no one, but he knows he can cry to God and be heard. Psalm 88 provides a good reflection on this verse. Verse 4 fits well into the Jonah situation.

In verse 5 (compare Psalm 31:22), Jonah feels rejected and banished by God, but he also experiences a longing to see God, and so he looks towards the place where the Holy One dwells, somehow hoping that God will see him.

Verse 6 and the first part of verse 7 take phrases from the psalms to express a situation that is hopeless (compare Psalm 69:2; 18:5). But it is just when things could not be worse that Jonah's God hears his cry and responds, liberating him from death (the Pit), and restoring his life (compare Psalm 103:4). The full liberation is narrated in the verse immediately following the prayer (see below, verse 11).

Verse 8 summarises the psalm. It is when Jonah realises the hopelessness of his situation that he cries out to God, and he knows that God is listening and responding (compare Psalm 77:2; 107:6).

YHWH is not like the false gods that people look to (verse 9). Earlier, the sailors offered sacrifice and made promises to their gods (see 1:16). Overwhelmed by God's saving action in his life, Jonah commits his life now to his God and will do whatever YHWH wants of him (compare Psalm 116:17-18).

Jonah's prayer ends, and the narrative continues in prose (verse 11). The only other time in the Bible that God speaks to an animal is when he speaks to the snake in the primeval garden (see Genesis 3:14).

The first part of Jonah's story puts him back where he started. But now he knows he cannot escape from his prophetic call, and he has experienced the marvelous, saving power of his God.

**<sup>3</sup>I call to YHWH out of my distress, and he answers me; out of the belly of Sheol I cry, and you hear my voice.**

**<sup>4</sup>You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounds me; all your waves and your billows sweep over me.**

**<sup>5</sup>Then I think, 'I am driven away from your sight; but I am still looking towards your holy sanctuary.'**

**<sup>6</sup>The waters close in over me; the deep surrounds me; weeds envelop my head. <sup>7</sup>I sink down to the base of the mountains. I am in the land whose bars close upon me forever;**

**yet you lift me up alive from the Pit, YHWH my God.**

**<sup>8</sup>As my life ebbs away, it is YHWH whom I recall. And my prayer reaches you, at your holy sanctuary.**

**<sup>9</sup>Those who worship vain idols give up any hope of mercy.**

**<sup>10</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I vow I will fulfill.**

**Deliverance is from YHWH!"**

**<sup>11</sup>Then YHWH spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.**

Jonah obeys

**<sup>1</sup>The word of YHWH came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”**

**<sup>3</sup>Jonah did set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of YHWH.**

**Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.**

**<sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh overturns.”**

We are back where we were at the beginning:

The word of YHWH came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me”(1:2).

This time God tells Jonah that he will tell him what he is to proclaim. And this time Jonah obeys.

The words translated here ‘exceedingly large’ could be translated ‘large for God’. If this is correct the accent is on God’s universal dominion (see 1:9) and on the relationship of Nineveh to God – something that will emerge as the narrative develops.

Jonah is keen to carry out God’s command, and begins preaching immediately on the first day. There are two things to note in Jonah’s message. The ‘forty days’ recalls Moses’ forty days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18), or the forty days that Elijah journeys before reaching the mountain where he encounters God (1Kings 19:8), as well as the forty years of wandering in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land (Exodus 16:35). ‘Forty days’ is not a measure of chronological time, but a way of speaking of a period of waiting till God’s will is fulfilled.

The second observation is that the expression ‘Nineveh overturns’ appears to be deliberately ambiguous. Does it mean Nineveh will be overturned in the sense of overthrown? We have seen enough of God’s awesome power in chapter 1 to convince us of this possibility, and, as the story progresses, this is certainly the way Jonah and the inhabitants of Nineveh understand the threat. As the story develops we realise that the message means that Nineveh will overturn in the sense of turn over (reform).

In this passage we see the Ninevites, from the ruler down, engaged in repentance, and, as a result, we see God ‘change his mind’ and not inflict on them the calamity we have been expecting since the second verse of chapter one. The following two texts provide a background for God’s readiness to change his mind in response to our behaviour:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

– Jeremiah 18:7-10

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.

– Isaiah 65:1-2

A classical example of the power of repentance to avert divine punishment is in the survival of Jerusalem in 701 when the lifting of the siege and the departure of the Assyrian army is attributed to the reforms enacted by King Hezekiah (see 2Kings 19; 2Chronicles 29-20; Jeremiah 26:18-19).

The opposite happened when King Jehoiakim ignored the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and so Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (see Jeremiah 26).

The picture this gives us of God is well expressed in the following psalm:

Being compassionate, God forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again.

– Psalm 78:38-39

It is true that evil must be punished. It is also true that the repentant will be forgiven.

**<sup>5</sup>The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on dirt.**

**<sup>7</sup>Then 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. <sup>8</sup>Human 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 which they can inflict.**

**<sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”**

**<sup>10</sup>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 carry it out.**

**<sup>1</sup>But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he was dejected.**

**<sup>2</sup>He prayed to YHWH and said, "YHWH! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I set out to flee to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, long suffering, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.**

**<sup>3</sup>And now, YHWH, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."**

**<sup>4</sup>YHWH responded, "You really are very dejected."**

**<sup>5</sup>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.**

**<sup>6</sup>YHWH God directed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the bush.**

The context makes it clear that what displeased Jonah and made him so 'dejected' (this is how the Greek Septuagint understands the Hebrew) was not so much God's response to the repentance displayed in Nineveh (see 3:10), as the fact that God had not kept Jonah in the loop. In 2Kings 20:1-6 God changed his mind in regard to King Hezekiah, but there God kept Isaiah informed. Here God changes his mind in regard to Nineveh without letting Jonah know. The reader is left with the impression that Jonah, having repented and expressed his commitment to God in the psalm (2:3-10) is unsure of his relationship with his God.

In his dejection Jonah turns in prayer to YHWH. He attempts to justify his earlier response to God's call when he decided to flee to the ends of the western world. His understanding of God, expressed in the second part of verse 2, is identical with Joel 3:13. See the commentary on page 65 and the list of other places where this creedal statement occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jonah's wanting to die reminds us of Elijah's request when he could find no respite from the burning heat of his desert journey to the mountain of Moses, as he was fleeing for his life from Jezebel (see 1Kings 19:2-4). It reminds us, too, of Moses' frustration at the fickleness and complaints of the Israelites during their wilderness journey (see Numbers 11:10-15).

It is not easy to get the exact feeling of God's response in verse 4. It seems to satisfy Jonah for the time being, so he must have accepted the response as expressing to him the qualities he has just attributed to God.

Jonah constructs a makeshift shelter for himself. Sits under its 'shade' and waits to see what develops in Nineveh. Then miraculously God arranges for a bush (יִרְקָאֵן, qîrḳāyôn) to shoot up to provide him shade. This particular bush is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, and there seems no point in attempting to identify it. Like the 'large fish' of chapter two, it is a creature of folk lore or fairytale. The point is not that it gave Jonah shade (he had already organised that). Rather, Jonah read it as a sign of God's care for him. It is this that made him 'very happy'.

The same God who miraculously caused the bush to shoot up, now arranges for it to be attacked by a worm and wither. Is there an echo here of the fragility of human existence?

You sweep men away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning; in  
the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the  
evening it fades and withers.

– Psalm 90:5-6 (see Psalm 144:3-4)

Though it is not explicit, we are probably to imagine the fierce wind as sweeping away Jonah's makeshift shelter (4:5).

In verse 3 Jonah asked God to arrange for him to die. Here in verse 8 he uses the same words, but he is wishing death upon himself. God, however, still responds (verse 9), in the same compassionate way he did in verse 4, using the same words, adding a reference to the bush.

The tale comes to its conclusion in verses 10-11. It is God's kindness that is highlighted. The prophet (and the readers of the tale) are to learn that God's kindness extends even to Nineveh, called for the third time 'that great city' (see 1:2; 3:2). In fact its size seems of more significance here than its repentance. The size of the population is evidenced from the fact that, according to estimates based on archeology, at its peak just before its destruction in 612, Nineveh had a population of about 300,000. At the same time Jerusalem's population is estimated at around 25,000.

Allowance is made for the ignorance of the inhabitants. From a Jewish perspective their lack of knowledge of the Torah and of YHWH would be enough to warrant their being thought of as ignorant.

Clearly the focus is on YHWH, not on Jonah. We are not told of Jonah's response to what YHWH says here.

**<sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.**

**<sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God prepared a fierce east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and, longing to die, he thought, "It is better for me to die than to live."**

**<sup>9</sup>But God said to Jonah, "You really are dejected over the bush." And he said, "Yes, dejected enough to want to die."**

**<sup>10</sup>Then YHWH said, "You were fretting about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night."**

**<sup>11</sup>And should I not have compassion on 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?"**

## God's compassion

In the Scroll of the Twelve Prophets, Jonah is followed by Micah. In the synagogue, Jonah is read at Yom Kippur. The following reading from Micah follows immediately. It reflects a long tradition in Judaism of how Jonah is imagined to have responded, and it teaches us how we might respond to the message of Jonah.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

– Micah 7:18-20